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DVDs: Can Someone Save Hilary Swank From Herself?

Posted October 16, 2007 | 02:19 PM (EST)

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It's worth repeating: the hardest part of being a movie star is picking the right projects. You can have all the talent in the world, but if you can't pick good scripts, you'll soon find your celebrity status has been squandered. Case in point: Hilary Swank. Swank is a two-time Oscar winner, so no one can doubt her abilities in the right role. But finding the right role - or just finding a role that isn't dramatically wrong - is tough for her. Swank and the people around her clearly have terrible taste in movies.

She broke through with her remarkable performance in 1999's Boys Don't Cry. Unfortunately, Swank followed that golden opportunity with the stiff costume clunker The Affair Of The Necklace, box office flop The Gift, soggy well-intentioned drama Red Dust and the ludicrous sci-fi flick The Core. Yes, she did some good work in Insomnia and HBO's Iron Jawed Angels, but one could be forgiven for thinking that Oscar had been a mistake.

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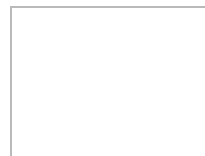
But then Swank did it again with her stunning work in Clint Eastwood's Million Dollar Baby. Then she really did it again by following up that vindication of her talent with three more dreadful films: would-be noir The Black Dahlia, the earnest Freedom Writers and now this week's DVD release, the horror thriller

flop The Reaping (\$28.98; Warner Bros.). Quick, somebody save this talented actress from her own worst instincts.

The anti-Swank may be Topher Grace, an actor who savvily turned his modest TV hit That 70s Show - whose Season Seven (\$49.98; Fox) is just out - into a platform to launch his movie career with well-chosen turns in films like Traffic, P.S., Spider-Man 3, and In Good Company. Now he's considered an actor just one big hit away from taking over the mantle of Tom Hanks or Jack Lemmon.

Also out this week is Planet Terror (\$29.95; Dimension), Robert Rodriguez's half of the Grindhouse B movie double feature. This two DVD set with loads of extras does not contain the original theatrical cut, just the longer version released overseas. It joins Quentin Tarantino's Death

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Proof (\$29.95; Dimension), which came out a few weeks ago, and really the whole experience of these movies has been a disappointing mess.

The original theatrical release showed both films with fake trailers for other B flicks thrown in and was a glorious goof. Most critics - like me - thought Rodriguez did best with *Planet Terror*, though Tarantino gave an awesome car chase and great freeze frame ending to the experience.

Unfortunately, the three plus hour double feature flopped. Overseas, both movies were released individually in longer versions with a number of critics believing Tarantino redeemed himself and improved his movie mightily. Rodriguez's fun, on the other hand, was reduced by making *Terror* stretch out.

Personally, my first instinct after seeing both of them was that they would have been even more fun if they were shorter, not longer. I challenge both directors to cut their movies to 65 minutes, creating a real grindhouse experience.

But worst of all is the DVD release. Instead of beginning with a lavish boxed set that contained both versions of the movies - their original US release and the longer overseas version - with loads of extras, they're being sold separately with only the longer version available. I'm sure some day we'll get the original movie experience that most critics championed and hardcore fans loved. But there's no excuse in the DVD age for not including both versions of each movie. That's just lazy indifference to the fans. But don't let that keep you away from checking them out: both flicks are fun, just not as satisfying on DVD as they should be.

Other releases: Richard Gere uses his shaggy, slightly disreputable charm to good effect in the con man drama *The Hoax* (\$29.99; Miramax); aliens use Earth as a giant boxing ring in the noisy, silly *Transformers Special Edition* (\$36.99; DreamWorks); Angelina Jolie regains her acting mojo in the quiet, nicely observed hostage drama *A Mighty Heart* (\$29.99; Paramount); the contemplative gem *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left For The East: Director's Edition* (\$29.95; Milestone), another release that should offer both the extended version and the theatrical version but doesn't; *Night of Lust* (\$19.95; Independent International), a naughty French skin flick from the early 60s notable now mostly for jazz legend Chet Baker's score; Finnish director Aki Kaurismaki's finale to his gently romantic, gently funny "Loser" trilogy, *Lights in the Dusk* (\$27.99; Strand); *Girl 27* (\$19.98; Westlake), a so-so documentary about an explosive Hollywood scandal involving rape from MGM's golden days; **closeted Hollywood legend Raymond Burr** followed Perry Mason with *Ironside Season 2* (\$49.98; Shout), the wheelchair bound seeker of justice whose show was filled with guest stars like Bill Bixby, Ed Asner and Anne Baxter; *The Invisible* (\$29.99; Hollywood) goes nowhere with its story of a dead teen's ghost haunting the people he left behind, but **star Justin Chatwin** has enough charisma to show he deserves better; *Ramones: It's Alive 1974-1996* (\$19.98; Rhino), a two disc set lovingly compiled by Rhino contains seemingly every concert clip they could get their hands on from this legendary band's raucous career; and *Show Business: The Road To Broadway* (\$28.95; Liberation), a good documentary capturing the bumpy journey of four musicals to the Tonys: *Wicked*, *Taboo*, *Caroline or Change* and *Avenue Q*.

