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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted: August 5, 2009 04:56 PM

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DVDS: New Miss Marple Doesn't Slay Me and More



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I never imagined Basil Rathbone would ever be surpassed when it came to playing Sherlock Holmes. But surely now Jeremy Brett is the definitive detective. For some, Margaret Rutherford holds the same place of honor when it comes to Miss Marple, the deceptively sweet and mild-mannered little old lady with a keen eye for clues. Others give TV's Joan Hickson first place of honor. But we can all agree the recent relaunch of Miss Marple with the excellent actress Geraldine

McEwan was a flop. Miss Marple with a long-lost love? One shudders. They've started from scratch (again) because they know mystery buffs will line up and watch anything with stately homes, British accents...and murder.

But surely they're pushing it with the desultory batch of episodes in Agatha Christie Marple Series 4 (\$59.99; Acorn). The new Miss Marple is Julia McKenzie, of the delightful miniseries Cranford. (Well worth renting, that one.) Her Jane Marple is certainly a little more Marple-ish than McEwan's but still not spot-on for my taste. This Marple actually seems a bit overwhelmed and flustered at times, even rather confused. (Very mildly, of course.) Yes, she gently prods the local police towards the proper clues but there isn't as much fun made of this as there might be.

I might be reading too much into a banal reaction shot, but one touch I did like was a hint of passion for Marple: when her predictions come true and another person is murdered, a close-up of Marple reveals the barest hint of a thrill of delight coursing through her. At another point, she's asked if she would ever consider heading to a mansion where murder is feared and the close-up shows Marple pretending to weigh the idea when of course wild bulls couldn't keep her away.

But no Marple could overcome the rote nature of these productions. We're offered 4 complete mysteries, each about 90 minutes in length. The first ("A Pocket Full Of Rye") takes a beastly half an hour to involve Marple properly in the goings-on and is unfortunately rather broadly comic in tone. In the last, she takes a bit of a back seat to young people investigating their first crime (Sean

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Biggerstaff of *Harry Potter* is the main one).

Yes, all four include the usual array of top-notch British talent: Brian Cox, Rupert Graves, Shirley Henderson, Matthew Macfayden, Jemma Redgrave, Prunella Scales, Samantha Bond, Alex Jennings and even Joan Collins are all on hand. But every episode contains a clutch of lesser performers who are genuinely bad and overact in the extreme, to the point of provoking laughter. (Blood...will...out!" sputters one young woman in "They Do It With Mirrors," rather hilariously.) And the casting of big names, as so often happens, provides the most obvious clues of all. If I ranked the episodes, I would be choosing which one was the least weak. So the biggest crime here is the one committed against Agatha Christie.

Also Out This Week:

Ballerina (\$24.95; First Run) -- It took me a few weeks to catch up with this documentary about five dancers in the Russian Kirov (aka Mariinsky). The five women range in age and disciplines, but their talent and extreme hard work link them completely. You see rehearsals and exercise and pain and talk with them while preparing for performances of crowd-pleasers like *Swan Lake* and *Romeo & Juliet*. But even those warhorses are incredibly demanding. Obviously, dance lovers will love this, but it's a testament to the sweat that goes into any artistic endeavor worth the name and anyone can appreciate it. Also out is the charming *Carmen & Geoffrey* (\$24.95; First Run), which captures the remarkable love story and artistic accomplishments of dancers Carmen de Lavallade and Geoffrey Holder. You'll appreciate my ignorance of the world of dance when I tell you I only knew Holder as the guy from those 7-Up ads and the James Bond film *Live and Let Die*.

