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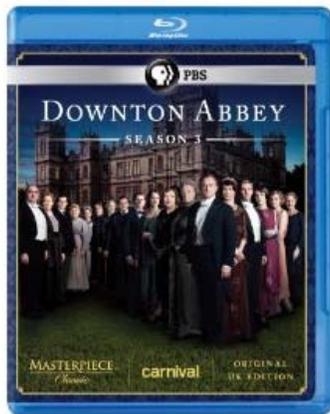
HUFF
POST

ENTERTAINMENT

DVDs: *Downton Abbey* Fans Better Brace Themselves

Posted: 02/01/2013 5:04 pm

This week I cover the new season of *Downton Abbey* (without any spoilers), some new releases including Adam Sandler's biggest hit in years, another excellent Criterion release, a John Ford gem and a round-up of (mostly) British TV. Enjoy.



DOWNTON ABBEY SEASON THREE (\$54.99 BluRay; PBS) -- I won't spoil the new season of *Downton Abbey* for you; creator Julian Fellowes does that very nicely on his own, thank you very much. Those who can't bear to wait for the episodes to air on American TV can rush out now and see the entire season, including the holiday special finale. I'll discuss the show once it has ended in the U.S. But it's no spoiler to say there will be many twists and turns before the season ends. Brace yourselves: not since the season one finale of *The Killing* on AMC or the "it was all a dream" lunacy on

Dallas has a show worked so hard to alienate its fans. I think the main problem is that *Downton Abbey* looks like a prestigious drama, has the trappings of a prestigious drama, has the great cast of a prestigious drama and follows in the footsteps of one of TV's all-time champs, *Upstairs Downstairs*. Unfortunately, *Downton Abbey* is a daytime soap and any possibility of character growth and development is squashed underneath the desire to make you squeal over some unexpected change. Dramas allow you to explore a character, a world, a relationship. Soaps simply leave you wondering what happens next. I think season three was a huge improvement over season two, in which characters behaved idiotically and completely out of touch with who they are. But it leaves no doubt that anyone hoping for greatness will have to settle for far, far less.

HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA (\$55.99 3-D BluRay Combo; Sony)

FRANKENWEENIE (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Disney)

TALES OF THE NIGHT (\$34.95 BluRay combo; Gkids/New Video) -- Adam Sandler isn't going anywhere. He's



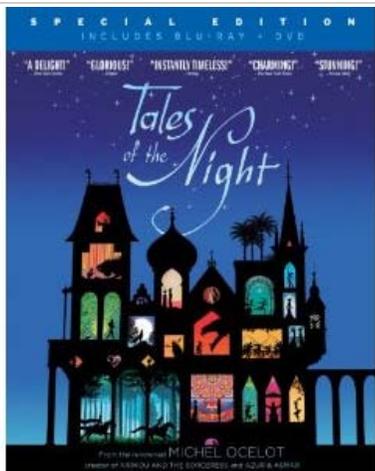
a smart actor who knows how to make movies at a reasonable cost and usually delivers an audience. Sometimes they misfire commercially, like the misbegotten *That's My Boy*. More often they misfire creatively but still pull in an audience, like *Jack And Jill* or *Grown Ups* (which has a sequel in the works). But life must be most enjoyable when Sandler can enjoy the rare film that gets pretty good reviews and strong box office. The animated film *Hotel Transylvania* is his biggest worldwide hit yet and actually has a little heart to it. It's not as rich as *ParaNorman* (the vaguely similar film that also came out last year), but by God it's not the train wreck that *Jack And Jill* was.

