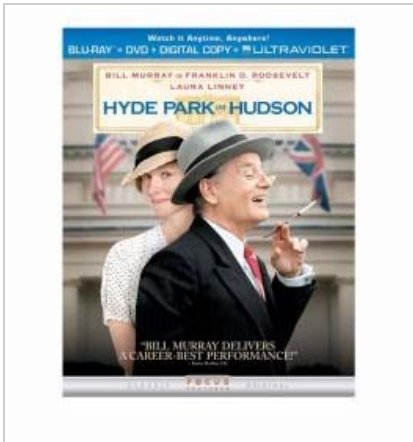


DVDs: Good Bill Murray, Great Jackie Chan, So-So Barbra

Posted: 04/16/2013 4:04 pm

What have we got on tap? Bill Murray as FDR and other new releases, a great Jackie Chan double bill, one of Barbra Streisand's lesser works, a clutch of documentaries, some titles for baseball fans to watch on their team's off day, a string of auteurist gems, and a TV roundup.

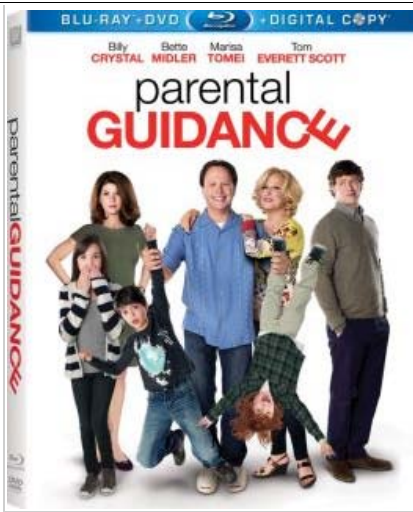


HYDE PARK ON HUDSON (\$34.98 BluRay; Universal) -- Bill Murray is surprisingly good as the patrician, blue-blooded FDR, ready to join the fight in WW II but needing England to woo his voters into supporting it. Murray certainly wouldn't spring to mind when casting the role but he's effective on every level. It's a pity the film he's in is so drab and dull; it turns even Laura Linney into a boring mouse of a distant relative and current love of the great man. (One of many.) A weekend when royalty visits is the excuse for this very modest drama with very little on its mind. Murray deserved much better.

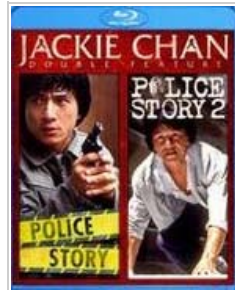


GATE OF HELL (\$29.99 BluRay; Criterion) -- Often, the movies released by Criterion are well-known masterpieces. When it's a film I haven't heard of, I sit up and take notice. Gate Of Hell seems to have fallen off the radar but it's certainly no obscure entry. Director Teinosuke Kinugasa's period epic about doomed romance won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film as well as the Oscar for Best Costumes. And no wonder! The film is visually dazzling, to say the least, with gorgeous costumes just one of many striking elements in this story of a warrior who falls in love with a married lady-in-waiting but just can't take no for an answer. One of Japan's first color films, it uses color as brilliantly as any of the masters to tell its story and was a worldwide success. Only the fragile prints and the cost of restoration kept it out of the public eye for decades. Now it's returned to prominence thanks to a 2011 restoration, beautifully presented here by Criterion.

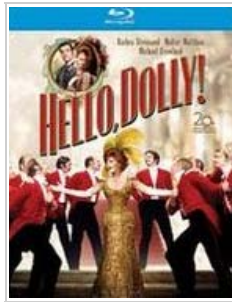
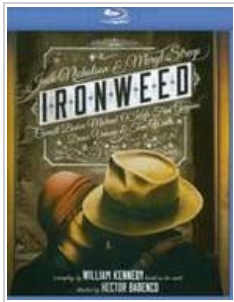
PARENTAL GUIDANCE (\$39.99 BluRay; FOX) -- Bette Midler's return to Broadway in *the one-woman show I'll Eat You Last* can't come soon enough. Here is she in a witless comedy with Billy Crystal about grandparents



asked to watch over their grandkids for a spell. Hilarity ensues until -- god help us -- lessons are learned. Presumably, as super agent Sue Mengers, Midler won't be learning any lessons on Broadway, just returning to the bawdy, penetrating humor that made her great.



