

DVDs: (Not The End Of) 'The Affair;' A Gorgeous 'Flamenco, Flamenco' And More

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No, no no! Streaming is so easy! Video on demand is so tempting! But STOP! Don't just watch that dumb movie you spot on your TV screen just because you remember the TV ads that ran four months ago and wasn't there a funny joke or two in it? I mean, you KNOW all the best jokes were in the trailer and about the best you heard was "it was pretty good" (translation: it didn't suck completely) and yet instead of seeking out a classic film or something off the beaten path you're gonna click on that comedy where the best you can hope for is that it won't suck. So don't. Literally the entire world of cinema and classic TV is at your beck and call via Netflix DVDs and on-demand and online retailers. RedBox and its lowest common denominator selection is the devil! Here are some bold new releases worth your time, some that aren't and a plea to be smarter. Your time is too precious to waste on stuff that might not suck.

THE AFFAIR SEASON ONE (\$39.98 DVD; Paramount/Showtime)

THE CASUAL VACANCY (\$29.97 BluRay; Warner Home Video)

THE COMEBACK: LIMITED SERIES (\$19.98 DVD; HBO) --

So in season one of The Affair -- wait, there's going to be a season two? That's just one of the twists in what was originally presented as a straightforward miniseries about a teacher having an affair with a waitress. It's another stand-out work from Showtime, which can hold its head high compared to HBO with work like this. The excellent cast -- Maura Tierney, good ole Joshua Jackson, and Ruth West -- is led by the marvelous Dominic West. He's now starred in three successful TV shows. The Wire is of course a stone cold classic. The Hour was a fun soapy UK show that would have fulfilled its full potential with another season or two set of its story set behind the scenes of a 60 Minutes style British TV series back in the day. And now The Affair. He's a superlative actor and a TV star of the first order and here's more proof.

I certainly don't expect The Casual Vacancy to return. It's an honest-to-goodness miniseries based on the novel by JK Rowling about the seamy underside of British small town life. If nothing else, it's not very good, despite talent like Michael Gambon involved. Even the cover image is tacky. Rowling was perhaps too determined to shed her Harry Potter image with this novel. I think it's better than its reputation (low bar, that) but the miniseries emphasized all of the novel's worst qualities like its too nail-on-the-head indictment of things everyone would indict anyway and the expose of small-town folk that became cliché with Peyton Place. Rowling's inspiration is surely headier stuff and her writing is better than her targets deserve.

And I certainly DIDN'T expect Lisa Kudrow's The Comeback to make a comeback. Eight new episodes that don't try and repeat the awkward charm of her 2005 sitcom but actually build on it? I wouldn't put it in the company of The Office (UK) by a country mile but both shows used their second season to enrich the characters to an unexpected degree. The meta-amusement of Kudrow's show (like Matt LeBlanc's Episodes on Showtime) is of course the self-referential nature of a star from Friends playing a woman from a hit show trying to make a comeback. It's much better than such minor irony. And while it's exactly the sort of show that will always be a cult favorite for some, actors especially will be savoring it for years to come.

FLAMENCO, FLAMENCO (\$29.95 DVD; Music Box Films)

Sometimes lightning can strike twice. Director Carlos Saura has devoted much of his career to capturing the arts on film, specifically dance and opera and music of all sorts. In 1995, he delivered the capstone to his career: *Flamenco*. Elegantly simple yet refined, it created a magical space inside a giant warehouse/film set. He brought together the world's greatest flamenco singers, dancers and musicians and captured them doing their stuff. Cinematographer Vittorio Storaro delivered ravishing imagery and abstract backdrops of solid colors and lighting subtly evoked the passage of time from dusk to nighttime to the next morning. It's a masterpiece. Fifteen years later Saura tried to do the same thing again with *Flamenco, Flamenco*. That's not a good idea, I mean how can you...oh wait, this sequel or extension or companion piece or whatever you call it is absolutely a worthy partner to the original. Slight changes have been introduced: instead of abstract backdrops we now have painted landscapes or movie posters dotting the stage or fantastic artwork blown up to huge proportions or mirrors and the like. No matter; the result is the same. Brilliant artists deliver riveting performances of flamenco music. Sometimes you have a dancer alone on a stage; sometimes three men sitting around a small table, with two of them providing percussion by rapping on the wood while the third sings; sometimes a large group filled with instrumentalists and singers and dancers all together. It's all marvelous (except perhaps for the very first song, the only performance I didn't absolutely love) from the small boy who danced his ass off to the mature woman who was utterly compelling even when just walking off the stage. Anyone who cares a whit about world music or dance or concert films or movies in general should see these two films. And anyone who wants to learn how to capture a live performance, this is how it's done. Can't wait for *Flamenco, Flamenco, Flamenco!*

