

DVDs: Botched 'Civil War,' Silly 'San Andreas,' Gorgeous 'Room With a View'

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The tidal wave of TV shows keeps coming, with new or repackaged sets for everything from My Favorite Martian to The Civil War. We also compare summer blockbusters of today to summers of yore (yore wins). And any day when we can dive into A Room With A View is a good one. Enjoy this roundup of DVD and BluRay releases!

JURASSIC WORLD (\$34.98 BluRay combo; Universal)

SAN ANDREAS (\$44.95 3-D BluRay combo; Warner Bros.)

MARVEL'S AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON (\$39.99 3-D BluRay combo; Disney)

BACK TO THE FUTURE 30TH ANNIVERSARY TRILOGY (\$49.98 BluRay; Universal)

DIE HARD NAKATOMI PLAZA COLLECTION (\$129.99 BluRay; Fox)

Jurassic World is the third highest grossing movie of all time, and I know exactly one person who thinks it was good. Plenty of people saw it, many said it was "alright" or "ok" and a few thought the special effects were pretty cool. Many loved the trailer with that money shot at the faux Sea World. But the movie itself? It seems more like a trailer for the (**sigh**) next three Jurassic Park movies to come. Truly, it's been a weak series from the start, with the original director Steven Spielberg in full theme-park mode. It was an entertainment of sorts, but the main attraction was seeing the dinosaurs, believing they were actually brought back to life. Contrast that with Spielberg's earlier masterpiece Jaws, where you were a lot more terrified by not seeing the shark. And it's a remarkably nuanced and gripping drama, with excellent performances all around. If you prefer, compare this Jurassic or the first and (modestly) best Jurassic with the 1933 masterpiece King Kong. Another creature feature with state of the art special effects but in that case it's in service of a story. The special effects may be a little more obvious to modern viewers but it doesn't matter: the story still grips and the ape has character. It's hard to imagine anyone watching Jurassic World and its series of set pieces with pleasure even a few years from now, much less in 2095. And while I was crazy about Chris Pratt's charisma in Guardians Of The Galaxy, his work in this admittedly inferior movie gives me pause. Do I really want him to star in the next Indiana Jones movie? Let's see another Guardians (and preferably some other project) before I make up my mind.

San Andreas is witless but at least it knows it's witless, in a way. Dwayne Johnson (sorry, still "The Rock" to me, Mr. Johnson) is just a guy who wants to rescue his family during the most remarkable series of disasters to ever strike. And it could all happen! The scientists say so. If that happens, I hope Johnson remembers he and I are distantly related (not really) and swings by to pick me up after getting his wife and kids safe. It's a whole lot of nonsense and probably plays better at a multiplex rather than on your home screen where thoughts about dialogue and character development might intrude because special effects just don't overwhelm your brain like they do at the cinema.

And neither of them disappoint me like Avengers: Age Of Ultron. What has happened to summer movies? I grew up in an era where Hollywood was producing smart fun popcorn movies with disarming ease. Now the merely good -- like the first Avengers movie -- seems like manna from heaven. Here comes the sequel and it's a godawful mess, more annoying than Jurassic World or San Andreas because I had zero expectations for them. Honestly, I didn't have high expectations for this. I just hoped it would be fun. Instead, the battle scenes are

over-edited messes, impossible to follow with any sense of who is where doing what to whom. Of course, you're supposed to turn your brain off, but with these superheroes in one key battle doing everything but helping individual little old ladies cross the street, however were they supposed to save everyone? And I'm no comic book fan, so when one superhero suddenly sprouts brand new powers of unknown depth literally out of nowhere, I don't go "Cool! That happened in Issue 137 of..." No, I go, "WTF? When she get the powers of a god? And exactly what are her powers and their limits?" We never find out. The bickering was repetitive; the ethical showdown between Iron Man and Captain America et al was short-circuited and of course it's all solved by a deus ex machina that makes everything that came before it pointless. Still, it's nice to see Paul Bettany and not just hear him.

Compare these to the summer movies of the past. Back To The Future? It's a veritable masterpiece. Scratch that, it IS a masterpiece, a pop pleasure with hidden depths and enough great performances to make it one for the ages. No wonder fans still flock to conventions and that it grossed almost \$5 million in showings around the world last week. (That was grossed by the trilogy though I'm going out on a limb and assuming most wanted to see the first.) The second is notably darker and weirder while the third is a harmless wrap-up. But the first? What a delight.

