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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted March 13, 2009 | 04:18 PM (EST)

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DVDs -- Pinocchio Looks Better Than Ever



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PLEASE, BLUE FAIRY. MAKE ME A REAL BOY

-- Walt Disney's Pinocchio is one of the crown jewels in the classic Disney canon and rightly so -- it's beautifully hand-drawn, filled with wit and charm (albeit in a story that considerably softens the satirical tone of the original novel) and taps into some elemental fears and desires. Is there a scarier transmorgification than the scene on Pleasure Island where Pinocchio and other boys get to go

on a rampage of smoking and fighting and smashing only to literally turn into asses? And it's nearly equaled by the attack of Monstro the whale. All of it is leavened by Pinocchio, a little puppet who is lulled or teased into trouble and can't see why he should tell the truth when a perfectly good lie is always on the tip of his tongue. A standard two DVD set costs \$29.99 and a BluRay combo pack costs \$34.99, but it also includes a standard DVD of the movie. (Both look just stunning.) That's perfect for parents who have a BluRay player in their living room but not in the kids' room or perhaps in the car for road trips where portable DVDs are so popular. Even better would be if they included a digital copy of the movie, made the whole thing \$29.99 and eliminated the standard DVD-only set. People could just buy the movie and get three different versions of it to watch on whatever platform they wanted. Released in 1940, Pinocchio came out one year after *Max Fleischer's Gulliver's Travels* (\$14.98; E1 Entertainment), an animated film that has long been in Disney's shadow, and rightly so. The animation is quite a bit softer and less precise, even in this nicely restored edition that greatly improves on the prints that have been circulating for years. *Pinocchio* is a movie; *Gulliver* feels like a cartoon. But for animation buffs, it's nice to see this film looking better than ever. I didn't get a copy of the BluRay version, but on Amazon, the sale price is 50 cents LOWER than the regular DVD, which is great to see. If you want to see a film that builds on the legacy of Disney by being true to itself, I can't recommend highly enough *The Prince's Quest* (\$19.98; Weinstein/Genius), known simply as *Azur & Asmar* when it was briefly released in select cities. This gorgeous French film tells a Persian myth about a noble-born boy and his best friend,

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the son of a nurse, who band together to rescue a fairy. In an echo of Persian art, the characters are often seen in profile. Further, the backgrounds are often static -- but the backgrounds are even more often stunningly detailed interiors that capture the beauty of Persian art and tile design that are so marvelous to look at it takes you breath away. Really, a delightful film.

PAUL RUDD: MOVIE STAR -- It happened quietly, but I couldn't be more pleased: **Paul Rudd** is a movie star. He's been a stellar talk show guest for years, whether charming David Letterman or dancing with Jon Stewart. He's had a major role in a string of terrific movies, dating back to *Clueless* all the way to *Knocked Up*. And now suddenly, he's the man: the lead in successful comedies like *Role Models* (Universal; \$29.98), a typical goof with Rudd and Sean William Scott as power drink pushers who have to do community service that was a strong box office hit; and *I Love You, Man* (opening Friday) with Rudd as a sad sack guy trying to find a male friend so he can have a Best Man at his wedding. Throw in voice-over work on the blockbuster-looking animated flick *Monsters Vs. Aliens* (opening March 27), and a clutch of upcoming projects like a caveman comedy with Jack Black and a James L. Brooks project and Rudd is on top of the world. In fact, he's appeared in movies that have **grossed just about \$1 billion in the US alone** and \$1.6 billion worldwide.

He's been charming ever since that breakout role in *Clueless* (hey, if he were your (step) brother, wouldn't you make out with him too?), including notable TV stints on *Friends* and *Reno 911*, as well as cult faves like *Wet Hot American Summer* and the solid hit but still under-appreciated *Anchorman*.

Frankly, I'm besotted with the guy, who turns 40 on April 6 but still looks almost the same as he did in *Clueless* 14 years ago. (Do he and Dick Clark have the same deal with the devil?) He's shown greater range on stage, but in movies Rudd has been mostly limited to comedies, which clearly he has a flair for. Still, it would be nice to see if he could have the range of a Cary Grant and sink his teeth into at least romantic *dramas* if not even weightier fare instead of just wise-cracking comedies. Clearly, Paul Rudd has the talent and the fan base. All he needs is some smart director to realize how much bigger a star Rudd could be.

