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DVDs: I Heart "Firefly"



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I would like to review Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* Season 1 (\$49.98 or \$60.98 on BluRay; Fox) by actually reviewing Joss Whedon's *Firefly: The Complete Series* (\$49.98 or \$89.98 on BluRay; Fox). But first I'd like to apologize to Mr. Whedon. I loved *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. Really loved it. Gobbled up every episode (until Whedon left after Season 5, when the show had clearly come to a conclusion but for financial reasons carried on for two more seasons). I wrote

about it and touted it to my friends and watched it all over again on DVD. So I should have been a fan for life and given all your projects a chance. But *Angel* was an unnecessary spin-off that never should have happened (though it got better). And so once *Firefly* came around, my attention was elsewhere. I actually looked up the Friday night schedule and there was nothing on opposite it so I have absolutely no idea why I didn't sample it, at the very least. It slipped by. So did *Dollhouse*, which sounded confusing and awkward. But I watched the *Firefly* film spin-off/finale *Serenity* and found it fun. Friends kept raving about the show. And after re-watching *Buffy* and falling in love with your talent all over again, I sat down to watch *Firefly* from start to finish.

My G-d this is a good show. A western in space (down to the horses and gun battles), *Firefly* is quirky, with the offbeat and clever dialogue we expect from Whedon. But it's also wholly satisfying and fun from episode one. Our hero Captain Reynolds (square-jawed Nathan Fillion, since on *Castle*) is a rebel who fought against the Alliance and now commands a small ship that stays on the outer reaches of space, taking the occasional smuggling job and in the grand tradition of anti-heroes has a code of honor that always keeps him doing good. His crew includes the sexy, capable number two Zoe (Gina Washburne); her husband, the pilot Wash (Alan Tudyk, a dead ringer for Anthony Rapp); the ace mechanic Kaylee (Jewel Staite); the muscle Jayne (Adam Baldwin) and various passengers including a "companion" aka prostitute (Morena Baccarin) that the captain has a soft spot for; a doctor and his sister; and a Shepherd (Ron Glass of *Barney Miller*).

I felt obliged to name each and every character because they are so vivid and real and I couldn't

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bear to leave any out. Each episode is self-contained, often with a heist or con or job of some sort they need to complete. There's also an over-arching mystery about the doctor and his disturbed sister (Summer Glau) but it's a relief to report that this isn't some wildly complex super-plot with tons of detail and confusing flashbacks. It's just a quiet presence on the show with facts slowly revealed at just the right pace. Some episodes feel like *Mission: Impossible* with the team working together to, say, steal a precious item. Others have the larky feel of *Maverick*, the great comic western starring James Garner. Still others feel funny or serious or uniquely themselves. And there's not a weak one in the bunch. Not one. (By the way, if you're a fan of *Mad Men*, January Jones pops up twice here in a terrific role.)

And time and again I was surprised by the emotional moments contained in these highly entertaining plots. The characters behave in surprising and remarkable ways that are both consistent with who they are and yet astonishing. I actually believed some of them might kill one another at various points. (And maybe they do.) That's pretty rare in any TV show. This isn't some rare, cult-ish show with a narrow devoted following. It absolutely deserved to be a big fat, Nielsen-gobbling hit. I actually can't believe any network would be dumb enough to cancel it after just half a season. I find it even harder to believe no other network picked it up. It's so, so hard to get a show on the air and even harder to make it good. And *Firefly* isn't good. It's great.

Though it only contains 17 episodes, they are of such high quality and the conclusion feels so fitting and right, that I don't hesitate to say that it belongs among the great TV shows of all time, and certainly ranks with *Battlestar: Galactica*, *Star Trek*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *The X Files*, *Dr. Who* and so on, as one of the best sci-fi shows of all time. Or you could rank it with *Maverick* and *Gunsmoke* as one of the best westerns TV has ever produced.

And yes, Mr. Whedon, I promise to watch every episode of *Dollhouse* and get ready for season two and watch at least the entire first season of every show you create in the future. I don't want to miss any more terrific television.

Other Sci-Fi Series Looking To Make A Name For Themselves:

Battlestar Galactica Season 4.5 (\$49.98; Universal) -- These final episodes brought this excellent sci-fi series to a satisfying conclusion after a shaky season 3. No, all the loose ends weren't tied up, but a lot of them were, the big reveals were sometimes expected but well done and the emotional journey of all the characters felt earned. Who would have thought such an awful artifact from the 1970s could have been the basis for such a fun show? Sadly, I didn't get the complete series on DVD (\$279.98; Universal) or the BluRay version (\$349.98; Universal) so I can't compare them to each other.

