

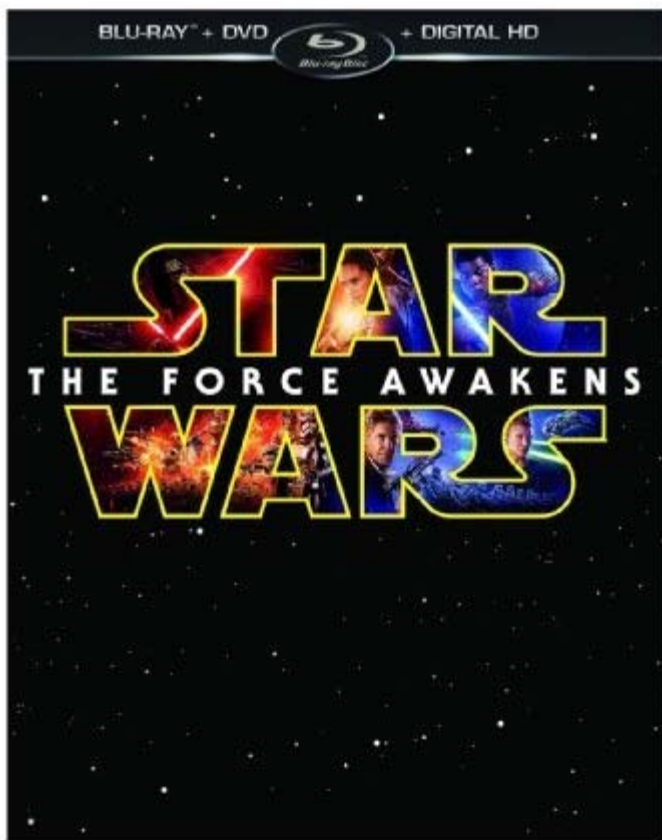


Michael Giltz, ContributorBookFilter creator

DVDs: DiCaprio's Triumph; Jackie Robinson's Legacy; A Great Agatha Christie Miniseries And That "Star Wars" Remake (I Mean, Reboot)

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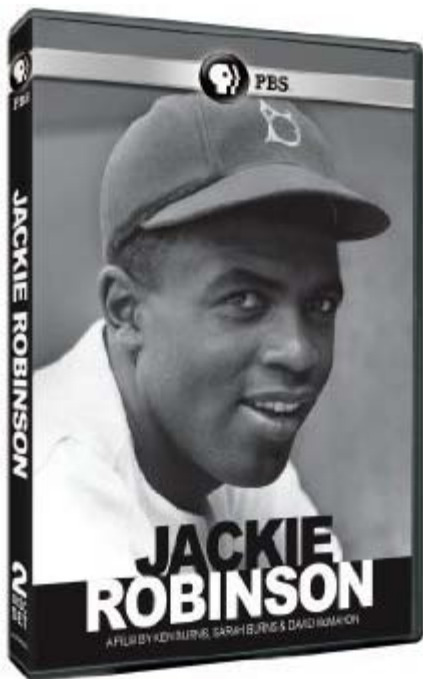


THE REVENANT (\$39.99 BluRay; 20th Century Fox)

STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Walt Disney Studios)

