

DVDs: Dumb Fun With John Wick, Smart Fun With Fury and Dear White People And More!

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The best part of January and February for DVD and BluRay (and streaming) buffs? The fact that all the big award season contenders come flooding into your home. It's probably the best time of the year for hardcore film buffs who don't live near an arthouse cinema or just prefer to screen their flicks at home -- just like studio moguls and all the Academy members who choose the Oscars, by the way. Here's a rundown of big recent titles since the beginning of 2015.

JOHN WICK (\$39.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

There are good movies and bad movies and movies so bad you sort of enjoy them anyway. But there's another category, the sort that B movies and drive-in movies specialized in for a while. These are knowing movies -- not camp or movies intentionally so stupid that they'd hope you laugh. But the sort of guilty pleasure movies that dove into genre with unrestrained glee. They weren't striving for greatness and unlike some B movies, they knew even a certain underground greatness that might be recognized decades later wasn't in the cards. They're just good dumb fun. And here we have John Wick, starring Keanu Reeves as some sort of hired killer who has walked away from the game. Then some random bad guys give him a tough time at a gas station. When he isn't fazed, they invade his home, beat the crap out of him...and kill his puppy. You don't kill a man's puppy. Not a man like John Wick. All hell breaks loose, with massive gun fights and fisticuffs staged like a video game and so many shots of Wick shooting people in the head it could become a drinking game of dangerous proportions. It's all patently absurd and if you're in the right mood, unmitigated joy.

THE PALM BEACH STORY (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion)

THE BITTER TEARS OF PETRA VAN KANT (\$29.95 DVD; Criterion)

For sheer, dizzying pleasure, it doesn't get any better than writer-director Preston Sturges. The Palm Beach Story comes right at the height of his powers. In the past, I've seen some weak prints of the film and it sure

could use a complete restoration. But here Criterion has delivered the strongest visual presentation I've seen of the movie so far -- not quite a complete rebirth but much more convincing. Sometimes on TV I've been worried the movie might fade away before my eyes. Not here, so you can relish the absurdity of the plot with twins and double weddings and a nutty old coot worth millions and so much more. I've never quite understood how Joel McCrae does it. Some actors are just "present" and always convincing, like Spencer Tracy. Others act their bums off, like Marlon Brando. McCrae is sort of convincingly unconvincing -- whether in a comedy or drama he always seems at a slight remove from the action. And yet you buy him, even if he's telling you it's all a load of bunk. Whatever it is, I'm crazy about it and the more I see of McCrae the more I appreciate him as one of the greats. Claudette Colbert, I get. She's beautiful, a great actress and has the comic timing of a master. Of course every man falls for her; they're only human after all. What a joy this film is and if you've never seen it you're in for a treat. This set includes the usual extras along with a military training film Sturges wrote about the same time and a radio play adaptation of the movie done in 1943.

The reputation of Preston Sturges has just grown and grown among film buffs. Yet, he has four or five absolute classics so Sturges never ranks high on polls of the best films of all time. No one can agree on which one to focus their attention; plus, they're funny and you won't find a comedy on [Sight & Sound's once a decade poll](#) until you reach *The General* at #34 and precious few after that. Fassbinder has a similar problem. He has so many strong films in so many varied styles it can be hard to get a grasp on all he accomplished. I have the sense he's fallen out of favor in recent years. Happily, Criterion and others have been keeping his body of work front and center with their efforts. *The Bitter Tears Of Petra Van Kant* is as good a starting place as any. Inspired by his own obsession with a handsome young actor, Fassbinder's tale uses the melodramatic style of Douglas Sirk to inform his story of the twisted relationship between a brilliant fashion designer and her icy muse. The great Hanna Schygulla is ideal as the object of desire and Fassbinder is both broadly entertaining and subversive at the same time. This set contains various new interviews with his collaborators as well as a substantial German documentary from 1992.