Torchwood Second Season (\$79.98 on regular or BluRay; BBC Video) and ***Torchwood: Children of the Earth*** (\$29.98 or \$34.98 on BluRay; BBC Video) -- I've always had a fondness for this *Dr. Who* spin-off, but the simple truth is that Season One wasn't that special. The only aspect that kept me returning was the unusual emphasis on sex and sexuality. Sci-fi rarely deals with sex on anything other than the geekiest, most basic level so that really did distinguish the show. But other than the fact that the hero (the winning John Barrowman) was bisexual and hit on everyone in sight, there wasn't much to recommend it. Season Two was a leap forward in quality. It's still a save-the-world-again series, but the budget was upped considerably and the writing grew tauter along with the acting. Season 3 is really a five part miniseries that goes even deeper into the show's other distinguishing aspect: its bleakness. They might just turn this pretty good show into a great one after all.

Doctor Who: Planet of the Dead (\$14.98 or \$19.98 on BluRay; BBC Video) -- This engaging self-contained episode is one of a batch David Tennant made as he said goodbye to the role of The Doctor. There's absolutely no reason to release them individually instead of in an inexpensive boxed set with all four one-offs. But they've always packaged and re-packaged *Doctor Who* endlessly with never a thought for the consumer so why should things change now? Fun episode, though.

Also Out On DVD:

I Love You, Man (\$29.99 or \$39.99 on BluRay; Paramount) -- OK, I've got a weakness for Paul Rudd, the effortlessly charming actor who came to fame in *Clueless* by snogging his sister (hey, hey, sister-in-law or step-sister or whatever, they weren't related). Here he plays a spin on his patented nice-guy with attitude character: a guy who gets engaged and realizes he's great with women (as in gal pals) but has absolutely no male friends. Even his dad prefers Rudd's gay brother (a fine Andy Samberg) to Rudd. So he starts going on "man dates" trying to find a male acquaintance he can buddy up with and it's all horribly embarrassing until Jason Segel (of *How I Met Your Mother*) stumbles into one of Rudd's open houses for a home he's selling and they hit it



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off. Rudd is hilariously funny when he tries to act cool here, awkwardly trying to give Segel a nickname or making some stupid abbreviated comment and then immediately cringing. I kept thinking I would get bored but the movie consistently held my attention and made me laugh and I was just about to declare it a winner when it came to a rather deflating finale. Nothing stupid or untoward, just kind of flat and unfunny. Besides, I doubt there's anything in this bromance worth watching twice. But it is an above average flick of its sort.

Shirley Temple & Friends and **1001 Classic Commercials** (\$14.98 each; Mill Creek) -- Sometimes, you get what you pay for. This bargain basement Shirley Temple set contains some Shirley Temple films and shorts (3 movies and 11 shorts, to be exact) and a lot of films (five more) and shorts (another 4) that were apparently made by her "friends." You get 8 movies in all, plus 15 shorts and if you're really a Temple fan, you can get *The Little Princess*, the 1939 gem, in a much better print. Her shorts are harder to find so even though the quality of the print is highly variable, hardcore fans might enjoy this until something more definitive comes along. The rest is bargain basement stuff, though I have been waiting for the Nancy Drew movies to come out in a nice little set (*Nancy Drew, Reporter* is here). You might think, for \$15 how bad can it be? But you're probably wrong unless you're the sort that tapes shorts off of TCM because you just gotta have them. On the other hand, the equally bargain basement compilation *1001 Classic Commercials* seems pretty good to me. The picture quality, again, is highly variable and rarely better than tolerable. But you can skip from commercial to commercial, it's got 16 hours of them, they really are kind of hypnotically fascinating and culturally nifty and unlike Shirley Temple, I don't imagine anyone will be remastering old TV commercials any time soon.

Crouching Tiger on Blu-ray!

First the good news: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* -- one of the all-time great adventure films which ranks alongside *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* but has an emotional complexity those films can't match -- is out on BluRay and looks smashing. Now the bad news: you can only buy it as part of a desultory boxed set (\$92.95; Sony) that also contains the excellent *House Of Flying Daggers* and the dreadful *Curse Of The Golden Flower*. These films do overlap in a way, with some actors in two out of three of them. Two were directed by Zhang Yimou and *Crouching Tiger* of course was directed by Ang Lee. Two are excellent. But they in no way shape or form belong in a boxed set together. Obviously, *Flying Daggers* and *Golden Flower* could be boxed with Zhang Yimou's *Hero* since those are his three action spectacles. But both of his movies are available separately while *Crouching Tiger* is not. So anyone a fan of Ang Lee's film either doesn't want those two or has already purchased them, which makes it almost impossible for anyone to buy this boxed set and not feel ripped off in one way or another. Truly boneheaded and the great *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* deserves better. Now when is Ang Lee gonna film the two prequels and when is someone else going to translate the book it was based on into English?