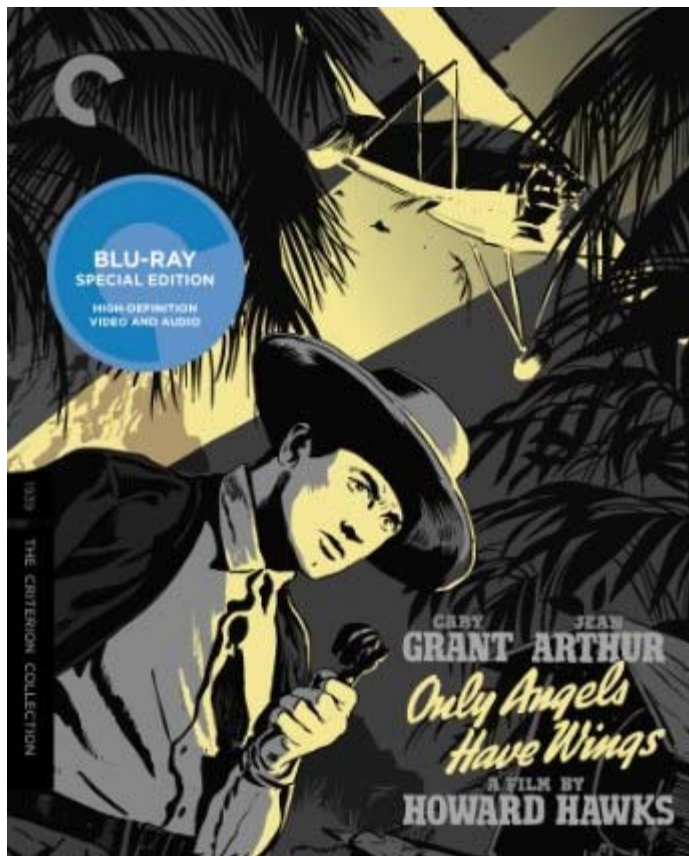
Two movies widely recognized as critical and popular successes...and all I can do is harrumph. I read the novel *The Revenant* to prepare for the movie and thought it was a fun, propulsive tale. Pure adventure but with an intriguingly off-kilter ending. No big finale after a novel's worth of building and building to said showdown. It reminded me in a way of Elmore Leonard's great Western *Valdez Is Coming*. But here, there's just a touch of mysticism, of communing with nature. I thought, "Huh! That'll be interesting to see. I wonder how they'll pull it off." Well, they didn't even try. Rather hilariously, they ignore the great ending of the novel and just have a boring old, mano-a-mano showdown that made me laugh knowing what I knew and having spent the whole movie anticipating the non-showdown showdown. That's not the only mistake for this movie that will surely suffer when looked back on even ten years from now. The book was a model of efficiency. But the movie dumbed down most everything. Various tribes of Indians attack the white men intruding on their territories. But since that might make them look savage, the movie creates an Indian princess held hostage and threatened with rape (but seemingly not actually raped) so the Indians would have a "reason" to attack white men, as if white men invading their world wasn't reason enough. Worse, one Indian is given a noble speech about how bad white men are, in case we missed the point. Ditto our hero, played very well by Leonardo DiCaprio. In the novel, he's abandoned when wounded by two men who even steal his only means of self-defense. Apparently that's not enough to justify a passionate desire for revenge. So he's given a son they kill off-handedly so Leo's revenge will seem purer. He's also given an Indian wife, now dead, who appears to him in dreams, smiling mystically when he is soaked in blood because of course she approves. All this means the beautiful cinematography is undermined by hocus-pocus, again because the simple beauty of nature isn't enough. If you watch the movie cold, it will be fine in one viewing but you'll hardly be drawn back. If you've read the good, not great, book, even once is too much.

Similarly, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is a let down. It's not the crushing let-down of *Phantom Menace*. It was hard to convince yourself *that* movie was good even as you watched it. But this time around, the vibe is right, the look is right, the old gang is back and it actually *feels* like a *Star Wars* movie. They're homages to those Saturday morning serials (just like Indiana Jones franchise) and frankly it's been 33 years since we've seen a "new" chapter. (Those flashbacks to 1-3 don't count.) So, great! Unfortunately, once it's over and you can happily breathe again because it didn't totally suck, you have to admit it also wasn't that good. In fact, wait a second, dear God, it's the EXACT SAME PLOT AS *STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE* aka frickin' *Star Wars*, as far as I'm concerned. It's not the next chapter, it's not even a reboot really. It's almost a note for note remake. Most tiresome are the jokey, nudge-nudge references to the earlier movies that constantly take place. And I'm admirably annoyed as only a leftie New Yorker could be over the treatment of Chewbacca. I mean, really, he's STILL not the pilot of the Millennium Falcon, just the co-pilot? That's kind of absurd, really. As with so many of these franchises, you watch it and sort of enjoy what you can and immediately kindle a new hope: maybe the *next* one will be really good. God knows, I dig the trailer for *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*.