POLICE STORY AND POLICE STORY 2 (\$19.99 BluRay; Shout) **IRONWEED** (\$29.99 BluRay; Olive/Paramount) **HELLO, DOLLY!** (\$24.99 BluRay; FOX) -- One of Jackie Chan's major triumphs, his Hong Kong action gem

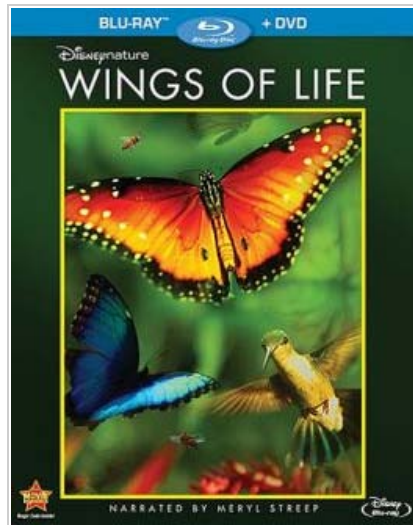
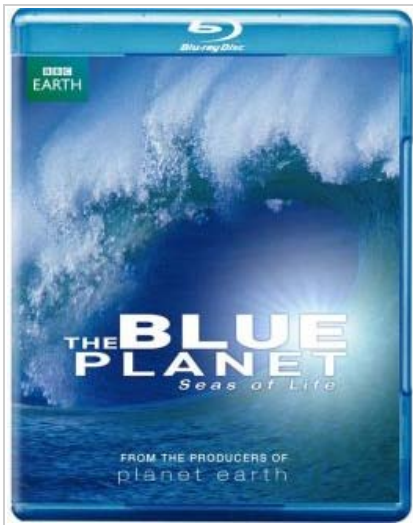


Police Story is filled with great stunts and genuine suspense, as opposed to the comic humor he'd been known for previously. It's paired on a no-frills release with the sequel *Police Story 2*.

Ironweed may seem less compelling as time has passed, but you can't beat the pairing of Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep (and Tom Waits!) as down-on-their-luck street denizens. The pacing is sluggish but

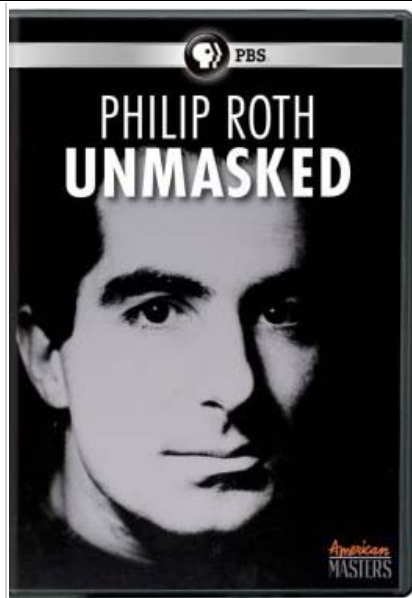
their acting is superb. The scene where Streep fantasizes that the customers in a bar have cajoled her into singing breaks my heart every time.

Finally, *Hello, Dolly!* is one of those lumbering movie musicals that typify the studio system for me in the 1960s. Director Gene Kelly did Barbra Streisand no favors with this two ton dinosaur. Poor Carol Channing deserved the part but at least her iconic performance wasn't weighed down by the trappings here. Musicals should not be exhausting.

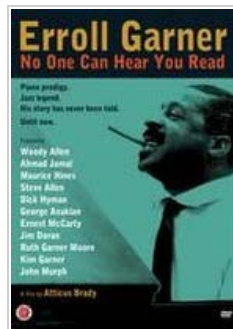
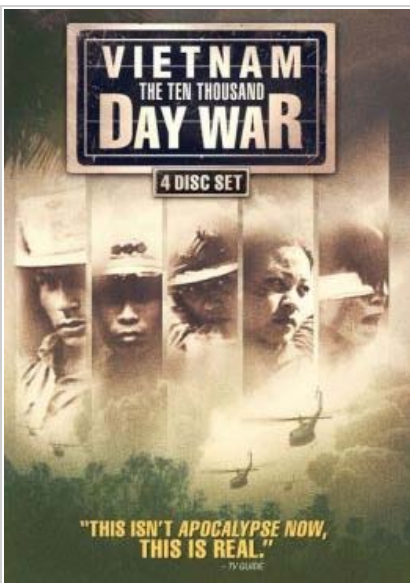


THE

BLUE PLANET (\$39.99 BluRay; BBC Earth)
WINGS OF LIFE (\$39.99 BluRay; Disney)
ORCHESTRA OF EXILES (\$27.95)



DVD; First Run Features)
PHILIP ROTH UNMASKED (\$24.99 DVD; PBS)
VIETNAM: THE TEN THOUSAND DAY WAR (\$39.99 DVD; TimeLife/StarVista)
ERROLL GARNER: NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU READ (\$24.99 DVD; First Run Features) -- It's been 12 years since *The Blue Planet* came out. That's not too soon to say it may be the greatest nature documentary film of all time, stunningly beautiful, smart, informative, ambitious and entertaining. It's certainly a landmark in television and every bit as influential as *The Civil War* by Ken Burns. Long overdue on BluRay, it's here in all its



glory.

