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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: June 26, 2010 02:38 PM

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DVDs: Latest Foyle, Best *Alice*, *Last Station*

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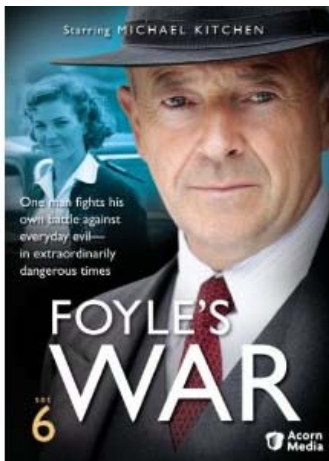
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Okay, let's dive in.



FOYLE'S WAR SET 6 (\$49.99; Acorn) -- It's hard to say goodbye. But one of my obsessive desires is to see TV shows I love end on a high note, something even the best series find very hard to do. *Foyle's War* was always designed to end on VE Day and while the last two seasons weren't top-notch, they were solid

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and I felt a sense of relief though I would miss Michael Kitchens and Honeysuckle Weeks (the greatest name for a British actress in decades) and the rest. But obviously creator Anthony Horowitz missed them as much as we did and they're back. I'm tentative, nervous...and delighted. For some bizarre reason, PBS edits 10 minutes out of these self-contained 100 minute mysteries when they air so I hope you waited like I did for the DVDs. I've been sworn to wait until my Foyles friends can all gather but a peek at the first episode was comforting indeed. And the hint that Foyle might head to America? The mind boggles.



ALICE IN WONDERLAND (\$44.99 BluRay Combo Pack) -- How in the name of heaven did Tim Burton and Johnny Depp's *Alice in Wonderland* become the sixth biggest worldwide hit of all time? It's one of only 6 films to gross more than \$1 billion and is just \$3 million away from passing *The Dark Knight* and becoming the 5th biggest hit of all time. And yet, it got mixed reviews and I certainly don't know a single soul that's truly passionate about it. Some people liked it, yes, but usually a film has to be a phenomenon of some sort. Personally, I thought Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham Carter were exceptional standouts in a typically muddled Burton film. And most of all I realized that *Alice in Wonderland* (one of my favorite books) is simply not filmable in any satisfying way. The Disney animated version comes closest but of all the live action versions, this one may be the best. But having sat through TV film and stage versions that were twee, childish or otherwise denuded, that just isn't saying much.



THE LAST STATION (\$34.95 BluRay; \$27.96 regular) -- Having just read Anna Karenina for the first time (damn good, not surprisingly), I was primed to see a film about Tolstoy's last days, when he founded communes and ignored literature for the wider scope of philosophy and utopia. And what a cast: Christopher Plummer as Tolstoy; Helen Mirren as his wife, a woman desperate to keep his estate intact and not let hangers-on and his publisher suck away her children's inheritance; Paul Giamatti as said oily publisher; and James McAvoy as the new kid, a pawn toyed with by one and all as he stands in awe of the Great Man. But it's all rather tepid, with Mirren and Plummer having glorious fun sparring and McAvoy charmingly befuddled and then they spar some more and he looks befuddled again and then more sparring and more befuddlement and then it ends. Not bad, but not the romp one hoped for.

To Rielle Hunter
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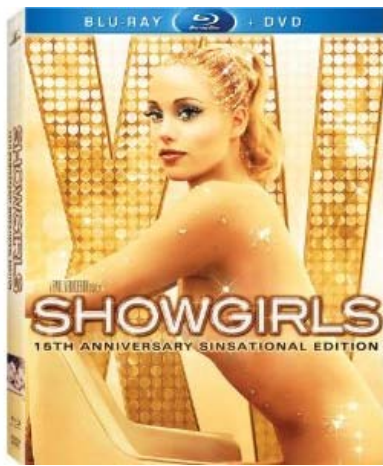


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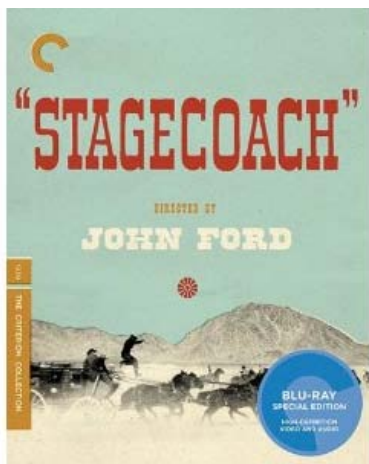
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Kourtney K.'s Stunning Bikini Bod



