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DVDs: Some of the Best (and Worst) Movies of the Year

Posted: 02/22/2012 5:10 pm

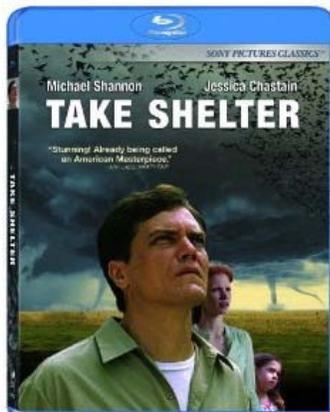
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DVD releases keep coming fast and furious, with this week's batch including some of the best movies put out in 2011... and some of the worst. Ain't that always the way?



Take Shelter (\$35.99 BluRay; Sony Pictures Classics) -- One of the best movies of the year stars Michael Shannon as a troubled dad who is either having apocalyptic visions or suffering a mental breakdown -- or both, since apocalyptic visions can be very stressful. It confirms writer and director Jeff Nichols as one of the brightest talents in cinema today (he worked with Shannon on the excellent *Shotgun Stories*) and co-stars Jessica Chastain in one of her 18 excellent performances in 2011. Not to be missed, from the slow-build beginning to the remarkable finale.

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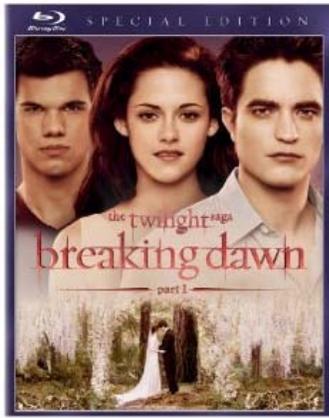
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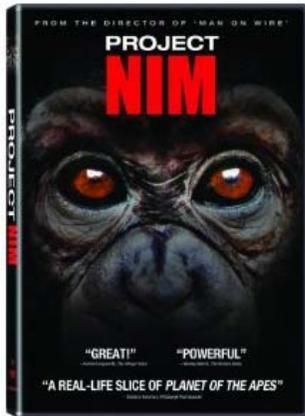
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Twilight Breaking Dawn Part 1 (\$33.99 BluRay; Summit) -- Honestly, you don't care that I think this may be the dullest *Twilight* film yet. However good or bad relatively speaking these movies may be, they're all grossing essentially the same amount of money worldwide. So if you've seen the others, you'll see this one and the finale whether or not you're told that it basically includes a lot of scenes of people standing around and talking and sort of killing time until the real finale in Part Two. Director Bill Condon will hopefully get to bring more personality to the more action-packed events of Part Two. Meanwhile, the pop music remains the best reason to still pay attention to the franchise.



Project Nim (\$19.98; Lionsgate) -- One of the best films of 2011, this utterly fascinating documentary looks at the life of Nim, a chimpanzee who took part in one of the most famous linguistic experiments of the past 50 years. At birth, Nim was taken from his chimpanzee mother and raised with a human family to see if a chimp could be taught sign language in a more effective and revealing way by immersing him among humans. The result was intense media attention in the 1970s and a life story with so many twists and turns your jaw will drop. Personalities clash, lovers break up, Nim gets bigger and more physical, (more chimp and less "human"), funding is lost and found -- the saga goes on and on and on, with Nim starting in a human home, moving to a country estate and ultimately sold off for medical testing despite the best efforts of some of the people who have worked with him over the years. Director James Marsh (*Man On Wire*) has pulled archival footage, new interviews and select reenactments to tell this remarkable tale with verve and compassion. I wouldn't be surprised if it became a fictional film down the road -- is Andy Serkis available?



