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Okay, a new year and a big new batch of DVDs, BluRays or if you prefer streaming video to catch up on, including a classic miniseries, a not-so-classic but hugely popular British soap, loads of Oscar hopefuls, Oscar shut-outs and the always welcome Criterion releases. Here we go!

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE KEEPSAKE EDITION (\$29.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

DOWNTON ABBEY SEASON 4 (\$54.99 BluRay; PBS) --

The brilliant BBC adaptation of Jane Austen's masterpiece came out in 1995, so it turns 20 next year. But the novel it's based on came out on January 28, 1813, so happy 101st birthday to this wise and witty work. If you've never read the book, for heaven's sake, why are you denying yourself the pleasure? If you don't often read novels from the 1800s, feel free to watch the Colin Firth, Jennifer Ehle miniseries first. It will orient you in the time and place and mores, freeing you up to appreciate the humor and passion and insight of the novel. It is unquestionably one of the best things TV ever produced and this new BluRay is happily remastered so it's a significant improvement over my previous edition.

Downton Abbey on the other hand is just a soap. A very well-acted soap, but poorly plotted and filled with cheap, Dallas-like twists. I'll assume you've seen the episodes that have already aired (stop reading if you haven't!). For me, I've grown disinterested after the tossed-off rape plot-line. Downton Abbey is too well-acted to enjoy the usual shenanigans of a soap. On a soap, it doesn't matter if a character wants to be a nun one week, is lusting after their brother the next and discovers a long-lost child they forgot they ever had the week after. And believe me, it takes talented actors to pull such nonsense off, which is why soaps have been the proving ground for many talented performers. But they know it's nonsense and let us in on the fun. Not so on Downton, where the cast sadly takes the idiotic doings of Julian Fellowes seriously and thus leaches it of the guilty pleasure we might have. These characters are too real for me to enjoy being tossed about by a fickle god; whether it's having Lady Mary clearly establish herself as informed and working on the estate at the end of one season after a long struggle (only to have her have to do it again at the beginning of the next as if the previous season had never happened) or throwing in a rape just to spice things up. Ugh. I hear the rest of this season doesn't have any insanity quite up to that level, but I stopped having fun so I stopped watching.

BLUE JASMINE (\$35.99 BluRay; Sony Pictures Classics)

CAPTAIN PHILLIPS (\$40.99 BluRay combo; Columbia Pictures)

THE ACT OF KILLING (\$27.99 DVD; Drafthouse Films)

JACKASS PRESENTS: BAD GRANDPA (\$39.99 BluRay; Paramount) --

Here are some Oscar hopefuls. I've often thought it must be unnerving to be a front runner: everyone, simply everyone, tells you they voted for you and you're going to win and at some point it must feel like bad luck to hear nothing but assurances. If that's the case, Cate Blanchett must be a nervous wreck. Surely someone was moved by Judi Dench, she is thinking. Maybe they just don't want to be rude to me? Well, watch Woody Allen's latest to see what she does and decide for yourself if she's a lock.

Captain Phillips is one of three survival films that all feel of a piece: one person against the odds. Gravity was

the most successful and might just win Best Director for Alfonso Cuaron. Tom Hanks stars in Captain Phillips, a solid effort in which a ship attacked by Somali pirates includes a captain and crew that satisfyingly do everything you would think of to foil the bad guys without behaving like super heros or Bruce Willis in Die Hard. For me, the most satisfying was the Robert Redford at sea flick All Is Lost, but this drama is a taut, enjoyable flick.

The Act Of Killing is up for Best Documentary and to even describe the movie is rather mind-blowing for many. In Indonesia, the men behind some crimes against humanity aren't in hiding: they're proud of what they've done. With the prodding of the filmmaker, they agree to reenact their mass killings in the style of Hollywood movies so the world will remember what they did and why. Huh? Imagine getting a serial killer to make a musical about all the people he slaughtered and you'll get a sense for the looking-glass craziness in this movie. Widely considered one of the best movies of the year and a ground-breaking documentary.

