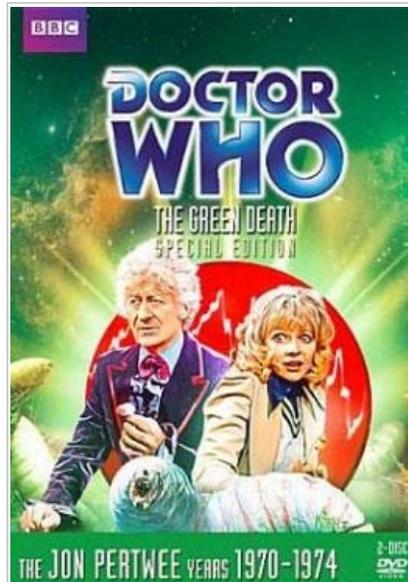


DVDs: Get Ready For The Doctor! Doctor Who? Exactly.

Posted: 08/29/2013 12:16 am

A big roundup of some of the best TV sets released in the last few weeks, ranging from classic miniseries and ground-breaking sitcoms to the hottest show on TV. But let's start with the Doctor.



DOCTOR WHO: THE DOCTORS REVISITED (\$39.99 DVD; BBC)

DOCTOR WHO: THE GREEN DEATH (\$34.99 DVD; BBC)

DOCTOR WHO: SPEARHEAD FROM SPACE (\$29.99 BluRay; BBC)

THE THICK OF IT (\$79.99 DVD; BBC) -- We can stop explaining who the Doctor is, can't we? Now America has finally caught up with the decades-long career of the TARDIS-traveling Time Lord. The budgets are bigger, many of his adventures suspiciously occur on Earth but the Doctor is rightfully celebrated here as the iconic TV figure he's been in the UK for so long. And none too soon: a lot is happening in the world of the Doctor. There's a 50th anniversary special taking place in November with

John Hurt portraying some incarnation of the Doctor alongside current lead Matt Smith. Then Smith says goodbye during the Christmas special with Peter Capaldi taking over for the next batch of shows. Whew.

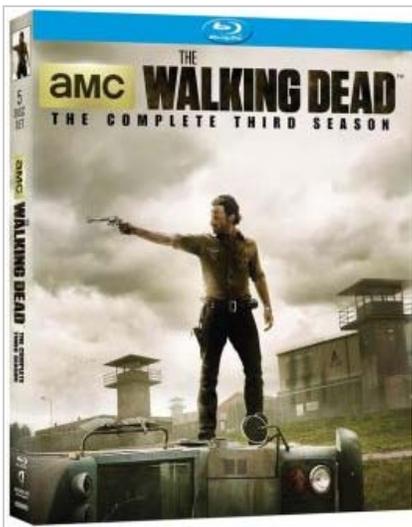
If you do need catching up, there's no better place to start than one of the *Doctors Revisited* sets. This one covers four doctors in nice retrospective fashion (including my first Doctor, Tom Baker) along with a complete adventure for each of them.

At just \$40 list, that's an absolute bargain for newbies since just one complete adventure -- such as Jon Pertwee's *The Green Death* -- usually runs \$35 at list. Granted, this edition comes loaded with all sorts of extras, an almost overwhelming amount of detail and bonus videos literally too numerous to mention.

Just to confuse you, the Doctor is finally coming out on BluRay, beginning with Pertwee's *Spearhead From Space*. That makes sense since this classic tale (also included on the *Doctor Revisited* omnibus DVD) was the first one shot in color. Why is this confusing? Because they're only charging \$30 list for the BluRay compared to \$35 for DVD.