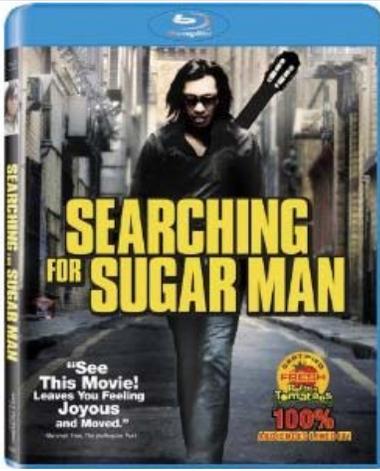


Tim Burton expands his breakthrough short film *Frankenweenie* for no good reason in this stop-motion black and white feature. Why he bothered is hard to determine. All the charm of the movie can be enjoyed simply by watching the short. And nothing much is gained. True, it's like manna from heaven compared to the witless *Dark Shadows*. But it does emphasize how bereft of inspiration he seems. Burton's two best films since his debut with *PeeWee's Big Adventure* -- the dramas *Ed Wood* and *Edward Scissorhands* -- were entirely original. Ever since he's remade movies, folk tales, musicals and books, all to diminishing

returns. Here's hoping he takes some time off to recharge and find something that truly inspires him.

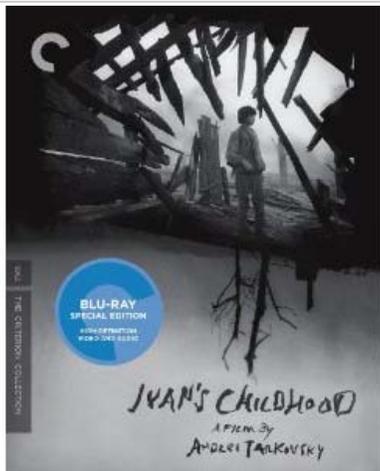
Inspiration is no problem for director Michel Ocelot, who follows his animated masterpiece *Azur & Asmar* from 2009 with a sweetly diverting collection of tales. Like in his earlier collection of stories called *Princes & Princesses*, a teacher and two students gather in an abandoned cinema and create a string of fairy tales, such as the story of a young man who stumbles into the realm of the dead and wins the hand of the princess and the story of a villager who believes he's been given a magic drum and uses its rhythms to save his people from warriors. Each tale is told in vibrant colors and a silhouette style of cutouts that is surprisingly effective and shows us how rich the world of animation can be. Only the lack of progression in the relationship of the boy and girl who tell these stories keep this from being as great as *Azur & Asmar*, but it's delightful all the same.





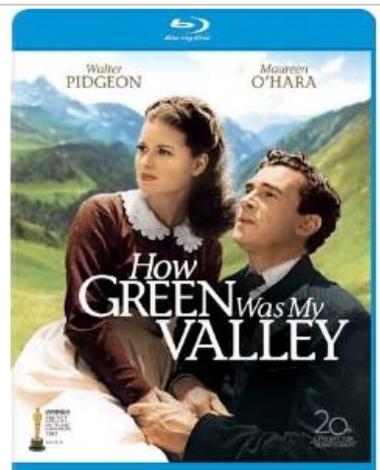
SEARCHING FOR SUGARMAN (\$35.99 BluRay; Sony) -- Like so many documentaries today, this ramshackle work has a very interesting story that isn't matched with any particular filmmaking skill. They also play fast and loose with the details of Sixto Rodriguez, a 1970s recording artist who delivered some very good music and then sank into obscurity, never realizing he'd become a superstar of sorts in South Africa. The film sort of glides over the fact that his revival took place in the 1990s (meaning the movie is rather late to the game of rediscovering Rodriguez) and that he'd already been

rediscovered in Australia in the late 1970s and early 1980s (even opening for Midnight Oil and recording a live album). Still, it's a good reminder of how fickle fame can be since Rodriguez clearly had the goods. He's reportedly considering making a new album and has 30 or so songs ready to go, so perhaps this latest rediscovery will finally stick.