JACKIE ROBINSON (\$24.99 DVD; PBS)

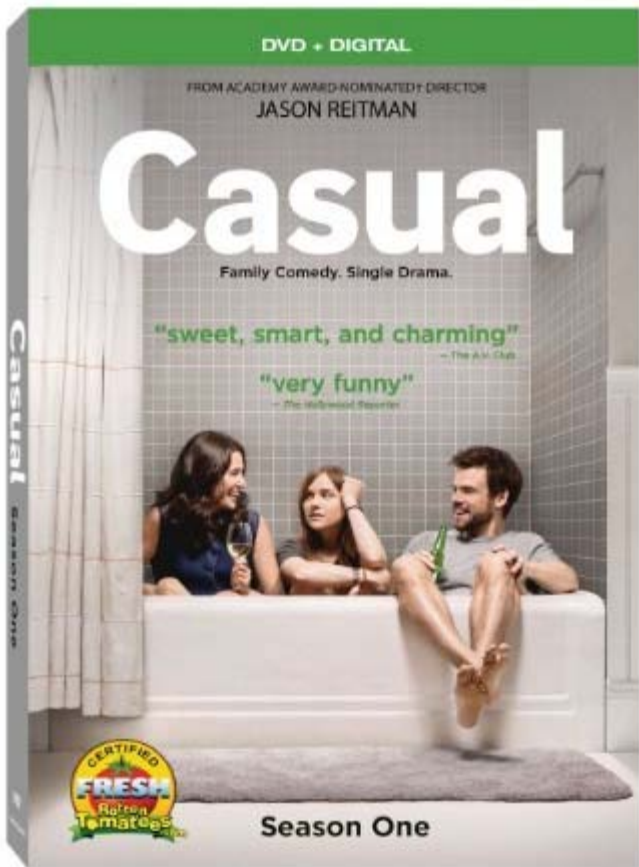
I'm almost certain I'm saying the same thing every other reviewer of this four hour documentary by Ken Burns has said before. Hasn't Jackie Robinson been done already, from an entire episode of *Baseball* to feature films to biographies? Well, not nearly enough, apparently. This work tells the full arc of Robinson's life and it's a fascinating one. Just start watching and in ten minutes you'll know you made the right decision.



ONLY ANGELS HAVE WINGS (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion)

I was just a dumb kid the first time I saw *Only Angels Have Wings* at the Olde Tyme Movie House, a revival theater in South Florida in the 1970s. Every week they showed a classic Hollywood film. I thought movies about adults that were funny and mature and sophisticated and sexy and daring and captivating and yet somehow fine for the whole family were a dime a dozen. Today, they seem like a unicorn, a magical creature we spot once in a great while from the studios of today, but rarely enough that we're never sure if the latest spotting will be the last one in our lifetime. I was also too dumb to know that director Howard Hawks was once dismissed as a genre director, sort of a glorified hack churning out entertainments until various critics (not just the French), said holy cow, these guys directed a lot of great movies. Here you've got Cary Grant running an airmail service in the middle of nowhere. Flying the planes is dangerous. Landing them is even more dangerous. Great broads like Jean Arthur and Rita Hayworth are along for the ride but it's a manly man's world. What a corker! It was released in 1939, often dubbed the greatest year in movie history and this is just one of many, many reasons. But it's a damn good one and this new edition from Criterion is spotless, from the great print to great extras like a radio play version with most of the cast and a chat between Hawks and Peter Bogdanovich.







- EPISODES SEASON 4** (\$29.98 DVD; Showtime)
- THE ODD COUPLE SEASON ONE** (\$36.98 DVD; Paramount)
- CASUAL SEASON ONE** (\$29.98 DVD; Lionsgate)
- GRACE AND FRANKIE SEASON 1** (\$29.98 DVD; Lionsgate)
- SILICON VALLEY SEASON TWO** (\$34.98 BluRay; HBO Studios)

When it came to the cast of *Friends*, I handicapped Matthew Perry as the One Most Likely To Succeed. But darned if Matt LeBlanc isn't the guy piling on the interesting credits, from hosting *Top Gear* to this British-US sitcom *Episodes*, a deft spoof of Hollywood and the star system. The next season of *Episodes* will be its last, ending in 2017 once they figure out when to film it around all of LeBlanc's other commitments.

