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- POLITICS
- MEDIA
- BUSINESS
- ENTERTAINMENT
- LIVING
- STYLE
- GREEN
- WORLD
- CHICAGO
- COMEDY 23/6
- VIDEO
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Michael Giltz

Posted September 23, 2008 | 03:54 PM (EST)

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DVDs: Did TV's "Will & Grace" Neuter Gays?



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Here are some questions I have about this week's releases:

Why didn't Will on "Will & Grace" ever get married? *Will & Grace: The Complete Series Collection* (\$249.98; Lionsgate) is a great chance to see this acclaimed sitcom in a new light. The elaborate boxed set includes all eight seasons and those who've been buying the individual seasons all along can stick with Season Eight to round out their set. The show began with NBC bracing for controversy that simply never came. The show

was too well written, too conventional in the best sense of the word, too...familiar to raise a ruckus. Will was a single guy in NYC with his best friend Grace, his wacky neighbor Jack and Grace's assistant who swilled martinis when she wasn't snapping off one liners. And it wasn't a show where Will just happened to be gay -- his gayness and the show's queer attitude was present at every moment, in every scene, in every way. But people complained that Will was neutered and Jack was a gay minstrel show. Apparently, they never saw Kramer on *Seinfeld* or the million other sitcoms with over the top secondary characters. Will never got married (until he officially settled down with his boyfriend on the final episode) and neither did Mary Tyler Moore. Heck, even *Sex and the City* waited until the last episode to give Carrie a happy-ever-after. So Will didn't get married because that's not how sitcoms usually work. They're variations on a theme, not dramas where upheaval and change are essential for growth. Will COULD have been married (though Grace's marriage was pretty disastrous comically speaking) and people WANTED Will to get married and that was all the success they ever wanted.

Is "Gigi" the greatest movie musical? I'm talking here about musicals created directly for the big screen. Most of the great movie musicals began on Broadway or even in dance. But *Gigi* (\$20.98; Warner Bros.) was created for the movies by Lerner & Lowe when they were at the height of their powers, just as Rodgers & Hammerstein may have created the greatest musical written for TV when they crafted *Cinderella* around Julie Andrews. Me, I've always been lukewarm about this one. I think it has something to do with prostitution. I'm far from prudish, but somehow I get

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annoyed when people romanticize whoring. (Don't get me started on *Pretty Woman*.) And isn't it just creepy today when Maurice Chevalier sings "Thank Heavens For Little Girls?" I know, it's silly and has nothing to do with what they intended. But there you are. Most people love it, just like they love *An American In Paris* (\$20.98). I've always preferred Fred Astaire to Gene Kelly, because Kelly always seemed so anxious to prove he was a "masculine" dancer where Astaire was always supremely self-confident and therefore more manly by not worrying about it. Kelly always seemed to have a chip on his shoulder about being a dancer. Ironically, here he tries to turn the musical into high art by inserting ballet -- it's pretentious and silly (I've always hated the lame "high art" moments he grew more and more besotted with) and ironically, those are the same moments that seem pretty damn girlish and campy today. Heresy, I know, and most consider it a stone cold classic. I'll take *On The Town* and anything by Astaire any day.

Is Charlie Chan racist? Fox has released the final boxed set of Charlie Chan movies (\$49.98; Fox), including the seven final Sidney Toler movies, including a few pretty good ones. First the good news: the five boxed sets include 25 movies in total, most of them starring the definitive Chan, Warner Oland and the not as definitive but still good Chan, Sidney Toler. The prints are very good indeed, especially for B movies and often include extras. These movies were kept out of circulation for years because a Swede playing an Asian was hard to swallow and Chan's aphorisms and slightly formal English seemed quaint and condescending to people who never considered that Chan's English is much better than their Mandarin or Cantonese. Watch the movies -- like the final box's *Charlie Chan at the Wax Museum* -- and the charge of racism (beyond who actually played Chan) is patently absurd. Chan is always the smartest person in the room and is widely admired by police forces and public officials all over the world. He is easily the most positive portrayal in Hollywood that Asians would receive for many, many years. His children -- including Number One son -- are invariably shown as happily assimilated, All American kids. It's just a shame these movies have been packaged in such bulky boxed sets. The 12 Oland movies should have been sold all together in one neat package with two movies to a disc and the 11 Toler flicks in another set. They should take up less than half of the shelf space and cost half as much. But what's here is great to have.