Wings Of Life is just one of the many films coming in the wake of *The Blue Planet*. Disney established DisneyNature, released a theatrical version of *The Blue Planet* and stepped up its own releases. Of course it has a long history of nature films, but they've really raised their game in the past decade. Director Louis Schwartzberg steps into the

big time with this film, which uses high speed photography to capture birds and bees and other flying creates in remarkable close-ups.

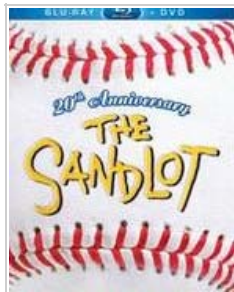
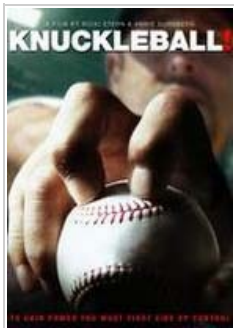
As the New York Times pointed out in its review, *Orchestra Of Exiles* is notable not just for its compelling story about the formation of what became the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. What makes the film unusual is that it didn't just capture this story unearthed by others; it delved into the facts and broke ground in the historical record that few other films ever attempt much less manage.

Since he's officially "retired," maybe we can start to place the late-career run of genius from author Philip Roth in context and appreciate it more completely. It's now a body of work, rather than a living, growing entity. Certainly that should be how the Nobel Prize committee treats it, since Roth should be a shoo-in in the next year or two if quality and an extraordinary career have anything to do with it. This PBS special -- *Philip Roth Unmasked* -- starts the process, though it spends more time than I'm interested in on parallels between Roth's personal life and his work. Who cares?

The masterpiece of reporter Peter Arnett and producer Michael Maclear, *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War* is a 26 part Canadian documentary series that came out in 1980, providing a balanced, sober, comprehensive and eye-opening overview of the Vietnam which had just ended a few years earlier. Maclear traveled to Vietnam and secured rare footage while Arnett had been stationed in Vietnam as a journalist for many years. Its breadth and depth is impressive as is the perspective the series offers despite appearing so soon after the last soldiers returned. This edition is essentially the same though it has included new graphics at certain points to make the story being told clearer.

If you're going to talk about a jazz great like pianist Erroll Garner, you can't really go

wrong with some appreciative talking heads and lots of lots of archival footage showing Garner doing his stuff. That's what you get here in this 53 minute labor of love by director Atticus Brady. I assume money was an issue but the relatively short running time would have been nicely augmented by more footage of even a complete concert, however raw the footage.

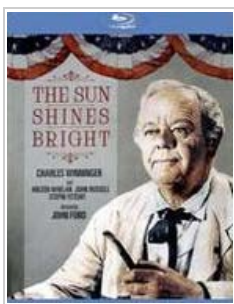


KNUCKLEBALL (\$24.99 DVD; FilmBuff)
THE SANDLOT 20TH ANNIVERSARY (\$19.99 BluRay; FOX) -- Baseball season is in full swing. You might think fans would save books and movies about this sport for the November-March off season. And yet, it's somehow too painful to talk about baseball when you can't watch it. That's why *42* came out in theaters once the season began (to big box office) and these

two releases are out in stores. *Knuckleball* is a fine documentary for ardent fans of the sport that followed the two

major leaguers who use the knuckleball. Their timing was perfect: they captured pitcher Tim Wakefield's final season and caught R. A. Dickey just as he was rising to fame. In 2012 (when the film came out) Dickey would become the first knuckleballer in history to win pitching's Cy Young Award.

The Sandlot is a kid's film with summer games of baseball as the backdrop for the usual youthful tales of first kisses, bullies and the like. Mind you, moms and dads with fond memories of their own childhood hijinks on the diamond will happily watch it too. It's the 20th anniversary but let's not confuse that with being genuinely good. Still, it is baseball.