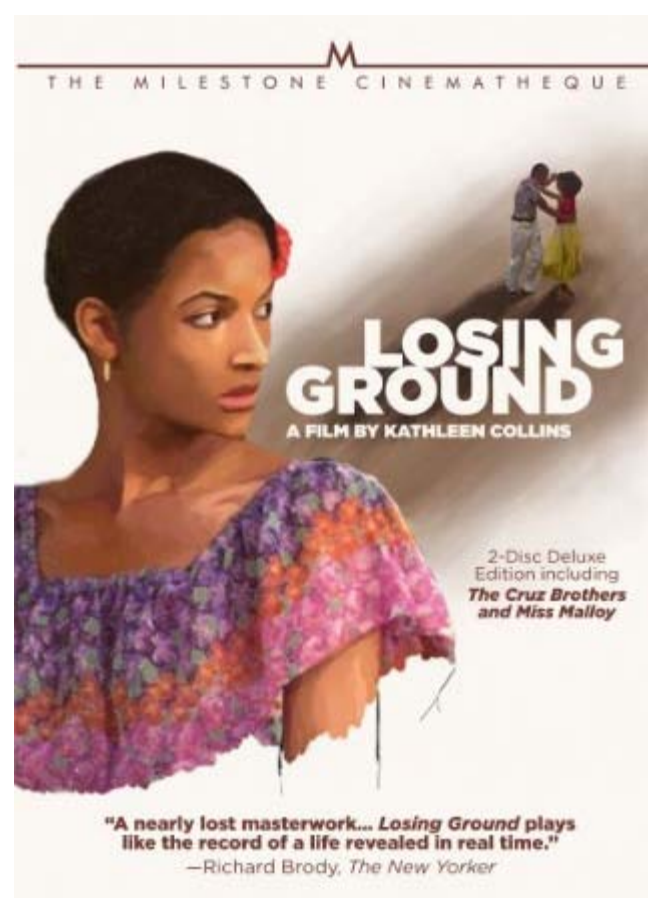
Meanwhile, Perry is in the far less interesting reboot of *The Odd Couple*. Nothing wrong with that in theory; it's been done one way or another countless times before and will be countless times again. The twist here is that Perry is playing the slob...and that's where the inventiveness ends. Maybe they'll find their reason for being in season two.

Increasingly, the action for sitcoms is not found on the major networks but farther afield, whether it's cable or even streaming services like Hulu. They've got *Casual*, created by Zander Lehmann and given a stamp of approval by Jason Reitman. A divorced single mom and her brother live together, raising her daughter and trying to try try again on the dating scene. The Golden Globes were savvy enough to nominate it for Best Comedy (they've got a thing for Reitman) and when you're trying to decide what to watch among the ever-growing list of good TV, that's as good a marker as any.

The pleasures to be had from Netflix's *Grace And Frankie* are certainly modest. But reuniting two-thirds of *9 To*

5 and letting them goof off around each other is surprisingly endearing if not earth-shaking. Lily Tomlin is so loopy you're almost surprised when she remembers her lines and Jane Fonda is amusing when tart. Sure their husbands left them for true love...with each other. But that's nothing compared to the daily indignity of growing older in a youth-obsessed world. Mild but consistent fun.

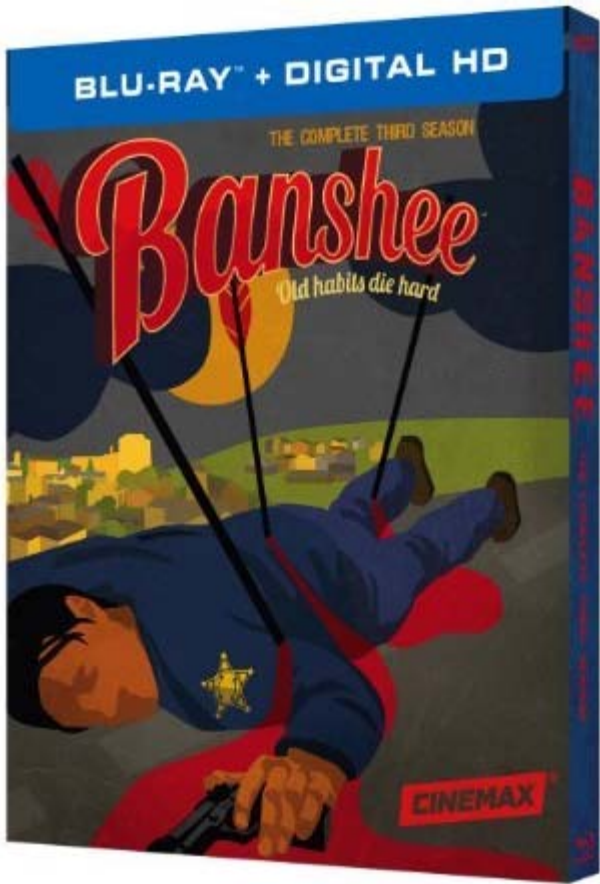
Finally, HBO is in dire trouble when it comes to new dramas. But its sitcoms are in solid shape, from *Veep* and *Girls* (both of which should indeed wind it up) to *Silicon Valley*, a look at the world of tech start-ups. Its co-creator is Mike Judge, who has an impeccable track record. *Beavis and Butthead* may be a little over-praised but it's distinctive and goofy and pretty awesome. (And the movie is better.) The animated sitcom *King Of The Hill* is probably the most underrated sitcom of the past few decades, capturing middle America without condescension or pandering (no small feat). Throw in the cult classic movie *Office Space* and his couch-potty invention in *Idiocracy* and you've got yourself a heck of a resume. Now he can lay claim to this show, battling it out with AMC for a look at the oh-so-spoofable insular world of Silicon Valley and its nerdy denizens. Elon Musk may not get the joke, but the people being tweaked usually don't.



