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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted February 6, 2009 | 05:18 PM (EST)

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DVDs -- Practically Perfect Mary Poppins



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Two weeks of DVDs to cover, so hold on.

PRACTICALLY PERFECT MARY POPPINS

-- The current Broadway hit Mary Poppins does a good job of joining the marginally darker tone of the books by P.L. Travers with the movie musical starring Julie Andrews in her Oscar-winning role as the "practically perfect" nanny. Only a treacly new song at the very end of the show about following rainbows or some such thing steps wrong -- in any case, the show is well worth seeing (with a nicely scary passage about toys

putting children on trial). A look at the making of that show is the main new feature on Mary Poppins 45th Anniversary Edition (\$29.99; Disney), which is a surprisingly long 139 minutes, though you'd never know it when watching. The last film Walt oversaw, it's a winning blend of live action and animation and thoroughly delightful from Dick Van Dyke's legendarily awful Cockney accent (part of the movie's winking charm) to Andrews, who was cheated out of starring in the film adaptation of My Fair Lady (a travesty) but is so good here that star and role simply merge into one. But this is a musical and as such it's the masterpiece of the Sherman Brothers, who also delivered a great score to the late period Disney animated flick The Jungle Book. We know the hits: "A Spoonful Of Sugar," "Feed The Birds," "Chim Chim-Er-Ree," "Stay Awake," the lesser tunes "Let's Go Fly A Kite" and "Jolly Holiday," the dance number "Step In Time" and of course "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." But even passing tunes are winners: "Sister Suffragette" is a winner and for a primer on how the money you deposit in a bank is put to work, you simply can't do better than "Fidelity Fiduciary Bank." (Go here to see Dick Van Dyke deliver it winningly.) Very few musicals created directly for the screen can match this gem.

So which Julie Andrews movie is your favorite? Mary Poppins? The Sound Of Music? I'd take Victor/Victoria myself.

THE DOCUMENTARY OF THE YEAR -- Full disclosure: I actually know the director of

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Roman Polanski: Wanted And Desired (\$27.98; Think Film/Image). Her name's Marina Zenovich and I met her at Cannes where she returned year after year while working on a documentary about Polanski but which didn't include an interview with him. Odd, I thought. We're not buddies; she's just someone I know well enough to be anxious when I finally saw the film. Would it be good enough for me to find something genuine and polite to say about it? (That's the worst thing about people you know who write books or plays or record albums or make movies or star in a show -- you have to talk to them about it and God help you if you have to struggle to say something nice. It's a nightmare.) The film was not a career overview but focused on the sensational scandal that turned Polanski into an exile unable to return to America: he was accused of unlawful sexual intercourse with a young girl. I thought I knew the story: somehow, I'd received the impression that it was statutory rape but that the minor was "willing" (though legally, one can't be). The movie spoke to most everyone involved who was still alive and painted a far bleaker picture. Polanski, to me, came across far less sympathetically even though the film treated him fairly. He was a predatory fellow who invariably seduced young women and girls throughout his life. The girl had long since forgiven him and moved on but never pretends in this, her first interview since the crime, that it was all fun and games. (You can't help condemning her mother as much as Polanski.) But the scandal wasn't just Polanski's actions but the absurd behavior of the presiding judge, which turned a crime for which Polanski should have long since paid his dues into a decades-long travesty. In short, Zenovich details a fascinating bit of Hollywood history so thoroughly and digs up enough new information that the film made headlines, reopened the case (which has a new court date as both the California courts and Polanski jockey on the terms) and both lays out the facts against the director AND the court system that failed the young girl miserably. It's gripping, funny and a model of fairness that doesn't confuse that standard with some sort of artificial balance. Bizarrely, some reviewers thought Zenovich was attempting to downplay Polanski's actions but detailing the insane behavior of the legal system doesn't change the facts of what he did one iota. And no one has told that story better than she does. So imagine my reaction to seeing the film: I went from relief over the fact that it didn't suck (thank God I'd be able to say something nice) to a growing realization that it was REALLY good to a wonderful tinge of jealousy over how good it really was. Naturally, the Oscars continued their bizarre pattern of ignoring top-flight documentaries (a track record that has improved slightly in the last few years) and ignored this film along with the animated *Waltz With Bashir*. That just puts it in the company of other great documentaries, right where it belongs.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH -- With Barack Obama as President, the idea of focusing on African American issues just for one month a year seems more absurd than ever. (Obama's presidency doesn't mean we'll talk and think and deal with race less, it means we'll deal with it MORE. Or so one hopes.) But if it serves as a spur for studios to release films that might otherwise not appear, well fine by me. I've always been a tad dismissive of Sidney Poitier, who always seemed more of a symbol than a man in his films (especially something like *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?*) What did I care about the burden he shouldered of representing a race on film? He bored me. But the truth is that I haven't seen a lot of his best work. *The Sidney Poitier Collection* (\$39.98; Warner Bros.) begins to rectify that, with four movies (three of which are good to great). You get *Something Of Value*, a curio I'd never heard of about Kenya co-starring Rock Hudson of all people; *A Patch Of Blue* which deals with race and blindness but is most memorable for Shelley Winters in one of her patented hateful character studies (was anyone more willing to be really disliked onscreen?); the actually forgettable *A Warm December* (an early Poitier directorial effort) and best of all Martin Ritt's film debut *Edge of the City* with Poitier befriending John Cassavetes. Also out: the fascinating documentary *Listen Up: The Lives Of Quincy Jones* (\$24.98; Warner Bros.) which just scratches the surface of his brilliant career in popular music; *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But A Sandwich* (\$14.98; Koch), the Afterschool Special-ish feature about drugs starring Cicely Tyson; *Tupac Assassination Part I and Part II* (\$14.98; Mill Creek) which delves into the death of Tupac Shakur and offers new interviews, audio of Shakur himself and more; *A Good Day To Be Black & Sexy* (\$26.98; Magnolia), an Altman-esque look at the lives of several couples in LA; and best of all *Black Is...Black Ain't* (\$19.95; Docurama), the final probing look at black culture before director Marlon Riggs died of AIDS.