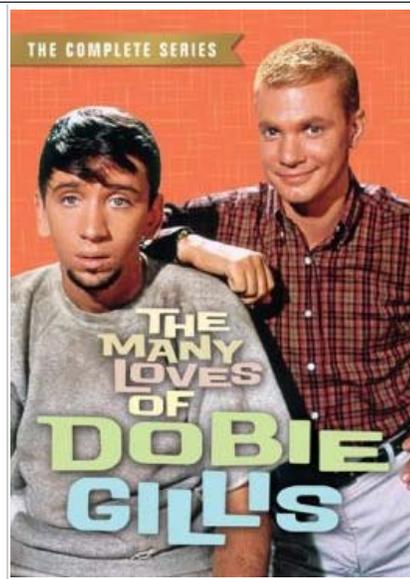
Okay, let me say this again. I LOVE the Doctor. But I don't care how many extras they cram onto the discs, these sets are wildly overpriced and woefully skimpy on actual shows. Are they really going to release 50 years of episodes on BluRay, with individual but expensive releases for every single adventure? (An adventure in the old days usually lasted in a three or four episode arc.) This is soaking of loyal fans in a way that the Doctor himself would be ashamed to see. Someone take a sonic screwdriver and fix this mess. Massive individual and definitive boxed sets for each Doctor -- and when the limited editions sell out, less expensively packaged copies of the same. Then a greatest hits set for each Doctor of their best few adventures (more or less depending on how long they played the role). Then INEXPENSIVE sets for each season of each Doctor if you think there's demand. But really complete sets for each one should suffice. (Only Tom Baker ran for a daunting seven seasons. The rest usually ran for three or four.) The massive markup of episodes that aired decades ago is not smart on a business level -- how many fans will actually bother to buy all of them -- or on a franchise level, since it keeps so many people from dipping into the history of the Doctor. For the love of God, stop the madness.

Enough ranting. Let's get fanboyish again. Peter Capaldi is the next very traditional choice -- a more mature man as most Doctors were, rather than a person of color or a woman as some expected. But he's a strong though little known actor to most. Lucky you. You get to check out his earlier work in the terrific series *The Thick Of It*. This scathing political comedy is the best of its kind since *Yes, Minister*, another British import. The first four seasons of *The West Wing* are great but I'll take the biting wit on display here over the inspirational tale that is *The West Wing* any day. I guess I just prefer reality to fantasy. Sometimes.

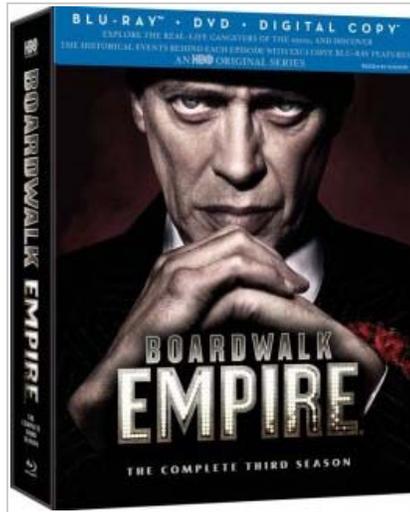
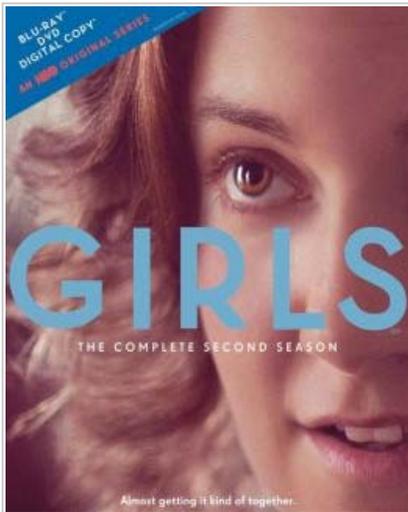


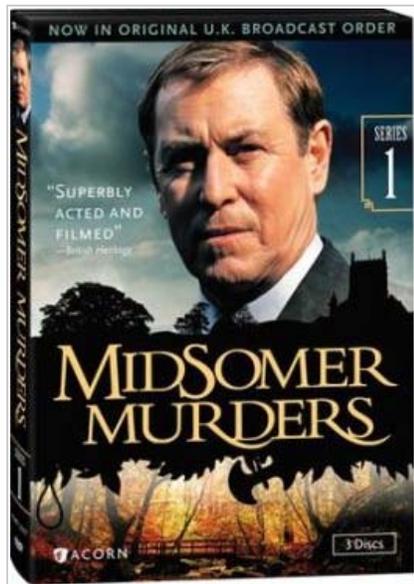
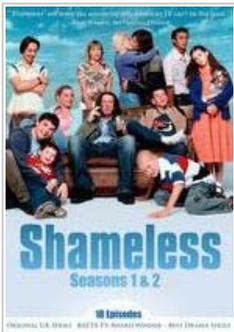
THE WALKING DEAD COMPLETE THIRD SEASON (\$79.99 BluRay; Anchor Bay) -- In three seasons, *The Walking Dead* has gone from guilty pleasure to very good drama to great drama. Look no further than the brilliant stand-alone episode "Clear," in which Sheriff Rick, his increasingly troubled son Carl and the fierce Michonne go on a road trip to get weapons. In a haunting touch involving a would-be hitchhiker, the show neatly captures the moral complexity of their world without saying a single word. It's a searing example of what it costs to survive and whether surviving is worthwhile if you've lost your soul. This is the heart of the series and they explore the question with remarkable persistence and engaging storytelling that upsets and confounds and challenges you at every turn. Yes, it's gory as all get out but *The Walking Dead* is serious television any fan of quality drama needs to see.