LOSING GROUND (\$39.99 BluRay; Milestone Films)

One is torn between bemoaning what might have been and celebrating what is -- let's lean towards the latter. Writer-director Kathleen Collins died too young of cancer at 46, but not before delivering this acclaimed feature film debut, a movie rescued from oblivion by Milestone Films. A professor of philosophy sees her husband's eye a'wandering and decides to take up a student's offer to act in his student film. And that was before realizing her co-star would be the student's uncle, a magnetic fellow who'd already begun flirting with her. Seret Scott holds the screen beautifully, Bill Gunn is solid as her husband and Duane Jones (*Night Of The Living Dead*, *Ganga & Hess*, *Beat Street*) is outstanding as Duke, the man who can philosophize with the best

of them. But it's a tribute above all to the unfulfilled potential of Collins who in 1982 at least proved she could deliver the goods. Included as a bonus feature is her 1980 work *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Molloy*, a 54 minute film which I've yet to watch.





BANSHEE: COMPLETE THIRD SEASON (\$34.98 BluRay; HBO Studios)
PRISONERS' WIVES COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$59.99 DVD: Acorn)

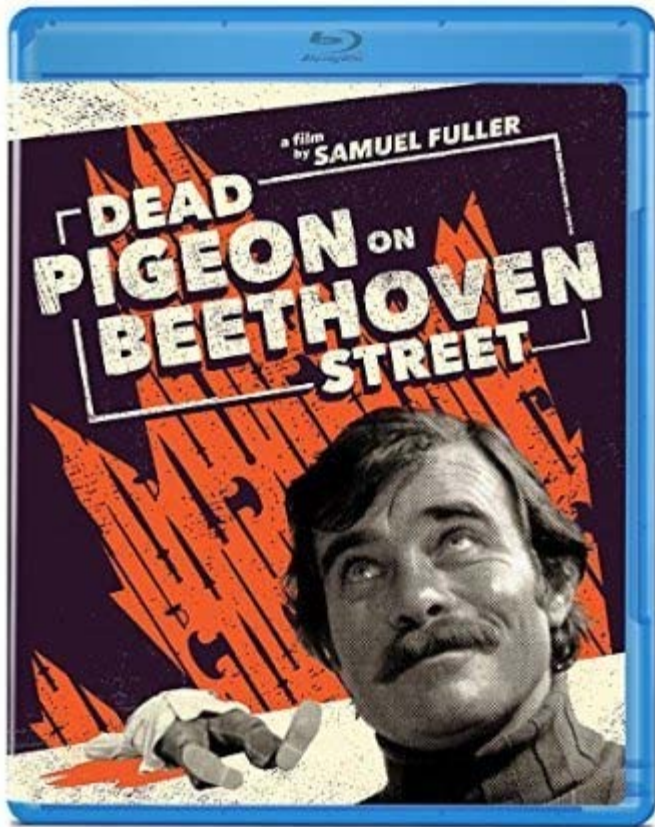
HAVEN: COMPLETE FIFTH SEASON (\$49.98 BluRay; Entertainment One)