Die Hard never approaches the greatness of Back To The Future. But it's fun by god and not irredeemably noisy and hard to follow in the action scenes and anchored by a genuinely compelling star thanks to Bruce Willis, who proved Moonlighting was not a fluke. (Mind you, he'd never do better but that's hardly a slam -- a classic is a classic.) God help me I've seen all five films in this franchise. In the movie theater. On opening weekend. Hey, it happens. Many are dopey and the first is no revelation but it remains good fun. No wonder every action film for the next decade was pitched as "Die Hard On A Bus" or "Die Hard In A Plane." Of course, anyone with a sense of history would know Die Hard is "Stagecoach In A Skyscraper." If you're besotted by it, you might just be in the market for a one foot tall+ replica of Nakatomi Plaza, the giant building where terrorists with European accents took hostage a bunch of people but failed to keep Bruce Willis out. I've been a little stunned by the number of people who not only recognized but could name "Nakatomi Plaza" when they saw this set. If that's your idea of fun (stumping friends), then placing this on your coffee table will be just the ticket.

THE WOLFPACK (\$29.98 BluRay; Magnolia)

Frankly, I kept waiting for someone to say this was all a fake. The story of children who were raised in a tiny apartment in NYC and never saw the outside world? And are now out and about, sharing their art and gingerly exploring the world? Way too strange to be true. But apparently it is, as this interesting documentary makes clear. It's a bizarrely compelling story of course, which is good since it's the tale -- not any artistic approach to telling it -- that sticks with you. The Wolfpack is in the hunt to be one of the nominees for the Best Documentary Oscar and in an era where hit documentaries don't automatically get excluded by the gatekeepers, this one has a shot to make it. And who wouldn't want to see the Wolfpack walk the red carpet? It would add that final surreal touch to Grimm tale they have endured.

MY FAVORITE MARTIAN COMPLETE SERIES (\$99.98 DVD; MPI)

NURSE JACKIE SEASON 7 (\$29.75 BluRay; Lionsgate)

DEXTER COMPLETE SERIES (\$99.98 DVD; Paramount)

THE FOLLOWING SEASON 3 (\$44.96 BluRay combo; Warner Home Video)

THERESE RAQUIN (\$29.99 DVD; Acorn)

AVATAR THE LAST AIRBENDER COMPLETE SERIES (\$39.98 DVD; Paramount)

THE CIVIL WAR 25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION (\$129.99 BluRay; PBS)

LOST IN SPACE THE COMPLETE ADVENTURES (\$199.99 BluRay; Fox)

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE THE ORIGINAL TV SERIES (\$129.99 DVD; Paramount)

My Favorite Martian is one of those high concept TV shows that reigned in the silly days of the 1950s and 1960s

before The Mary Tyler Moore Show and Hill Street Blues revolutionized comedy and drama once and for all. Its first two seasons were shot in black and white while the third was shot in color. For whatever reason (sci-fi feels more natural in black and white?) it's the earlier shows that feel more believable. It's a modest distinction, but an interesting one: our dreams and fantasies are perhaps more acceptable when they're markedly different from "real life" and thus presented in black and white or the "unnatural" effect of 3-D, which pretends to be real but since you're looking at a flat screen makes its perspective exaggerated and strange. Martian is harmless, anonymous fare and I'm sure someone somewhere has seen it as an allegory for being closeted (our hero must hide a Martian's "alien" identity and "pass" as normal so the neighbors don't get freaked out). For anyone other than those who grew up with it and have fond memories, the show will not bear watching. Still, it's a credit to the considerable talent of Bill Bixby and Ray Walston that it is watchable still. They would both do much better with better material in the future.

Nurse Jackie had good material from the start, even if the Emmys seemed confused as to whether this was a drama or a comedy. Sure, there are funny moments, but this is unquestionably a black drama. Edie Falco is the pull and she's kept the show's focus on Jackie. But not even she could maintain the spiraling out of control nature of Jackie's life for seven seasons without a little strain. It's good they finally put it to rest with some dignity before things got truly ludicrous. An excellent cast maintained interest as well. I'm not sure how the show will play as a whole now that it's over. And isn't that the interesting new development of TV? What matters is not how it diverts us week to week, but the shape and arc of a show from beginning to end. Obviously, that matters less for procedurals with discrete episodes. But for most dramas with an ongoing storyline, the shape of a show once it's over will determine its fate, not any week to week pleasures it may have afforded. Unfortunately, I think Nurse Jackie was better with week to week shocks than it will prove when digested all at once, just like some serialized novels worked wonders when spaced out month to month but paled a little when gobbled all at once. We shall see.

