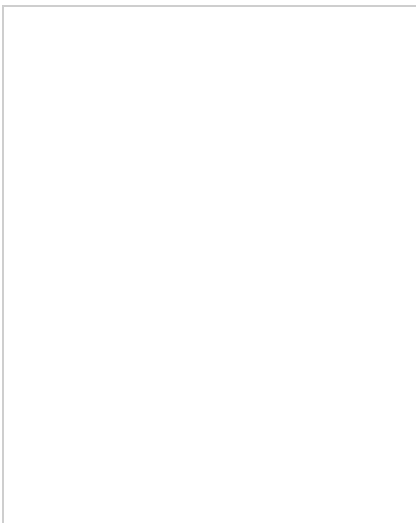


## DVDs: Horrible *Hobbit*, Great Day-Lewis, Treacly *Life of Pi* and More Oscar Faves Hit Stores

Posted: 03/27/2013 5:47 pm

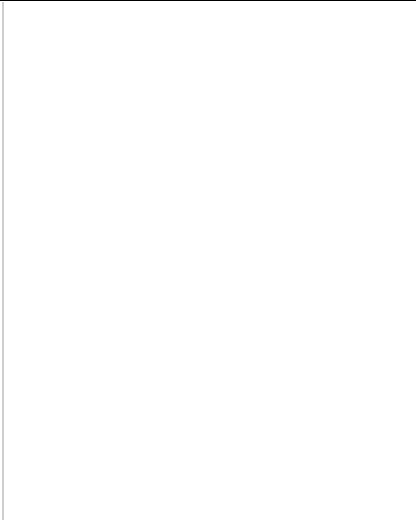
A flood of Oscar winners, nominees and those that should have been hit stores in the last few weeks. Here's a rundown of recent new films that have just debuted on DVD and BluRay.



**THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY** (\$35.99 BluRay combo; MGM/Warner Bros.) -- *The Hobbit* will go down in history as the first film released commercially in 48 fps, an innovation that will soon jump probably to 64 fps or some other standard but which may very well become as common as color and sound is today. The 3-D however, remains a gimmick that will soon fade again except for big blockbuster films that somehow justify the cost for their thrill rides. Sadly, these are the most important details about *The Hobbit*. I loved *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and consider it a landmark film achievement and easily one of the greatest fantasy works of all time. *The Hobbit* is as complete a fall from grace as *Star Wars: The*

*Phantom Menace* was from the original George Lucas trilogy, right down to the annoying minor character inserted for comic relief and to amuse the kiddies (Jar Jar Binks in one, Radagast the Brown in the other). I watched it in both formats (3-D and 2-D) in the theaters but don't think I can bring myself to watch it a third time and detail the many jaw-droppingly bad artistic choices, from the video game chase in the realm of the Great Goblin to having Thorin hug Bilbo with all the gusto of a guest on "Dr. Phil." And I could rattle off the dwarves in order of their arrival at Bag End. The extras are voluminous and the movie is presented with care, though doubtless you'll be enticed by even more bonus features once all three films are released. I'll see them all but I'm not looking forward to it. Nothing in 2012 disappointed me more.

**LINCOLN** (\$39.99 BluRay combo; DreamWorks/FOX) -- What a remarkable performance by Daniel Day-Lewis as Lincoln, though to call it a performance is already to cheapen his accomplishment. You simply watch the film and wonder how they got Lincoln on the set. Day-Lewis captures an idea of Lincoln with complexity, warmth and intelligence. It's a pity his work is wasted on a rather routine period drama. The middle section is a better than average episode of *The West Wing* as Lincoln and his compatriots push for the passage of the 13th Amendment. (That's a



compliment, by the way.) The flag-waving, pointless introduction, the condescending appearances by totems of African-American respectability and the pointlessly drawn-out

final act of the film that trudges through the end of the war and (spoiler alert!) Lincoln's assassination all spoil the modest pleasures in the middle. Day-Lewis created a living breathing person; director Steven Spielberg and screenwriter Tony Kushner immediately embalm him in piety.