Race To Witch Mountain (\$39.99 Special Edition and \$44.99 BluRay; Disney) -- Okay, before I bemoan the changes made to *Escape To Witch Mountain* (what, kids think the word "escape" is too dull so they changed it to "race") not to mention the inclusion of The Rock, let's be clear. I had fond thoughts for the original Seventies kid flick but it was pretty tame, even at the time. So *Race To Witch Mountain* doesn't soil a beloved classic, it just takes a high concept idea and revamps it for today. No harm, no foul. But no good movie, either. The BluRay costs \$5 more than the Special Edition but only \$3 more on sale at Amazon (\$25.99 versus \$22.99). But the single disc edition costs only \$15.99 on sale, which is a very substantial difference. It's nice to see BluRay and Special Edition DVDs coming closer in price, but until they're regularly under \$20, fans won't bother with either. The BluRay does contain a regular DVD along with the digital copy that also comes with the Special Edition. Is all that confusing? For \$26 instead of \$16, you can get a lot of flexibility (a copy for the BluRay player, a regular DVD for the kid's room and road trips and a digital copy to carry on a laptop or other device). But that's a lot of money for a little convenience. Kudos to them for releasing all three versions at the same time, but cut out all the bonus features or keep them and lower the price and drop the stripped down one-disc version and send those only to video stores and Netflix. The array of choices is confusing and wasteful and tiresome and BluRay is about to go under for good if it hasn't already as an option.

Flight of the Conchords Second Season (\$29.98; HBO) -- During the first season of this show about a New Zealand duo looking for pop success in the US, I often fast-forwarded to the always delightful musical numbers. But slowly the show is growing on me or the guys are just finding their rhythm. In either case, it's become a quiet charmer...even when they're *not* singing.

The Soloist (\$29.98; DreamWorks) -- Oscar bait, but no one was nibbling. The TV movie-ready story of a down on his luck newspaper reporter (Robert Downey Jr) helping out a talented homeless man (Jamie Foxx) with a gift for classical music) is pure mawkishness that two fine actors can't overcome.

The Shape of the World (\$59.99; Athena) -- This six-part PBS miniseries turns the science of cartography -- map-making -- into an exploration of the globe. Narrated by Patrick Stewart, it does have the air of a lecture, but a very good lecture indeed. Teens might think they won't be interested, but they will be. It's often damning with faint praise to say a series can inform and educate you, but that surely was the goal here and they achieved it.

Project Runway Season 5 (\$27.95; Genius) -- The most star-studded PR yet, with guests like Sandra Bernhard, LL Cool J, Brooke Shields and Natalie Portman popping in alongside Tim Gunn and Heidi Klum. The men were completely shut out of the female-dominated final three and rightly so. And while a reality series might be the wrong place to make this argument, why do they wait till right before the beginning of the new season to release a show on DVD? In the UK, they release shows on DVD as soon as the series ends (sometimes, even while it's still airing) and that piggybacking on all the reviews and publicity seems smart to me. Anyone who wants to catch up before the new season only has a blink of an eye to do it here. (That's really a pain when it comes to 24, for example.) Get it out as soon as the show ends; don't hold onto it until right before the new

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season begins.

The Tigger Movie: 10th Anniversary Edition (\$29.99; Disney) -- I don't like endless spin-offs of Disney characters. I really don't like the direct-to-DVD mush (though this one was released theatrically) and I don't think a character like Tigger -- a classic supporting role if ever there was one -- should be front and center, any more than I want to see a Peanuts film focusing on Snoopy. So sue me, I was wrong. *The Tigger Movie* is the exception, thanks to songs by the legendary Sherman Brothers, great voice work and a better than average script. Gentle fare that can hold its head high. And if it leads you to reading the A.A. Milne books aloud to your kids, all the better. Extras include two new Tigger shorts.

The Love Boat Season 2 Volume 2 (\$36.98; Paramount) -- How in God's name did I sit and watch this series every Saturday night as a kid? It is almost embarrassingly predictable and trite, with the least sexy crew-members on a cruise ship ever. (And where are the gay cruise ship employees?) Heartily condemned by critics at the time and now I'm old enough to know they were right. Not that this stopped me from skipping ahead to the episode starring Charo and you may feel compelled to search out the ones with Sonny Bono, Corey Feldman, Reggie Jackson, Minnie Pearl and the like, depending on your taste or age range. Sure, regular folk had Social Security. But aging celebs had *The Love Boat*. (Now, I guess they have *Dancing With The Stars*.)