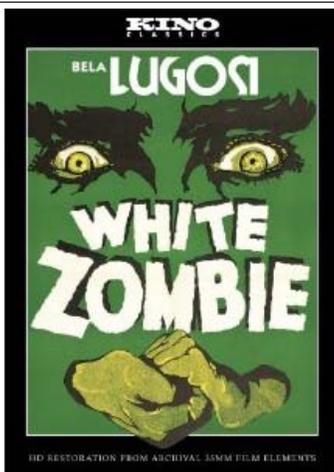


IVAN'S CHILDHOOD (\$39.95 BluRay) -- Like Ingmar Bergman, director Andrei Tarkovsky has an austere, intimidating reputation. Those who started with his final work *The Sacrifice* may have never ventured beyond it. But the clever Steven Soderbergh remake of *Solaris* and this debut feature from Tarkovsky himself may give adventurous filmgoers a chance to rediscover this Russian master. Focused on a young boy, it shows him dealing with the horrendous nightmare of World War II while flashing back to life before the war which now seems almost impossibly ideal. Remember, the Soviet

Union bled for the war like no other country; military losses alone were about 10 million with another 13 million in civilian deaths, dwarfing everyone else. This film is beautifully shot and heart-rending, easily his most accessible. Extras include several essays, interviews with scholars, the cinematographer Vadim Yusov and star Nikolai Burlyayev. Most importantly, the film looks terrific.



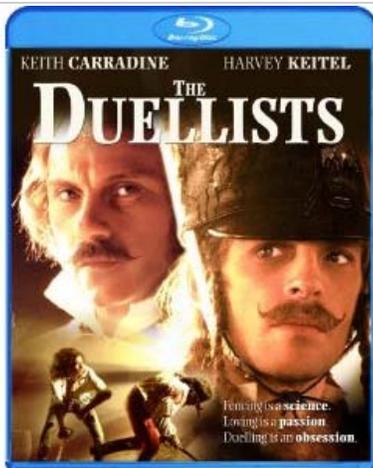
HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY (\$24.99 BluRay; FOX)
WHITE ZOMBIE (\$24.95 DVD; Kino)
THE DUELLISTS (\$19.97 BluRay; Shout Factory)
THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE (\$29.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)



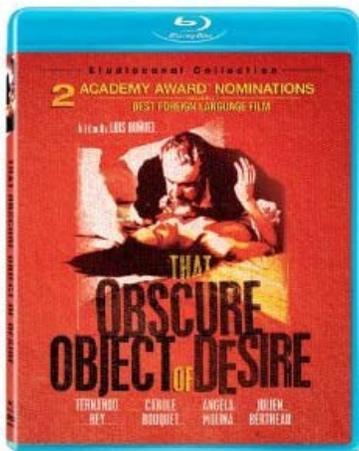
GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT

(\$24.99 BluRay; FOX)

WILD RIVER (\$24.99 BluRay; FOX) -- John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* is studio filmmaking at its finest. It's an intelligent adult story but also quite accessible to kids thanks to the character played by Roddy McDowall that is at the heart of the film. When war prevented them from filming this story in Wales, they simply built a massive set in the Santa Monica Mountains and the Welsh themselves probably wondered what local town it was shot in. The sound of the mining disaster alarm still sends shivers. Sentimental, heart-tugging to be sure, but told with restraint and craftsmanship of the highest level. A real champ.



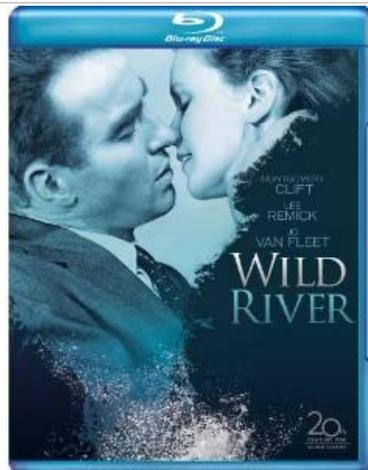
It was only 1932, but Bela Lugosi already felt the weight of his breakthrough performance as Dracula haunting his career. He would only ever enjoy real artistic success in horror films but they didn't all have to be variations on that role. Case in point: *White Zombie*. This super low budget set in Haiti lets Lugosi put his inimitable stamp on the zombie genre. It's great to see a 6 minute clip of Lugosi being interviewed at the time and historian Frank Thompson puts the film in context. I'm not quite sure why they included the entire unrestored version of the film as well as the cleanest digital copy they could achieve. Surely a clip or two would be enough to demonstrate the work they did. But it makes no matter; this zombie flick shows how much could be made with little.