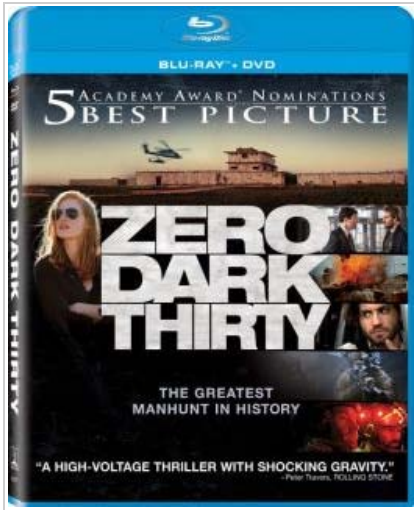
**RUST AND BONE** (\$35.99 BluRay; Sony Pictures Classics) -- An art house favorite, *Rust and Bone* is essentially a woman's picture, a weepie about a heroine who overcomes tragedy to triumph, namely an accident that leaves her paralyzed. That's the rough outline, though you almost don't realize it while watching the film because it's made with such maturity and complexity by the great French director Jacques Audiard. Marion Cotillard and Matthias Schoenaerts are superb as the woman facing a life-changing blow and the man who has no time for self-pity. Adult fare in the best sense.



LES

**MISERABLES** (\$34.99 BluRay combo; Universal) -- Oh dear. *Les Miserables* the musical has never been treated kindly by critics. It opened to poor reviews in London but audiences flocked immediately and it became a worldwide sensation. I've seen the musical several times and love the score, though the subsequent work by the creators has been

almost universally dreadful (including *Miss Saigon*) and gives me pause. This film version won't help matters, since the casting in classic Hollywood style has been done to maximize star power and minimize singing ability. It's a musical, for heaven's sake! One major actor who can charm and talk-sing their way through a part? Fine. But this version has wall to wall stars who simply can't do justice to the roles, including Russell Crowe, Sacha Baron Cohen, Helena Bonham Carter, and, yes, Anne Hathaway and Hugh Jackman. Most of them can't sing. Hathaway gets by and seems the shining star compared to the rest but I can't imagine anyone listening to a real Broadway star belting out "I Dreamed a Dream" and preferring Hathaway. (Cue the comments.) Jackman is a very appealing performer whose on-stage magnetism has never remotely been captured on film. I'd love to see him in *Pal Joey* or numerous other shows. But he has a light, pleasant voice when Jean Valjean demands a Wotan of massive, belting power. But you could have the best singers in the world and it wouldn't matter when director Tom Hooper seemed determined to shoot the film in haphazard style with TV-like close-ups dominating what should be an epic film. Instead of satisfying me, it makes me long for the new Broadway production coming in 2014 so I can hear real singers belt out those songs once again.



**ZERO DARK THIRTY** (\$40.99 BluRay combo; Sony) -- This isn't an authorized work but you wouldn't know it from the hagiography at work here. Our heroine seems to be the only one in government who is not a dunce head and remains focused like a laser on capturing Osama Bin Laden. Those criticizing the film for its politics are surely misguided -- whatever the order of scenes, the movie is clearly reaching for a moral complexity about how the war and manhunt were implemented. This is no rah-rah, ain't torture grand movie. For all its flaws, it has an intelligence and scope that keep the movie watchable. Jessica Chastain holds it together ably as the driven intelligence operative though Jason Clarke is the one that

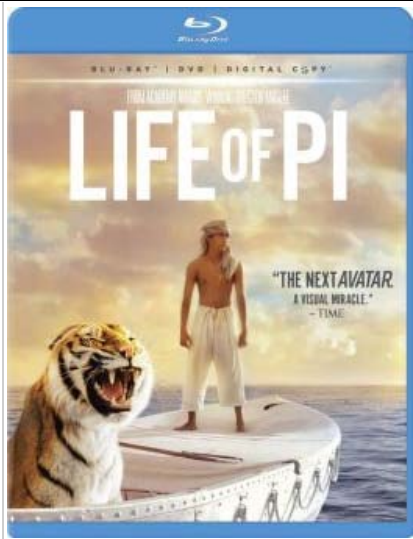
stayed with me.



**THIS MUST BE THE PLACE** (\$29.99 BLURAY; Anchor Bay) -- What an oddball delight. Sean Penn places a burned out, Andy Warhol-like rocker who lives in Dublin with his firefighter wife (Frances McDormann). He rushes back to the US, too late to say goodbye to his dying father and then heads out on a road trip to track down an aging Nazi war criminal hiding in America and thus fulfill his dad's dying wish. Yes, it's as nutty as it sounds. Director Paolo Sorrentino follows in the footsteps of many Europeans who make movies set in America. It feels like someone from another planet discovering a place that is somewhat similar to but oddly different from the place you know. Penn walks a tightrope with his truly off kilter hero, a sweetly daffy

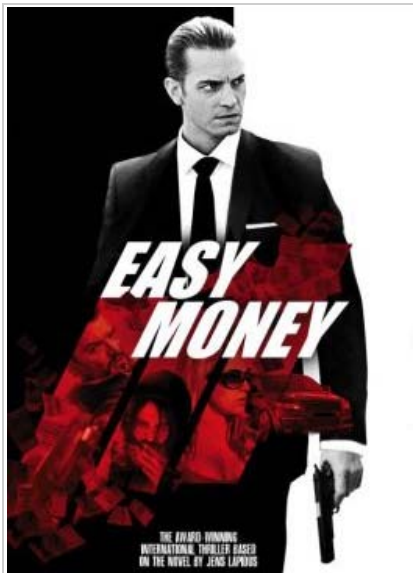
soul who is far more perceptive than most people assume. If anyone had paid attention to the film, he surely would have won an Oscar nomination. Fans won't want to miss it. Others will wonder what the heck they're watching.