DEAR WHITE PEOPLE (\$24.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

THE RETRIEVAL (\$34.95 BluRay; Kino Lorber)

Why pair these movies together? They both tackle race in America with precision and intelligence. Otherwise, they are very different. *Dear White People* is a sly comedy that gained all sorts of deserved critical attention, strong press and some modest but encouraging box office for a truly independent film. (In the indie world, \$4.4 million at the box office should translate into strong numbers on DVD and BluRay sales and rentals, VOD and so on.) *The Retrieval* was a festival favorite but its critical acclaim didn't even begin to garner press or ticket sales. But both are worth your time and both signal directors who might well go on to substantial careers. *Dear White People* has fun mixing in reality TV, talk radio, gay geeks and more into a combustible mix lit by a frat party with a racist theme. Tyler James Williams of *Everybody Hates Chris* is all grown up here and quite winning but the star of the show is Tessa Thompson as the voluble, smarter-than-you Sam White. Her tug of war between two men is no contest since one of them is such a drip chemistry-wise and the violent showdown feels utterly contrived and out of character. But some less effective acting in minor parts aside, writer director Justin Simien has declared himself one to watch.

Similarly, *The Retrieval* makes the most of a modest budget to tell its compelling story. In this case it's a drama set during the Civil War era in which a boy named Will (Ashton Sanders) is assisting bounty hunters who track down runaway slaves. One can't help but think of *Huckleberry Finn* as the film progresses. Writer and director Chris Eska has delivered the sort of little-seen gem that was made for DVD. Not so long ago, a movie like this would be screened in a big city or two and then disappear and if it was lucky get rediscovered on late nite tv or at a revival house. Today? Everyone has the chance to see it right now. And should.

FOYLE'S WAR SEASON 8 ([streaming on Acorn.TV](#)) -- I rarely discuss streaming or video on demand options;

hey, it's hard enough to stay on top of the stuff coming out on BluRay! Nonetheless, I'll make an exception for Foyle's War, a show which launched with a brilliant first season and quickly became one of my favorite on TV for years. It's hard to say goodbye to a beloved series for fans and it's often just as hard for the people making the show itself. That's why so many great shows have drawn out their welcome, producing a final season or two (or more) that is far inferior in quality to the original. Think MASH or All In The Family or Little House On The Prairie or ER or a million other examples. (That's why I give the most credit of all to a series like The Mary Tyler Moore Show or Breaking Bad or The Office (UK), which know when to leave well enough alone.) So here is Foyle's War finally saying goodbye. If you have any interest in a series that was initially set during WWII, a mystery with a strong grounding in history as a fascinating backdrop to some fascinating stories, dive into season one. You'll find an excellent cast with Michael Kitchen giving a performance for the ages as Foyle, a man of integrity and few words. As all involved tried to walk away and then came back again and again for just a few more episodes, the quality has unquestionably dropped. It's been precipitous enough that I've had to downgrade the series overall from one of TV's best to one of those good shows marred by a drop-off in later seasons. Still, fans of the show will undoubtedly want to say goodbye and the only way to do so is to watch the [final three episodes on AcornTV](#). That's where newcomers will find earlier seasons as well, along with everything from Rumpole of the Bailey to Doc Martin. It all began with Season 1, which of course is available on DVD for those Luddites who can't handle streaming. (But even my mom can, so it's really pretty easy and you do get one month free.) Watch that first season and you'll be hooked. And if someone can explain to me why creator Anthony Horowitz never wrote a novel around these characters, I'd be mighty pleased. That's the real mystery, as far as I'm concerned.

BOYS (\$24.95 DVD; Wolfe Video) -- This is a gay coming of age tale, reportedly made for Danish TV and set in the world of high school track teams. The fascinating aspect of seeing gay films from around the world is seeing how starkly different different societies are towards gays and sex in general. Some countries, you feel like you're watching a gay film that would have been made in the US in the 1960s -- they try to be positive but are filled with self-loathing and stereotypes. Others make the culture you're in seem passe they're so progressive and cool about it all. The Danes are awfully forward thinking in some ways, but this was made for TV so it's not terribly explicit or envelope-pushing, though the emphasis on one boy's home life proves especially interesting. Sieger (Gijs Blom) is questioning and confused, vulnerable after his mom's death and drawn to friendship with Marc. Marc (Ko Zandvliet) is most definitely not confused and wants a relationship. The usual misunderstandings and twists and turns ensue. But the two actors have great chemistry. (Blom in particular is a find.) And the look of the film (by cinematographer Melle Van Essen) is top-notch. For those interested in the subject, it's a modest little find with one or two actors who might well break out into wider stardom.