WAS NATALIE WOOD A STAR? -- Of course, but did she WANT to be a star? A handful of great films -- *Rebel Without A Cause*, *West Side Story* and *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* -- ensure she'll always be remembered. Two good films are included in the boxed set *The Natalie Wood Collection* (\$59.98; Warner Bros.), namely *Splendor In The Grass* and *Gypsy*. They fit nicely alongside four other middling films like *Inside Daisy Clover* and *Cash McCall*, which are fine but not great and in which Wood is fine and not great. Her final movie *Brainstorm* (\$19.98; Warner

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I'm a little embarrassed to love this show as much as...

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First Lady Fashion At Friday's NATO Concert (PHOTOS)

Another night, another fashion opportunity for NATO leaders and their spouses! See...

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A harrowing horse fall at the John Smith's Fox Hunters' Chase...

Jim Cramer Declares The Depression "Over" (VIDEO)

On Thursday's episode of "Mad Money" host Jim Cramer declared that the depression...

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ATLANTA — Traces of a chemical used in rocket

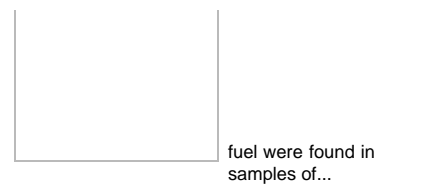
Bros.) and why it isn't included in the boxed set is a puzzle. Anyway, it's more memorable for some trippy special effects than Wood. In all, maybe she was too happy with Robert Wagner and not quite voraciously hungry enough for stardom after several decades of work to carve out a more significant career. Certainly she would have been better off during the heyday of the studios when Wood's charms would have been showcased in countless movies by people probably more invested in her career than she was.