**LIFE OF PI** (\$39.99 BluRay combo; FOX) -- I didn't finish the novel *Life Of Pi* (and I rarely

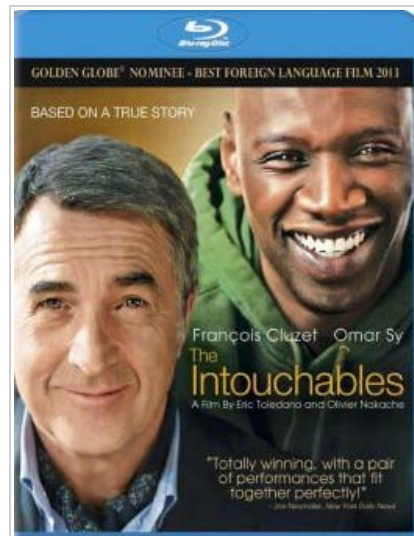


stop reading anything) so if you loved the book, you can ignore me starting...now. The feature film version by one of my favorite directors, Ang Lee, was praised for its 3-D and gorgeous fairy tale look. I thought this parable about a young man on a small boat with a Bengal tiger was dripping in goopy, pretty colors, like an episode of *My Little Pony* come to life. The 3-D was a complete waste of time, amounting to pointless distraction in the bookend scenes (gee, that fridge really looks like it's a few feet behind the actor) and lame moments in the heart of the tale (like having the tiger's paw come out towards the audience). Audiences -- more than critics -- however, really embraced

the novel and film and it's certainly a lovingly edition with some solid making-of extras. The ability to watch it without 3-D is a decided bonus.



**EASY MONEY** (\$24.99 DVD; Anchor Bay) -- This twisty Swedish noir was one of the undiscovered gems of 2012. A college student falls in with a rich crowd and turns to crime to maintain a facade of wealth and ease. He becomes entangled with a fugitive from the cops and the Mob enforcer who wants to capture the rogue first. Smart and great fun, it's based on a trilogy of crime novels. I can only assume the English language remake is already in the works. Watch this so you can see the new version and say confidently, "The original was better."



**THE**

**INTOUCHABLES** (\$35.99 BluRay; Sony Pictures Classics) -- One of the truly hateful films of the year, *The Intouchables* was an improbable worldwide smash hit that traffics in the most offensive racial stereotypes imaginable. The fact that the film has an earnest heart and thinks it is making a plea for racial understanding makes it all the more noxious. A paralyzed white man of wealth (Francois Cluzet) hires a poor, uneducated ex-con (Omar Sy) because he's the only one that doesn't treat Cluzet with pity. The white people are uptight and listen to classical music and go to the opera. The black guy is a

funky life force who gets them to boogie down to soul music. The white guy exposes the black guy to the world of the mind. The black guy of course is closer to the life force and actually enjoys life. Ugh. Cluzet and Sy, unfortunately, are very talented actors and make this dreck seem almost acceptable. It's not.



**SINISTER** (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Summit) -- Trust Ethan Hawke. When he does a B movie horror flick, you can bet he susses one out with a decent script and an emphasis on atmosphere and creepiness rather than the slasher porn that dominates these days. Fans of the genre repeatedly singled it out to me as a cut well above the low-brow horror flicks that seem to come out almost every week during the slow months.



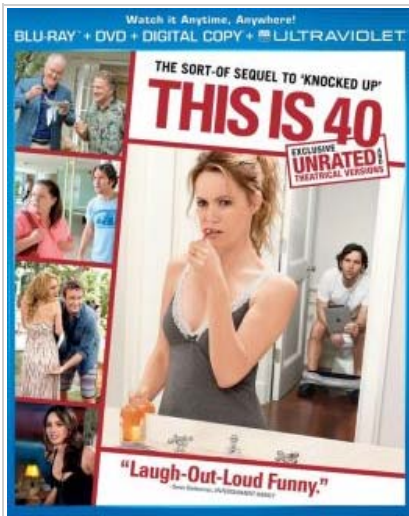
**HITCHCOCK** (\$39.99 BluRay combo; FOX) -- Watching a genius at work would make for a fascinating film. Unfortunately, Hitchcock is more interested in pop psychology and the off camera life of Alfred Hitchcock (Anthony Hopkins) and his wife (Helen Mirren) rather than an exploration of the making of *Psycho*. The master would be mortified. Luckily, you can ignore this (and the misguided *Bates Motel*) and actually watch *Psycho* and *Rear Window* and *Vertigo* and *North By Northwest* and *The Lady Vanishes* and *The 39 Steps* and *Shadow Of A Doubt* and *Rebecca* and don't you dare watch this unless you've already seen them all. Twice.