Somehow I have no problem with British actors playing, say, Russians. (In fact, it happens so often I'm sometimes surprised when Russians don't have British accents.) But Americans playing French? It just strikes me as absurd, whether it's Kirk Douglas foolishly pretending to be French in Stanley Kubrick's *Paths Of Glory* or Harvey Keitel and Keith Carradine posing as Frenchmen in *The Duellists*. Still there's no denying Ridley Scott's visual flair; this is a gorgeous looking movie to rival another Kubrick film, *Barry Lyndon*. Scott offers a commentary track but I especially appreciate the chance to hear composer Howard Blake weigh in on his contributions. Composers and



cinematographers and set designers often are far less circumspect and self-censoring than directors and therefore a lot more fun.



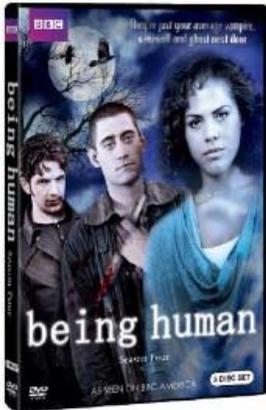
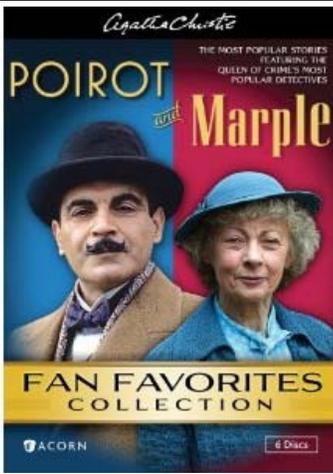
I'm simply not a Luis Bunuel fan but if you're going to talk about world cinema you simply must tackle some of his key work, including his final film *That Obscure Object Of Desire*, an Oscar-nominated comic drama about sexual obsession presented here in a fine BluRay print.

Gentleman's Agreement by director Elia Kazan is a woefully earnest film I found a bit heavy-handed even the first time I saw it as a 12-year-old. Gregory Peck discovers how different the world is when

he starts to pretend he is Jewish for a magazine article on anti-Semitism. The making of the film is far more interesting than the film itself. Most studio chiefs were Jewish and avoided Jewish themed films like the plague (they thought assimilating meant ignoring their roots) and were truly wary of the bestselling book that inspired the movie. Complain about anti-Semitism? When it was made anyway, they offered to buy it from FOX so they could lock it away forever. But the film went on to much success and won the Oscar for Best Film.

Director Elia Kazan went on to direct *Wild River* some 15 years later. It gets lost in the shuffle of his bigger movies and personally I find it sad to watch the always subtly sad actor Montgomery Clift in his post-accident phase. But the story of a government agent who must clear out a small town so a dam can be built is low-key drama of the sort studios rarely tackle anymore and Martin Scorsese, for one, considers it one of Kazan's neglected gems.

POIROT AND MARPLE: FAN FAVORITES (\$99.99 DVD; Acorn)
BEING HUMAN SEASON FOUR (\$49.98 DVD; BBC)



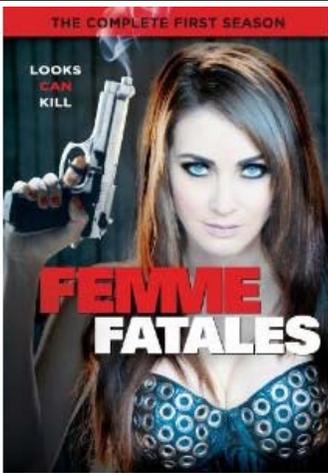
MISFITS SEASON TWO (\$24.98 DVD; BBC)

FEMME FATALES COMPLETE FIRST SEASON (\$29.98 DVD; EOne)
WODEHOUSE PLAYHOUSE COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$59.99 DVD; Acorn)

