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DVDs: The Cover-up Of The Assassination of Jesse James....

Posted February 4, 2008 | 11:50 PM (EST)

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Momentum is a funny thing. *No Country For Old Men* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and glory has surrounded it from day one, with Javier Bardem garnering numerous awards for his portrayal of a killer and the movie itself darn near every end of the year award in sight.

The Assassination of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford (\$27.98; Warner Bros.) premiered at the Venice Film Festival, where Brad Pitt won the Best Actor award even though he's clearly in a supporting role while Casey Affleck is the lead. Affleck garnered tons of praise for playing Ford and has a shot at winning Best Supporting Actor if he can come from behind and beat the favorite... Javier Bardem. *Jesse James* received some end of the year accolades, including lots of mentions for Affleck, the brilliant cinematography by Roger Deakins and even Best Picture from the San Francisco critics.

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But *No Country* has become the top-grossing film (happily so) for the Coen Brothers while unless you live in a few major cities the chances are that *Assassination of Jesse James* didn't even play in your town. It's grossed less than \$4 million in the US.

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Well, I hope you have a great home theater system because this is a great, great movie (and my favorite of the year). Don't pop it in late at night when you're a little sleepy: it's two hours and forty minutes long -- and a thoughtful two hours and forty minutes at that. It's also strikingly beautiful -- almost satirically picture postcard at first. Though this isn't some revisionist demythologizing work, the beauty of the images does reinforce the aura of "hero" that surrounded the basically thuggish outlaw **Jesse James**. Robert Ford (Affleck) idolized James all his life, collected every novel and article and photo of James he could find, pored over them again and again and yearned to step into those stories.

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He did, but at a sad price. Ford is a squirrely little man and Affleck's greatness here is in letting us empathize and understand and even care about Ford without ever playing for our sympathy or trying to make Ford "likable." Ford is so thin-skinned and unsure of himself that it's doubtful, but one of the questions of the movie is whether things might have worked out differently if everyone - even the amiable James - hadn't mocked the transparently eager and nervous Ford at every turn.

I suppose the movie is about one of the first celebrities and hero worship and the real truth behind the West of our dreams. But that sidesteps the deep pleasure of the straightforward story director Andrew Dominik tells: the story of an outlaw burdened by fame and the sad character who worships and kills him and then desperately tries to get on with what is left of his life.

It's a leisurely movie but because of a complicated production history, Dominik may have an even longer version that hews more completely to the **Ron Hansen novel** it's based on. (That may explain why this DVD has no extras to speak of.) I'd love to see it someday but you wouldn't want to miss what's here - a great Western to rank alongside *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Ride The High Country*.

Also out: *Slings & Arrows: The Complete Collection* (\$59.99; Acorn), all three seasons of the acclaimed series about a threadbare theatrical troupe; Rosario Dawson's bold performance as a woman who is raped but refuses (to say the least) to be a victim in *Descent* (\$26.98; City Lights); *The Aristocats* (\$29.99; Disney), one of the animated studio's second-tier yet solid flicks and surely the highlight of Eva Gabor's film career; *Route 66 Season One Volume Two* (\$29.98; Roxbury), one of TV's landmark anthology shows disguised as a road trip; Lindsay Anderson's brutally fascinating kitchen sink drama *This Sporting Life* (\$39.95; Criterion) with three Anderson documentaries as very welcome extras; the video game documentary *The King of Kong* (\$27.98; New Line) with extras that compellingly update the story and make this essential viewing even for people who saw the movie in the theater; *Romeo & Juliet...Get Married* (\$19.98; LifeSize) puts a soccer spin on the awfully pliable romance by Shakespeare; *Midnight Express* (\$19.94; Columbia) the harrowing Alan Parker drama that taught US travelers once and for all that it is *not* a good idea to bring drugs into another country; *Beauty and the Beast: The Final Season* (\$50.99; Paramount), the end of Ron Perlman's unlikely stint as a romantic lead; *Rocket Science* (\$27.98; HBO), another quirky teen comedy that proves misguided when it lets the plot overwhelm some interesting characters; *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (\$29.98; Universal), a far less-compelling sequel which makes the fact that Cate Blanchett is so riveting anyway all the more remarkable; *Third Watch Complete First Season* (\$59.98; Warner Bros.), the poor man's *ER*, though not when it comes to the extremely watch-able Eddie Cibrian; *ER Complete Eighth Season* (\$49.98; Warner Bros.), the rich man's *Third Watch*; *The Wiz 30th Anniversary Edition* (\$19.98; Universal), which contains a bonus eight song CD though really it's an eight song CD with a bonus DVD containing the movie; Julie Taymor's woebegone Beatles musical *Across The Universe* (\$28.96; Columbia); and finally, one of the greats, Billy Wilder's classic *The Apartment* (\$19.98; MGM) in a new edition with extras including a salute to the versatile, remarkable Jack Lemmon.