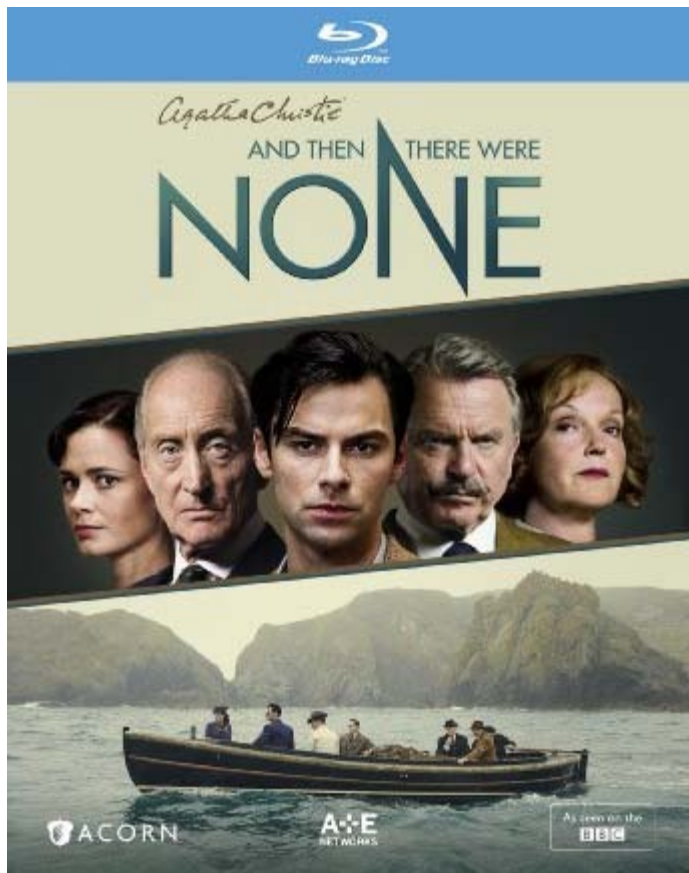
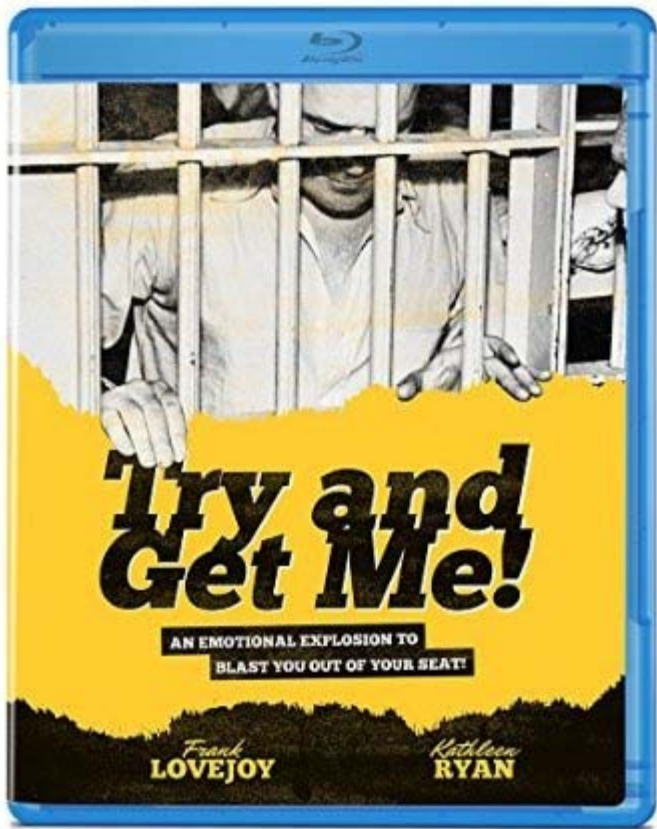
Almost by accident, US companies have cotted on to the fact that producing 22 episodes of a drama or sitcom every season is exceptionally difficult. More importantly, they now realize it's often not good for business either. Some shows aren't *meant* to run 100 episodes. Between tentative orders for eight or ten episodes for the first season and not being able to afford cranking them out 22 at a time, cable and streaming channels almost by default have discovered that one size doesn't fit all. A show like *Banshee* has a very particular premise about a guy just out of prison and facing off with organized crime. To tell the story right, it can't be dragged out forever. And if they want to make money off people binge-watching the entire run or buying a BluRay set, then letting the show run its course and stop -- giving viewers a beginning and a middle and an end -- is actually more profitable than destroying the experience by ramping up production. So now we've got season three of *Banshee* with the last eight episodes already airing on Cinemax. They'll have 33 episodes in all and that's just fine. Similarly, the acclaimed *Prisoners' Wives* from the UK shows the life of wives when their loved one is put behind bars. It's quiet, observant and funny. Season one had six episodes. season two had four. Maybe there won't be any more. That's fine too. *Haven* is most like the major network shows of old. But it's an offbeat sci-fi series spun off from a Stephen King tale and it too has a specific beginning and middle and end, all centering around a small town in Maine that is beset by supernatural doings. Endlessly stretching it out would frustrate everyone! So you've got four seasons of 13 episodes each. And a fifth and final season...of 26 episodes. Does that make sense? Not really. But you get 78 episodes in all and the knowledge that they could prepare for the finale with their eyes wide open. Is all this mapped out at the beginning of every series? Of course not. Is the temptation to keep a show like *Breaking Bad* going and going awfully strong? Of course. But thanks to so many outlets vying for content, more and more we're seeing shows being given at least a chance to end on their own terms.