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Michael Giltz *I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz* 4 fans [permalink](#)

Thanks everyone for weighing in. Clearly, there is NO definitive Marple yet, as made clear by the comments. I am penalizing the excellent actress McEwan for being saddled with a string of movies that were very weak -- frantic editing, ridiculous flashbacks to Marple in love and so on -- that have nothing to do with her actual performance. But saddled she was. I agree with those who claim the Christie books are thin on character compared to some of the great detective novelists working today, but the detectives themselves are certainly memorable as Suchet proved with Poirot. I think the truly great modern Marple is still waiting to appear.

Reply Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 03:37 PM on 08/17/2009

QuietAmerican *I'm a Fan of QuietAmerican* 11 fans [permalink](#)

In my book, Joan Hickson was to Miss Marple what Jeremy Brett was to Sherlock Holmes - definitive indeed.

Watching the Geraldine McEwan episodes, I could only think -- what were the director and editors thinking? I loved her work in "Mulberry," but the jarring music-video-type editing of McEwan's Marple episodes never seemed to give her a chance to get her bearings as Miss Marple -- the production style was completely out of character for what was supposed to be a slower-paced time than our Twitter-based society. It was as though the directors and editors themselves were impatient with their own creation and wanted to rush each story through to its conclusion before they themselves fell asleep.

Thank goodness they've slowed down a bit for this latest Marple incarnation (and I am a fan of Julie McKenzie), still - Joan Hickson owns it.

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margo152 *I'm a Fan of margo152* [permalink](#)

A vote for Margaret Rutherford. Oh that's right Margaret is not with us any more. But someone like Margaret would be great. The new Miss Marple has hit a real high for being BORING! The last one was best described as a fragile Miss Marple.

Reply Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 01:29 PM on 08/09/2009

wm1066 *I'm a Fan of wm1066* 22 fans [permalink](#)

I loved Geraldene McEwan, she was great! This latest person on PBS is NOT the Miss

Marple I envision. But then if you thought Rutherford, with her slapstick humor, was a great Miss Marple there is no use talking to you Michael.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 03:15 PM on 08/07/2009

[Sleepyjohns](#) *I'm a Fan of Sleepyjohns* 2 fans [permalink](#)

Co-sign on Margaret Rutherford.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 03:31 PM on 08/07/2009

[Blissable](#) *I'm a Fan of Blissable* [permalink](#)

Margaret Rutherford slapstick? Rutherford took herself and the role very, very seriously. It was her big disappointment in life that no-one else did. Say what you will about her Miss Marple, (Christie herself was none too keen on it) but slapstick it most definitely was not. Poor Margaret would be spinning in her grave.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 04:38 PM on 08/07/2009

[wm1066](#) *I'm a Fan of wm1066* 22 fans [permalink](#)

Maybe slapstick was too strong a word for you, but if you watched those productions they had a hokey soundtrack that evoked humor that was out of character for a murder mystery.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 03:17 PM on 08/08/2009

[Sleepyjohns](#) *I'm a Fan of Sleepyjohns* 2 fans [permalink](#)

Joan Hickson and Geraldine McEwan were spot on Marples. I find it odd that your characterization of McEwan's work in the role as a "flop" has to do with a fictive addition developed by the writers rather than a real critique of her take on Jane Marple. Odd and insulting. While Hickson nailed the 'I've seen everything of the world from my garden' and gave the character compelling sagacity, McEwan's twinkling-eye and impish smile further fleshed out this beloved character. Just watch McEwan and John Hanna interact in The 4.50 From Paddington; watching them together makes the whole film worth it.

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[3reddogs](#) *I'm a Fan of 3reddogs* 2 fans [permalink](#)

Sorry, but if you had actually read any of Agatha Christie's "Miss Marple" books you'd know that Hickson's and McEwan's portrayals (stature, mannerisms, etc) come a lot closer to Jane Marple than Julia McKenzie's robust stature, bland personality, and totally uninspired performances.

