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## DVDs: Hidden Treasures

Posted October 2, 2007 | 12:47 PM (EST)

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It's easy to take DVDs for granted. They're small, inexpensive, often loaded with extras and offer great picture and sound far superior to VHS and a lot easier to use than those bulky old laser discs. We just assume that a few months after a movie hits theaters that we'll be able to buy the DVD for about \$20. And before the next season of a TV show begins, we know the previous season will pop up in a boxed set as well.

This week's major releases are no exception to the rule: [Ken Burns' engrossing \*The War\*](#) (\$129.99; PBS) is just winding up on public television but is already out in a lavish set; [Disney's \*The Jungle Book\*](#) (\$29.99; Disney) -- one of their most under-appreciated animated films and Walt's last -- celebrates its 40th anniversary; the family friendly [Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer](#) (\$34.98; Fox) is filled with commentary tracks and making-of videos; Fred Astaire and [Audrey Hepburn](#) are charming if way too far apart in age for the romantic musical [Funny Face](#) (\$14.99; Paramount); John Cusack's exceptional work in the word of mouth horror hit [1408](#) (\$29.95; Dimension) can be appreciated along with an alternate ending; and TV shows like [Entourage](#) (\$39.98; HBO), [Shark](#) (\$59.98; Fox), the almost-cancelled [Jericho](#) (\$49.99; Paramount) and even the cable hit [The Sarah Silverman Program](#) (\$19.99; Paramount) are all on DVD as a matter of course.

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All of those releases are expected -- even demanded -- by fans. But look at all the titles in the last two weeks that even ardent DVD fans can only shake their heads in happiness over. Leading the pack is surely [Cinema 16: European Short Films](#) (\$29.98; Warp Films).

Shorts barely existed in the world of VHS, but they're ideal for DVDs where people can skip to their favorites with ease. This compilation contains 16 shorts from rising stars and top filmmakers like Christopher Nolan, Nanni Moretti, Ridley Scott, Mathieu Kassovitz, Lynne Ramsay, Lars Von Trier and my personal favorite Roy Andersson. (Even Andersson's feature films are hard to find on DVD.) Outside of film festivals, these shorts would simply be unavailable to almost anyone anywhere in the world. Imagine if people could buy novels but never read a short story and you'll realize how absurd that is. [Cinema 16](#) is simply filled with treasures.

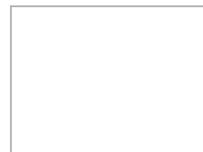
Another DVD delight is the documentary "film festival" arranged by Docurama, which releases a series of DVDs close to each other, making an event out of small films lacking a high profile. Their

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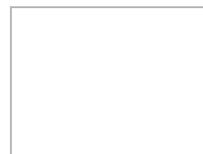


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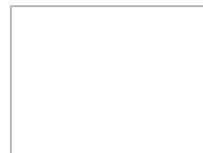
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recent batch includes an ode to a New York chef at Shopsin's called "I Like Killing Flies," a celebration of Alvin Ailey called *Beyond The Steps* (with a short film extra containing an entire piece of theirs), and my personal favorite *Plagues & Pleasures On The Salton Sea*, the story of a failed utopia in Southern California that's narrated with relish by John Waters (all \$26.95; Docurama).

Robert Klein is famous enough that his eight HBO comedy specials -- which haven't aged a bit thanks to his timeless concerns - would be expected to come out on DVD (\$39.99; SRO). But could we really expect to get them for \$5 each? And no one could expect to find *The Catherine Tate Show Series One* (\$29.99; SRO). This relatively obscure UK sketch show (to Americans) showcases Tate's chameleon-like ability to play tons of different characters a la Tracey Ullman and come up with absurd but hard to forget catch phrases like "Am I bovvered?" that will get you far in any conversation with a Brit.

Waterbearer Films just released three foreign gay films from the 80s and 90s: *Lakki: The Boy Who Could Fly*, *Friends Forever* and the sweet-natured *Sebastian* (all \$29.95). You can depend on the Swedes, the Norwegians and the Danish to treat coming out with maturity, but is it really reasonable to expect little-known gay films like this to be readily available?

One set that isn't a surprise is *The Up Series* (\$99.95; First Run Features), Michael Apted's landmark documentary series that revisits the same group of people every seven years. The new boxed set includes all seven editions so far, from *Seven Up* to "49 Up," and DVD is the ideal way to experience this unique and brilliant work.

You might also expect to find *Ten Canoes* (\$24.99; Palm Pictures), an Australian film that delves into aboriginal culture with charm. But you might not expect it to look so beautiful, thanks to DVD's inherent high quality and the care taken in transferring this acclaimed art house movie onto the format.

And everyone knows that sex sells: pornography and erotica are always the first genres to test new formats like DVD-ROM, laser disc, DVD and downloadable films. So no one should blush at seeing *Vintage Erotica Anno 1960* (\$24.95; Cult Epics), the latest in a series rescuing erotica shorts from obscurity.

