

DVDs/BluRays: I Wanna Live at Pee-wee's Playhouse!

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Lots of fun stuff this week, starting with Pee-wee's Playhouse, collected in a new boxed set and looking better than ever. It's not just one of the best kid's shows of all time. [I consider it one of the best TV shows of all time](#), full stop. (It's at #21, actually, and only The Muppet Show ranks higher.)

PEE-WEE'S PLAYHOUSE: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$149.99 BluRay; Shout! Factory)

ANNIE OAKLEY: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$99.99 DVD; VCI) -- The Paul Reubens TV classic came out in a boxed set years ago on DVD -- actually, 10 years ago, to be exact. No extras to speak of, but at least you could watch the five season run of Pee-wee's Playhouse whenever you wanted. But now Shout! Factory has gone back and remastered the entire show and put it on BluRay. Is it worth buying? Of course. If you own the old set, is that worth replacing? Oh yes.

Let's face it, we have to judge the quality of TV shows on a sliding scale: you can't expect an obscure or low-budget TV show to have tons of money and care lavished on it. All 81 episodes of the family-friendly TV series Annie Oakley are out on DVD. Have they been lovingly restored? Nope. But fans of that show from the mid-1950s (which would amount mostly to folks who grew up with Gail Davis as the honest and true sharp shooter; it hardly shines through as a gem), why they're surely thrilled its been collected at all.

Now here's Pee-wee's Playhouse, one of the best TV shows of all time. The entire run is here and it's been restored and rightly so with the same care as a classic Hitchcock film. The show was shot on film and they've gone back and remastered it so we can see it on film! (Back then, it was edited and aired via video.) So to say this BluRay set looks hyper-surreal is putting it mildly. It's never looked better. You also get tons of extras.

The show remains an unending delight. It's subversive only if you think showing people of different races and cultures on TV is subversive and that encouraging individuality and creativity is somehow rebellious. You can let your freak flag fly with Pee-wee and that's clear from the squeaky voice of Cyndi Lauper singing the theme song right through the eye-popping production design of the show. The talent on display is extraordinary, the cast is

bursting with marvelous talent that went on to substantial careers -- and it's all in service of being goofy and making kids laugh without ever dumbing things down. A sense of pop history, silly asides, a knowing but never cynical awareness of the adult world, and above all the helium-voiced, delightful, man child that is Pee-wee. Dipping into any episode from the run reveals a consistently wacky and charming daffiness is at play. I also like the compact, colorful packaging. Did I mention you'll laugh? Now bring on the new movie!

Annie Oakley in contrast is a bare-bones set. The visuals are so-so but just fine, really, for anyone who wants to relive a childhood memory of the Western. It will not captivate any new viewers but hey, it's all here in one nicely compact set and that's gotta count for something. Sometimes, fans just have to be grateful their personal passions are actually available to rent or buy.

PENNY DREADFUL SEASON ONE (\$48.99 BluRay; Paramount)

UNIVERSAL CLASSIC MONSTERS COMPLETE 30 FILM SET (\$199.99 DVD; Universal)

THE VINCENT PRICE COLLECTION II (\$79.99 BluRay; Shout! Factory) -- Halloween is closing in so you should grab some titles to get in the mood. Perhaps your best bet is to take a chance on Penny Dreadful. This little-discussed Showtime series sounded like a tired mash-up of classic monsters: Dorian Gray, Van Helsing, Frankenstein's monster -- they're all here. But the series has captivated serious buffs of gothic tales and the show certainly has an excellent cast, from stalwarts like Timothy Dalton and Josh Hartnett right down to relative newcomers like Eva Green, Reed Carney and my personal favorite Harry Treadaway as Dr. Frankenstein. (Surely his twin brother opens up the possibility of some fun episode stunt casting.) It's coming back for a 10-episode season two.

Universal can package and repackage its classic lineup of horror movies from now until doomsday and rightly so. No studio has a better library of horror classics. This 30-film DVD set is my kind of set: Each clutch of movies (like the Dracula films or the Werewolf movies) comes in their own clamshell. So it's a nice little library, with each set easily pulled out for easy access and careful storage. You'll find masterpieces like Frankenstein and The Bride Of Frankenstein, more cultish fare like The Creature From The Black Lagoon down to the third and fourth iteration of The Mummy and so on. It's all presented in quality prints and fans who want to gorge on these mostly black and white creep shows should be kept busy for weeks to come.