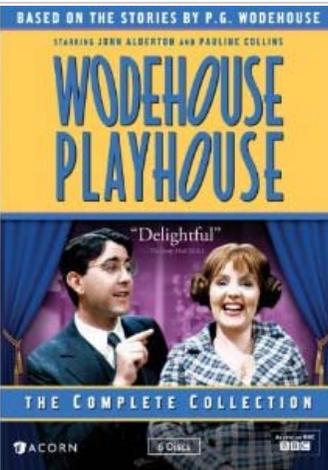
DOCTOR WHO: SHADA (\$39.98 DVD; BBC) -- Can you have too much Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple? No, I don't suppose you can. However, I'm not quite sure who this collection will appeal to. It contains greatest hits (selected by fans) of both Poirot (played by David Suchet) and not one but two Marples (assayed by Geraldine McEwan and Julia McKenzie). Now, many people enjoy detectives but they usually have a favorite and when it comes to their favorite they definitely have a favorite actor they prefer. That doesn't stop them from watching each and every version, mind you. But this sort of set seems designed to start arguments. Serious arguments that might turn into rows that might lead to... murder. For those willing to risk it, you get 11 mysteries totaling about 16 hours in all.

I've never been entirely sold on *Being Human*, the high concept comic drama which features young people who just happen to be a ghost, a werewolf and a vampire coming together as roomies. But the British version is superior to the American remake. Season Four is a hard hurdle even for hardcore fans since many actors were ready to move on. You've been warned.

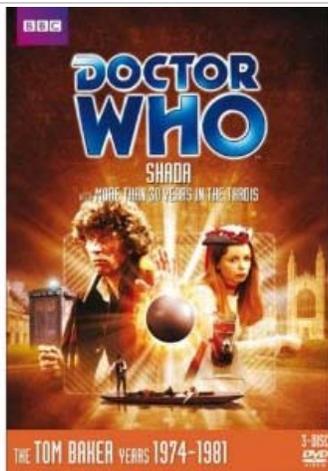
Misfits is another British import. I'm kind of astonished this show hasn't been remade in the U.S. yet, focusing as it does on teens blessed with unexpected powers. In this season a masked hero or threat is hovering over the gang. The show is



already into its fourth season so the DVDs are lagging behind a bit. There's even a feature film in the works.



Sometimes you just want pulpy fun and that's what the undemanding Cinemax anthology series *Femme Fatales* has on top. Spot the babe with the smoking gun on the cover and you know what to expect. Happily, the series modestly out-delivers. Tanit Phoenix is the host, setting up each episode's storyline and then stepping in at the end to wrap it up (not to mention popping in during some tales to push the plot along). You get some clever overlap from one episode to the next with a minor character here taking center stage there. Gratuitous sex is dependably available in each episode and most of the time, to be fair, the stories are a little rote. But it's just good enough in its way to make you wish they'd aim even higher. Or is that lower?



Now, it's not truly possible to read only P.G. Wodehouse and only watch Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie in the TV series *Jeeves & Wooster*. I know; I've tried. Eventually life must move on. That's when you dive into *Wodehouse Playhouse*, a British series from the 1970s that adapted non-Jeeves and Wooster stories in an anthology series starring Pauline Collins and her husband John Alderton (Thomas

of the original *Upstairs, Downstairs*). The pilot has been lost but the remaining 20 episodes are here. If you enjoy this sort of nonsense, it really only works well when done by the Brits. Best of all, Wodehouse himself intros the first seven episodes.

I can't believe I'm starting to agree with those who insist that Matt Smith may be even better than David Tennant as the Doctor. But my first Doctor -- Tom Baker -- will always be the one who pops to mind when I read that character's name. Here's one of the more mysterious adventures from his reign that lasted from 1974-1981, famously the only tale never to be finished. The BBC offers very admirable and engaging extras on these *Doctor Who* reissues: this set is truly loaded with the story of why this tale never ended, a 90 minute documentary on the show, a 27 minute short on how labor strikes have affected the show in general and much more. Still, I long for a complete boxed set for every Doctor. Someday...

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