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13 Movies That Changed The Way We View Poverty

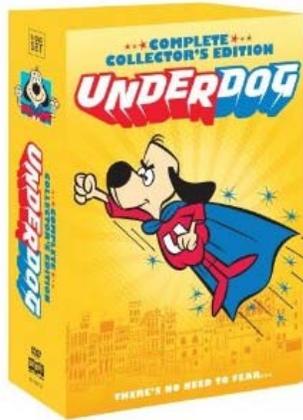
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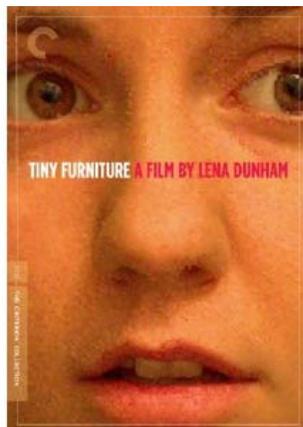
Madonna's Message For Americans: 'Don't Get Fat And Lazy'



J. Edgar (\$35.99 BluRay; Warner Bros.) -- How did Leonardo DiCaprio get swamped into delivering so many committed, potentially fascinating performances in so many turgid, stiff bio-pics? First Martin Scorsese and now Clint Eastwood entice him with roles bursting with promise. J. Edgar Hoover is certainly a public figure ripe for investigation. But Eastwood always seemed an odd choice to plumb the tortured depths of this polarizing, probably closeted figure and nothing in the movie has changed anyone's mind. Like Meryl Streep's *The Iron Lady*, it's another film that tackles an utterly riveting historical figure but seems afraid to take any point of view on him whatsoever. Armie Hammer plays Hoover's right hand man (in every sense of the word) but we'll have to wait to find out his talent via a better project.



Underdog Complete Collector's Edition (\$69.97; Shout) -- It's a little unnerving to realize how fragile our TV and film history can be. *Underdog* has been a valuable property since it launched in 1964 by Total TeleVision productions. Nonetheless, original masters were lost, the other segments that made up an original episode (like "Commander McBragg" and "Go Go Gophers" disappeared or got disconnected from its original show and on and on. So Shout has stepped in and done its usual thorough restoration, including the best masters of as much of the material as could be found. Underdog and his girlfriend Polly Purebred are back, along with his "energy vitamin pills" that were cut decades later out of fear that kids might use drugs. (Uh, isn't taking vitamins supposed to be good for you?) It's not a great series but it is distinctive and fans will be delighted that it has been preserved with care on this six DVD set.



WATCH: Raging Grannies Have Some Words For Todd Akin

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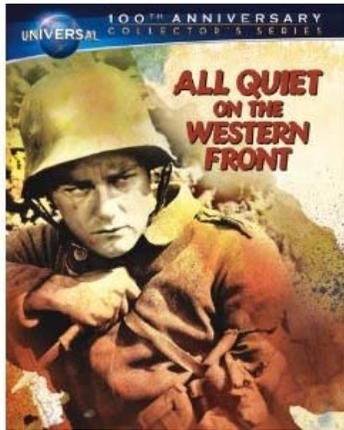
Tiny Furniture (\$29.95; Criterion) -- For me, about the highest honor a movie can get is to be included in the Criterion library. When it happens for a young filmmaker, it's an even more exciting claim -- this isn't just a new talent, they're saying, this is an artist we truly believe in long term. So it's fun to see writer, director and star Lena Dunham get the Criterion treatment for her breakthrough film *Tiny Furniture*, a drolly painful look at a college graduate moving back home with her mother and sister (played by Dunham's real mother and sister) while trying to figure out what to do with her life. It's no surprise to see Nora Ephron and Paul Schrader among the extras, talking with Dunham about her work. Talent attracts talent. I've already seen her pilot for the new HBO comedy *Girls* and think it's truly offbeat and intriguing. You need to catch up with her now and this set -- which includes her debut *Creative Nonfiction* and four shorts -- is the ideal place to start.