SHOWGIRLS (\$29.99; MGM) -- I'm not one for camp. I enjoy good movies, not laughing at bad ones. I don't line up for Ed Wood retrospectives or glory in obscure trash. But I'm only human. Some movies are gloriously bad, which only happens when everyone working on them is either utterly indifferent to the film they're making or convinced it's gonna be amazing. Everyone on *Showgirls* believed it would be amazing and everyone involved (director Paul Verhoeven, screenwriter Joe Eszterhas, stars Gina Gershon, Kyle MacLachlan and Berkley herself) has made good or great films before and since this one. I love it when Elizabeth Berkley is befriended at the beginning of the film and then inexplicably starts cursing at her new-found friend. I love it when she goes topless at the drop of a hat but gets infuriated when asked to rub an ice cube on her nipple. Don't watch it alone: you might hurt yourself laughing and who would be there to take you to the hospital?



STAGECOACH (\$39.95 regular or BluRay; Criterion) -- Kudos again to Criterion for not charging extra for BluRay. (It's almost as annoying as people charging extra for 3-D. What's next? Charging extra for color or sound?) Anyway, 1939 is often named the greatest year in movie history and the classic Stagecoach by John Ford is just one of many reasons. What astonishes me is how influential the film became. The story of a stagecoach of disparate characters trying to get through hostile Apache territory is the blueprint for everything from *The Towering Inferno* and *The Poseidon Adventure* to *Die Hard*. You throw together colorfully distinctive characters (always including a loser who will gladly sell everyone else out to save his skin), give them a flawed but admirable hero (in this case John Wayne, in his star-making turn) and eliminate them one by one. Tremendous fun in the best print I've ever seen, much better than the previous Warner Bros. edition and well worth upgrading too. Criterion extras include a lengthy interview with Ford from the 60s, an hour long silent film of his, a radio dramatization, experts like Peter Bogdanovich and more.

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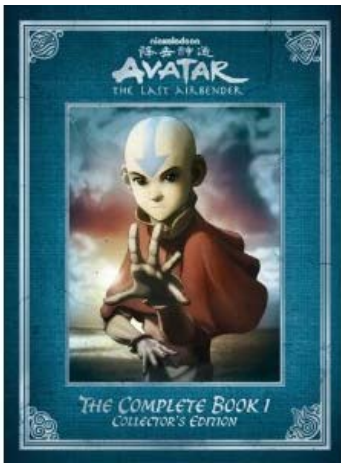
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THE VIRGINIAN COMPLETE FIRST SEASON (\$79.98; Timeless Media) -- Like their reissue of *Wagon Train*, this is a carefully remastered collection of an iconic TV show based on the classic novel by Owen Wister (well worth picking up) and starring James Drury as the man with no name Virginian and Lee J. Cobb for the first four seasons as Judge Garth. Begun in 1962, the show was unusual in being 90 minutes, so each one of these 30 episodes is 75 minutes long, virtually a feature length film in those days. I'm not a fan of the packaging, but the tin case looks nice and the DVDs (with three episodes to a disc) look very good once you can actually extricate them from the box and get them in your player. This is a Western for adults, with a who's who of guest stars and even top film directors like Samuel Fuller learning their trade. I'm still waiting for James Garner's *Maverick*, but this is another notable TV Western finally getting its due.



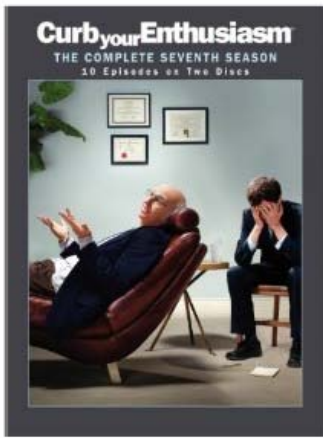
STONES IN EXILE (\$14.98; Eagle Rock) -- This documentary debuted at the Cannes Film Festival, where hearing Mick Jagger toggle back and forth between pretty impeccable French and that broad British accent was a highlight. The film is catnip for Stones enthusiasts, combining present-day footage interviewing the Stones with archival footage shot at the time when they were in the south of France as tax exiles and just happened to be recording *Exile On Main Street*, the greatest album of their career and hence one of the all-time rock CDs. Why was I a bit dissatisfied? Well, we know their dissolute world; what I really wanted was a creative breakdown of the music, even track by track. But the film does set the time period well, showing the antic circus that surrounded them at all times, with drugs and groupies (and families!) constantly demanding their attention. It's a miracle they recorded anything at all, much less "Tumbling Dice" et al. Loads of extras, though not apparently a giant cache of footage from the documentary film that was being shot at the time and is the source of the archival footage. I suppose asking the Stones to release *Cocksucker Blues* is like asking the Beatles to release *Let It Be*. We'll have to wait til they're gone for that to happen. But meanwhile, any fans who rightly gobbled up the remastered *Exile On Main Street* should rent or buy this film to get a sense of the madness that went into it.