BRAND ON THE BRAIN -- Studios will use any excuse to "brand" a bunch of movies and bundle them together or just make them a part of a series in hopes that the collector in you will buy them all. "I Love The 80's" works perfectly, despite bad punctuation (it should be '80s). Just as the '70s (see?) had a distinctive vibe, a number of hit films from the '80s had a glossy, poppy glow about them that somehow makes linking everything from the umpteenth comedy from Cheech & Chong to the goofy *Flashdance* perfectly reasonable. Jennifer Beals is so talented and beautiful that she somehow overcome the absurd hit *Flashdance* (\$14.98; Paramount) though why we didn't howl it out of the theaters I'll never know. *Cheech & Chong's Still Smokin'* (\$14.98; Paramount) was a weezy gasp for the duo but *Top Secret!* (\$14.98; Paramount) proved Airplane! was no fluke and made Val Kilmer a star. *The Naked Gun* (\$14.98; Paramount) rescued a great TV series with a decent movie spin-off and while I loved the '80s, I must admit I've never seen Eddie Murphy's *Coming To America* (\$14.98; Paramount), so now I've got no excuses. A fairly disparate bunch of flicks, but they all belong together somehow. Not so with the Martini Movies series from Sony. These five movies from the '50s, '70s and '80s are from different decades and genres and priced a tad too high and NONE of them belong in a series called Martini Movies. The most intriguing of the bunch is *5ive* (\$19.94; Sony), a post-nuclear holocaust sci-fi film of sorts. Then there's *Vibes*, with Jeff Goldblum and Cyndi Lauper as psychics looking for buried treasure; Elliott Gould torn between the Establishment and campus radicals in *Getting Straight*, the modest spy spoof *Our Man In Havana* with Alec Guinness and *Gumshoe*, an even more modest detective satire with Albert Finney. All of them are \$19.94 each from Sony. The covers are murky and unattractive and the tag of Martini Movies makes absolutely no sense. Why not call them Oddballs and Eccentrics? Or why not ignore some forced theme and just release them even more cheaply at a budget price?

WAS IT THE HOCKEY MASK? -- I can't quite figure out why the *Friday The 13th* franchise has proven so enduring. Jason isn't a particularly interesting villain and the original *Friday The 13th Uncut* (\$16.99 regular and \$29.99 on BluRay; Paramount) doesn't offer anything that would indicate hit potential. *Halloween* was genuinely scary and had a great score; *Nightmare on Elm Street* had humor, *Saw* had a vicious nasty tone and so on. But *Friday The 13th*? Those fascinated can watch *His Name Was Jason* (\$19.97; Anchor Bay), a two DVD set exploring every facet of the series. And the first three films are back out in new editions (\$16.99 each; Paramount) with truly sensational-looking covers that boast a very cool 3-D effect. So what was it about *Friday The 13th* that made the movies endure? It might be something as simple as the title: everyone knows Friday the 13th means bad luck so they immediately understood what the first film would be and it provided perfect marketing for the sequels. Sometimes it's just as simple as that.

BARBRA TAKES CHARGE -- Streisand had a triumphant film directorial debut with the unlikely *Yentl* (\$29.99; MGM), the modest Isaac Bashevis Singer short story turned into a musical starring Streisand as a girl who dresses as a boy so she can go to yeshiva and study. A perfectionist, it's no surprise to see Streisand has delivered a new cut about three minutes longer. But happily she also includes the original theatrical version, as well as an audio commentary and a second disc loaded with extras. Being in charge suits her. Also out: The over-stuffed star-studded vehicle *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* (\$19.97; Warner Bros.); the woebegone Peter O'Toole-starring *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (\$19.97; Warner Bros.), a story which most definitely did NOT cry out for a musical version; Nick Nolte and Debra Winger in *Cannery Row* (\$19.97; Warner Bros.); Vivian Leigh in the role audiences demanded after seeing her as Scarlet O'Hara: a prostitute in *Waterloo Bridge* (\$19.97; Warner Bros.) and Julie Christie just luminous in the Thomas Hardy tale *Far From The Madding Crowd* (\$19.97; Warner Bros.).