Vincent Price was trapped in a horror film of his own: he was a brilliant actor who found himself relegated somehow to horror films. Some of them were good, some were great and a fair chunk were pretty awful and he knew it. Still, Price did his best and at times seemed an almost obligatory presence in the genre. The first collection of Price horror flicks was quite strong. This set has seven more films and two at least are presented with care and well worth your time. They're also widely available in inferior prints so fans may own them already, but this is a notch above. I'm speaking of House On Haunted Hill and The Last Man On Earth, from the fallow period when no one thought about Price much at all. For some reason, The Fly still isn't in the mix, but you do get unfortunately The Return Of The Fly. The rest include Roger Corman tackling Poe and so on with fitful results. Hardcore buffs will appreciate having them all together. The rest should cherry pick so they can celebrate Price and speak well of the (un)dead.

SATELLITE (\$24.99 DVD; Indiepix) -- Okay, do you really like discovering new movies? Everyone says they do but then they turn around and just rent or stream whatever dumb Hollywood flick they just saw an ad for, that movie they couldn't be bothered going to a movie theater to see. I don't quite get saying something is "rentable" as opposed to going to a theater. Sure, I get the cost issue and that people only have so much time. But time for me is more precious than money. Either a movie is worth your time or not. And bland Hollywood fare that you'll forget an hour after watching isn't worth it, whether you're headed to the movies or to Redbox. So let's take a chance on this romantic drama Satellite. It played film festivals to acclaim and then finally opened in New York City. The result? A rave in the New York Times from one of its lead critics. And that fairy tale ending led to...nothing. No one saw the movie and it disappeared from view. Now it's finally coming out on DVD, so people

can discover writer-director Jeff Winner's tale of two young lovers who grab at passion and demand that the other live life to the fullest. Winner and the two leads (Karl Geary and Stephanie Szostak) haven't set the world on fire since this came out. Think how differently their lives might have been if audiences had embraced this wildly romantic story. It's not too late. And isn't finding gems that slipped through the cracks one of the reasons we love DVD in the first place?

MY DARLING CLEMENTINE (\$39.99 BluRay; Criterion)

TOPKAPI (\$29.99 BluRay; Kino Classics)

WHITE CHRISTMAS (\$26.99 BluRay; Paramount)

LA DOLCE VITA (\$39.99 BluRay; Criterion)

GORKY PARK (\$29.99 BluRay; Kino Classics) -- A clutch of classics, popular fare and one unappreciated pleasure. John Ford's masterpiece My Darling Clementine is a great, great Western. Henry Fonda is magnetic and the film always compelling. It looks terrific and Criterion offers compelling, thoughtful extras. But me, I just want to dive into the movie. Weirdly, most people have never seen it. It was a popular film in its day, of course, but it's a western and in black and white and admit it, you've never seen it. What are you waiting for?

Topkapi is a bauble of a film, a caper comedy of the sort they rarely make anymore and almost never with the charm that director Jules Dassin brings to his all-star cast, led by Dassin's gorgeous wife Melina Mercouri. Peter Ustinov won a second Oscar and all the other talent is having a ball in this terrific looking tale about stealing a priceless jeweled dagger from a museum in Istanbul. A friend just returned from a cruise in the Mediterranean and said it almost looks as good in real life as it does here.

White Christmas is an odd duck. It's sort of the adult version of those Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney flicks where they said, "Hey kids, let's put on a show!" In this case, it's the adults, who need to raise money for their old but proud friend the General, who led them in WW II. (It was made in 1954.) Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye are on top and it's all spun off rather clumsily from Holiday Inn, a bauble that produced the monster hit song "White Christmas." (Holiday Inn was ONLY open on the holidays so they had a different song for every season and obviously "White Christmas" was a winner. Hence this remake/spin-off which can barely be bothered with a story but makes darn certain Crosby sings the tune at the beginning and the end. For some reason, people just love it and the film is a TV perennial and has spun off a stage version. That includes "White Christmas" as many times as possible too.

La Dolce Vita never gets old, even if you do. When you're young, watching this Fellini film makes you feel very adult and sophisticated. When you're old, it makes you feel buoyant over the possibilities of art and the happy memories of when you first saw it and the characters seemed so grown-up rather than...gulp, contemporaries or even young. It's a rich masterpiece that reveals new facets every time you watch it. Criterion's presentation is impeccable of course, with the "usual" extras, with the caveat that their extras are always intelligent and interesting, as opposed to cursory and obvious, the way so many commentary tracks and making-of videos can be.