Dexter had a great arc: too bad they didn't realize that arc ended with season five. It went on for eight seasons and had kind of a train wreck of a final year, complete with a ludicrous wrap-up that dims the show a bit. But nothing can detract from Michael C. Hall's masterful work, the essential work of Jennifer Carpenter as his sisters and the still amazing fact that they made a serial killer the likable star of a TV series. Like Buffy The Vampire Slayer, you can just watch five seasons, stop, and then marvel at its brilliance. Wait a while if you must watch the rest. Maybe the future of TV criticism is to provide an ideal guide to watching TV shows: which can be binge-watched, which should be doled out with only two (or maybe even just one!) episode at a time and with some space in between viewings, which seasons or episodes to skip for maximum pleasure and so on. Not a greatest hits approach like one might do for sitcoms, but a way to navigate good dramas and not ruin a good show by gobbling up episodes too fast. Here's a tip: watch The Wire with closed captioning on, stop watching Gilmore Girls when Rory goes to college, gorge on 24 all you want...and watch Dexter. For five years, it was brutally good.

Dexter accomplished the remarkable feat of making a serial killer the star of the show. (The new Wicked City is trying the same thing but even the ads make me dubious.) The Following is more traditional: our hero Kevin Bacon must track down evil himself. He may be plagued by darkness and the actual serial killer may be inspiring disciples and a lot of fun. But each week (or so) we get some satisfaction in seeing a bad guy put away, rather than waiting for justice delayed for five years. Like Criminal Minds and other similar shows, The Following is dark, dark, dark and just too grim for my tastes. But Bacon is a terrific actor, proving once again what range he has. (And following this with this surreal ads for eggs just to remind us he can do comedy.) Unfortunately, season three proved the last but not with any warning to the creatives: it ends on a cliffhanger, which is always a bad idea for a serialized drama. So fans will surely petition for a TV movie or miniseries to wrap things up. Buying the set would be one clear way to make your passion heard.

Just in time for the play's appearance on Broadway with Keira Knightley, here's a reissue of a UK miniseries

based on Thérèse Raquin, the novel by Émile Zola. It's been turned into a stage play, numerous films, an opera, a musical (by Harry Connick Jr.) and more, though never terribly successfully, I think. I haven't seen them all, not by a long stretch. The BBC tackled it in 1980, with Kate Nelligan, Brian Cox and Alan Rickman headed an excellent cast that as has happened before and since, can't raise Zola's plot above the melodrama of a married woman seemingly stuck in a major depression having a torrid but not apparently happy affair. Sex sells, I suppose.

Avatar The Last Airbender is the latest TV series to get repackaged and reissued again. Why does this happen? Big box stores like Walmart don't keep a library of DVDs in stock and don't reorder titles once they've been out for a while. So unless the studios release a "new" title, it won't be found in stores. So older product must get gussied up and put out if they want copies on sale for the holidays. On top of that, studios sense the days of people buying elaborate boxed sets are fading away and want to get some more sales done before everyone turns to streaming. Who cares, as long as great shows like Avatar are made available? It's a very smart animated series with a smart storyline, good characters, a convincing mythology and a clear, driving narrative. However, this show has been plagued by a bad mastering job since it first hit DVD many years ago. This set is just a repackaging of those previously issued discs so the blurry work on the first two seasons remains frustratingly in place. If this was remastered, it would be one of the best sets of the year. As it is, if you've never seen the show before, it's cheap and it's watchable. It's just not the definitive version this excellent series has never been given.

I'm even more stunned by the problems with The Civil War. Avatar The Last Airbender was never touted as being remastered. The Ken Burns documentary was and why wouldn't it be? It's one of the most popular and critically acclaimed works in TV history. If anything deserves careful preservation, it's a series like this. Unfortunately, the job was botched. I'm not techie, but something is dramatically off, with the brightness levels distractingly bright, ruining the image on the first two discs in particular. Looking online, it's a widespread problem, not one related to my set. Some folks suggest a work-around for people with the DVD players that can accommodate fiddling with certain settings, but that's all behind me. This needs to be recalled and done right. One can see how minor shows can skip through the cracks and get ignored. But a show like this? Hard to imagine what went wrong.

