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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: October 30, 2009 05:19 PM

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DVDs -- How Do You Say "GoodFellas" In Italian? Il Divo!

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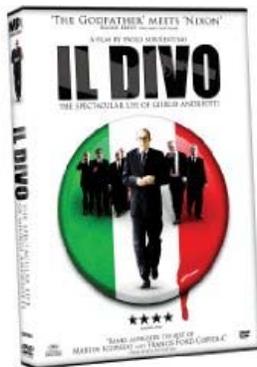
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Il Divo is one of the best and funniest films of the year, a tour de force in which director Paolo Sorrentino (previously known for static if admirable films) uses every cinematic trick in the book a la *GoodFellas* to tell a convoluted, wickedly satirical tale about corruption in Italian politics, which is redundant but shouldn't be.



At the heart of it is actor Toni Servillo's performance as legendary prime minister Giulio Andreotti, a man nicknamed variously the Hunchback and the Black Pope and the Sphinx and God. In a droll nod to the classic vampire film *Nosferatu*, Servillo glides through the film, hands folded across his chest and barely raising his voice above a whisper when making some pronouncement from on high. He's devilishly funny and scary, as is the rest of the sprawling and memorable cast. It's easy to follow: the corrupt people in power want to stay in power. And the only thing more dangerous to them than the police and the media is each other. Fresh and exciting on every level.

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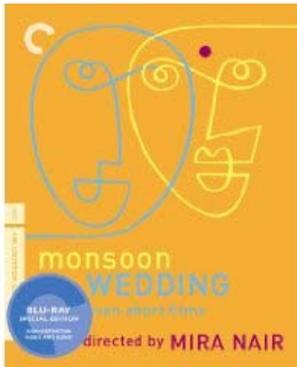
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TINKER BELL AND THE LOST TREASURE (\$29.99 regular DVD and \$39.99 BluRay; Disney) -- I generally deride straight to DVD titles because they dilute a brand, are generally subpar and waste everyone's time. If it's not good enough to release as a feature film or TV movie (though some often are, just to fill the maw that cable offers up 24 hours a day), why make it? On the other hand, direct to DVD titles provide a great training ground for new talent. Last year's *Tinker Bell* seemed in the standard vein. But friends who sat through it again and again with their kids spoke well of it, so this sequel (one of four more Disney plans to make) is no surprise. Unlike many other such titles, it takes a rather minor character from *Peter Pan* and builds a franchise around them, which is less annoying than giving a tepid new adventure to Ariel or Cinderella or Pan himself. Plus, the original Tink was pretty underwhelming, what with her cat fighting with Wendy, self-interest and flighty ways. It's no surprise to see this Tink far more modern and self-reliant. In this tale, Tink goes on an adventure so that the supply of pixie dust in Pixie Hollow she accidentally endangered can be restored. The usual hijinks ensue, with lessons learned and order restored, but it's a notch above similar releases and parents won't be unduly bored.

THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA'S BEST IDEA (\$99.99 or \$129.99 on BluRay; PBS) -- Has Ken Burns reached the JK Rowling stage where everyone is afraid to offer even the slightest editing suggestion? Twelve hours to talk about our national park system? Really? Couldn't it be done in six hours or even ten? There's something to be said for brevity and the discipline of a shorter running time. but then of course you sink into it and realize that two hours devoted just to, say, Yosemite, doesn't seem so crazy after all. After six years of filming, it looks smashing (with BluRay just that much sharper and beautiful). You'll definitely feel the urge for a road trip to one or more of the parks. Next up? Twenty hours about the highway system!



MONSOON WEDDING (\$39.95; Criterion) -- Director Mira Nair is having a rough fall. Her new movie *Amelia* looked like pure Oscar bait but it opened weakly at the box office and received poor reviews. Perhaps she can take comfort in the loving treatment offered by Criterion for one of her most successful films, *Monsoon Wedding*. Her best film is still *Mississippi Masala* (starring a Denzel Washington that's never been sexier or more appealing on camera). But *Monsoon* is a crowd pleaser rooted in some telling detail about the Hindu-Punjabi families celebrating a marriage. The extras include seven shorts by Nair as well as new interviews and subtitling, all done with Criterion's usual care.