OBAMA ON DVD IN RECORD TIME -- CBS is rush-delivering a four hour DVD covering the rise of Barack Obama pegged to his appearance on *60 Minutes*. *Obama: All Access* (\$19.99; Paramount) (which makes him sound like a rock concert) includes not just all the interviews he's given 60 Minutes over the last few years but also key public moments like Obama's announcement



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by Michael Giltz

Affairs to remember: Farley Granger bedded Ava Gardner, Shelley Winters, and Leonard Bernstein. In his autobiography, Include Me Out, Hitchcock's muse ... (The national gay & lesbian newsmagazine)
by Michael Giltz

of his candidacy, that speech to 100,000+ in Berlin, his acceptance of the party's nomination, his victory speech, his inaugural address and the speech that made me support him: the thoughtful, discerning talk on race in Philadelphia. Other documentaries just out: *The Secret Policeman's Balls* (\$39.99; Shout), a great compilation of the Amnesty International benefits led by Monty Python members and featuring top comics and sensational performances by top artists like Pete Townsend and Sting; *Rent: Filmed Live On Broadway* (\$24.95; Sony), a heartfelt record of the musical's last performance which is -- rather absurdly -- more expensive than the DVD of the feature film; two excellent musical documentaries by Robert Mudge: *Gospel According To Al Green* and *Sonny Rollins: Saxophone Colossus* (\$24.99 each; Acorn) -- both are discerning looks at two legendary talents and filled with great songs; *The Singing Revolution* (\$26.95; Docurama), the acclaimed look at Estonia's national music festival Lalupidu that helped them throw off the shackles of the Soviet Union and kept their spirit alive through song; and finally *Sam Kinison: Unleashed* (\$14.98; Mill Creek) contains two HBO specials from the comic I never appreciated but admired by his fellow artists (Johnny Carson called Kinison one of his all-time favorites) and remembered forever for actually making a funny routine out of people starving in Africa.

OTHER RELEASES:

Cheers: The Final Season (\$39.98; Paramount) -- Yes, they should have packed it up four or five years earlier (no sitcom should run more than seven years) but they maintained their dignity while saying goodbye.

Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa (\$34.98 for regular two-pack and \$39.98 for BluRay; DreamWorks) -- the smash hit sequel bundled with spin-off adventures of those very efficient penguins. It will overshadow the live action *Space Buddies* (\$29.99 regular and \$34.99 on BluRay), the Disney comedy about talking dogs who travel to the moon and back. But don't be surprised if talking dogs prove irresistible to kiddies and the parents who want them entertained harmlessly for 84 minutes. The animated *Oliver and Company* (\$29.99; Disney) arrived just as Disney was finding its way again in animation but there's a reason that *The Little Mermaid* from the following year was the one that drew the hosannas. Still, this reworking of Dickens in New York is fine fare.

Save Me (\$24.95; First Run) -- Chad Allen as a gay man who falls for another fellow when he's attending ex-gay camp. Whoops. Other gay releases include *La Leon* (\$29.95; Water Bearer), about a gay man isolated in the jungles of Argentina and *Whirlwind* (\$24.95; Wolfe), a gay drama set -- where else? -- in New York City and starring some talented stage actors.

The Lucky Ones (\$27.98; Lionsgate) -- yet another drama linked to the Iraqi war (this one starring Tim Robbins in the story of three veterans on a road trip in the States) and sure to be re-discovered a few years down the road as a fine film.

Zack And Miri Make A Porno (\$29.99 regular or \$34.99 on BluRay; Genius) -- was it not raunchy enough or sweet enough to quite work? No, it just wasn't quite interesting enough, strange to say. Great title, though.

The Invaders Second Season (\$36.98; Paramount) -- the second and final season of this 60s curio, a combination of *The X-Files* and *The Fugitive*.

Closing The Ring (\$19.98; Genius) -- Sir Richard Attenborough is a nice man and played a great Santa but simply isn't a very nimble director. But Shirley MacLaine, Christopher Plummer, Brenda Fricker and others do what they can with this stodgy, old-fashioned romance set during and after World War II.

FINALLY, A BLU-RAY ROUND-UP

BluRay titles keep pouring out. One fact is clear: movie studios are NOT lowering the price of BluRay fast enough. In this economy, they better make BluRay the same price of even CHEAPER than their regular DVD releases if they want to get people excited about buying a new DVD player and discovering the jump in quality BluRay provides. And if they don't act soon, BluRay will simply fade away. No one NEEDS BluRay discs because regular DVDs are great (unlike the awful VHS tapes they replaced). Mind you, if you have an HD-ready plasma or LCD TV and a sound system, you certainly should buy a BluRay player because it will make your library of regular DVDs look better and you can always rent BluRay titles or just buy the ones that are actually a bargain or too good to pass up (like *The Godfather*.) For all the titles below, you can just assume they look substantially better than their regular DVD counterpart. I'm just trying to keep you up-to-date on what's being released.