So what's your favorite Paul Rudd movie and do you think he could branch out into dramatic acting?

P.S. I started writing this last Friday and just saw the **New York Times had a feature profile of Rudd with the same angle here.**

THE LAST LAUGH -- Surely that's being had by F.W. Murnau, whose stature keeps rising as his movies are restored. Hot on the heels of the gigantic boxed set *Murnau, Borsage and Fox* comes this 6 DVD set *Murnau* (\$99.95; Kino) with exemplary renditions of classics like *Faust* (a new edition), previously released *Nosferatu*, *The Last Laugh* and *Tartuffe* plus two new films *The Haunted Castle* and a romantic comedy (!) *The Finances Of The Grand Duke*. Why *Tabu* isn't included is a mystery probably explained by rights lapsing or some such thing. If you don't own any, this is essential and you can be certain that all of the titles are lovingly restored and offered with bountiful extras. I can't quite wrap my head around a romance by Murnau, but the "old dark house" genre of *The Haunted Castle* is a natural for him and I've never seen his *Faust*. If you bought earlier Murnau boxed sets, rest assured that those three are also available on their own.

GOT MILK? -- I'm looking forward to giving Gus Van Sant's solidly conventional, well-acted drama about Harvey Milk (\$29.98; Universal) another chance. I enjoyed it but rewatching the classic documentary about the same story just before seeing the film didn't do it any favors. In every way, the documentary was superior and indeed the most powerful moments of the film were footage taken from the era of San Francisco in the 70s when Milk fought for basic civil rights for gays. Penn is very good and has nice chemistry with James Franco but I was delighted to see Lucas Grabeel of *High School Musical* in a small role and thought Emile Hirsch stole the show as a volunteer always ready to volunteer for a little one-on-one with anyone and everyone. The extras are quite modest, which is a shame for a film that took so many years to get to the screen and features such great craftsmanship.

THE GOOD DOCTOR -- You never forget your first Doctor and mine was Tom Baker, arguably the definitive Doctor Who until David Tennant put his stamp on the role of the time-traveling busybody in recent years. Baker held sway from 1974 to 1981 and while I've been clamoring for

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years that they do the obvious and release boxed sets devoted to the entire run of each Doctor, I must admit that *Doctor Who: The Key To Time Special Edition* (\$99.98; BBC America) comes close -- it presents an entire season, which just happens to be one long story arc. A similar set was released (at a lower price) in 2002, but this one is jam-packed with all the extras of that one plus many more, including making-of documentaries. Family viewing is probably damning with faint praise but that's exactly what this is.

THOSE FR%#@ING KIDS -- I'm relieved to say that *South Park: The Complete Twelfth Season* (\$49.99 on regular DVD and a too-high \$69.99 on BluRay; Paramount) is NOT sheer delight from beginning to end. Why am I glad it's not great from start to finish? Because I've been enjoying this show so much for the past four or five seasons (when it really became a great, great sitcom) that I'd feared I'd lost the ability to critique it impartially. In fact, I hadn't just lost my mind -- the last four seasons have been superlative. This season is merely good. Actually, make that very good. The *Heavy Metal* spoof is a bit drawn out and the two-part Pandemic (with giant guinea pigs trashing the town and pan flute bands the secret to destroying them) is tiresome in the extreme, but otherwise it's a solid season, from the day the internet goes down (creating a Mad Max-like future) to Canada On Strike, which has one of their patented musical numbers. When oh when will they make another feature-length musical?

CRITERION TREASURES -- Criterion continues to mine cinema history for lost treasures. Akira Kurosawa is perhaps the most Western of Japanese directors and almost certainly the most popular one over here. But I still have nooks and crannies of his work to explore. Best known for his period samurai epics, Kurosawa also delivered acclaimed films like *Dodes'ka-den*, a 1970 film -- his first in color -- about down and outers on the fringes of Tokyo. A 30 minute documentary talks about the making of the film and there's a substantial new essay by film historian Stephen Prince and one of Kurosawa's collaborators. But while Kurosawa is very well known here, Hiroshi Shimizu is virtually unknown, something that should change with the release of *Travels With Hiroshi Shimizu* (\$59.95; Eclipse), a four movie set covering movies from the 30s and 40s that also focus on the marginalized and the working class.