If The Act Of Killing feels like a blow to the head, Bad Grandpa is definitely more like a knee in the crotch. This very successful spin-off of the Jackass franchise made lots of money and garnered an Oscar nomination for the terrific makeup of Johnny Knoxville as the cranky title character. What's most notable about this is that it wasn't effective in the controlled environment of a set where careful lighting and such can achieve the desired effect. The makeup here had to make him look like a convincing old man in the real world so Knoxville could punk people with his misbehavior. That's pretty amazing. It's likely to lose to Dallas Buyers Club but the work here is definitely more of an achievement and worthy of Oscar's attention. Needless to say, the people nominated should go to the Oscars done up as old curmudgeons or at least bring Knoxville in character onto the stage with them.

THE SPECTACULAR NOW (\$24.99 BluRay combo; Lionsgate)

DON JON (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Fox)

ENOUGH SAID (\$39.99 BluRay; Fox Searchlight)

RUSH (\$34.99 BluRay combo; Universal)

THE FIFTH ESTATE (\$36.99 BluRay combo; Touchstone/DreamWorks) -- And now we come to a clutch of movies that expected or deserved Oscar nominations but came up short.

To be honest, no one was talking about The Spectacular Now as being in the midst. But this teen drama quietly became one of the best reviewed movies of the year thanks to a subtle screenplay by the team behind (500) Days Of Summer, a sterling cast and a wonderful low-key style that upended our expectations even as they told the familiar story of an apparently popular dude falling for a goody-goody girl. Toss in alcoholism and a wayward dad and you've got pure Young Adult Novel territory. But it's done so well, you never quite notice. The Fault In Our Stars should be this lucky. Kudos to breakout Miles Teller and TV's Shailene Woodley making the leap to film with ease. A real sleeper.

Of course, (500) Days of Summer starred the charming and talented Joseph Gordon-Levitt. He's made his directorial debut with the funny and nervy Don Jon, a romance about a guy addicted to porn who is challenged to have a real relationship by a gal who gives as good as she gets. Scarlett Johansson is the girl and she's very funny here, capping a year in which her voice work on Her was exceptionally good as well.

Someone foolishly pointed out that Oscar doesn't usually nominate people who have died but have films eligible. But how often does an Oscar worthy performance come from someone who has died after the movie was made and before nominations are announced? Not too often, I'd think. So it's not telling but perhaps a little disappointing that James Gandolfini finally got a movie role worthy of the man from The Sopranos but couldn't live to see his acclaim. Certainly Julia-Louis Dreyfuss has never been this good on film either. Enough said about Enough Said.

I've been a huge fan of German actor Daniel Bruhl for years: Goodbye Lenin, The Educators, Inglorious Basterds, to name just three. It looked like he'd finally have a North American breakout with this racing movie

directed by Ron Howard. But the movie flopped and Bruhl's Oscar-bait of a performance (involving a serious crash, damaged looks and a noble comeback -- all based on real events!) somehow didn't snag their attention. Bruhl will someday; trust me.

Bruhl also stars in *The Fifth Estate*, a movie that was treated as if it were Julian Assange rather than a complex film about Julian Assange. It seemed to be ostracized from the start, as if it had no right to exist, ignoring work by It Boy Benedict Cumberbatch and director Bill Condon's nuanced look at a ripped-from-the-headlines story the entire world is talking about. Very strange. Even if one has issues with the film (it's far from perfect), it's certainly worthy of discussion.

INSTRUCTIONS NOT INCLUDED (\$24.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF MEATBALLS 2 (\$40.99 BluRay combo; Columbia)

IT'S A MAD, MAD, MAD, MAD WORLD (\$49.99 BluRay combo; Criterion) -- If you're going for laughs, you're rarely thinking about the Academy Awards. Here are three that just went for the jugular.

Instructions Not Included is the Cinderella story of the year. This gentle comedy involves a bachelor who finds a baby from one of his many flings on his doorstep. He raises the little girl with love (think *One Man And A Baby*) only to have the mother come back to reclaim the child years later. You'll laugh; you'll cry! It's a breakout film for Mexican star Eugenio Derbez, who co-wrote, directed and stars. Think Woody Allen!

Hopes were higher for *Cloudy With A Chance Of Meatballs 2*. The original was a left-field winner. But any hopes that this sequel would build on that success ended when the movie was screened. It's not awful, just more of the same and a bit unnecessary.