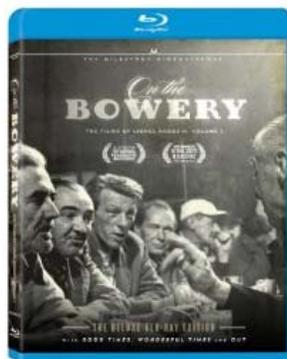
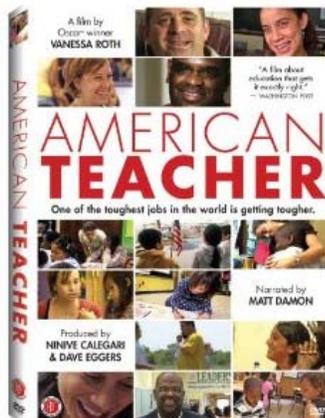
Doctor Who: The Doctor, the Widow and the Wardrobe (\$14.98; BBC/2Entertain) -- it's an annual tradition: another Christmas, another *Doctor Who* special. In 2010, they did a brilliant spin on *A Christmas Carol*. This year they've spun off an idea from the Narnia books. If you're willing to wait, this episode will be included on the next complete season boxed set. But if you can't wait, it's a bit of Christmas in February and very welcome indeed. Two other *Doctor Who* titles are out as well. *The Caves of Androzani* comes from the Peter Davison years. Having just watched the lovely series *All Creatures Great And Small*, it's especially fun to see Davison switch from the lazy, girl-crazy Tristan to the Doctor. And *The Sensorites* is an adventure from the 1960s and the William Hartnell years. Each is \$24.98 and include copious extras.



Tower Heist (\$34.98 BluRay; Universal) -- The history of *Tower Heist* is a damn sight more interesting than the movie itself. First, it was touted to be the first big budget feature from a major studio to be made available day and date on Video on Demand/Pay Per View when it was hitting theaters. (I believe the cost would have been \$60, with the idea that parents or groups of people might be interested.) That fell apart when theater owners balked. Then director Brett Ratner and star Eddie Murphy were slated to head the Oscars until Rattner made a string of offensive and impolitic remarks that forced him to step down as producer, with Murphy loyally following suit. Where did these remarks occur? During Rattner's PR trek to promote *Tower Heist*. it's a pity the film itself -- sort of a spin on *Ocean's Eleven* -- wasn't so hapless and unfunny.



All Quiet on the Western Front (\$39.98 BluRay combo; Universal) -- The classic anti-war film from 1930 is just one of a string of movies getting a lavish reissue to celebrate Universal's 100th anniversary. This set includes a DVD and a BluRay, a lavish hardcover booklet case with production history and stills, a "silent" version and intros by Leonard Maltin and Robert Osborne. The movie looks beautifully restored. It may be churlish to complain about such a worthy project but \$40 seems a bit pricey for a catalog title, even one as significant as this. Plus, a few more extras like a thoughtful commentary track by an expert would be welcome and inexpensive. Still, it's a classic film carefully preserved and fans will be able to see a landmark film at home in better shape than ever before.



- American Teacher** (\$24.95; First Run Features)
- On the Bowery** (\$39.95 BluRay; Milestone)
- Woody Allen: A Documentary** (\$29.95; Docurama)
- Most Valuable Players** (\$19.99; Virgil Films)
- Urbanized** (\$34.95 BluRay; New Video/Plexifilm)
- How to Die in Oregon** (\$29.95; Docurama)
- Pianomania** (\$27.95; First Run Features)

A string of documentaries, some of varying quality but all of them with some intrinsic value thanks to their subject matter. Truly, pound for pound you'll find that documentary films are a better, safer better

for entertainment -- especially when you're intrigued by the topic but often even when you're not. Matt Damon narrates *American Teacher*, a straightforward and absorbing look at the intense challenge of teaching. It puts the lie to the absurd demonization of teachers that has become a political football in the past few years. It demonstrates simply and clearly how more than 90 percent of teachers spend their own money on essential supplies, how two-thirds of all teachers take a second job to make ends meet and how a typical workweek includes at least 60 hours when you include grading papers and other common tasks teachers do at home. When you look at countries all over the world that have passed the U.S. in student standards, several factors are present: teaching is a valued, highly regarded profession and they are paid accordingly. Want better students and better schools? Pay teachers -- all teachers -- a lot more and then expect more from them. And raising the salary means all teachers, not the sliver of new teachers who enter the profession. Half of all teachers will retire in the next decade so the demand for teachers and the need for great ones has never been higher. *American Teacher* is not particularly accomplished or artful, but it is essential viewing for anyone who cares about our education system. You'll watch it and want to call your favorite teacher from grade school and thank them all over again.