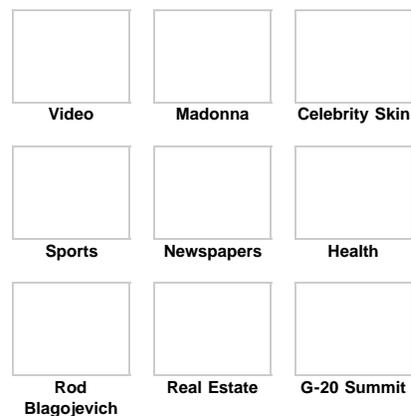
HAGRID FIGHTS CRIME -- For heaven's sake, keep the kiddies away from *Cracker: The Complete Collection* (\$119.99; Acorn). Yes, it stars Robbie Coltrane but the boozing, whoring and gambling criminologist Cracker (brilliant at his job, dismissive of his colleagues, mess of a home life -- in short, the typical British crime fighter) couldn't be more different from the Hogwarts fellow. This set contains all 11 of the feature-length mysteries from the show's run, which blessedly ended before Cracker could turn into a caricature, the way Jane Tennison threatened to do. Great stuff and a nicely compact set, but awfully expensive for a 13 year old series that was never a huge hit in the US anyway.

ESCAPE TO THE ORIGINAL WITCH MOUNTAIN -- The Number One movie of the week is *Race To Witch Mountain*. But I can't handle the idea of substituting kindly Eddie Albert with The Rock, even if he has made a string of family films. So why not check out the gentle original from 1975, whose special effects seemed so nifty at the time. (Heck, I was even excited by the scene where the kids sat in bed and communicated with each other...telepathically!) You knew the brother was going to be prey to bad influences in the sequel *Return From Witch Mountain* (\$19.99 each; Disney) because he was wearing a horrible turtleneck and in general the very modest magic had gone. But you can never go wrong with a story where kids feel special and misunderstood. I asked my sister the night after seeing the first movie if we should try to speak to each other telepathically when we went to bed and she told me I was a loser. But she cheated by saying it out loud. Fine for the very young.

LOVEJOY'S DISTANT COUSIN -- In the very small subgenre of mystery series revolving around the art world, you can add *The Baron* (\$59.98; Koch) to the list (which I think includes Lovejoy and precious little else). One of an endless string of interchangeable British action series, *The Baron* was the first live action UK show that premiered in color and starred a Texan who fought crime with his handsome assistant until American networks said "Give us a broad" and they dumped the guy in favor of a glamorous female sidekick. You get the entire 30 episode series which is fine but will appeal mostly to those who are already fans of the show.

BLUE EYES -- The death of Paul Newman means the usual flood of releases and tributes, but naturally an actor who worked steadily for decades can't have made ALL good movies. *The Silver Chalice* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.) was a plodding Biblical epic and the first showcase for Newman, who loved to make fun of the film. Indeed, it's a strange, miserable little movie, with the sets either bizarrely stylized (the outdoor scenes look like leftovers from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* or maybe the

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dream sequences from Hitchcock's *Spellbound*) or in the case of the interior scenes cavernous and echoing to a ludicrous degree. *The Helen Morgan Story* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.) was a little better thanks to the great director Michael Curtiz, but Newman is still a boy toy. *When Time Ran Out* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.) was a Seventies disaster movie trading on the success of *The Towering Inferno* and *The Outrage* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.) is an oddball western costarring Laurence Harvey where Newman plays (gulp) a Mexican. But fans can treasure *Rachel Rachel* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.), in which Newman made his fine directorial debut and provided a great showcase for his brilliant wife, Joanne Woodward.