NOTE: I remain astonished that some enterprising producer hasn't worked with Saura to get the stage rights to this series. Beg and plead and cajole a passel of these artists to come to Broadway and you'd have a sensation to rival Tango Argentina.

HOT PURSUIT (\$35.99 BluRay; Warner Home Video)

INSURGENT (\$35.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

You knew I'd get to the bad stuff, right? *Hot Pursuit* is exactly the sort of film you shouldn't rent or buy or stream. Do you know anyone who's seen it? Maybe. Did they love it? No. Did any of them say it was "kind of funny" or "not bad"? Maybe, but why out of all the films made in history that you haven't seen would that be enough to make you watch this. Hey, I love Reese Witherspoon. Everyone loves Reese Witherspoon. I'll bet even her exes have nothing but nice things to say about Reese Witherspoon. And Reese Witherspoon has good taste! But that doesn't mean you should go see absolutely everything she's made, not when the buzz tells you this is most definitely not worth your time. So for heaven's sake....

Is *Insurgent* another example of a waste of your time? Not exactly. I didn't like the books *The Divergent* movies are based on. I didn't like the first movie. It's definitely a poor man's *Hunger Games*. (Or should I say poor woman's, in honor of the writers and stars?) But still, if you actually saw the first movie and actually intend to see the final movie (or dear god, the final two movies since they turned the third book into two features), well maybe this one is worth your time. Among the fans, they actually seemed to like it more. Plus it's got more action. So if you must, BluRaying or streaming or VODing this and movie three before heading to the theater before *Allegiant Part 2* in 2017 is smart economics. I'd still prefer you watch something honest to god good instead but I've no objection to junk food as such.

ORPHAN BLACK SEASON 3 (\$34.98 BluRay; BBC Home Entertainment)

HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER SEASON ONE (\$39.99 DVD; ABC/Walt Disney Studios)

STRIKE BACK COMPLETE THIRD SEASON (\$39.98 BluRay; HBO)

Speaking of junk food, the thinking person's TV junk food is definitely *Orphan Black*. This sci-fi, cloning mystery wrapped in a puzzle and worm-holed into an engima began as the cat's meow. Everyone over-praised it in my estimation. Most of all they loved the lead performance by Tatiana Maslany, who has finally earned the Emmy nomination she so richly deserves. I'd say the ONLY reason to watch is the performance of Maslany and with

two lesser seasons that have left all but the most ardent a little disappointed (and really, some people remained faithful even to *Lost*, so someone always will), well, the praise has come back down to earth. Now it can be enjoyed for what it is: utter, sometimes enjoyable nonsense.

How To Get Away With Murder has the same popcorn appeal. It's a convoluted, almost absurd TV show with season long arcs and self-contained mysteries in certain episodes all as a metaphor or more accurately a simply outlandish example of doing anything to get ahead in college and in life. It's held together by Viola Davis's nuanced, strong and just plain fun portrayal of the smartest person in the room. Still, she's gonna need some new interns for season two. This is hard work!

Strike Back has no pretense to greatness which ultimately makes it a better, more satisfying series than either *Orphan Black* or *How To Get Away With Murder*: it's never threatening to topple over due to a series of increasingly shaky plot twists and turns. Secret government organizations, terrorists, biological weapons, international intrigue, strike forces in deep cover operating in hostile territory -- what's not to like? Any season can probably be enjoyed on its own as *Section 20* focuses on some new threat. The fifth and final season just started on Cinemax so dive in one way or another. Sullivan Stapleton is a strapping lead and if you start at #5, you'll be sure to work your way back to the start. Start at season one (UK one, that is; look it up) and you'll work your way forward.