Lost In Space certainly isn't a classic like The Civil War but it is an enduring show of sorts and certainly fondly remembered. Don't worry: the discs look good. But it is a notably awkward boxed set, with the discs especially difficult to pull out and access. That aside, it's a silly series, intended for family viewing. Unlike My Favorite Martian, I think it has enough zip and depth of a sort to appeal to little kids and of course the adults who saw it the first time around (or in reruns as kids). It's a little campy, a little goofy, rarely terribly good or bad but always exactly aware of what it was. The copious extras are a pleasure for those watching this through a nostalgic haze.

Happily, not every TV show is plagued with remastering or packaging problems. Mission Impossible is the original series, not the 1980s reboot and not the feature films. Good, since the original series is by far the best incarnation of this franchise. And even it paled after the first few years. They've taken all the original discs, put them in a new compact but sturdy box and released it with the extras they had before in a new edition that's reasonably priced once sale prices are taken into account. Boxed sets that can satisfy fans and win new ones aren't always an impossible mission, apparently.

INDIAN SUMMERS (\$59.99 BluRay; PBS)

HOME FIRES (\$49.99 BluRay; PBS)

DOWNTON ABBEY SEASONS 1-5 (\$109.99 BluRay; PBS)

A ROOM WITH A VIEW (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion)

If every action film in the 1990s was pitched as "Die Hard On A Boat" or whatever, pretty much every period TV

show for the last five years has been nicknamed "Downton Abbey In New York City" or some such thing. It hasn't really worked yet, but since many (like me) are suckers for a British accent and a period setting, they keep coming. England has two perennial sources for stories: their occupation of India and the world wars. Indian Summers is set in India, with the mostly imperious British looking down on their dark-skinned wards while sleeping with one another or drinking themselves to death. It hopes to be *The Jewel In The Crown: The Series* but isn't close to that miniseries of even the soapy pleasure of *Downton* at its best. Instead, it's a slog, both too high-minded to be fun and too dumb to take serious. Some very fine actors are involved, but they are wasted, from Julie Walters chewing the scenery as Cynthia Coffin (!) on down.

Little better is *Home Fires*. This drama is set on the home front during World War II, with women the focus. It too has an excellent cast, but not the baby overload of *Call The Midwife* or any other factor to set it apart from a hundred other movies and tv shows and plays and books set in the same era. When even my Anglophile mother quickly loses interest, the limits of this one are clear.

Of course, *Downton Abbey* has all of them in the rear view mirror as it hurtles towards the series finale of its last season. I haven't been a fan of the show, which is a poor man's *Upstairs Downstairs* and has proven frustratingly inconsistent and -- worse -- repetitive in both storylines and how it deals with characters. From friends in the UK, however, they say the final episodes are proving zippier and more focused than in years. Clearly, having the finish line in sight is inspiring one and all to do their best work and send things off in style. Thank god Maggie Smith is still on board so she can hopefully have the last word. What we have here is the first five seasons neatly collected in one set and looking just smashing. Now of COURSE they're going to package all six seasons in one complete collection down the road, probably in varied versions, including one with a full tea service made of fine British china and another with a weekend pass to a stately home and so on. So you've been forewarned. But if you don't care about having them all in one neat set and can't wait, this will let you binge in style.

Mind you, when I want an English fix, I got to Italy. At least that's what happens when I watch the Merchant-Ivory masterpiece *A Room With A View*. It's a personal favorite simply bursting with great actors from Daniel Day Lewis and Simon Callow to Maggie Smith and of course Rupert Graves at his most floppy-haired and Helena Bonham Carter at her most lovely. She is hardly decorative, though: Carter gives a marvelous impassioned performance as Lucy Honeychurch, the young woman torn between her dutiful suitor (Day Lewis) and the impassioned Julian Sands. It's a wonderfully romantic and beautiful film, from the enrapturing use of pieces sung by Kiri Te Kanawa (you'll want the soundtrack) to the lush cinematography of Tony Pierce-Roberts. That beauty finally comes through in this BluRay from Criterion, which is impeccable (earlier editions were less satisfying). Of course, it also includes copious extras, as you expect from Criterion. Or should I say copious and stimulating extras, as one expects from Criterion. Lots of movies include slapped on extras; Criterion includes extras that actually inform and deepen your appreciation of the movie. Has it really been 30 years since this bauble first debuted? It remains an absolute pleasure.

NOTE: Prices and format are strictly based on what is made available to me for review. If they give me a DVD, that's the format and list price I include. Needless to say, every title here is often available in multiple disc formats not to mention on demand and via streaming so the list price included is virtually never what you'll pay and the format is always just one of many ways for seeing the work reviewed.

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