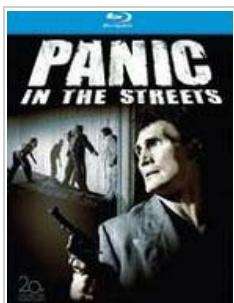
THE SUN SHINES BRIGHT (\$29.99 BluRay;

Olive/Paramount)

RUTHLESS (\$29.99 BluRay; Olive/Paramount)

CHINA GATE (\$29.99 BluRay; Olive/Paramount)

PANIC IN THE STREETS (\$24.99 BluRay; FOX) -- An auteurist's delight! Four films from four notable directors, all in decent prints on BluRay. John Ford's *The Sun Shines Bright* is a gentle drama and Ford's personal favorite. It's certainly bursting at the seams with his usual gallery of supporting players. This BluRay contains the preferred director's cut of the film about a judge running for reelection in 1905 Kentucky.

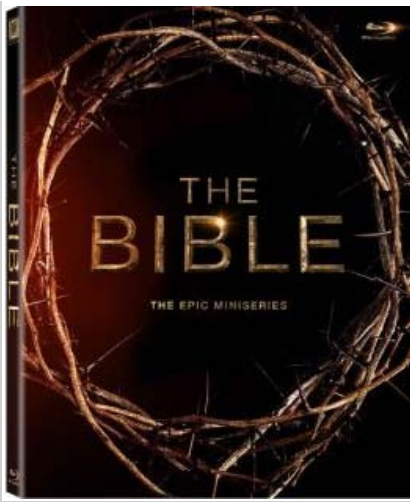


Ruthless is Edgar G. Ulmer's little-discussed melodrama about a ruthless millionaire who will stop at nothing -- nothing!

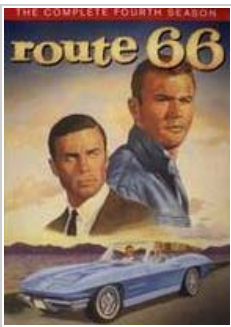
-- to make more money. A fine supporting cast, again, and the film poster tagline sums it up nicely: Money and Power. Money and Power.

Samuel Fuller knows his way around a war zone and it shows in *China Gate*, an action film about mercenaries set in Vietnam during the tail end of the French occupation. Fuller wrote, produced and directed; the cast includes Gene Barry, Lee Van Cleef, Angie Dickinson and even Nat King Cole (who sings the title song!). Beautifully shot, it's a trim and nasty tale of mercenaries hired to blow up an arms depot in enemy territory. It's *The Dirty Dozen* ten years early, in a way.

Finally, Elia Kazan insists *Panic In The Streets* is the only "perfect" film he ever made, achieving exactly what he set out to do in this noir tale of Jack Palance as a ruthless killer on the lam and Richard Widmark as the medical examiner trying to track him down because he knows the fugitive is the carrier of a deadly plague. Great fun.



BIBLE (\$69.99 BluRay; FOX)
BOSS SEASON TWO (\$39.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)
THE DICK VAN DYKE SHOW SEASON 1 (\$59.98 BluRay; RLJ)
SPIES OF WARSAW (\$24.99 BluRay; BBC)
ROUTE 66 THE COMPLETE FOURTH SEASON (\$29.99 DVD; Shout) -- If good intentions made good television, *The Bible* would be a



masterpiece. Unfortunately, it gives biblical epics a bad name -- and a lot of biblical epics are pretty tiresome already. it doesn't have the fun of *The Ten Commandments* or the authenticity of some other, braver tellings of these stories. It's just earnest and dull.

Kelsey Grammer found the second role of a lifetime (obviously, *Frasier* was first) in *Boss*, a drama about a ruthless mayor of Chicago. (Is there any other kind?) Unfortunately, he couldn't find an audience and Starz wasn't ready to plunk down for a third season on prestige alone. The Emmys really could have made a difference here. Watch the two seasons to see what you missed.

The Dick Van Dyke Show is one of the all-time great sitcoms. It's coming out on BluRay and looks good, if pricey.

I still think of David Tennant as Doctor Who so obviously he left that franchise not a moment too soon. Nonetheless, though I occasionally think "The Doctor!" and wonder why he doesn't pull out his sonic screwdriver when in a jam, Tennant has impressed me on stage and TV in various other roles. Here in *Spies Of Warsaw* he plays a war hero and blue blood drawn into intrigue in Poland before World War II.

Finally, it took a while. But fans of *Route 66* who bought each season as it came out and then felt ripped off when a complete boxed set was released can rejoice. They're now free to buy just the fourth and final season of this anthology series posing as a road series about Todd and Linc traveling from town to town and discovering America. Lots of strong guest stars and an eye-opener for its time.

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