SAMUEL FULLER COLLECTION: COLLECTOR'S CHOICE (\$79.95; Sony) -- \$11 per film isn't that much, but I wish this seven DVD set of movies linked to Samuel Fuller was a tad cheaper. It's a grab bag of movies that he directed or scripted or wrote the novel the film was based on. All are remastered with care and two of them would make a good double bill about the media: *Power Of The Press* depicts a corrupt publisher and *Scandal Sheet* is the ripe for remake tale of a tabloid editor who unintentionally knocks off his ex-wife and then watches as his own reporters investigate the crime. Mild extras include Martin Scorsese (who helped fund the restorations) and others talking about Fuller and his films.

IT'S GARRY SHANDLING'S SHOW: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$159.99; Shout) -- Shandling passed up on the chance to be the permanent guest host for Johnny Carson. He also passed up on a chance to be in a sitcom for NBC. That led him to the hinterlands of Showtime (always an also-ran to HBO despite earlier, better original programming), where he produced the Burns & Allen-like goofiness that is this sitcom. Shandling certainly wasn't the first to break the fourth wall, but few did it with such twinkling regularity. This lovingly produced set includes all four seasons with 72 episodes and loads of extras. Perhaps the most remarkable fact is that he followed it with another ground-breaking TV series, *The Larry Sanders Show*. Many stars have appeared in multiple TV hits; almost known have appeared in more than one genuine landmark. Here's hoping Shout will be able to give that show its due, just as they've done with this.

EASY RIDER ON BLURAY (\$38.96; Sony) -- Perhaps because I watched it long after the revolution of

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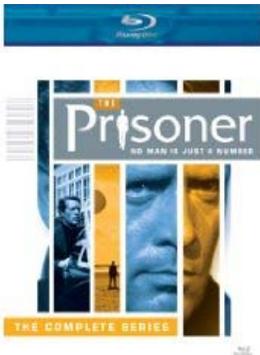
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the Sixties and early Seventies or simply because I wasn't high, I've never been a big fan of this shaggy, remarkably successful indie film. Undoubtedly Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda were as surprised as anyone when it became a cultural phenomenon. But it has great music and a star-making performance by Jack Nicholson and a definite...vibe that can't be discounted. It contains a new feature called BD Live, which to my mind essentially just lets you surf for factoids about the film without having to stop the movie and head to the internet via your computer. Underwhelming, unless you thought PopUp Videos were an underutilized teaching device. I prefer to learn more about a film after I've watched it, not during. Still, it looks and sounds great.

JAZZ ICONS SERIES 4 (\$119.99; Naxos) -- Whenever you see a documentary about some great artist like Anita O'Day or organist Jimmy Smith or Coleman Hawkins, they invariably show a clip from a red-hot TV or live concert appearance and you think, "Dang, I wish I could see that whole show." Now you can. In an ongoing series I've somehow missed til now, Naxos is releasing solid video and great sound on a string of DVDs, each one focusing on an entire set of a jazz legend. It began with Ella and Louis and Chet Baker on Series 1, then continued with the likes of Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins and so on. From my feverish sampling (each set contains about eight or nine DVDs and they run to 40 in all, so far, with titles also available individually), the quality is very good. Clearly they're not just grabbing anything and slapping it onto DVD. These shows are substantial and presented with care. Some are invariably more compelling and just simply longer than others. But for fans who have never been able to see more than glimpses of their idols at work, this series is tremendous.

THE L WORD COMPLETE FINAL SEASON (\$62.99; Showtime/Paramount) -- Rarely has a series gone out on such a deliriously goofy note as *The L Word*. A fun series about the lives and loves of lesbian and bisexual and straight women (often not *that* straight and certainly not for long), *The L Word* soon became just a soap, albeit one whose focus kept it different and certainly compelling to its fan base. But the "Who Killed Jenny" finale was so nutty and over-the-top (and this from a show that *lived* over-the-top almost from the get-go) that you sensed even the cast having a bit of fun with their what the heck is going on attitudes. About eight bucks per episode is a bit pricey but the extras are substantial and fans will have to have it.