Being There (\$28.99; Warner Bros.) -- a pitch-perfect swan song for Peter Sellers (yes, I'm

ignoring his Fu Manchu movie which came after) and a final gem from Hal Ashby, the greatest director of the Seventies. Chance is everything Forrest Gump and Benjamin Button are not: intriguing, compelling, wickedly satirical and humane.

Pretty Woman (\$34.99; Touchstone) -- made Julia Roberts a star, of course and gave Richard Gere the second of his seemingly nine lives. But I'm astonished at the women who think this is the height of romance -- she's playing a whore! \$15 more than the regular DVD.

The Cure Trilogy (\$24.98; Eagle Rock) -- three albums played in their entirety in 2002 by a band who I just got into with their terrific new release *4:13 Dream*.

Zodiac Director's Cut (\$36.99 but on sale for the same price as the regular DVD on Amazon; Paramount) -- I wish it contained the theatrical edition as well, but this is a superior release of one of the best films from the past decade. It hardly seems possible the same person made *Benjamin Button*.

Office Space Special Edition (\$34.98; Fox) -- a genuine cult comedy worthy of the name. Side-splittingly funny and compulsively watchable but again, why not include the original theatrical edition as well? \$15 more than the regular DVD. Ugh. But what a terrific film.

Drumline (\$29.99; Fox) -- battle of the college marching bands; sweeter than you'd expect.

Vicky Cristina Barcelona (\$34.99; Weinstein; Genius) -- Penelope Cruz and Javier Bardem have a lot of fun. But this is minor Woody and only looks good in comparison to the truly still-born *Cassandra's Dream*.

Sideways (\$29.99; Fox) -- the Oscar-winning dramatic comedy that holds up quite well.

Rock N Rolla (\$35.99; Warner Bros.) -- director Guy Ritchie's latest attempt to rebottle the magic of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*.

Napoleon Dynamite (\$34.98; Fox) -- I resisted it for a while (and it's still no *Office Space*), but this is a nicely eccentric comedy with some great riffs. \$20 more than the regular DVD, however.


Max Payne (\$39.98; Fox) -- the dependable Mark Wahlberg in a shoot-em-up tale of vengeance with supernatural overtones.

Stargate: The Ark Of Truth (\$34.99; Fox) -- a DVD sequel to the hit TV series.

Pride and Glory (\$35.99; New Line) -- Edward Norton and Colin Farrell are cops uncovering corruption, but Farrell had better luck on the other side of the law this year with *In Bruges*.

So which Julie Andrews movie is your favorite? *Mary Poppins*? *The Sound Of Music*? I'd take *Victor/Victoria* myself.

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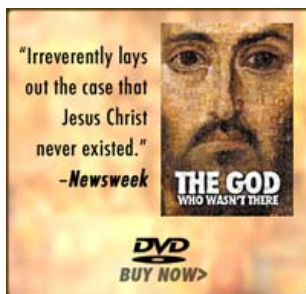
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I'd like to see a movie that crosses "Mary Poppins" with "Snakes on a Plane". Picture it: either Julie Andrews or Samuel L. Jackson sings to the children about disgust with the motherfucking snakes on the motherfucking plane. While we're at it, cross "Mary Poppins" with the "Evil Dead" trilogy: if someone can find a way to make Julie Andrews sing an entire song about showing the primitive screw-heads a boom-stick, then I'll have seen everything.

PS: in case anyone's forgotten, too much sugar rots your teeth (then again, the English aren't known for great teeth).

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I thought seeing Mary Poppins bare her breasts in S.O.B. was traumatic enough. You may have topped that.

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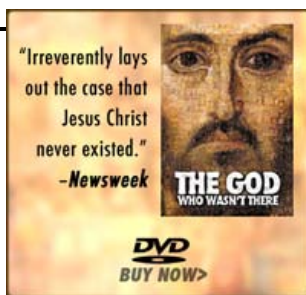
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