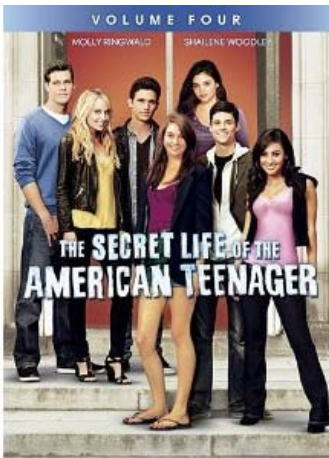
AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER COMPLETE BOOK 1 (\$55.98; Nickelodeon) -- I think M. Night Shyamalan is a technically gifted director with a fatal weakness when it comes to screenplays. So watching him tackle the live action *Airbender* is intriguing: it might just be the right property to put him back on top since he can create tension and atmosphere with Hitchcockian ease but desperately needs a strong story to anchor his talent. If you're not familiar with the animated series, by all means dive in. This collector's edition is a very modestly spiffed up version of the set that's been out for four years. You don't need to replace your earlier edition by any means, but it's as good a place as any to dive into the saga of Aang, the last Airbender but also just a little boy overwhelmed with his responsibilities. Very good animated series with 15 episodes and new extras like a peek at the film and a nice booklet.



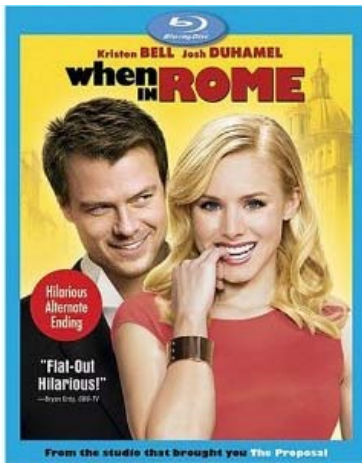
A STAR IS BORN (1954) (\$34.99 BluRay; Warner Bros./MPI) -- It would take a film historian to chart the myriad versions of this take on *A Star Is Born* that have popped up over the years when trying to restore the lost footage cut out of George Cukor's musical drama. This BluRay edition looks sharp and sounds great to my ears. The impeccable Janet Gaynor version is a tad superior to many and the rock and roll version with Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson is far worse. But despite some hokey moments of Garland working on scenes intended for hit movies she is starring in, it is the *drama* in this musical drama that stays with you. We don't really watch a star being born because Garland is clearly a star from the moment she pops onto the screen, even if washed-up James Mason is supposed to "discover" her. Both are at peak form here, delivering nuanced, painful work as her star rises and his sinks into alcoholic despair. And one number alone ranks among the greatest in film history. You can learn everything you need to know about Garland from her heartbreaking work in "The Man That Got Away."



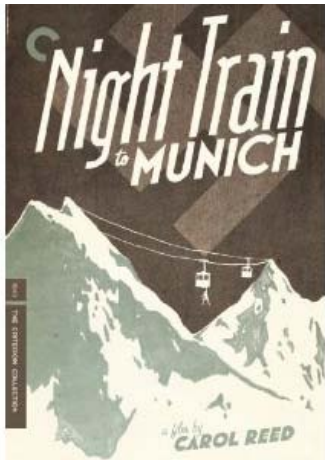
CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM SEASON SEVEN (\$39.98; HBO) -- Ok, I will. Just kidding, but hasn't *Curb Your Enthusiasm* stayed too long at the party? How many times can we watch Larry David weasel his way into some excruciatingly embarrassing social situation? Quite a few times over the years, as it turns out. But surely he's reached a logical end when they engineer a *Seinfeld* reunion which is both amusing and yet of course incapable of living up to expectations. Yet it comes pretty close, thanks to a season-long buildup with David engineering a reunion so he can win back his ex Cheryl Hines, who longs to play George's ex-wife. Daringly, David plays off the real-life racial slurs uttered by Michael Richards in one episode. Another season comes out in 2011 but it's almost a shame they didn't call it a day right here. Also just out: *Entourage: The Complete Sixth Season* (\$49.99 BluRay and \$39.98 regular DVD; HBO) which really should have wrapped it up around Aquaman time or at least have had the nerve to show our hero's career collapse completely and find out his entourage didn't have his back when the juice wasn't there anymore.



