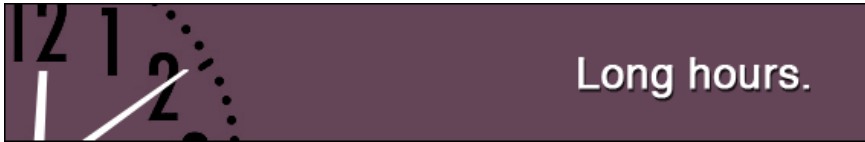
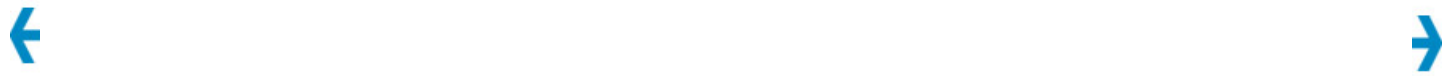




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DVDs: My Blueberry Nights -- What Went Wrong, Wong?

Posted July 2, 2008 | 06:01 PM (EST)



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Director Wong Kar Wai is clearly one of the coolest directors in the world. He delivered a string of distinctive movies (like *Chungking Express*, *As Tears Go By* and *Fallen Angels*) capped by one of my favorite movies of the decade, 2000's brilliant, sexy, evocative *In The Mood For Love*.

Since then, the sunglasses have remained firmly in place and the cool quotient hasn't budged. But the movies have... faltered. I thought *2046* was a worthy followup albeit very similar in tone, but a second and third viewing haven't made a good case for that "ITMFL Redux." Re-doing his action flick *Ashes Of Time* feels like a momentary exercise. An English language remake of the not so great *Lady From Shanghai* seems a spotty future plan. And then there's *My Blueberry Nights* (\$19.98; Weinstein).

This poorly received film stars Norah Jones as a nice girl who indulges in pie at her local diner when her heart is broken. Bizarrely, she has to go on an elaborate road trip in order to understand that said diner owner -- the wildly adorable Jude Law -- might just be boyfriend material. It has all the usual Wong tics: slow motion, overwhelmingly gorgeous cinematography, a beautiful cast, music that dominates the proceedings and precious, hyper-aware narration. And there's the problem. It's not just that *My Blueberry Nights* fails (filming in a second language is always a challenge), it's that the film fails so spectacularly while embracing the very style that made Wong famous. Not only do you reject this film, but it forces you to rethink your opinion of his earlier work.

Often, a movie that drips sentimentality or preciousness can get away with it...in Italian or Norwegian or some other tongue. You can bet critics that praise certain foreign language films would never stand for their open emotionality if the movie were American. It's not self-hatred -- it's just that certain emotions or certain artifices are easier to swallow with the slight distance that

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subtling provides. (If Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* had been an English language film, we'd still be throwing up and Benigni would still be in hiding.)

Good Lord, I just mentioned Wong and Benigni in the same breath. That's how still-born this movie stubbornly remains. No need to panic: He's produced only one bit of wheel-spinning (*2046*) and one flop in another language (*Blueberry*) in a career filled with notable films. Hopefully Wong will return to his native tongue fully engaged and give us something fresh and new so my concern that he's run out of tricks will be allayed.

Also out this week:

Mad Men Season One (\$49.98; Lionsgate) -- The tag "best show on TV" is a moving target that roams restlessly from series to series. One minute it's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the next it's *Battlestar Galactica*, the minute after that it's *The Office* and then *The Wire*. Now it's *Mad Men*, a terrifically acted, compelling drama about advertising executives in the early Sixties. Everyone loves the sexy costumes, the endless smoking and drinking and the sleek design (the regular DVD set even comes in a giant lighter-shaped box), but it's really the great actors and subtle performances that make this a winner for any era. Jon Hamm is great as the enigmatic lead Don Draper, but January Jones is equally great as his unhappy and unfulfilled wife, Christina Hendricks brings intelligence and wit to the sexy office secretary (and mistress). John Slattery is always good and I've got a serious weakness for Vincent Kartheiser in the very difficult, unsympathetic role of office weasel. One caveat: I found the office politics completely compelling, not to mention the heart attacks and private tribulations. The "revelations" about Hamm's personal life however are way too melodramatic and unnecessary to my taste. Can't a guy just be private and aloof without a soap-worthy backstory? The less of that the better. Loads of extras and in an encouraging sign, the Blu-Ray boxed set is exactly the same price. The new season of *Mad Men* on AMC begins July 27 -- catch up now.

Shotgun Stories (\$24.95; Liberation) - I had to travel to Roger Ebert's film festival in Champaign-Urbana Illinois in order to discover this gem, a quiet, Western-like contemporary drama about two feuding families linked by a just-dead father and simmering anger. Violence begets violence is the sad, inescapable message here, one delivered with power by first-time director Jeff Nichols and an intense Michael Shannon. One of the best movies of the year and a sterling debut.

Mishima: A Life In Four Chapters and **Patriotism** (\$39.95 and \$24.95; Criterion) -- This is the extraordinary utopia that film buffs now live in: I recently attended a screening of *Mishima* with Paul Schrader in attendance. (It was EbertFest, again.) I'm sure they secured the best print available and it was okay albeit a little muddy in the sound department. In the past, that would have been virtually your only chance to see the move in any condition whatsoever. But now, with DVD, it's available whenever you want. Imagine what the history of literature would be like if most books were rarely available for reading. This new world of easy accessibility to great prints of movies has only been around for about 10 years, really. Who knows what effect it will have on improving the quality of talent down the road? Schrader casually mentioned this disc was coming out and said it would probably be far superior to what they were screening. Boy was he right. His boldest film visually, *Mishima* is also his strangest and best as a director, thanks to a magnetic central performance, great sets and a brilliant score by Philip Glass. *Mishima's* own short film *Patriotism* is fascinating but proves he was a better writer than director. Copious extras make it worthwhile for fanatics.