THE LADY IN THE VAN (\$34.99 BluRay; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment)

I was awfully lucky to see Maggie Smith on stage in London performing in the Alan Bennett play *The Lady In The Van*. Based on an event in the playwright's life, it was about a somewhat homeless, fitfully eccentric woman who parked her van in the driveway of a playwright one day and stayed put. For years. It was a showcase for Smith, who could bring this creature to endearingly eccentric life without ever actually making her cutesy. Never once did Smith deign to make the lady in the van merely amusing or god forbid adorably amusing or worse of all sentimental. She was enraging and funny and a little frightening. All in all it was a fine evening of theater though not one of Bennett's best. But my eyebrows rose when hearing they were turning it into a movie. Was that wise? It was not. Whatever pleasure one received from Smith's impeccably florid performance, her lady in the van was very much a creature of the stage. The more constrained realism of film would not be kind to this pretty flimsy excuse for a tale. And indeed it isn't, despite the valiant efforts of all involved. Best to have left well enough alone.





DEAD PIGEON ON BEETHOVEN STREET (\$29.95 BluRay; Olive Films)

TRY AND GET ME! (\$29.95 BluRay; Olive Films)

AND THEN THERE WERE NONE (\$34.99 BluRay/ Acorn)

Here are two tough noirs and a tough -- yes, tough -- Agatha Christie to finish off this column. Okay, so director Samuel Fuller helped a German critic snag interviews with Hawks and Ford for a documentary film project. In thanks he was offered the chance to direct an episode of a German crime drama in 1974. That expanded into an English language film vaguely inspired by the Profumo affair called *Dead Pigeon On Beethoven Street*. Now it's been expanded by 25 minutes to a more complete director's cut and is widely available for the first time in ages if not ever in its full form. For fans of Fuller, one of the more frustrated of great directors, this is a rare if unusual treat.

Equally rare is director Cy Endfield's noir with Lloyd Bridges as a ruthless manipulator and a lot to say about journalistic ethics and our violence-saturated society. It's tough and cold and a genuine B movie, free thus to say and do as it pleases with only nominal nods towards the decency codes that once ruled Hollywood. *Try And Get Me!* is for hardcore noir fans.

Most anyone, however, should enjoy this new miniseries adaptation by the BBC of Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*. Even people who've never read the novel or seen one of its many adaptations know the premise, if only because it's been lifted or satirized so many times since. A group of people is invited to an isolated location. They don't know each other or their host. But it's soon clear the host has a grudge -- seemingly a valid one -- against each and every one of them. And the host is going to kill them off, one by one. From the first stage adaptation on, the cold-hearted conceit of the book has been softened. Not here. An excellent cast including the likes of Sam Neill, Miranda Richardson and Charles Dance is let loose in a story that does full justice to Christie's original story, as black as any noir. Acclaimed in the UK, it seems set to be the definitive version for years to come.

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