THE



MANY LOVES OF DOBIE GILLIS THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$139.99 DVD; Shout) - Shout has firmly established itself as a source of great boxed sets like this -- offbeat movies and TV shows that might otherwise slip through the cracks. It's the sort of stuff that Rhino once rescued on CD from the music vaults. *The Many Loves Of Dobie Gillis* is by no means a great show or a cult classic, but is genuinely odd and groundbreaking in a quiet sort of way. And what casting. Genuine beats must have been horrified to see themselves parodied so quickly on TV (the show began in 1959) but Bob Denver would never have a better part. And what casting? After Denver (who of course earned eternal fame on Gilligan's Island), the first season featured never to be beat cast-members like the luminous Tuesday Weld as his love interest and Warren Beatty as his rival. (Dobie doesn't stand a chance.) Dobie's frank desire for girls, girls, girls and Weld's just as frank desire for money, money, money feels modern, along with the show's breaking of the fourth wall. Even better, they avoid the foolishness of having adults play high school students by rushing Dobie and his beatnik pal into the Army and finally college in the second and third seasons. It's never quite as good as you want it to be but it's not nearly as mindless as many of the shows that followed in the 1960s and 1970s. Extras are modest, especially for a show with such a complicated history. (It began as short stories and was then a feature film, spawning another novel along the way.)





GIRLS THE COMPLETE SECOND SEASON (\$39.99 BluRay; HBO)
BOARDWALK EMPIRE THIRD SEASON (\$79.99 BluRay; HBO)
STRIKE BACK SECOND SEASON (\$49.99 BluRay; Cinemax/HBO)
SHAMELESS SEASONS 1 AND 2 (\$24.99 DVD; Mill Creek)
MIDSOMER MURDERS SEASON I (\$59.99 DVD; Acorn) --
When do shows lose buzz? After what happened to Dr. Phil, I'm not about to

discuss the date rape/consensual sex issue raised provocatively by Lena Dunham during the second season of her singular series *Girls*. But I will raise the spectre in this hurried world that the show has already gone from over-praised to almost forgotten, despite the Emmys and press. (The loss of Christopher Abbott is especially troubling.) Both extremes are wrong but that's the problem with buzz.

