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DVDs: 1939 -- The Best Year For Movies...Ever!

Posted February 15, 2008 | 03:24 PM (EST)

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Film buffs have declared 1939 as the greatest year for movies so many times that it's seen as historical fact, rather than just a widely accepted opinion. And no wonder: in 1939, the ten movies nominated for Best Picture include landmark classics in so many genres that it makes your head spin. Mr. Smith Goes To Washington. Stagecoach. Ninotchka. Love Affair. The Wizard of Oz. Wuthering Heights. Of Mice and Men. Dark Victory. Goodbye Mr. Chips. And a little flick called Gone With The Wind. Some people argue for 1974 and I'm quite fond of 1987, but you get the point: 1939 was a heck of a year for movies.

So earlier this year I decided that if 1939 was the greatest year of all time for movies than I should watch any movie made in 1939, however obscure. (Here's my list.) So imagine my delight when Charlie Chan Volume 4 (\$49.98; Fox) showed up. It contains four Chan mysteries, including three released in 1939. That brings to 16 the number of Charlie Chan movies finally made available in nice new prints after years of being out of circulation.

They were rumored to be under wraps because the Murdochs found them racially offensive. In fact, the movies are exemplary. Yes, Chan speaks haltingly (in a second language) and delivers one aphorism after another. But he is invariably portrayed as respected and admired by fellow members of the police force and the public at large; his family is filled with wholesome, All-American kids; some casual dialogue in his native tongue is offered up naturally; and Chan is always, always the smartest person in the room. Chinese audiences were understandably thrilled to have an on-screen hero shown in such a positive light as opposed to say, Fu Manchu and other diabolical Eastern villains.

The latest four Chan films -- starring the new and lesser Chan Sidney Toller -- are true to form. All are modest, briskly entertaining B movies -- just programmers people could watch and enjoy and

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forget. There's an exotic locale, a murder, a scene where all the suspects are brought into a room and the lights go out and Chan solves it all. *Charlie Chan in Honolulu* (1938) is typical and *Charlie Chan in Reno* (1939!) little better, with the allure of easy divorces being the main draw. *Charlie Chan at Treasure Island* (1939) is a step up, thanks to a convoluted look at psychics, fortune tellers and other frauds. But the real gem here is *Charlie Chan in City In Darkness* (1939), where Chan is in Paris and helps capture Nazi villains trying to smuggle weapons out of the country. As the fine brief documentary makes clear, this was a propaganda war film made even before war officially broke out. That gives it a drive and importance the other films lack.

And that's the best thing about this 1939 project: I keep stumbling on movies I might never have watched or somehow missed, like the Dr. Kildare series (with Lionel Barrymore chewing the scenery with glee); *Five Came Back*, a corker of a drama about a plane crash in the jungle starring Lucille Ball before she was Lucille Ball; and hilariously misguided kitsch like *Way Down South*, with a boy soprano who sure loves his slaves almost as much as he loves belting out into song. (Bizarrely, it was co-written by Langston Hughes.)

Also out this week: *Lubitsch Musicals* (\$59.95; Criterion), a collection of four movies by Lubitsch that is exactly why this more modest series by Criterion is such a dream -- more obscure movies made available in decent prints that otherwise would never have seen the light of day; *Gone Baby Gone* (\$29.99; Miramax), a movie that's solid on so many levels it may be best remembered years from now as the directorial debut of Ben Affleck or the breakthrough for brother Casey or the breakthrough of Oscar nominee Amy Ryan; *Stanley Kramer Film Collection* (\$59.95; Sony), five typical movies from the always earnest director that made an impact at the time but soon were revealed as stolid (*Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*), silly (*The Wild Ones*) and just plain bizarre (*The 5,000 Fingers Of Dr. T*); *Warner Bros. Academy Awards Animation Collection* (\$44.98; Warner Bros.), a terrific collection of 41 Oscar nominated shorts from the vaults of Warner Bros., MGM and Fleishcer; *Becoming Jane* (\$29.99; Miramax), an engaging bit of fluff raised up by an exceptional cast including Maggie Smith, Julie Walters, James Cromwell, Anne Hathaway and the increasingly dreamy James McAvoy; *Doctor Who Third Series* (\$99.98; BBC Video), which has proven far better than any Doctor Who revival with a decent budget had any right of being and *Torchwood First Season* (\$79.98; BBC Video), a darker more adult (and sexy) spin-off that found its footing by the end of the first season; *We Own The Night* (\$28.95; Sony), James Gray's beautifully shot, well-acted, intelligent but ultimately stillborn police drama; *Tootsie* (\$19.94; Sony), a new edition of one of the best comedies of all time with some welcome extras that unfortunately do not include director Sydney Pollack's standard-setting commentary track that appeared on the laser disc; *Dresden* (\$29.98; Koch), a German miniseries that shows a young nurse hiding a British pilot in the days leading up to the cataclysmic bombing; *Blade: The Series* (\$39.98; New Line), a TV spin-off of the vampire hunter character that's much harder to kill than the vamps themselves; *In The Shadow Of The Moon* (\$19.99; ThinkFilm), a pretty good documentary about the space race with some engaging characters, though the more elegant *For All Mankind* (\$39.95; Criterion) from 2000 is still where novices should begin; *Lillie* (\$59.99; Acorn), the 1978 Masterpiece Theatre melodrama about the shockingly modern actress Lillie Langtry; *A Zed and Two Noughts* and *The Draughtsman's Contract* (\$29.99 each; Zeitgeist), two lovingly presented films by Peter Greenaway done with the care his boldly original movies deserve; the utterly unique *Kiki & Herb: Live at the Knitting Factory* (\$24.98; Alive Mind), which documents the legendary cabaret duo's Year of Magical Drinking tour with straightforward ease for all those unlucky enough to have missed them in person (available only at [their website](#)); *Romance & Cigarettes* (\$24.96; Sony), John Turturro's oddball musical; *The Bubble* (\$27.99; Strand), promising director Eytan Fox's Israeli drama that is better about sexual politics than the real kind; *The Legacy Of Stone Cold Steve Austin* (\$34.95; WWE) and the more surprised you are that it "only" contains three discs the more likely you are to buy it; the genial detective show *The Rockford Files Season Five* (\$39.98; Universal), which surprisingly never broke into the top 30; and finally fans dismayed over having to say goodbye to the sitcom *Girlfriends* can ease their pain by watching *Girlfriends Third Season* (\$36.98; Paramount).