THE SECRET LIFE OF THE AMERICAN TEENAGER VOLUME FOUR (\$39.99; ABC Studios) -- How's this for confused? By and large, I wish TV shows would release their DVDs as soon as the season is over. But with ABC Family shows like this and *Greek*, I wish they'd wait. Huh? Well, these shows split their seasons in two parts with months off between each. But they put out the DVD set when only half the season has aired. That's why we're watching the third season of *Secret Life* but already on Volume Four of the DVDs. But on to the show, which has always faced a bit of a dilemma. Since it began with our heroine being pregnant, the first season felt like a climax. They've struggled a bit with where to go from there, throwing in new characters, trips overseas and now opportunities in New York City among other game changers. It was almost as if the show began four seasons in and without the plots setting up these people we were already plunging into the sort of twists that usually arise when a show has run out of ideas. But I'll always be faithful to a show with Molly Ringwald even if I still can't really accept her as the mom rather than the teenager.



WHEN IN ROME (\$39.99 BluRay and \$29.99 regular DVD; Touchstone) -- Oh, Kristen Bell, how we love you. Captivating on TV's *Veronica Mars*, breezily charming and funny on talk shows (especially with Craig Ferguson), Bell is still waiting for the right vehicle to make her the star she so clearly is ready to become. This tepid romantic comedy, with Bell and Josh Duhamle gamely trying to charm their way past a silly tale of lovers crossed up by a magical Italian fountain that plagues Bell with a bevy of admirers when all she really wants is Duhamel -- provided he really does want her and isn't just magicked into thinking so. Whatever. They almost make it painless, but the story is too dimwitted even for them to rescue.



NIGHT TRAIN TO MUNICH (\$29.95; Criterion) -- It's not an out and out classic along the lines of director Carol Reed's *Fallen Idol* and *The Third Man*, but this adventure tale is nifty fun that picks up where Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* (a REAL classic) left off, thanks to minor characters who pop in again, star Margaret Lockwood (this time as the daughter trying to help her scientist dad escape the Nazis) and a sharp screenplay by Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat (the guys behind Hitch's gem). Plus, it gave Rex Harrison his first big role. Modest extras include a video chat about the film's creative team and a nice essay in the booklet but as with all Criterion releases it looks very good.



YOUTH IN REVOLT (\$34.95 BluRay and \$28.95 regular DVD; Sony) -- I'm a sucker for actor Michael Cera, who is one of those distinctive character actors that finds endless variations on his stock role of the self-deprecating, self-aware sad sack he's been doing ever since *Arrested Development*. But the whimsy is too forced in this story of a young man who finds some spine thanks to an alter ego (also played by Cera), who smokes and seduces women with abandon and pushes him to extremes. Our hero establishing his bonafides in the intro by avowing his love for Sinatra (which barely comes up ever again) and other such telling, cool details. He's a virgin of course and the sexy confident girl staying with her Christian parents at his dad's trailer park is an eye-opener. Little jokes don't quite ring true, like that Sinatra reference that barely surfaces again. He's also a serious cineaste (we see him renting Criterion's *La Strada*) and when he chats with her about films, he says his favorite movie of all time is Misoguchi's *Tokyo Story*. To which she replies it's a great film, but wasn't it by Ozu? His stammering response is "Who can say?" I laughed at that, but it was a cheap laugh. If he had simply been nervous and referred to a film wrongly, ok. But how could he get the director wrong for his favorite film of all time? No one who rents *La Strada* needs to reach for a film reference. You can make a mistake about a lot of movies, but not your favorite. The whole film feels false, though not for any specific reason. It's just a snarky film with Cera stumbling from one misadventure to another while trying to lose his virginity, none of them quite believable (of course) or funny enough to make the believability unimportant. And Cera's shtick -- so winning in *Juno* and *Superbad* -- can feel forced when there's not a real character underneath all the passive aggressive comments and pop cultural references. It's certainly not a bad movie and I enjoyed all the fine actors in it, including the delightfully named Portia Doubleday as the girl and Jonathan B. Wright of Broadway's *Spring Awakening* as her suspicious boyfriend. But the entire film is too familiar and arch to make you believe in any of the characters.