On the other hand, *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* was made with the highest expectations. No comedy had ever featured more stars and this Stanley Kramer epic was bursting with big names, all of whom got to do their bits at length. The original cut was five hours long and the original roadshow version at 197 minutes was thought lost forever. (How long was it? During the intermission, they even played audio of cops talking to each other on the radio in the lobbies and restrooms. It never stopped!) Happily, Criterion has worked to create as full a restoration as possible for the movie that went on to be a huge box office hit and score multiple Oscar nominations and one win. (None for acting; there were so many stars that probably no one in the Academy voted for the same person twice.) To me, it's one of those lumbering elephants of the 1960s but I have friends who swear by it and will give it a chance again. Certainly this edition could not be more loving and is bursting with extras and the usual Criterion care.

THE COSBY SHOW SEASONS 1 AND 2 (\$14.99 DVD; Mill Creek)

TREME: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$134.99 BluRay; HBO)

CHARLIE'S ANGELS SEASON 1 (\$9.99 DVD; Mill Creek)

TOP OF THE LAKE (\$34.99 DVD; BBC Home Entertainment)

MARRIED WITH CHILDREN SEASONS 1 AND 2 (\$14.99 DVD; Mill Creek)

GOOD TIMES SEASONS 1 AND 2 (\$14.99 DVD; Mill Creek) -- Here's a TV roundup of classics, the unappreciated and the over-praised.

People (wrongly) think they can stream any TV show they want, whenever they want from this or that service. It's not quite true but it's changed their attitudes towards collecting TV shows. Why buy most of them when you can just stream that season of *Star Trek* if you're so inclined? The response from studios should be to get classic TV out there in as cheap a package as possible. Make an entire series or at least several seasons so inexpensive that people almost can't help themselves. Cheap doesn't mean cheap, however. I don't care about extras (neither do most people), but you better have the COMPLETE episodes (don't ever bother releasing shortened versions used for syndication or shows missing their original music cues). Thank God that's finally happened with *The Cosby Show*, one of the biggest hits of all time and a show so popular they were probably

afraid to release it in the deluxe style it deserved. Now you've got seasons one and two (the complete original broadcast) in one set for \$15. Yes, 49 episodes for \$15 -- and frankly, it's on sale for less than \$10. Even at full price, that's about 30 cents an episode. If you see that in the checkout line of your local grocery store, you almost can't resist. And believe me, it's worth it. Right from the start, the cast is gelling, the kids are cute without being annoying and Cosby is his charming, hilarious self. I'm having a blast re-watching them and am astonished about how vividly I remember certain details. A delight and at a great price.

Treme is priced as the deluxe, collectible drama it is. Maybe now that the entire series is done and brought together in one box, we can start to appreciate this well-acted, funky, very much its own beast drama from HBO about the people of New Orleans. Perhaps no show will ever match *The Wire* but now we can accept Treme on its own terms and see the shape and flow of the show from beginning to end.

Charlie's Angels, on the other hand, will elicit nothing but giggles. It's not even a guilty pleasure, really, since it's so damn silly it's highly unlikely you'll watch more than a few episodes. But for those who want a blast of the past and just love their angels (my favorite was the smart one, Kate Jackson), why this again is the entire first season of the drama in a very inexpensive package that makes it worth a gamble or a good gift for any teen boy who wonders what dad watched when he was just a kid. Good god, did we all really watch this nonsense? At least the casting was great.

Top Of The Lake is one of the most acclaimed miniseries of the year but for me it's the best example of the Emperor Has No Clothes. Elizabeth Moss is a terrific actress and she's good here. But the mystery she's delving into in New Zealand is not terribly compelling and the scenery chewing from Peter Mullan and especially an out of control Holly Hunter as a cult leader grows quickly tiresome. I don't blame Hunter; there's not much to do with this nonsense but try and gin it up with some humor. But it's a dull, trudging affair. I am, to be sure, in the minority on this one. But I don't know why. On paper (Jane Campion directs!) this was wildly promising. In execution, a flop.