DOWNTON ABBEY SEASON 5 (\$54.99 BluRay; PBS)

TYRANT SEASON ONE (\$39.98 DVD; FOX)

Have you switched to Empire yet? Primetime's hottest new soap of course is set in the world of hip-hop music but they're both essentially the same -- shows you watch for crazy plot twists and to see what happens next. Character development? Not so much. Downton Abbey began as a show that ripped off superior entertainment like its obvious precursor Upstairs Downstairs to the movie Mrs. Miniver and countless others. Now it's devolved into ripping off itself by just recycling storylines they've already done like Bates being accused of murder (again), Thomas being evil and then sympathetic and in the good graces of the family and then out of them and then in them again so often it's become ludicrous. (Surely at some point, they'd learn their lesson?) The cast is so skillful, pleasures are there to be had even for those who prefer a modicum of logic and continuity.

What's the difference between Downton Abbey and Empire or Tyrant? The latter two seem to know they're over the top fun and let you revel in it, without the pretense of high art. Mind you, Tyrant is from people behind Homeland so they might have considered it a bid for Emmy greatness. Tyrant is set in a fictional Middle eastern country run by a dictator, the father of the show's protagonist. Our hero who has made a decent life for himself in America reluctantly returns for a wedding. When the ruler dies, he suddenly finds himself drawn into aiding his

brother, prodding the unstable man towards democracy while becoming embroiled in the usual palace intrigue. It's like Dallas, but a Dallas where JR can have you executed any time he chooses. Fun? Yes, not to mention well-acted in a soapy sort of way and given a nice jolt by the various real-life events that intrude onto the action, like the Arab Spring.

FURY (\$34.99 BluRay; Sony)

PORK CHOP HILL

KING: THE THE MARTIN LUTHER KING STORY

A HOLE IN THE HEAD (\$29.95 each BluRay; Olive Films)

Fury came out, got some strong reviews, did well at the box office and will surely find more fans on DVD. Fair enough. But if you could invest in futures on movies the way you do in other markets, this would be one to put a "buy" on. Its reputation is sure to grow in years to come. It's a classic war film, built around the denizens of a tank who face the horrors of war, the camaraderie of bonding under fire and all the other usual experiences faced by men in battle. Set during WW II, it's episodic and familiar in its way. But the cast led by Brad Pitt is excellent from top to bottom, with Shia LaBeouf doing more to rehabilitate his image by simply delivering a good performance and Logan Lerman proving yet again he's got an innate likeability that is one of the sure signs of a movie star with a long career ahead of him. It's a big leap forward for David Ayer, the writer of Training Day and the director of End Of Watch. Think Sam Fuller and you'll have a sense of the gritty reality this movie captures. It's a keeper.