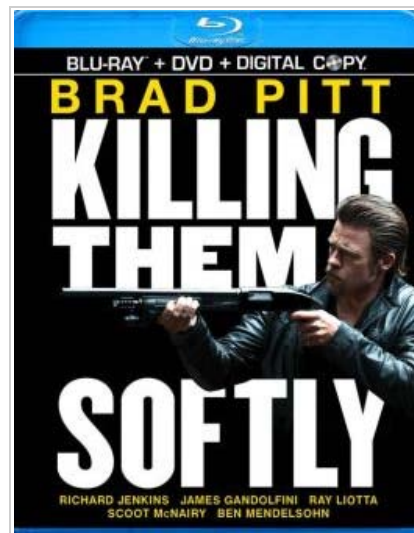
**WRECK-IT RALPH** (\$49.99 BluRay combo; Disney)

**RISE OF THE GUARDIANS** (\$54.99 BluRay combo; DreamWorks Animation) -- Two animated films that fall short, proving again how good Pixar was at its best. (And yes, I put that in the past tense. I'm getting worried about them.) Despite its video game setting, *Wreck-It Ralph* is a by-the-numbers tale of a character who gets lost and then returns home again. It's main virtues are some fine vocal work by Sarah Silverman and Jane Lynch but the story is too routine to hold your interest. At least it feels like a work reaching for originality. *Guardians*, on the other hand, is too desperate to launch a franchise to worry about things like characters and story and emotion. It wanted to launch

an *Avengers*-like team including holiday stars like Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy and so on. No dice. The best extra comes on *Ralph*, which includes the Oscar-winning short *Paperman*. As long as works of originality are being done in the shorts, we can hope for another great animated film sometime soon.



**THIS IS 40** (\$34.99 BluRay combo; Universal) -- This spin-off from *Knocked-Up* was uncalled for and unasked for, though it's still fitfully fun to see Paul Rudd and Leslie Mann as a married couple that can tear into each other with glee. Still, the slapped-together nature of the project is belied by the absurd 134 minute running time. I like everyone involved but they're trying my patience. The few genuine pleasures come courtesy of Albert Brooks. Isn't it about time he give another project of his own?



**KILLING THEM SOFTLY** (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Anchor Bay/Weinstein)

**RED DAWN** (\$39.99 Bluray combo; FOX) -- Two disappointments of very different sorts. After *The Hobbit*, the movie that let me down the most was Andrew Domink's *Killing Them Softly*. it's based on a terrific crime novel that is bursting with hilarious, can't miss dialogue and vivid characters. But somehow the film does miss from beginning to end, starting with the modest but unnecessary change in time and the addition of a mild political overlay that is distracting. Even still, virtually nothing here holds the attention despite a cast and crew that on paper is flawless. Dominik's Chopper was a great debut that launched Eric Bana. *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward*



*Robert Ford* gave Brad Pitt one of his best parts and Casey Affleck the role of a lifetime. It's one of the best films of the past decade. So I'm sure Dominik will deliver again. I just hope we don't have to wait five years. *Red Dawn* on the other hand was an unnecessary remake of a fun little B movie I always liked defending. But this revisit failed to deepen the characters or explore the moral complexity of a rebellion when your country is being occupied, the sort of layering that a remake and times demand. Instead it was just witless fun that has me rethinking my appreciation of the original. I'm almost afraid to go back

and watch it again.



**THIS IS NOT A FILM** (\$19.99 DVD; Palisades Tartan) -- Finally, here is a thoroughly original work. Part protest, part documentary, part essay, Iranian director Jafar Panahi has responded to a ban on making films by starring in a work that "is not a film." Don't believe him. He shows the next film he wanted to make and discusses camera angles and the such by placing tape on the floor of his home and spelling it all out. This is captured on a cell phone and edited into the work we have here. Silencing people has never been more technologically impossible than it is today as this unique film amply demonstrates. I hate it

when people call actors or filmmakers "brave" for playing a role. No, cops and soldiers and firemen who risk their lives are brave. Playing a part on stage or film is not brave. Here's the exception to the rule.

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