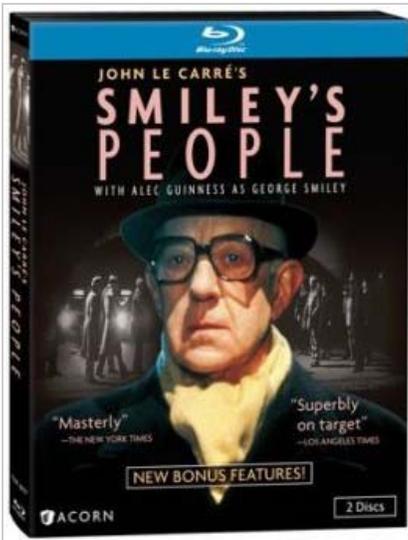
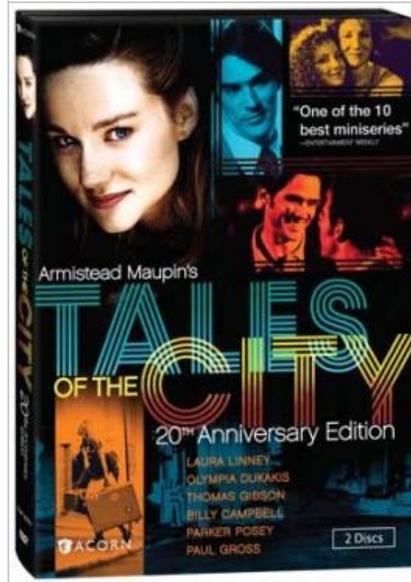
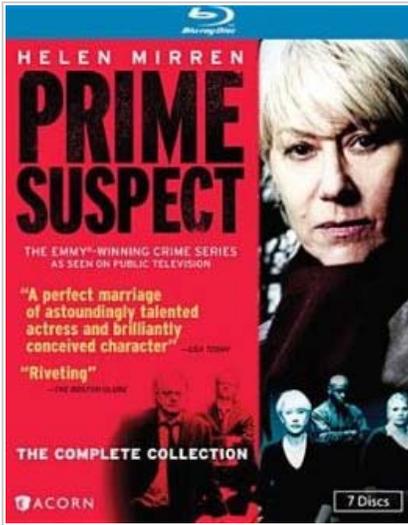
Boardwalk Empire never had it, at least not since it actually debuted. It's overseen by Martin Scorsese and has great actors from top to bottom. But Steve Buscemi is not the right actor to hold the center of this show and I don't have a single friend who speaks about it passionately, even if they do still watch it. It's handsome and diverting, but far too familiar.

I'll take the goofy fun of *Strike Back* on Cinemax any day. You can't hate a series with the best tagline in television: "diplomacy is overrated." Tagged the second season on Cinemax, it's actually the third season of the UK series. The best action show on TV (the bar is quite low, actually since there aren't many genuine action shows on TV at all), this season revolves around nuclear triggers on the loose in Africa. It's 24 without the ticking clock. This show deserves a lot more buzz than it's getting.

You couldn't get more buzzy in the UK than *Shameless*, the ribald drama created by Paul Abbott that won a BAFTA for Best Drama. This blackly humorous look at a very edgy family featured a great cast -- including James McAvoy -- and just wound up its 11th and final season this May. That was far too long but early on it was raw and very funny indeed.

Finally, buzz was never important for *Midsomer Murders*, the *Law & Order* of the UK, given how long its run, not its format. This show has been on the air since 1996 and is still very popular. The number of bodies that have piled up in the fictional county of Midsomer -- populated by a seemingly endless stream of charming villages and vicious killers -- is truly shocking. Its dependable charms are on full display in the first five mysteries contained here. Sometimes buzz would just get in the way of cozy

pleasure.



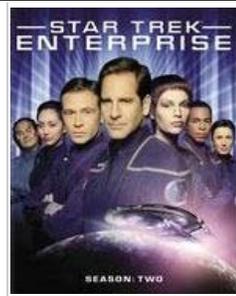
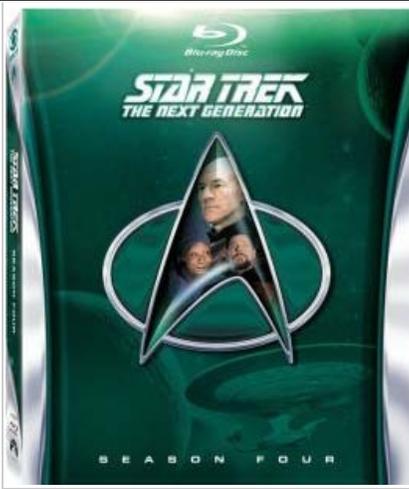
PRIME SUSPECT THE COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$119.99 BluRay; Acorn)
TALES OF THE CITY 20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION (\$49.99 DVD; Acorn)
SMILEY'S PEOPLE (\$59.99 BluRay; Acorn)
-- Three great collections from Acorn and they don't get much better than *Prime Suspect*. Helen Mirren's performance as DCI Jane Tennison is rightly hailed as a landmark in television history. She is one of the great anti-heroes in the medium -- indeed, any medium. This set rightly collects all seven of the miniseries featuring this indelible character. But make no mistake: the first two are head and shoulders above the others and head and shoulders above almost anything else ever created on TV. They're that complex, brilliantly acted, gripping, moving and flat out exciting. Mature, subtle and any other adjective you want to throw at them, they are television at their finest. The other five mysteries involving Tennison are of varying quality, usually solid, sometimes

dicey and even less superior. But Mirren is never less than brilliant and nothing can take away from the accomplishment of those first two entries in the series.