That said, I think we agree that no one (Robert Downey, Jr. included) will ever match Jeremy Brett's take on Sherlock Holmes. Two different actors played Dr. Watson but, let's face it, you're so riveted by Brett's screen presence that you barely notice Watson :-)

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 01:57 PM on 08/07/2009

[sallythewerewolf](#) *I'm a Fan of sallythewerewolf* 4 fans [permalink](#)

Didn't Helen Hayes play Miss Marple once?

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[rzan1](#) *I'm a Fan of rzan1* 27 fans [permalink](#)

Geraldine McEwan was totally delightful as Miss Marple and brought a bit more depth to the character. You are wrong in your assessment.

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[countfloyd](#) *I'm a Fan of countfloyd* 3 fans [permalink](#)

"They've started from scratch (again) because they know mystery buffs will line up and watch anything with stately homes, British accents...and murder."

I will watch a mystery where you can't figure out who did it in the first 30 seconds, are well written and feature really good actors in the lead. That eliminates almost all american cop shows.

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[Ponderus](#) *I'm a Fan of Ponderus* 165 fans [permalink](#)

Geraldine McEwan brought something almost unrecognizable to the paper thin "characters" is

Christieland: recognizable humanity. Maybe that's what threw you off, Mr. Giltz. She went deeper than any of the Marples before her -- and McKenzie continues in this vein with her unshockable, subtly worldly, coolly amused -- but morally adamant -- take on Miss M.

You're just mistaken -- and wrong.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 12:01 AM on 08/07/2009

[Rocket Age Magician](#) *I'm a Fan of Rocket Age Magician* [permalink](#)

Sorry, Michael, but we can't ALL agree that Geraldine McEwan's tenure as Miss Marple was a flop. It certainly wasn't business-wise, her three series did extremely well in England and were very popular. In the NY Times and SF Chronicle reviews of the McKenzie series, both hold McEwan up as the gold standard Marple, one proclaiming Joan Hickson "icy," and the other a bore. Hickson was for some tastes, but not all. David Suchet is the definitive Poirot, but there simply isn't one for Marple, and all the contenders, including Lansbury, Rutherford, Hickson, McEwan, and now McKenzie (for that matter, even Gracie Fields from her one appearance) have a claim to the old busybody's knitting needles.

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[sexyrexy](#) *I'm a Fan of sexyrexy* [9 fans](#) [permalink](#)

let's not forget Albert Finney as Poirot in MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS. loved the costumes..

love McEwan generally but not as Marple.

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[NHBill](#) *I'm a Fan of NHBill* [8 fans](#) [permalink](#)

Finney is great in almost everything, but his Poirot was a unforgettable.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 09:02 AM on 08/07/2009

[wm1066](#) *I'm a Fan of wm1066* [22 fans](#) [permalink](#)

David Suchet seems lost without Hastings!

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[3reddogs](#) *I'm a Fan of 3reddogs* [2 fans](#) [permalink](#)

I miss Hastings too. Hard to believe Suchet's been doing Poirot for 20 years!! Also bummed that there's only going to be two Poirots this time around - Cat Among the Pigeons and Mrs. McGinty's Dead. Maybe Hastings will show up to exclaim over Mrs. McGinty's carcass :-)

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[sexyrexy](#) *I'm a Fan of sexyrexy* [9 fans](#) [permalink](#)

true about Jeremy Brett as the definitive Holmes.. and I personally feel the same way about Joan Hickson.. she spoilt Miss Marple for me.

Angelea Lansbury played her in MIRROR CRACK'ED.. and now it Julia's Mc Kenzie.. not the same.. Miss Hickson it is.

by the way-- I had the good fortune to meet Agatha Christie's daughter with her husband on set of Inspector Poirot.. I had such a big kick out of it..

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 05:08 PM on 08/05/2009

[NHBill](#) *I'm a Fan of NHBill* [8 fans](#) [permalink](#)

I think Brett benefited from more modern sensibilities and greater production values than Rathbone. But ole Basil left an indelible mark.

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