So how many **movies from 1939** have you seen?

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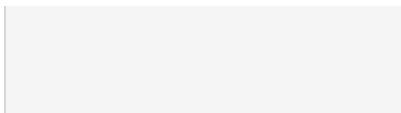
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39 was wonderful, but i can't restrict myself to a favorite year alone--i have a soft spot for the mid-late 40s--a truly remarkable range of wonderful movies and brilliant directors, etc--Best Year of Our Lives, A Matter of Life and Death, Black Narcissus, Red Shoes, Gentlemen's Agreement, Lost Weekend, Brief Encounter, Tree Grows in Brooklyn, Notorious, Adam's Rib, Scarlet Street, Strange Love of Martha Ivers, Treasure of the Sierra Madre, Harvey Girls, Easter Parade, etc... (and that's not even counting the Italian films and Japanese, etc)

Favorite Flag as abusive [Posted 08:27 PM on 02/21/2008](#)

waiguoren [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of waiguoren](#) [permalink](#)

Interesting post.

You mention Sidney Toller as "the lesser Charlie Chan."

Could you not have mentioned the name, somewhere in the piece, of Swedish actor Warner Oland, who would be "the greater Charlie.?"

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 03:53 PM on 02/19/2008

normathumb See Profile I'm a Fan of normathumb permalink

I am curious to know which Chan films had Sol Hoopii in them?

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 11:10 AM on 02/19/2008

3fingerbrown See Profile I'm a Fan of 3fingerbrown permalink

Good post, good comments. Another big moment in Hollywood history from 1939, this one taking place off screen: Alfred Hitchcock arrives in Hollywood. Also from '39, one of my favorite Hollywood anecdotes, from the Hollywood Reporter: "Hungarian director Michael Curtiz had his crew in hysterics when he asked his prop man for a mohair-covered throne chair and specified, 'Be sure it's from a real moe.'"

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 09:52 AM on 02/18/2008

VictorAndTim See Profile I'm a Fan of VictorAndTim permalink

Everyone's list here is valid and just makes me long to see a good OLD movie. Can you imagine? They managed to make classics without special effects, car chases or color film?

1939 was a great year among many great years.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 07:35 AM on 02/18/2008

realrick See Profile I'm a Fan of realrick permalink

My fave is 1962

Lawrence of Arabia

To Kill a Mockingbird

The Longest Day

The Miracle Worker

Birdman of Alcatraz

The Manchurian Candidate

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance

How The West Was Won

Lonely Are the Brave

The Days of Wine and Roses

So many great ones that year.....(and now you can actually read the post!)

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 02:35 AM on 02/18/2008

realrick See Profile I'm a Fan of realrick permalink

....Not to mention "Dr. No".....

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 01:43 AM on 02/19/2008

anfractuuous See Profile I'm a Fan of anfractuuous permalink

1939 also brought us "Stanley and Livingstone", "Beau Geste", and "the Four Feathers", all spectacular tales, all taking place in the confident Victorian era. Whenever, or if ever, they are remade, it is never without a suffocating dose of modern irony.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 12:42 PM on 02/17/2008

liberaldawg See Profile I'm a Fan of liberaldawg permalink

1939 was the greatest year for film. Followed closely by 1967 with "The Graduate", "Bonnie & Clyde" "In the Heat of the Night", "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" "Cool Hand



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Luke", "The Dirty Dozen"

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My all-time favorite movie is from 1939 -- The Women.

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Grulg See Profile I'm a Fan of Grulg permalink

I've always liked the Chans and Motos, I'll also speak up for Gunga Din from '39, that's worthy, too.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 01:43 PM on 02/16/2008

wm1066 See Profile I'm a Fan of wm1066 permalink

Loved Gunga Din, The blacks were black and the whites where white and the cinemetographer knew what he was doing with his filters. Even the low lighting scenes where done well. Would love to see that on a big screen.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 02:33 PM on 02/17/2008

LoRiseAntlers See Profile I'm a Fan of LoRiseAntlers permalink

I love me some Rockford Files.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 01:19 PM on 02/16/2008

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