Does it matter that *Married With Children* is now available with the proper opening song (Sinatra singing "Love and Marriage")? Heck, I usually skip the title sequence when gobbling up two or three episodes at a time. But yes, it does matter because that's the theme song we heard every week and that's the theme song we need to hear when re-watching them today. Otherwise, it's just "wrong." I know this sitcom was initially a spoof of witless sitcoms. It certainly had an excellent cast that knew it, led by Ed O'Neill and Katey Sagal. But it went on so long and devolved into rote material with such regularity that even its most ardent supporters would have to admit it actually became a witless sitcom at some point. No worries; they all went on to better work and especially early on you can still glimpse a hint of the mockery they had in mind. Barely.

Good Times was, for me, like an early version of rap. Much like *Sanford & Son*, white people could watch and enjoy this show. But it wasn't made with us in mind. Unlike *The Cosby Show*, which was universal in its humor and aspiration by being so insightful about human nature and parents and kids; *Good Times* was universal by being so specific about the lives of working class black people. Their references were not our references. Their point of view was not our point of view, even as we recognized so much that was universal. Norman Lear hated "Dy-no-mite!" and that catch phrase elevated it to hit status. But what was so refreshing about *Good Times* was how beside the point a white audience seemed to be. They'd do just fine without us, you had the feeling, and that made it all the more fascinating and enjoyable to watch. Even *The Jeffersons* had an obligatory (and silly) white neighbor and a mixed race couple in the building. *Good Times* just had talented actors and smart humor.

RIFIFI (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Criterion)

LA VIE DE BOHEME (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Criterion)

THRONE OF BLOOD (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Criterion)

THIEF (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Criterion)

LATE RAY (\$44.95 DVD; Eclipse Series 40 From Criterion) -- I usually start with Criterion because their

releases are always so consistently excellent. This week I decided to end with them just to save the best for last.

We can thank the McCarthy era witch hunts for Rififi. Those paranoid doings sent director Jules Dassin back to France from Hollywood, where he promptly delivered the greatest heist film of all time. This sophisticated caper has been copied and emulated ever since. Isn't it time you appreciated the original? A brand new remastering with the usual solid Criterion extras.

Aki Kaurismaki's shaggy tale of artists living on the margins came out in 1992 but remains as woebegone and amusing as ever. A new transfer overseen by the director, this was shot in black and white, one of those films that looks so good you think maybe every film should be shot in black and white. The most substantial extra is an hour long documentary about the making of the film. They've done some technical nips and tucks on *La Vie De Boheme* but essentially Criterion is reissuing all their films in combo packs with both BluRay and DVD to create ease of inventory and allow buyers to upgrade their library without having to choose if they're not ready yet to give up DVD.

That's why we've got Akira Kurosawa's *Throne Of Blood* in a new transfer. His feudal Japan take on *Macbeth* is a haunting look at corrosive ambition from 1957. Toshiro Mifune is the warrior who wallows in gore to fulfill a prophecy he take power. As always, he's impossible to take your eyes off of whenever he's on screen. Extras include commentary by experts, alternate subtitle options and a documentary about the making of the film.

Michael Mann's moody *Thief* has always been a cult favorite. It's never risen to the attention of another early effort *Manhunter*, despite a great performance by James Caan as a safe cracker planning that illusive "one last heist." It's never looked better thanks to a new restoration and this set includes all the previous extras and new interviews with Mann, Caan and a member of *Tangerine Dream* about their influential score. Ripe for reappraisal.

Fans of the legendary Satyajit Ray are rolling in clover right now. Major restorations are taking place of his great works and those are slowly coming out theatrically in Europe (and sometimes here) and then on BluRay and DVD. The films look amazing -- far better than we've ever seen them look in the US. It's like seeing Ray for the very first time. As the major titles come out, now we even get the treat of seeing lesser-known Ray come to light. Here is Criterion's no-frills line *Eclipse* putting out Late Ray. This three DVD set contains the master's final three films: 1984's *The Home and the World* (about a love triangle), 1989's *An Enemy Of The People* (the Ibsen play) and 1991's swan song *The Stranger*. Ray has never been less than lauded but so few of his movies were seen in decent prints that I think his work as been reduced to the *Apu Trilogy* (with even that masterpiece shown only in battered and fading prints). We're in for a major reappraisal and upgrade to his already high estimation and these three final works will certainly be part of the conversation.

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