So tell me, is Hilary Swank squandering her Oscar glory? Will Topher Grace become the next Tom Hanks? And did you see the *Grindhouse* movies in the theater, will you check them out on DVD or do you just not care about zombies and hour-long car chases?

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

I don't know about Hillary's choices, it's just that sometimes even reading a script won't let you know whether or not you can make it a good film or it's just going to be for the money. Or at least not all the time.

She's a kind of a different actress and I find myself looking to see what she comes up with next. But not always happy with the results.

So my question back at you would be: Is she really in that much demand? Do the big shots throw scripts at her? Or does her agent not have a clue as to what to give her?

Because she does have an unusual persona and maybe, just maybe, despite her acting chops, she just doesn't come across as someone that is the first pick as an actress in a big budget romance or drama movie?(Is actress the right word or is everyone an ACTOR now, I get confused)

I find myself in a delimma. I liked Topher in T70S, but I thought he basically played a version of that character in all of his movies except Spiderman 3. So I just cannot see him ever taking over the mantle of Hanks or Lemmon. Not even in my wildest dreams. He just doesn't have that....well...that indefinable something that made both those men such great stars to watch. Even in Good Company just seemed like a more mature version of Eric. Traffic and SM3 were about the only ones he seemed like a different person.

Grindhouse was great and I would love to see the long versions. Something about his movies that just makes you love them. He has a great style of moviemaking and he'll always get my money for tickets.

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

uhhh...topher grace is one to follow? i mean, he made some pretty good films but he was also in "win a date with tad hamilton!"--so, maybe it's not just about picking the right roles any more than it's taking a job to make some money.....

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The key to getting an Oscar is to gain weight for a role, to call attention to the plight of some people, or for a female to shatter stereotypes by kicking ass.

You can tell when a film was made with an Oscar in mind.

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Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

True, but wanting an Oscar and choosing a role you think would be Oscar catnip is FAR from getting a nomination, much less an Oscar or people would get them all the time. I'm certain Swank, a nobody at the time, did NOT have Oscar in mind when choosing Boys Don't Cry, an indie flick that would be lucky to get a solid release but became a phenom. Million Dollar Baby -- given her role and her character's fate and Clint Eastwood's involvement -- was much more of a conscious, this is gonna be Oscar worthy choice. Last year, people made Dreamgirls, The Good Shepherd, The Painted Veil, The Pursuit of Happyness, Home of the Brave, The Good German, The History Boys, Bobby and many many other films just KNOWING they would win an Oscar. It rarely works out that way.

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Alvin4NY See Profile I'm a Fan of Alvin4NY permalink

The shift in asking price when you receive an Oscar goes waaaaayyyyyy up -- and as soon as you win, you get offers up the ass. She probably picked a couple of movies that paid top dollar despite her mis-givings, and who cares? In this industry, you have to stay true to your art, but you also want to protect your future, and have a cushion so that you can take the roles that pay less, but offer more, artistically speaking. Hillary hasn't made any choices she can't recover from.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 01:52 PM on 10/18/2007

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Well, maybe she was cashing in. But you can do that without doing junk. And once you start making movies for the money, it can become very hard to regain the momentum you had artistically. And long term, you'll do a lot better financially if you make good movies. On the other hand, there's Nicolas Cage.

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mamacat See Profile I'm a Fan of mamacat permalink

I love Hilary Swank. She is incapable of making a bad movie.
I like Topher Grace, but really, to compare him to Ms. Swank?

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Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

You're teasing, right? You don't think The Core was a bad movie?

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DasBoot See Profile I'm a Fan of DasBoot permalink

Yes, Hillary Swank made some bad choices in-between, but nothing comes close to Halle Berry following her Oscar with the god-awful Catwoman. She should have been forced to return the trophy right then.

That's what happens when the Academy gives out an Oscar based on one good movie. Kate Winslet on the other hand delivers world class performances in great movies en mass, but still gets shunned.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:21 AM on 10/17/2007

rpence See Profile I'm a Fan of rpence permalink

Another good thing about Kate W. is that she gets naked a lot in movies--and that's something never to be shunned!!

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Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Yes, I think all actors -- male and female - should be encouraged to embrace nudity

-- even when they reach their AARP years like the commendable turns by Nicholson and Kathy Bates.

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Catwoman was horrific. But she also followed the Oscar with two more X-Men movies and Jinx in Bond. None of them challenging, but very commercially successful. Plus the TV movie Their Eyes Were Watching God. So nothing to cement her abilities as an actress, but she strengthened her box office pull. Kate Winslet indeed has excellent, challenging taste and proven she's the real deal many times over.

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

My biggest problem with Tarantino's 'Death Proof' is Trantino himself. He keeps getting in the way of his own junky material.