STOP MAKING SENSE ON BLURAY (\$34.99; Palm) -- Jonathan Demme's concert film of Talking Heads is indeed one of the greatest concert films of all time. Actually, it was the very first film I got to see at an advance screening when I was a critic for my college newspaper. The other local critic didn't show up so I was alone in a cavernous theater with a giant screen that would soon be chopped up into two screens as multiplexes took over. I knew Talking Heads were good but hadn't really paid attention to them yet, despite a very active record buying habit. So I was completely alone when the film began, David Byrne shambled out and started to play "Psycho Killer" on an acoustic guitar. As the film progressed and the excitement built, as more and more band members came on stage and the music grew bigger and bigger and Demme's brilliant visuals captured the group at the height of its powers, I was simply overwhelmed and only my natural Catholic inhibitions kept me from dancing in the aisles. I've seen it enough times since then to know this was an honest reaction to a great, great film, which looks and sounds better than ever on BluRay. Needless to say, I walked out of the movie theater and headed straight to the record store where I gorged on three or four of their albums. You'll do the same if you're not already a fan. Ranks with *Jazz On A Summer's Day* and *The Last Waltz*.



THE PRISONER BLURAY EDITION (\$99.95; A&E) -- Huge sigh of relief. A&E often delivers excellent programming in merely decent quality. (Their so-so rendition of *Jewel In The Crown* recently is still a heartbreaker.) Happily, with the iconic series *The Prisoner* (bizarrely remade by AMC when it's hard to imagine any conceivable reason why you would want to remake such an odd duck of a show), they've used the latest transfer of the show to deliver a top-notch set. Patrick McGoohan's head-scratcher remains as enigmatic as ever (even *Twin Peaks* eventually explained itself, sort of) and that's what makes it timeless. Well done.

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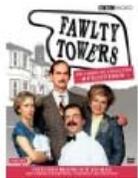
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ICE AGE: DAWN OF THE DINOSAURS (\$29.99 or \$39.99 for the combo pack) -- Well, obviously, there's going to be an *Ice Age 4*. I like Ray Romano and really look forward to his new TV series and I hope he's been able to cash in on this very modest look at creatures making do during some very bad weather. The squirrel/nut routine doesn't even amount to Road Runner/Coyote level humor. And that's the highlight. But the films continue to grow in box office from \$383 million for the first worldwide to \$651 million for the second and \$882 million for this. Oh yes, there will definitely be a sequel. The BluRay combo pack is what every studio should offer for every film if they hope to see BluRay gain more than a toehold: a BluRay copy, a regular DVD copy and a digital copy. The flexibility is very welcome.

CHINATOWN (\$16.99; Paramount) -- It's a classic and if you have any interest in movies, you've already seen it. Heck, you probably already own it: it came out on DVD in 1999 and again two years ago in 2007. There's no noticeable improvement in the already very good picture and sound so I assume it hasn't been remastered. There are, of course, new extras -- they pull you back in the way they pulled you back into the umpteenth Elvis Costello reissue by including some new b side or demo. Here, the extras are very good indeed: audio commentary with director Roman Polanski and director David Fincher (looking to bigfoot the go-to director Steven Soderbergh when it comes to this sort of thing), a substantial documentary with Robert Towne looking into LA's history with water and an appreciation by Soderbergh, Kimberly Pierce and others. If you own it, this is worth renting for the new stuff. If you don't own it, you should.



FAWLTY TOWERS/BLACKADDER REMASTERED (\$49.98 for Fawlty/\$79.98 for Blackadder; BBC) -- Any excuse to watch or talk about *Fawlty Towers* is fine by me. In 12 episodes, John Cleese co-created one of the best sitcoms of all time and certainly the best short-run series of its kind until *The Office* some 30 years later. It is a farce, quite literally, with people running in and out of doors and slamming into each other as small misunderstandings snowball into gigantic disasters. It is, quite simply, perfect. Rowan Atkinson had great fun with his non-*Bean* masterpiece, the sniveling, cowardly, dastardly Edmund Blackadder, the anti-hero who pops up throughout British history (each season takes place in a different era) with a self-preservation instinct rivaled only by Flashman. Goofy fun that helped launched Stephen Fry, Hugh Laurie and Miranda Richardson, among others. Both shows look sharp and are filled with new extras. I'll watch them as soon as I stop watch the shows themselves...again.

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NOTE TO READERS: I was provided with a final copy of every DVD reviewed in this column. In fact, I refuse to review DVDs based on streaming videos available online or advance DVD discs since it's impossible to verify the quality of the picture, sound, menus, extras and other features on an advance disc. I receive many more DVDs each week than I could ever cover. Typically, I don't guarantee coverage for any DVD that is sent to me, merely that I will consider it for coverage.

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