Finally, there's Gorky Park. Released just as Ronald Reagan firmly had the Soviet Union in his sights, it's a Cold War flick with an empathetic look at Arkady Renko, a Soviet officer who must investigate some mysterious deaths and becomes rightly skittish when the KGB wants nothing to do with it. The novel by Martin Cruz Smith was prominently reviewed and treated as much more than "just" a detective story. The screenplay was by Dennis Potter, for pete's sake, and the cast was filled with talent like Brian Dennehy, Lee Marvin and William Hurt offering his usual cool, intelligent reserve as the hero. Smith has written eight novels about Renko but sadly Hurt has never been able to tackle the character again.

SILENT WITNESS SEASON ONE AND SEASON SEVENTEEN (\$34.99 DVD each; BBC)

I SPY: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$129.99 DVD; Shout! Factory)

MURDOCH MYSTERIES SEASON 7 (\$59.99 BluRay; Acorn)

THE RED SKELTON SHOW THE EARLY YEARS 1951-1955 (\$59.97 DVD; Timeless) -- Silent Witness is getting a big push by the BBC and rightly so. CSI seemed to come out of nowhere when it blasted to the top of the Nielsen ratings in 2000. (In fact, a reboot of *The Fugitive* was pegged to be the big show on Friday nights but CSI was a monster hit from day one.) Of course, pathologists and medical examiners and the like have been around since Quincy if not earlier. But CSI was most clearly following in the footsteps of *Silent Witness*. That show launched in 1996 and had gruesome fun depicting the work of forensic pathologists. Just like CSI, this show is still on the air, hitting its 17th season. Needless to say, the cast and approach to story has evolved over the years, from Amanda Burton as a Professor Sam Ryan at Cambridge in the first three years to London and eventually a host of supporting, recurring and guest starring characters. It might rival *Law & Order* for the way most every British actor seems to have popped in at one point or another. Now we can catch up with both season one and season seventeen coming out on DVD.

With [a new biography of Bill Cosby in stores](#), I've been reminded of what a consistently fascinating and successful career Cosby has enjoyed. The section on his breakthrough work in the light drama *I Spy* was especially interesting. Cosby was a complete neophyte as an actor and he and Robert Culp bonded strongly and became lifelong friends, with Culp encouraging and aiding Cosby's growth as an actor while they both championed civil rights and the best possible depiction of Cosby's character. Simply having a black man starring in a TV drama was groundbreaking and several stations refused to even air such a scandalous project. But the show was a strong hit and Cosby won the Best Actor Emmy three years in a row, thanks in no small part to Culp's work (they were very much a team) and the Emmy desire to pat itself on the back. The show remains a modest diversion, though you'll enjoy the banter of the two men far more than any particular storyline or adventure.

Similarly, the Canadian period crime series *Murdoch Mysteries* just wants to entertain. Season Seven (a relief for fans since the show narrowly avoided death after being cancelled by one network) quite typically tosses in everything from steroids in sports to Thomas Edison as a suspect in a crime to abusive husbands, racism and even curling. Oh the topics of the 1890s may touch on heavy issues of today but the show is out for fun, with name-dropping of historical characters and even the Loch Ness Monster all in good fun. (As is Sherlock Holmes popping in because who doesn't want to meet Sherlock Holmes?) A season eight is on tap as well.

Has any performer practically erased themselves from pop culture history with the success of Red Skelton? He was a radio star and had made movies when TV came calling. Skelton was enthusiastic from the start and embraced TV whole hog in 1951 with his own variety show featuring his classic clowning and other recurring bits alongside guest stars and the like. He was rewarded immediately with big ratings and the Emmy Award for Best Comedy and Best Comic. The show ran for 20 seasons, usually in the Top 10. Oddly, it started on NBC for two years then jumped to CBS for some 16 years then back to NBC for a final gasp in 1970/1971. Even more strangely, Skelton blamed his conservative politics for the firing, rather than CBS's wholesale dumping of heartland shows like his and Ed Sullivan and *Petticoat Junction*, to name just a few. You can understand his ire when hearing that his show was ranked #7 overall when it got booted. Since he reportedly made more money from his kitschy paintings of clowns than he did from his TV show, Skelton responded with pique. He simply refused to syndicate his variety show. And for decades, Red Skelton's decades of work in television simply vanished from view. If there's one reason why he isn't mentioned much today, that is surely it. His sentimentality may not have aged well and his clowning may seem like little more than funny faces to some. But it's TV history and now for the first time in a long time, we can watch some of these early shows. Many literally haven't been seen since they first aired. The picture quality won't blow anyone away, but it's reasonable and you can enjoy watching Skelton and seeing what America took to its bosom for literally decades. Is he a TV legend? I never thought so, because I'd never really seen him and the stuff I had seen looked tired. Now he can be judged and appreciated for the work he did and not the sad way his career petered out.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the founder and CEO of [BookFilter](#), a book lover's best friend. It's a website