Icons of Screwball Comedy

Two good, no muss, no fuss DVD compilations of some solid screwball comedies. *Icons Of Screwball Comedies Volume One* (\$24.96; Sony) contains two Jean Arthur flicks and two Rosalind Russell showcases. *Volume Two* (\$24.96; Sony) has two Irene Dunne and two Loretta Young titles. As so often happens, you need both since Arthur and Dunne are the two standouts with their movies slightly superior to the others. All are genial fun and none of them are either beautifully pristine or shockingly bad when it comes to print quality. But if I had to choose one, it would be Volume Two, because I especially enjoy Dunne as the author of a naughty bestseller in *Theodora Goes Wild* and my other weakness is for mysteries so the screwball-mystery *A Night To Remember* with Young is a two-fer.


Super Friends: The Lost Episodes

I suppose it's wrong of me to suggest that anything should *not* be collected on DVD. But these after-thoughts of a TV cartoon series (created after *Super Friends* was canceled and hidden in a vault until they aired a decade later) are certainly better off forgotten by anyone but historians. I'd almost blocked out the Wonder Twins Zan and Jayna and -- gulp -- their buck-toothed blue space monkey Gleek from my memory til this two disc, three hour compilation (\$26.98; Warner Bros.) crossed my desk. That's certainly the low point, but everyone else here, like Superman and Batman and the Flash, is seen to much better effect both before and after this batch of routine episodes. Also just out is the equally forgettable Daffy Duck feature film *Quackbusters* (\$14.98; Warner Bros.) from 1988. The three shorts included as extras easily outshine the film and let you know what Daffy was really about, especially *Duck Dodgers and the Return Of The 24 1/2th Century*.

Chris Isaak Greatest Hits Live

Chris Isaak is as winning a rock and roll talent as they come. He's got a marvelous voice, great

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skills as a songwriter and knows the territory he's staked out -- blue tunes of misery and heartache -- better than anyone since the heyday of Ricky Nelson and Roy Orbison. This all-too brief 68 minute concert film from the TV series *Soundstage* (\$19.99; E1) captures the handsome devil in all his glory. When his career is over, he'll deserve boxed sets and a number of his albums will be seen as classics (such as his debut and *San Francisco Days*) but as a throwback to the Fifties, Isaak will best be remembered through a really smartly chosen, well-paced single CD greatest hits set that will become essential for any rock and roll fan. This show is a good first stab at that set list and fans will eat it up. But still, 68 minutes? They should have left the camera rolling.

Get Your Kicks... With Some Other TV Show

Rarely has a TV show been kicked around on DVD as often as *Route 66*, the anthology series in which two guys travel the country and stumble on compelling storylines with guest stars in a new town every week. The entire release has been a farce in one way or another. First they released just half of Season One, which drives me bonkers. No one in the world ever wanted half of a season of a TV series. To make matters worse, the picture quality was variable. Then they put out Volume Two and the picture was better but they ruined it by including fake "widescreen" imagery by chopping off the top and the bottom of the screen. Then they put out the entire Season One without the fake widescreen, so that anyone who bought it had to buy it all over again.. Then they put out Season Two in one complete set and did a pretty good job, so everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Now they've released Volume One of Season Three, which almost makes sense since one of the leads got sick and left the show. But this set includes the first 16 episodes and not the 17th episode, the final one in which George Maharis appears. To top it off, the entire Season Three was available in one set at Best Buy in an exclusive deal, but it's been recalled since all the discs from Volume Two proved defective. If that isn't enough to scare you off, I don't know what is. But as for the show itself, it's a solid anthology, with fairly hard-hitting topics and juicy performances from top-notch actors throughout. I assume they'll probably re-do the entire season three and put it out for everyone, but that's just because it's the most annoying thing they could do. G-d knows what will happen to season four.

Pushing Daisies Second Season

Unlike, say, *Firefly*, I'm not actually shocked that *Pushing Daisies* didn't become a massive, broad appeal hit. It really is an odd duck, which isn't to say that anyone with a love for classic Hollywood screwball comedies, whimsical mysteries, or offbeat fare like the edgier *Arrested Development* won't be thoroughly pleased by this series. The quality is high, even as they must have known the cancellation ax was being sharpened. Lee Pace is an utter charmer as a man with a disquieting gift -- he can touch dead things and bring them to life but if he doesn't put them back to "sleep" right away something else must die to take their place -- who uses it to solve crimes. He's brought his true love back to life and so now they're doomed to a sweetly platonic romance, which is surprisingly sexy when the woman is Anna Friel, another find. The supporting cast is top-notch, with Chi McBride and Kristin Chenoweth first among equals and Jim Dale's playful narration as the perfect touch. Cult hit couldn't have happened to a nicer show.