Vantage Point (\$28.96; Sony)/**Drillbit Taylor** (\$34.99; Paramount) -- *Vantage Point* is a decent airplane movie about a presidential assassination with a top-notch cast led by Dennis Quaid, Forest Whitaker, Matthew Fox and Sigourney Weaver elevating things somewhat. Fine while you wait for the next season of *24*. *Drillbit Taylor* stars the affable Owen Wilson in a good concept (school kids hire an adult to protect them from bullies) in search of a good script. But let's pause for a moment to look at the idiocy of so many various editions of each title. *Vantage Point* is available as a single disc edition, a two-disc special edition for \$34.95, a Blu-Ray edition that costs \$10 more than the standard DVD and even more than the special edition but contains basically the standard version. Oh and there's a tiny disc version for the PSP. FOUR different versions. *Drillbit* has three versions including an "Extended Survival Edition" (mostly some extra scenes) and a Blu-Ray version that costs \$5 more. Include ALL the extras on th cheapest edition you can put out so that stores don't have to carry three or four different versions. And how often do people really want

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Least Wasteful Cities In America (SLIDESHOW)

It's great to love the city you live in, and better to

to watch a comedy extended by 10 or so minutes? Just let them choose that as an option on the menu. That way, people who want the theatrical version but wouldn't mind seeing the extras aren't going to be stuck with only one option. And stores won't have shelves bulging with umpteen versions of every movie. No one should have to pick and choose when buying movies at their DVD store. It's a waste of space and a waste of time.

Heathers 20th High School Reunion Edition (\$19.97; Anchor Bay) -- This black comedy about high school misfits getting their revenge holds up very well indeed ("I love my dead gay son!") and Christian Slater and Winona Ryder have chemistry to spare. Modest new extras. Very different teenage rebels are on display in the hit East German drama from 1957 *Berlin-Schonhauser Corner* (\$24.95; First Run Features). It's the best of three German films just out, including a documentary about the bombing of civilian sites in Germany during WWII -- *Firestorm* (\$24.95; First Run Features) that would make **Nicholson Baker** proud and *Solo Sunny* (\$24.95; First Run Features), a real curio about a female pop singer circa the late Seventies.

Till Death Do Us Part (\$29.98; Navarre) -- The effortlessly funny John Waters hosts this true-crime series that depicts real-life cases of spouses who decide to off their significant other. Hitchcock has nothing on Waters as a droll host and this is perfect for the newly divorced in our life. For a more serious look at crime, try *Rebus Set 3* (\$49.99; Acorn) with Ken Stott as the prickly Scottish detective in four new mysteries.

Bob The Builder: Let's Build The Beach (\$14.98; Hit) -- Bob the Builder does his part for conservation (sort of) by building a promenade on the beach. Your kid might also enjoy *Fireman Sam To The Rescue* (\$14.98; Hit), which also contains five main episodes. (Bob also features two bonus episodes.) And if you don't want to feel like you're grooming your baby for a career just yet, there's always the less job-oriented *Care Bears: King Of The Moon* (\$14.98; Lionsgate).

The 2007 Newport Music Festival (\$124.99; Acorn) -- A generous, 10 disc set offers 15 plus hours of music from the venerable classical music festival. However, the price is far too high given the extremely perfunctory camerawork on display. (At outdoor performances, the image is just terrible). On the plus side, the sound is solid, which is notable since Acorn releases are not known for high fidelity. At half the price, the banal presentation of some fine performers would be okay. At this price, viewers have a right to expect more. Just as DIY in presentation is *Homemade Hillbilly Jam* (\$24.95; First Run Features), but it's far more acceptable in this shambling documentary about roots music than in a film set in the high-falutin' world of classical music. Decent fun for buffs.

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Tony, don't you own a DVR? I never even remember what day of the week shows air anymore, thanks to DVRs. I thought Norah was fine too -- she certainly wasn't the problem, though I don't expect her to do a lot more acting down the road.

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Couldn't agree with you more about My Blueberry Nights. Wong Kar Wai is my wife's favorite filmmaker, so we saw it in spite of the poor reviews. Which, we found, were accurate, because it was a pretty poor movie. I thought Norah Jones held up well despite her inexperience and her lack of anything substantial to work with. What I found most disappointing, however, is that Wong Kar Wai didn't even take advantage of shooting on location! Dusty highways in Vegas and all interior shots in NYC. What the...?

And on a totally different subject, if there's one TV series that's tailor-made for me, it's Mad Men. But dammit, I always forget when it's on! The DVD will come in handy, as if I need any more incentive to have "liquid lunches."

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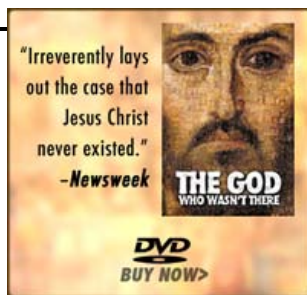
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