BLURAY -- *Let The Right One In* (\$34.98; Magnolia) is a Swedish vampire flick that genuinely deserves the moniker of cult hit after playing in theaters for months and months. Plus, on sale it's only \$1 more than the regular DVD. *Vanishing Point* (\$34.98; Fox) is the 1971 car chase flick about a guy traveling from Denver to San Francisco in 15 hours that's a classic cult film in its own right. Maybe B movies shouldn't be spruced up but it deserves to be seen in all its seedy glory and this edition contains both the US and UK versions plus other extras. Too bad in this case the BluRay is an absurd \$25 more than the regular DVD and even \$16 more when on sale at Amazon. Jonathan Demme enjoyed a modest comeback with *Rachel Getting Married* (\$39.95; Sony). It didn't make a lot of money but is probably his best well-reviewed feature film since *Philadelphia* in 1993 and scored Anne Hathaway an Oscar nod. It's an unfortunate \$11 more than the regular DVD and \$7 more on sale on Amazon. Finally, there's *Primal Fear* (\$29.99; Paramount), a B movie crime thriller which immediately made Edward Norton a name to watch. It's almost twice as expensive as the regular DVD. Studios need to lower BluRay prices unless they want this positive tweak of DVDs to crash and burn immediately.

THE MEN OF THE 12TH PRECINCT -- For years, if you asked cops which TV show got it right, it was never *Hill Street Blues* or *Kojak* or *NYPD Blue* and probably wouldn't be upcoming *Southland*. The answer was always *Barney Miller*. The mundane duties, the "regulars" among the people you dealt with, the camaraderie of the men and women in blue -- Barney Miller got it just right. *Barney Miller Complete Third Season* (\$29.95; Sony) catches the show at a peak, just before Abe Vigoda would leave for his spin-off. Among the terrific episodes is the cast's personal favorite, the one where they all accidentally eat funny brownies and get stoned. One of the all time greats.

FINALLY --

The Boy In The Striped Pajamas (\$29.99; Miramax) -- A heart-tugging Holocaust drama, which is not exactly a phrase that belongs together.

Dear Zachary (\$29.99; Oscilloscope) -- A hard-to-believe documentary about a woman who apparently murders her husband and then seeks custody of the son she was carrying when allegedly committing the crime. The sort of tale that makes work easy for the folks on Law & Order.

SpongeBob Vs. The Big One (\$19.99; Paramount) 90 minutes of nerdy fun, including Johnny Depp doing the voice of Jack Kahuna Laguna.

The Starter Wife Season One (\$34.98; Universal) -- Debra Messing proves conclusively she's not a one-hit wonder with this miniseries turned hit TV show about a dumped woman in Hollywood.

Howard The Duck (\$14.98; Universal) -- Sadly, NOT a cult favorite or a reviled film that deserves a new look. Just a very, very bad movie that retroactively ruined the reputation of the comic it's based on. George Lucas's biggest folly until *Star Wars Episodes 1-3*.

L'Innocente (\$24.98; Koch) -- One of Visconti's less convincing period epics, this one set in the 1800s where a wealthy man cheats on his wife but is infuriated to discover she's cheating on him as well.

Crowley (\$26.97; Anchor Bay) -- Simon Callow gloriously hams it up as "the Wickedest Man In The World," Aleister Crowley, whose soul takes over the body of a college professor prompting a lot of extracurricular activity for his more nubile students.

The Librarian: Curse Of The Judas Chalice (\$24.96; Sony) -- ER may be coming to an end but Noah Wyle can take comfort in this TV movie franchise where he plays Flynn Carson, librarian by day and vampire hunter/adventurer by night.

Transporter 3 Special Edition (\$34.98; Lionsgate) -- Once to the well too often for this simple-minded series about a "transporter." Star Jason Statham had a much better time this year with *The Bank Job* (\$19.98; Lionsgate).

Hotel Babylon Season 3 (\$39.98; BBC Video) -- The Brits can do some brilliant comedy and great period miniseries, but the US still kicks their butt when it comes to trashy soaps like this one, a spin on the old *Hotel* series. The staff never seems quite sexy enough and the tawdry goings-on not quite tawdry enough. Still, better than that low-rent show about flight attendants.

Head Case Season 1 (\$19.97; Anchor Bay) -- A would-be "outrageous" series about a therapist for celebrities with an oddball staff (including a one-armed assistant) and a parade of celeb guests who parody themselves. This ain't no Garry Shandling, but it is nice to see Steve Landesberg of *Barney Miller* back in action.

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