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DVDs: Hitchcock's Best Movie

Posted November 20, 2007 | 03:31 PM (EST)

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Alfred Hitchcock made so many wildly entertaining films that picking out your favorite can be difficult. But if I break it down between his UK and US career, I can start to get a grasp on it. My favorite from his British era is *The Lady Vanishes*. It's a pure delight and wouldn't be matched for comic elan till *North By Northwest*. Criterion has outdone its previous edition from nearly a decade ago with this marvelous version (\$39.95). You get a newly remastered print of the film (it's slightly sharper and steadier than the previous very good print), a scholarly commentary, a short documentary on Hitchcock, an entire 1941 feature called *Crook's Tour* featuring the movie's breakout comic relief characters Charters and Caldicott (it proves they should have remained sidekicks but is fun to have) and best of all brief excerpts from Francois Truffaut's legendary 50 hours of audio interviews with Hitchcock. Now if only Criterion would get the rights to the entire set of tapes and release that on DVD complete with stills from the movies they're talking about. Also out this week is Ingmar Bergman's early theatrical drama *Sawdust and Tinsel* (\$39.95; Criterion).

I Am Cuba: The Ultimate Edition (\$44.95; Milestone) is an appropriately jaw-dropping boxed set in the shape of a cigar box. Russian director Mikhail Kalatozov's stunning ode to Communist Cuba is filled with enough bathing beauties, gorgeous scenery, hip-shaking music and remarkably fluid, head-spinning camera shots to turn even Bill O'Reilly into a fellow traveler. It's as if Leni Riefenstahl had discovered sex. Truly a terrific midnight movie and you also get a half hour documentary about the making of the film and a two hour look at Kalatozov's entire career, including his masterpiece *The Cranes Are Flying*.

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Helvetica (\$24.98; PlexiFilm) is a very good documentary film about the modest font that has taken over the world. Like a classic *New Yorker* article, it tackles an offbeat subject you had no particular interest in, shows it to be fascinating and engages you completely for its just-right 80 minute

running time.

UK director Shane Meadows delivers *This Is England* (\$19.95; IFC), another impressive film about the underbelly of society. This time he looks at the racist nationalists that flourished during

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Maggie Thatcher's glory days of the early 80s. Meadows blindsides you by showing the genuine warmth, the desperate need for belonging that brought these young misfits together in makeshift families better than their own - all without sugarcoating the ugliness. Despite a too pat symbolic ending, it's one of the best of the year.

Now a clutch of music-oriented titles: *Hairspray* (\$34.98 for the deluxe edition; New Line) has gone from a movie to a stage musical back to a movie and unfortunately lost something every step of the way. It's painless fun but a flick that used to gently mock racism and "message" movies has now become a message movie itself. And why oh why didn't they cast Harvey Fierstein? *Nirvana: Unplugged In New York* (\$19.98; Geffen) is just as historic as you remembered and presented perfectly with the entire concert (including two extra songs) plus the broadcast version and even rehearsal footage. *Led Zeppelin: The Song Remains The Same* (\$20.97; Warner Bros.) sounds sonically overwhelming (as it should) and has fun extras like a press conference about the band's money getting nicked from their hotel in New York -- the Drake -- and a Cameron Crowe radio piece on the movie that sounds more like an ad. Best of all, you can avoid the fantasy scenes and home life bits and skip to the concert segments, though really nothing captures the 70s quite like seeing Robert Plant playing "Lord of the Rings" in a Welsh forest by dressing up in ancient garb, carrying around a sword, picking wild mushrooms and staring up thoughtfully at the sky. *Colma: The Musical* (\$27.98; Lionsgate) has a nice DIY feel and it's good to see low-budget indies tackle musicals but it would be nice if the pleasant cast could sing better. *Mika: Live In Cartoon Motion* (\$14.98; Universal Republic) is a live concert from the UK dance-pop singer who could give Freddie Mercury lessons in flamboyance. *Eric Clapton: Crossroads Guitar Festival 2007* (\$29.99; Rhino) documents his latest guitar jam featuring virtually every name guitarist you can think of and climaxes with his Blind Faith buddy Steve Winwood.

Finally, *Film Noir: Five Classics From The Studio Vaults* (\$49.95; Kino) collects some corkers, especially an early Powell-Pressburger wartime suspenser called *Contraband* (1942) and a terrifically good, hard-boiled post-war British noir about gangsters with the can't-be-improved title *They Made Me A Fugitive* (1947). (Don't worry; they'll pay for it.)