Every scene of the Korean war film Pork Chop Hill starring Gregory Peck is emblazoned on my brain. Why? Because apparently the local TV station in South Florida where I grew up owned a print of it. Back in those days, they'd fill up a late night/early morning slot with whatever was at hand. Why go dark (remember when TV stations signed off?) when you could show something for free and keep the lights on? So week after week after week, Pork Chop Hill would invariably air at 1 am or 2 am after regular programming was over. I've seen it dozens of times and have a fondness for it far beyond the film itself. As a fledgling night owl, I didn't want to go to sleep any more than that local station wanted to sign off and we'd both fight off the inevitable with Peck and his men being ordered to take a hill. It was a meaningless gesture for a meaningless, militarily insignificant speck of land. But in war you did as you were told and didn't ask why, even if you knew the goal at hand was exceptionally pointless. The cynicism of the film is what makes it so lasting. Little did I know it was by director Lewis Milestone, who earlier delivered that classic anti-war film All Quiet On The Western Front. The casting was an early triumph of the great Lynn Stalmaster, who got his start in TV and began to break into movies with I Want To Live and this one. You'll recognize almost every actor, but many became familiar faces after this movie came out, not before. It's a minor gem and well worth any war movie buff's time. The BluRay looks quite good and is the latest example of savvy vault diving by Olive, which goes into studio archives and puts out titles on BluRay that might otherwise escape notice. Also just out is King: The Martin Luther King Story starring Paul Winfield (a nice companion piece to Selma), and the Frank Sinatra vehicle A Hole In The Head, one of the last gasps of the great director Frank Capra, and it shows. Still, you gotta love a movie with an advertising campaign that insists it's "The Most Wonderful Entertainment In The Who Wide Wonderful World!" Only Sinatra and Capra fanatics will agree but at least it's out and looking pretty good.

THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN (\$39.99 DVD; PBS)

Who can understand the vagaries of DVD and BluRay? This critically acclaimed, landmark miniseries aired in 1984, won the Emmy for Best Miniseries and has been rather haplessly treated ever since. It garnered all sorts of accolades and brought new converts to the brilliant Raj Quartet series of novels by Paul Scott. It got excellent ratings. And yet, after a desultory release on VHS it's been treated like a red-headed step child. It came out on DVD but looked poorly. It was rereleased in a 25th anniversary edition..and still looked terrible. It came out in a much better looking version in the UK, but for some reason that's taken a decade -- a DECADE -- to come out in

the US. So we're looking at a decade old remastering presented on DVD instead of BluRay. Nonetheless, it's the first time a decent edition of this show is worth watching in your home since it aired originally. The miniseries is notably adult and reserved in its tone and plot lines. The central character is the rather hateful Merrick (Tim Piggott-Smith), who becomes obsessed with the relationship between a young, London-educated Indian and a British girl right around the time India is beginning to decide maybe it doesn't want to be under the thumb of British rule after all, thank you very much. The great Peggy Ashcroft has a plum smaller role, Charles Dance made his mark and the cast throughout is exceptional. In trying to capture the scope of the books, the miniseries does bite off more than it can chew. Scandalously, I would suggest it's ripe for remake, perhaps as four seasons with ten episodes per. If you do it again, you better devote a lot more air time to a work that already runs to 14 episodes. But it is satisfying overall, thanks to the general care and intelligence that marks this work that along with *Brideshead Revisited* and *I, Claudius* and others made it seem like the British owned the miniseries for a while.

THE FACTS OF LIFE -- COMPLETE SERIES (\$199.99 DVD; Shout Factory)

I remember a distressing number of episodes from *The Facts Of Life*, even though I swear it was never a favorite show of mine. Still, it was a key element in NBC's revival as the show was spun off from *Diff'rent Strokes* and helped launch *The Golden Girls* on Saturday night. A perennial Top 30 hit, it lasted for nine (!) seasons and gave Charlotte Rae the sort of showcase every journeyman actor dreams of. (Journeyman is a compliment; as in trouper.) It tackled countless hot button issues with a sitcom's half hour solution always at the ready, from acceptance of people with disabilities to weight issues and drinking and about a million other things. At the heart of it was an ensemble of characters who got along great. They certainly got long in the tooth by the time Rae stepped away after seven seasons (an old pro, she even knew when to get when the going was good) but Nancy McKeon, Mindy Cohn and the rest always somehow kept our good will. This set contains most everything and certainly everything Shout Factory could get the rights to include. You get the backdoor pilot episode that introduced the setting, two TV movies and a reunion panel discussion among other goodies. (The 2001 reunion movie is missing; God knows why but I'm certain it wasn't for lack of trying on Shout's part.) Most of all you get all 201(!) silly disposable, dated episodes -- each of them comfort food for those who grew up with the series and perhaps serviceable entertainment for kids a little bit younger than the characters on the show. For fans, this is as good as it will ever get.

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