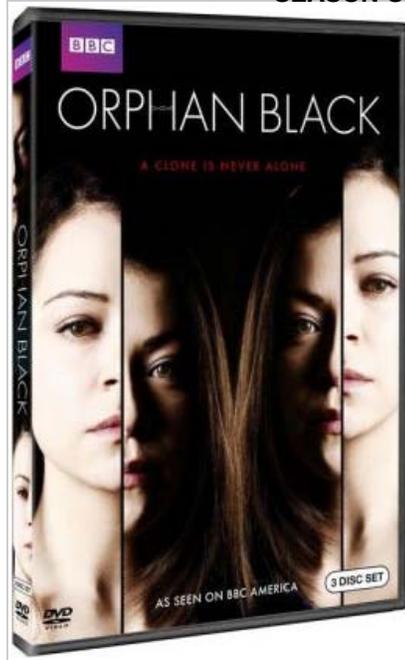
Tales Of The City -- a miniseries revolving around gay, lesbian, straight, transgender and other denizens of San Francisco -- was about as unlikely a source of a popular miniseries as you can imagine, despite the wide appeal of Armistead Maupin's novels. But sexy fun is sexy fun and this soapy charmer had a great cast and great spirit of openness and joy that made it far more than a romp for a narrow audience. The novels hold up better, I think, but this is still a major work and a clear inspiration for *Desperate Housewives* and their ilk.

I was gobsmacked when John Le Carre's *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* was turned into a brilliant film starring Gary Oldman. Never mind it had to compete with Alec Guinness and his marvelous work in the award-winning miniseries that preceded it. I just didn't think that twisty tale could be condensed down into a two hour film and still make sense while remotely resembling the source material. I somehow doubt they could pull off the same trick with the even denser sequel *Smiley's People*, which is even more subtle and...dense. Guinness remained wonderfully impenetrable in the BBC miniseries, with the slightest widening of his eyes or pause in his speech speaking volumes. He's great but if you haven't read the book or at the very least pay the utmost attention, I can't imagine you'd have a clue as to what's going on.

STAR TREK THE NEXT GENERATION SEASON FOUR
(\$129.99 BluRay; Paramount)



**STAR TREK
ENTERPRISE
SEASON TWO**
(\$129.99 BluRay;
Paramount)
**ORPHAN BLACK
SEASON ONE**



(\$29.99 DVD; BBC) -- Probably the most successful syndicated drama in TV history, *Star Trek The Next Generation* in some respects surpassed the original series in its acting and sophistication. Seasons three and four saw the series at its best, though frankly the failure to follow through on the game-changing aspects of the Borg and their threat to Earth left me forever disappointed. Fans won't be disappointed with the BluRay transfers of season four, which are generally up to par with seasons one and three. (Season two was a disaster.) I would much prefer they make both the original and the updated versions of episodes available as an option, since there are a number of special effects and other tweaks included to bring the fx up to today's standards. That's fine, but it is always good to know exactly what we were watching when it first aired.

Star Trek Enterprise never quite capitalized on its premise of a prequel to the original Star Trek but somehow survived for four seasons, thanks to foolish fans like me who will watch just about anything with the label *Star Trek*, though we will spend endless time online critiquing the various ways in which episode so-and-so couldn't possibly work out that way because it contradicts episode such-and-such from Deep Space Nine or the original series or whatever. If only it had ever proved worthy of such passion.

Many people are passionate about *Orphan Black*, a modern tale of intrigue revolving around cloning. I gave up after the second or third episode because as with so many modern shows they make you feel like you have to take notes to follow the action. I don't mind complexity but come on. Nonetheless friend after friend has praised the performance of lead actress Tatiana Maslany in the dual role of a woman and her clone while the outrage over her shutout at the Emmy nominations was about the most interesting aspect of that day. So there's not getting around having to catch up with this before season two begins next spring.

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