Should you watch Max Ophuls for the first time on DVD? Ophuls is such a master of grand cinematic gestures that it's almost a shame to watch one of his movies for the first time on DVD. You may have a plasma TV and a great sound system, but nothing beats watching a movie for the first time in a darkened theatre. So I'm gladly diving back into his brilliant *The Earrings Of Madame De...* (\$39.95; Criterion), a typically marvelous release including loads of background and even the original novella the film is based on. But I might hold off if I can on watching *Le Plaisir* and *La Ronde* (\$39.95 each; Criterion). I'm sure they'll come to a theater sometime. If there's no art house in your area, however, dive in: you'll not get any better way of seeing them than these DVDs.

Will Cybill Shepherd ever get respect? One of the great TV actresses, Shepherd starred alongside Bruce Willis in one of TV's boldest, most visionary TV shows ever, *Moonlighting* and yet her work there is often dismissed as just a play on her public image and she's remembered more for fighting with (and being outnumbered by) Willis and the show's creators. Then came *Cybill*, an intelligent, adult sitcom in which Shepherd was overshadowed (and fought with) her marvelous costar Christine Baranski. In the UK, this show has been released on DVD season by season. What does *Cybill* get here? A bizarre best-of that includes 13 episodes, including half of a two-parter and the series finale but not the pilot. Any show worth releasing on DVD deserves to be put out in complete season boxed sets. Poor *Cybill*.

Was the 80s the best decade ever for movies about teens? Sure, you've got *Rebel Without a Cause* in the 50s and *Dazed and Confused* in the 90s and *Superbad* today (which doesn't even really feel like a high school movie). But the 80s -- thanks to John Hughes -- had one great high school movie after another. The latest repackaging of them comes in a lunch box style set called *High School Flashback Collection* (\$39.98; Universal), which includes *Weird Science*, *16 Candles* and his masterpiece *The Breakfast Club*. If you don't own them, this is as good a place to start as any.

Who is the best Maigret? Like Sherlock Holmes, many people have tackled Georges Simenon's Inspector Maigret. I had no idea Charles Laughton was one of them, but 1949's *The Man On The Eiffel Tower* (\$24.95; Kino) is a curio -- the original negative is lost, Laughton insisted the director be fired and that fellow actor Burgess Meredith direct and then Burgess had Laughton direct the

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I'm a little embarrassed to love this show as much as...

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scenes Burgess appeared in. Laughton's Maigret isn't quite as reserved as I'd prefer, but it's intriguing to think what turns his career might have taken if this had become a series.

Is *Speed Racer* really that bad? Well, it's certainly not good and the running time of 2 hours and 15 minutes is just absurd. (I've long thought any movie over 100 minutes and under 180 minutes should be banned.) *Speed Racer* ((\$28.98; Warner Bros.) does have a nifty, bold look -- indeed, the most experimental adaptation since *Dick Tracy*, in a way. (*Sin City* and *300* are in a whole other category, to me.) But it doesn't have that Warren Beatty film's wit or self-awareness. I was never a big fan of *The Matrix* so I have nothing to apologize for. But anyone who insisted the Wachowskis were visionaries certainly does. Do you?