Also out this week: *Nosferatu: The Ultimate DVD Edition* (\$29.95; Kino), beautifully restored with loads of extras; *Live Free or Die Hard* (\$29.99; Fox), the Bruce Willis franchise taken to a satisfying if ludicrous conclusion; *Hudson Hawk Special Edition* (\$19.94; Sony), a woebegone Willis flop at the time that has a genuine cult following among folk who think it's the *Buckaroo Banzai* of its day (and if you don't know that movie you best stay away); *In Between Days* (\$29.95; Kino), a quiet gem about a South Korean girl living in a northern American city and giving first love an uncertain whirl with a high school buddy and sometime thief; *Hearts Of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (\$24.99; Paramount), the acclaimed documentary about the making of *Apocalypse Now*; *Star Trek Season One* (\$194.99; Paramount) which combines both the DVD and HD-DVD formats in one deluxe set though surely anyone with HD-DVD doesn't want regular DVD and anyone with regular DVD won't want to spend so much more to get a version they can't watch yet; *Monsieur Hire* (\$29.95; Kino), a gem of an erotic mystery muted in tone but not in emotional impact; *Mission: Impossible The Third Season* (\$49.99; Paramount), which is so fun it reminds you how far off the mark the movies have really been; *The Universe: The Complete First Season* (\$44.95; A&E), the solid science series on the History Channel -- I can't wait to see how it turns out; and the *2008 Video Playmate Calendar* (\$19.99; Image) and I can't wait to see how that turns out either.

So tell me, what's your favorite Hitchcock film? Is there one you just don't get? Me, I love *Rear Window* and - scandalously - am not a huge fan of *Vertigo* (though it does have one of the all-time great scores). What about you?

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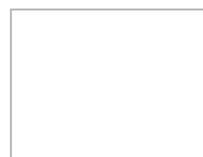
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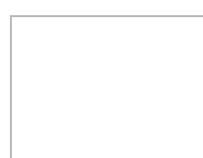
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I love all Hitchcock's "wrong man" movies, like The Wrong Man, North by Northwest, Saboteur, and The Man Who Knew Too Much. Love Rear Window, but don't love Vertigo.

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Best would be North by Northwest - but close is "To Catch a Thief". Grace Kelly is perfect in it, as she was in Rear Window - cool, beautiful, perfect timing.

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Never cared for "Vertigo". It's almost easy to take "Psycho" for granted, but it was so cutting edge at the time (no pun intended). Always loved "Rear Window", "North by Northwest", "Shadow of a Doubt" and "Strangers on a Train". A friend recently turned me onto "Lifeboat" which I enjoyed a great deal.

I wish Criterion would spend more energy getting something like "The Magnificent Ambersons" out on DVD vs. making better versions of some of the things they've already put out.

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I love all of Hitchcock's movies with the exception of Marnie, which I never quite got.

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not my fave, but just caught 'notorious' again on tcm and greatly enjoyed it...

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3fingerbrown See Profile I'm a Fan of 3fingerbrown permalink

I'm partial to Hitchcock's films of the '40s. Someone already mentioned "Notorious," a superior entertainment with a standout performance by Claude Rains as one of the most complex "villains" ever. At a time when other directors were turning out unabashed flag-wavers with good guys and bad guys clearly defined, Hitchcock's genius for perversity led him to make a film where the good guys (working for the Allies) were not particularly virtuous and the bad guy (working for the Nazis) was, in the end, a tortured and pitiable figure.

Also from this period is "Shadow of a Doubt," a near-perfect thriller with another great villain, played by Joseph Cotten. He's rarely mentioned today in the same breath with other top leading men of the era, but Cotten was an excellent performer who turned up in many great films of the '40s--beginning the decade with "Citizen Kane" and ending it with "The Third Man." Cotten's time on the A-list was relatively brief, but the body of work he compiled while he was hot is quite impressive.

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For me it is a toss up between Rear Window & North by Northwest. I admire Psycho and The Birds for their unrelenting creepyness, but that just isn't as entertaining as the others.

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Of the British period, my favorite is The 39 Steps, with The Lady Vanishes as a close second. Ultimately, though, nothing beats Vertigo as both stunning drama and masterful film-making. But I agree that it's hard to narrow the list with Hitchcock; I mean, what about Psycho? Or Strangers on a Train? Or Notorious? Or...? Etc.

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OK I give....when I was a child there was "The Birds", and of course "Psycho" that scared me to death. But as I grew older and knew more about the composition of film and the director's role I was introduced to Hitchcock's earlier works. Films like "Rebecca" and later "Strangers on a Train" introduced me to the tricks of the trade that Hitchcock invented, the viewpoints, the atmospherics, the attention to clue-yielding objects, not to mention his themes of identity and memory: "Who are we, really?" In that vein I'd have to say "Spellbound" remains my favorite and could be used as a "textbook" example of masterly directorial technique.

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I want to say "Vertigo" is my favorite because it zooms in on an obsession with so much intensity--through color, shape, movement, music--that it epitomizes Hitchcock's genius.

But heck I love Cary Grant running away from the plane in the cornfield. "North By Northwest" changes directions so many times, it seems to be a movie about one thing and then it shifts to another thing, and then again to something else. U.N.-- train-- Mt. Rushmore.

I-- scandalously-- don't care as much for "Psycho" with its pseudo-psychological writing at the end, after the characters take turns going back to the motel, as well as the absence of Hitch's usual glamor.

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BettyG See Profile I'm a Fan of BettyG permalink

I agree about Rear Window, I watch it every time it's on TV. I'm also not in love with Vertigo -- James Stewart's obsession gets a bit hard to take.

I love "To Catch a Thief" too. It's fun, and I guess I like Grace Kelly best as the heroine.

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