THE BOOK OF ELI (\$35.99 on BluRay or or \$28.99 on regular DVD) -- I'm a sucker for post-apocalyptic movies, which convince me more and more that I would not last a day in such a world. (Prison is another story: I'd offer to write letters for people, brush up on my legal skills and otherwise employ my smarts to make myself more useful alive than dead. But I digress.) Still, it's a credit to Denzel Washington that he kept my attention throughout this otherwise undistinguished tale of a loner determined to protect a rare copy of one of the last books left in print. Did Google triumph? No, after the apocalypse everyone blamed reading and burned most every book in sight, especially and most tellingly religious books. It doesn't take long for us to realize Washington is protecting the Bible. Fine. The action is OK enough but not much happens beyond that revelation and a final reveal that I took as simply ironic while others took it as literal. Either way, it's not that much of a "wow" and then the movie almost laughably has two or three false endings when the wow ending was all we needed. Still, it's nice to see the Hughes Brothers back in action and Mia Kunis sure does keep up her appearance nicely, nuclear holocaust or no nuclear holocaust.

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Steamboater 12:42 AM on 6/29/2010
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Curb Your Enthusiasm can stay as long as it wants. It's always fun to see Larry step where others fear to tread and screw up and often get paid back for it. The show is hilarious.

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"A Star Is Born" is a brilliant take on Hollywood and the people who go up and down the ladder there. Garland and Mason are top-notch too. The found scene where Norman Maine proposes to Vicky Lester during a recording session couldn't get any more real either. Garland was a much better actress than Janet Gaynor too. The opening at that benefit with Garland on stage singing "You Got To Have Me Go With You" and James Mason drunk popping out on stage only to have Garland save his @ss is something you could have imagined Garland doing too. Everything about this film was just right, even the "Born In A Trunk" medley which the studio wanted cut but which really shows you why Vicky Lester became a star.

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NHBill 06:42 PM on 6/28/2010

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Pretty crummy bunch of titles.
The newer films are all very mediocre and the older ones seem uninspired.
Will BluRay really make THAT much difference on an old mono 1939 film in B&W?
Save the BluRay for the special effects spectaculars.
I am a Huge Stones fan but found the Exiles doc a bore.
When will they release a clean copy of "Ladies and Gentleman the Rolling Stones".
It's the concert film from the 1972 Exiles tour and catches the Stones in their absolute prime.
Sorry Showgirls is just a disaster.

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wallyone 08:07 AM on 6/28/2010

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How could you have put THE LAST STATION into the DVD player expecting a "romp"? Have you no taste at all? Are you not prepared to watch a really fine movie with great production values, great script, great characters, historical nuance, great craftsmanship, fine arc, great acting, etc.? I found myself thinking about it long after viewing, as the themes of fame, social change, cultism, and changes in marriage over time are always relevant.

Maybe you should watch it again. Perhaps after swearing off inane action movies for a while!!

HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 04:51 PM on 6/28/2010

59 Fans



I expected a romp because that's how the film was sold and that's what it went for throughout the first two acts. And I didn't put in the DVD -- I paid my money and saw it in the theater. I'm glad you enjoyed The Last Station, which I felt was played as a romp for most of the film -- fighting and screaming and loving, with Helen Mirren even tumbling into a room while peeping from the balcony and howling in despair -- and then went for a serious note towards the end as Tolstoy died. (God help us if that's considered a spoiler.) I enjoy all kinds of films: action, comedy, drama, period, silent, foreign, slow, fast, etc. I simply didn't find The Last Station terribly absorbing. Of course, the Academy agreed with you when, to my surprise, it gave nominations to Mirren and Plummer.

Glencora 01:08 AM on 6/29/2010

9 Fans

The Last Station reminded me of the Gertrude Stein quote about Oakland - "There's no there there." Yes, the performances were wonderful, but they almost seemed disconnected from each other. Both were so overwrought that it just seemed like two veteran actors giving very good performances who sometimes were on the screen together. But since there was so little background given, it was hard to know why everybody was so upset. I thought it was maybe a B+ movie.

SparkyDash 07:28 AM on 6/28/2010

242 Fans

"Foyle's War" will always be in the top tier of my all-time favorite shows. I love Michael Kitchens.

HUFFPOST SUPER USER

FearlessFreep 01:23 AM on 6/28/2010

182 Fans



STAGECOACH is one of my favorite romantic movies! (Another is LADY AND THE TRAMP.) Who says westerns never have a good female character?

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Steamboater 12:37 AM on 6/29/2010

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Stagecoach is wonderful and so is Claire Trevor, even with her New York accent. The remake with Ann Margaret was a mes.

JimBozo 11:44 PM on 6/27/2010

54 Fans

I'm with you on Showgirls. It and Fight Club are 1&2 on my funniest movie list- for different reasons. Showgirls had remarkably good production value, which helps, I'm sure.

HUFFPOST SUPER USER

Steamboater 12:39 AM on 6/29/2010

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Showgirls is camp personified.

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