So what's your favorite Western and/or your favorite Jack Lemmon movie?

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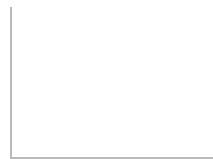
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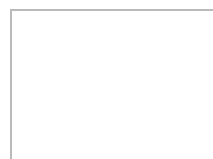
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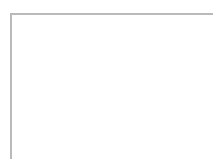
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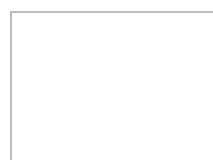
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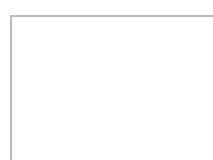
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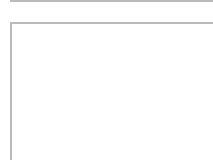
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I'm generally not a big fan of Westerns - but I do like a few - usually the spaghetti type. I know everyone always mentions The Good, The Bad and The Ugly - but I prefer High Plains Drifter. The man with no name just suddenly appearing on the horizon always gets me.

For a serious Jack Lemmon movie, I love The China Syndrome and for a comedy Some Like It Hot.

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I loved Jack Lemmon in Tuesdays with Morrie. My favorite westerns are Destry Rides Again (Jimmy Stewart with exceptionally long legs) and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.

I saw The Apartment and Days with Wine and Roses the years they came out. Considering that I was 5 years old in 1960, I can understand why I didn't get anything out of those movies. I suppose I'll have to give them another try.

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Nothing can beat "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" in my mind. From the Ennio Moricone score, to the cinematography, and direction by Sergio Leone, nearly a perfect picture.

Not to mention perfect casting in the lead roles. Clint playing the angel of mercy, Blondie, not the typical western hero, but a badass who just happens to possess a heart, Eli Wallach, the entertainingly despicable "Tuco" the rat, and Lee Van Cleef playing one of the most cold hearted killers in cinema history, pure brilliance.

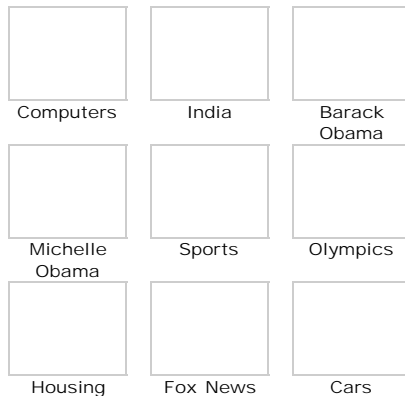
And plenty of great lines, as when a would be killer of Wallach gives a little speech before trying to dispatch him in a bathtub, only to be shot himself with Wallach warning him, a bit too late, "If you're going to shoot, shoot, don't talk."

And the end of the film too was perfect, bringing the Tuco-Blondie relationship full circle, as Wallach teeters on the cross, hands tied behind his back, eyeing the gold, with a noose tightening around his neck and the disappearing figure of Blondie on the horizon.

Eastwood westerns got a bit too contemplative after that for my tastes. If I want to watch a movie about

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the moral implications of killing a man I'll watch another genre.

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I completely agree with your assessment of The Assassination of Jesse James. Casey Affleck and Brad Pitt are both tremendous. I love how the movie takes its time, at a pace befitting the world it was portraying. Once the viewer settles in for a few minutes, they'll feel transported to a different time and place, which any great period piece should do.

It's interesting how this film and No Country For Old Men act like Western bookends, a century apart. Each depicts the end of an era in the West.

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