There's no denying the power and the fun of the climactic car chase. I've played the final 20 minutes over and over several times, but despite the acclaim the director continues to receive for the rhythm and delivery of his dialog, this longer version released just a couple of weeks ago actually highlights the film's - and the director's - enormous weakness; every character talks exactly the same. Are these the only kind of people Tarantino knows? He needs to expand his social activities and listen to conversations made by people who read something more substantial than a graphic novel. Not everyone drops the f-bomb after every other syllable or knows the lyrics to songs by Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick and Titch. Here, each character is foul-mouthed, seemingly uneducated, trivial, and full of pop-culture references that serve no purpose other than highlighting the fact that these people have nothing interesting to say, and in this longer version they keep saying nothing in particular for over 90 minutes. The only performer that can't deliver Tarantino's dialog is the director himself, and that's because he's such a lousy actor of no depth whatsoever.

I look forward to the day when Tarantino writes and directs an intelligent drama populated with people who actually sound as though they completed college, have never read a comic book, don't require junk-culture references to make a point, and no one carries a gun. Now, that's a challenge. I'm not sure he's up to it.

For anyone who might be interested in the old-fashioned double feature of the early days of cinema, complete with fake trailers, try to find a copy of 'Movie Movie' with George C Scott. Not a great film, but humorous, all the same, and worth a look.

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Citizen54 [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Citizen54](#) [permalink](#)

I agree that Tarantino's dialog can be a flaw and think you described the problem perfectly. But I do think he made an "intelligent drama" with Jackie Brown. Sure, there was the prolific swearing, and the jokey stuff like the chicks-with-guns bit on tv (hilarious), but the conversations between Jackie and the bail bondsman (played by Robert Forster) were mature and believable. When I first saw the movie, I wondered if Tarantino wrote their lines.

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

I'm not sure you know what grindhouse cinema is or have ever seen one. I own hundreds of titles from the era and I'm happy Tarantino and Rodriguez tried to make a new one for a new generation. Let's remember folks: With names like Death Proof and Planet Terror, I don't think they were trying to make a college-grad film with no guns and oscar-caliber dialogue. You have to love those old grindhouse movies to really be able to talk about them. And something I've found, people love to talk about movies and genres they know nothing about. It's like putting down Cannibal Holocaust for being Cannibal Holocaust. "I hate cannibals and cannibal movies! So I'm going to talk about how bad it is and how I wish it could've been just like Million Dollar Baby!" Maybe Cannibal Holocaust just isn't for you. On the other hand, if you want depth and meaning in your movies, just look at Hillary Swank's latest . . .

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

PS> My above post was aimed at Apples, not Michael.

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 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

I'm not sure if you think Tarantino could do a better job at the sort of film he makes or just don't like his type of movies. He'll always make flicks stuffed with pop cultural references, I'm afraid. I haven't made up my mind yet whether I prefer his shorter or longer version, but unlike most critics I thought Rodriguez did a better job of creating a real grindhouse movie. Tarantino amde a "real" movie pretending to be grindhouse.

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

Don't misunderstand me, I like his movies a lot. I like the way they look - the wide screen photography, the framing, the use of color - plus I really do like his writing, but there comes a time when you want such a talent to move on. I'd like him to truly challenge himself and stop making all of his characters sound the same.

When Uma Thurmon's character finally comes face to face with John Carradine in 'Kill Bill' I was waiting for some verbal fireworks to explode, something truly inventive to knock my socks off - considering what we'd been through up until that point I think the audience deserved some startling pay off. Instead, Carradine's character starts using comic book references, just like so many other Tarantino characters, to make his slow point. My eyes rolled.

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

Traffic and Spider Man 3 were "good choices"? SM3 was famously bad (but successful, maybe that's all that counts) and Traffic was a bunch of 30-second policy speeches strung together in the vain hope of making a movie -- especially Topher Grace's little screed in the car with Mike Douglas. Unwatchable.

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

I'm sure Topher wishes he could find more "unwatchable" films like "Traffic" to participate in.

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 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Im with Brueso, fatjoe. And you skipped over the two films I prefer more. I admit it: I really dig Topher. He's got a very amiable persona on That 70s Show and used it well in A Date With Tad Hamilton, proving he's got romantic comedy potential. I thought his work in PS was very appealing too, though I didn't love the movie. I thought Spider-Man 2 was better than SM3, but Topher in particular gave a fun, nasty edge to his role in Venom (no one I know complained about Topher, just that Venom was killed off, going against all the backstory of the comics). YOU didn't think he held his own? Certainly it was a smart choice by doing well in a film that would be a blockbuster. And I personally love the original miniseries Traffik and really didn't care for Soderbergh's condensed film version. Nonetheless, it was a strong commercial hit, got Oscar nominations, and Topher had a good supporting role undercutting his goody-goody image from That 70s Show and letting people know he was up for anything, not just leading man roles. Of course his character was SUPPOSED to be annoying. Finally, the best of the batch is In Good Company, a very underappreciated drama, even though it did good box office and got very good reviews. Like Jack Lemmon's best work, I think it commented on corporate America and gave Topher his most complex, interesting role. I really think he has potential.

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