TV on DVD -- *Torchwood* is a fun, slightly more adult spin-off from *Doctor Who* now available on BluRay (\$99.98; BBC Video). Most of all I love the show's sexy playfulness. Our hero -- Captain Jack Harkness -- is played by the terrific gay actor John Barrowman. Captain Jack is unabashedly bixexual, flirting with every good looking woman and man (and alien) in sight. As if that weren't enough, practically his entire team of investigators has a polysexual experience of some sort or another in the first season. Has any TV show ever been more fluid? Nope. *Duckman Seasons One and Two* (\$49.98; Paramount) isn't Howard the Duck but he's clearly related and Jason Alexander has a blast playing him. *Criminal Minds Season Three* (\$59.98; Paramount) said goodbye to Mandy Patinkin and hello to Joe Mantegna and fans didn't seem to mind in the least. *Dirty Sexy Money Season One* (\$39.99; ABC) is a primetime soap that sometimes thinks it's an earnest drama -- the sooner it finds its inner *Dynasty*, the better. *First Among Equals* (\$49.99; Acorn) is a 1986 UK miniseries about politicians jousting to become Prime Minister and stars Tom Wilkinson in one of his breakout roles. Finally, I generally decry repackaging of TV shows (just give us the complete seasons) but this one is clever: *Star Trek: Alternate Realities* (\$39.98; Paramount) showcases 20 alternate universe/parallel dimension and other such episodes from all five *Star Trek* TV shows. It's a silly exercise -- the sort of thing a fan might do a blog posting about -- but if any set of TV shows lends itself to this, surely it's the *Star Trek* universe(s).

Odds and ends - Al Pacino stars in *88 Minutes* (\$28.96; Sony), which I still have trouble believing is actually 107 minutes long (and believe me, it feels longer); *Proteus* (\$24.95; First Run Features) is an intriguing, beautiful documentary about a 19th century artist and biologist obsessed with undersea life and it's 60 minutes long but feels even shorter because it's so original; a lot of doggies surface in *101 Dalmatians II: Patch's London Adventure* (\$29.99; Disney), the live action *101 Dalmatians* (\$29.99; Disney) with Glenn Close a good Cruella; and *102 Dalmatians* (\$29.99; Disney) but really all I ever want to watch is the original animated *101 Dalmatians* and even that is second-tier Disney (so I'm a cat lover; sue me); *Ladies and Gentlemen The Fabulous Stains* (\$19.95; Rhino) is the long-lost 1982 punk rocker movie starring Diane Lane and Laura Dern finally rescued from obscurity -- it's no gem, but it's fun to finally see a movie you've only heard about for years; *Snow Angels* (\$27.98; Warner Bros.) is David Gordon Green's latest modest little drama that made no stir at the box office, which is probably why his next movie was *Pineapple Express*; international gay flicks come to light as well, including the Phillipine drama *Moreno* (in which gay men realize fidelity is important to them to), *Star Appeal* (a Chinese underground movie about a bisexual man who adopts a naked guy who claims to be from Mars) and *Johan* (a 1976 French gay flick that has been chopped and sliced of all the naughty bits for years until now) and all are \$29.95 from Waterbearer; *Before The Rains* (\$27.98; Lionsgate) has spice planter Linus Roache discovering his Indian housemaid won't stay quiet about their affair after his wife returns; Tim Robbins stars in *Noise* (\$26.97; Anchor Bay), a *Falling Down* for noise pollution; an excellent cast -- including Matthew Broderick, Brittany Snow and Maura Tierney -- does what it can with the black comedy *Finding Amanda* (\$26.98; Magnolia); and finally three documentaries: *Constantine's Sword* is a truth-telling condemnation of war and Christianity's complicity in it, *Breaking The Maya Code* is a look at the race to decode Mayan heiroglyphics and *The Search For Mengele* is a scathing look at Mengele, the people who helped him escape and the governments who preferred to let him remain hidden that is narrated and co-written by David Frost. All three are from First Run Features at \$24.95 each.

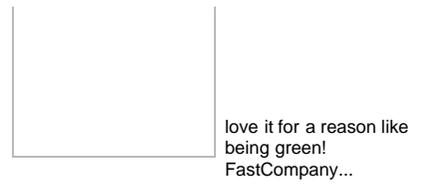
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Actually Will got "married" or at least settled down and raised a child with his boyfriend Vince in the last episode of Will & Grace.

Sitcom characters are over the top. I think the show was amazing.

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