NIGHT AND THE CITY (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion)

Film buffs like myself often make a common mistake: we assume you've seen *Casablanca* and *The Philadelphia Story* and *Red River* and *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*. I mean, hasn't everyone seen those masterpieces? Well, no. We're on slightly safer ground with bleak, noir classics like *Night And The City*. Serious film buffs and people of a certain age have seen *Night And The City*. It's a masterpiece, after all, telling the story of a loser trying to carve out a slice of the London wrestling market, failing miserably and paying the price. Everyone is dirty here and the law barely a factor as the not-so-good guy gets his comeuppance from the really-not-good guys and it all ends badly. Bleak? Wonderfully so because nothing ages well like cynicism and *Night And The City* by director Jules Dassin has it in spades. It's beautifully shot and terrifically well-acted and a tonic. Feeling bummed about life? *Night And The City* will prove you have damn good reason. Feeling good about life? What better spice than a great work of art that takes pessimism to new levels of profundity? Criterion can be trusted to do right by this film and they do with a terrific new remastering. They present the preferred American version along with the more upbeat UK version and its peppier score. It's merely a curio since the American cut is clearly preferred (that doesn't happen often). You also get scholars and Dassin weighing in on the film which has gone from casually dismissed to being considered one of the greats. Besides, if you watch MMA or the hijinks of pro wrestling, this is a fascinating glimpse into an earlier era of that sport/pastime.

SEASHORE (\$24.95 DVD; Wolfe Video)

To cap off this week, here's a great example of a little seen gem. It's the sort of movie you have to read or hear about; it's probably not going to pop up in the recommendations list of your Netflix or Amazon account..unless you're a big fan of *Wild Reeds* and *Summer Storm* in which case even the most clueless algorithm should summon up the sense to say, how about *Seashore*? Let's not go overboard: this is a solid, good Brazilian drama about two young men who head to the seashore to hang out at the one guy's beach home while he deals with some business for his dad. Tomaz (Mauricio Barcellos) is the friend, a beautiful, sensitive lad who is always drawing in his sketch pad. Martin (Mateus Almada) is his less good-looking, slightly indifferent pal and thus an unspoken object of desire for Tomaz. It's a quiet film, with most of the action of the very expected but somehow compelling sort: they goof off in the abandoned seaside town (it's winter); they try to get into a bar; they invite friends over and end up playing truth or dare and so on. Nothing remarkable. But after the sensory overload of most films, it's a pleasure to see a confident, low-key movie like this. It's co-written and co-directed by Filipe Matzembacher and Marcio Reolon with assurance. In classic foreign film style, sometimes a straightforward

scene is initially puzzling simply because it hasn't been bluntly spelled out to us the way an American film would: in this case, it's a scene where Martin heads to the home of his late grandfather to pick up a document of some sort. Everyone there -- tenants, caretakers? -- is hostile and he's deeply uncomfortable. Slowly we realize what's going on but though the information about who they were didn't need to be withheld, it doesn't feel like an unfair stunt. With Tomaz as our eyes and ears (mostly), if Martin doesn't spell things out to him, why should we be any wiser? Turns out the film is not about the coming of age of Tomaz but really about Martin. His change over this brief trip is modest but convincing and quite moving. It's the feature debut for the directors and an early acting credit for our two leads. Maybe we'll be hearing a lot more about them in years to come (I certainly want to see more of the directors and Barcellos. Also, on the tech side the cinematography of João Gabriel de Queiroz was excellent; he's certainly one to watch too.) Maybe this was a lucky accident and Seashore will simply be added to the list of worthwhile gay(ish) coming of age films like *Another Country* and *Summer Storm* and *Wild Reeds*. In any case, fans of gay movies or world cinema should know this film -- unlike the latest random Hollywood product that just happens to be hitting stores whenever you're looking for a movie to watch -- is definitely worth their time.

NOTE: Prices and format are strictly based on what is made available to me for review. If they give me a DVD, that's the format and list price I include. Needless to say, every title here is often available in multiple disc formats not to mention on demand and via streaming so the list price included is virtually never what you'll pay and the format is always just one of many ways for seeing the work reviewed.

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