Also Out:

A Life Among Whales (\$19.98; Indiepix), earnest hour-long documentary about the scientist who popularized the idea that whales "sing;" *Pulling Second Season* (\$24.98; MPI), the rude, somewhat funny Britcom about a single gal stumbling through life; *Prison Break: The Final Break* (\$26.98 and and \$29.99 on BluRay), the ludicrous finale with our hero breaking his wife out of prison -- how Wentworth Miller maintained his dignity through all this I'll never know; *London To Brighton* (\$24.98; E1), in which a prostitute finds an 11 year old girl for a mobster but thinks things have gone too far when he gets violent -- it's not kitchen sink drama so much as the gunk underneath the kitchen sink you find when you're trying to unclog a pipe drama; *Fast & Furious* (\$34.98; Universal) the silly sequel even by the standards of this silly series about car thieves; *Bad Lieutenant* (\$19.98; Lionsgate), a special edition of Harvey Keitel's coruscating performance as a violent cop; and *Après Lui* (\$24.98; IFC), with Catherine Deneuve's typically restrained performance as a bereaved mother who becomes obsessed with her dead son's (handsome) best friend.

On Bluray:

Here is a rundown of the latest BluRay releases and whether they're worth splurging on. (Studios, lower your prices quick to the same as regular DVDs and maybe there's still a chance that BluRay will catch on. Maybe.)

This Is Spinal Tap (\$34.99 on BluRay versus \$14.98; MGM) -- Ok, you simply can't pay too much for one of the funniest and most influential comedies of all time. Still, \$7.50 on sale for

regular DVD versus \$22 at Amazon? Given the movie and how often people watch it again and again and again, this is worth it but perfectly illustrates how studios are killing BluRay. Except for landmark films and effects extravaganzas, people ain't gonna spend this much more money on BluRay.

The Class (\$39.95 versus \$28.96 on regular DVD; Sony) -- My favorite film of 2008, this French gem ranks at the top of films about the classroom. If you already own it, there's no need to upgrade. And if you haven't bought it, the \$8 price difference (on sale) is pretty steep.

Sling Blade (\$34.99 versus \$14.99 on regular DVD; Miramax) -- Again, you have to pay twice the price to get it on BluRay (even on sale), which is way too much. But who would have expected this oddball drama to launch Billy Bob Thornton into the fine, multi-faceted career he's having? I thought he had one-hit wonder written all over him, but that's what I get for confusing the actor with the role.

Cutthroat Island (\$19.99 versus \$9.98 on regular DVD; Lionsgate) -- If you're gonna introduce some cheaply priced BluRays, it's no surprise they'd start with a notorious flop like this pirate movie starring Geena Davis. She's perfectly convincing as a swashbuckler but the film is bloated, as advertised. And even at \$20, it's still twice as much as the regular DVD.

Wild Pacific (\$34.99 versus \$29.98 on regular DVD; BBC/2 Entertain) -- Nature documentaries have become so routinely stunning that something as simply gorgeous as *Wild Pacific* barely makes a stir. But it looks smashing on your TV and for a change the BluRay isn't wildly more expensive -- only \$3 more on sale at Amazon.

Big Trouble In Little China (\$29.99 versus \$9.98 on regular DVD; Fox) -- A big flop a la Cutthroat Island but this supernatural spin on Escape From New York has a lot more character and a lot more fans. Too bad John Carpenter's cultish flick costs three times as much on DVD (and two times as much even on sale) as the regular disc. This is the sort of spectacle that deserves top quality.

My Cousin Vinny (\$34.98 versus \$14.98 on regular DVD) -- Marisa Tomei's Oscar-winning role (and no, it wasn't a mistake; she deserved it and has proved it since with fine turns in *The Wrestler* and elsewhere) in this amiable comedy that has grown in stature among the average fan over the years. (In other words, regular Joes *love* this movie, not just Joe Pesci.) But there's no compelling need for the BluRay upgrade unless you've got a Marisa Tomei poster on your wall.

The Towering Inferno (\$34.98 versus \$19.98; Fox) -- A genuine spectacle and a very influential movie, this Oscar-winning triumph from 1974 has the usual all-star cast, a stately pace and some awesome special effects that hold up a lot better than the CGI in *Transformers* and *GI Joe: The Rise Of The Cobra* will. The BluRay comes loaded with extras and on sale it costs \$7 more, which for a spectacle like this is just about worth it. It's remarkable to me how so many of the plot points of this movie became conventions that would be repeated time and time again in disaster flicks to come. And at 2 hours and 45 minutes, it's a good reminder that over-long movies have been around for ages.

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Totally agree. Except the "Mad Men" star was Christina Hendricks, not January Jones. And there are only 14 episodes, unless you know something I don't, and I'd love it if you did.

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