But no one - not even the most sincere optimist - can do anything but smile with surprised delight at finding something like *On and Off The Rails: The British Transport Film Collection* (\$29.95; Kino). Fourteen British railroading shorts, including gems like "John Betjeman Goes By Train," "Blue Pullman" and what the liner notes describe with a straight face as "lesser known gems" like *This Is York?* If anything does, surely this counts as a hidden treasure. And guess what? They're delightful.

What hidden treasures are you still waiting to pop up on DVD? Me, I'm waiting for a boxed set of the Oscar nominated shorts from years past and a serious compilation of *Laurel & Hardy* shorts from their heyday.

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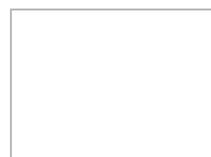
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I used to have a copy on laser disc of the documentary "Laurel & Hardy's Laughing 20's" which I loved, and even recall seeing at the movies as a support to the general release version of Cinerama's "The Wonderful World Of The Brothers Grimm." I would love to have a DVD copy.

Come to think of it, I wouldn't mind one of "Brothers Grimm" either. It's not that it was a particularly great movie, but I still yearn for those huge 70mm, curved screen presentations, and watching DVDs of 'How The West Was Won,' 'Khartoum,' and even (yikes) 'Krkatoa, East Of Java' helps bring back some of those road show memories.

Glad you mentioned 'The Catherine Tate Show' which can often be a hit or miss, depending on the character she's portraying, but when it works - like "Am I boverred?" Lauren or the foul mouthed Nan - the show is a gem.

Also released today is the British black and white comedy 'The Big Job', which I actually remember seeing in Britain during my youth. It stars Sydney James, Jim Dale and several other of the Carry On regulars. I loved it back then. I'm sure it looks dated but I'm trying to get a copy of it, all the same.

And finally, keeping it Brit-side, any word on 'The Fast Lady' with Stanley Baxter and Leslie Phillips, who played the voice of the talking hat in the Harry Potter films?

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**Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

I had lots of laser discs, but not the Laurel & Hardy one. I'm jealous. They've been putting out their later, inferior movies and I'm sure it's just a matter of time before they're unearthed. I think I might have seen The Big Job as a kid, but I've never heard of The Fast Lady. The latter is available on its own in the UK and the former as part of a cheap Sydney James boxed set, so if you're willing to pay shipping, you can get them from Amazon.co.uk. Yes, you'll have to play them on a computer DVD player, which can be reset to play that region's titles, assuming you don't own a region-free player which are common overseas but not so common here. (Keep in mind you can only change your computer DVD drive back and forth several times before it locks -- I like to keep one drive dedicated to UK dvds just for this purpose. And those region-free players are pretty cheap. BUt be careful, you'll find yourself lusting after a lot of UK TV and movies you normally wouldn't be able to buy and watch.

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Where is The Whoopie Boys with Paul Rodriguez? Where is the TV show Friday's with Michael Richards? Jeckyl and Hyde Together Again?? Break em out of the vault!

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**Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Despite the flood of TV shows, there are still plenty missing -- sketch shows like Fridays might be missing because of music rights, the same reason The Wonder Years isn't out. I'm still waiting for seasons three-seven of Hill Street Blues, the most influential TV show of all time. But I can't complain since Police Squad finally came out recently.

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**jmpurser** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of jmpurser](#) [permalink](#)

Just in case there's someone out there who hasn't tried this, do yourself a favor, and get a television series you like on DVD. Rent it from netflix, you don't have to buy it.

The experience of watching "tv" on dvd is so much superior to the commercial filled, bug crowded, time dependent format that it's like a whole different show. Amazing. I canceled my cable and pick up entire series off netflix now.

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**moober** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of moober](#) [permalink](#)

This is what I do as well. After watching a whole season of The Wire, I thought, 'How does anyone follow this intricate show with a full week between episodes?'

But there are some show i have to watch week to week so I can hold my own at the 'water cooler', like Top Chef and Damages.

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**Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

I agree. It's getting to the point where I have no patience waiting a week to see a new episode. Most TV shows benefit greatly from being watched over a short period of time (one or two a night) rather than stretched out over six months. The better the show, the bigger the benefit. This isn't quite as true for sitcoms, I find. Don't ask me why. But I don't just use Netflix. I've been DVRing the entire season of Mad Men on AMC and in about a week or two I'll devour it all at once. Lots of people with cable do the same with DVRs, HBO on Demand etc. It is indeed the best way to watch TV.

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**CriminallySane** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of CriminallySane](#) [permalink](#)

Shorts? I am old enough to remember when a short - generally but not always a documentary - was standard pre-feature fare in theater runs.

Ahh, the old days...

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**Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Oh, those days of yore. Now the twist is this: Wes Anderson's new movie The Darjeeling Limited has a short about 12 minutes long that serves as a sort of prequel. Instead of tacking it onto the movie, they just put it on iTunes for free, so anyone can download and watch it. I watched it after seeing the movie, which helped me catch a quick moment I wouldn't have appreciated otherwise. Similarly, Bruce Springsteen just put the first single from his new album for free on iTunes which makes perfect sense: he wants people to hear the song and rather than spend payola on radio play, he can just put it out there for anyone to play whenever they want. It's a bold new world.

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And for people like me, who have no use for iTunes?

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