On The Bowery is one of the most notable archival releases of the year. It collects two major films and some supplementary shorts by director Lionel Rogosin. *On the Bowery* used non-actors to tell the tale of men on Skid Row. It looks fantastic in this restoration, though the story has all the creakiness that non-actors and a roughly improvised script can bring. Great extras include other shorts about the same world, one from 1933 and one from the 1970s. His other major film is the rather juvenile anti-war film *Good Times, Wonderful Times*. It's entire reason for being is to show people at a cocktail party nattering on about this and that and contrasting it with found footage of war crimes, suffers of Hiroshima and Hitler Youth rallies. You get the point in about five minutes and it goes on for more than an hour. But apparently it was a notable spur to the anti-war movement around Vietnam.

Woody Allen is the full documentary that aired on PBS about the director's career. It's good for fans but he remains resolutely unhelpful at self-examination; maybe he's talked himself out through therapy over the years.

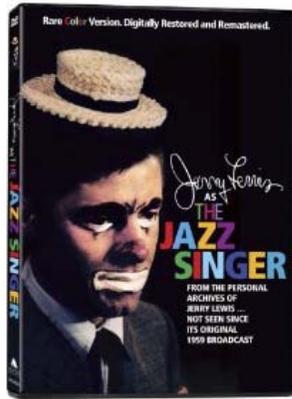
Most Valuable Players is a rough, unremarkable look at high school students in Pennsylvania who compete to put on lavish musicals every year. It's rescued by some memorable kids and a generous spirit.

Urbanized is yet another offbeat film by Gary Hustwit, the director of *Helvetica* and *Objectified*. This one tackles urban planning.

How To Die In Oregon is a straightforward but almost inevitably wrenching look at people in Oregon facing the question of assisted suicide when it comes to end-of-life planning.

Finally, *Pianomania* is an acclaimed look at Stefan Knupfer, the Chief Technican and Master Tuner for Steinway & Sons in Vienna who must constantly juggle the demands of high-strung musicians, varying halls and the demands of a particular piece to find the right piano for the right concert and make certain it's tuned ideally. Like any specialized endeavor, you'll be surprised how absorbing it can be even if you don't care about classical music.





- Boeing Boeing** (\$24.95; Olive/Paramount)
- The Geisha Boy** (\$24.95; Olive/Paramount)
- Rock-a-Bye Baby** (\$24.95; Olive/Paramount)
- The Jazz Singer** (\$14.95; Inception)

Jerry Lewis fans rejoice. You've got three of his films, including two with the underrated director Frank Tashlin. The one that will probably get the most attention is the overdue reissue of *Boeing Boeing*, which was brilliantly revived on Broadway a few years ago. It co-stars Tony Curtis in the Dean Martin-like role of a swinger who balances multiple relationships with airline stewardesses by making certain when he's dating one that all the rest are out on assignment. Thelma Ritter is her usual dependable self as the housekeeper who's seen it all, but it can't hold a candle to the Broadway version I just saw. *Geisha* and *Rock-A-Bye Baby* benefit tremendously from the visual flair of Tashlin. And *The Jazz Singer* is a TV remake of the Al Jolson film that aired in 1959 and has barely been seen since. Though aired in 1959, it's the color version that was filmed at the same time that has been nicely restored. The story was creaky in Jolson's time and that's only been affirmed by Lewis and Neil Diamond but it's a definite curio.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs and BluRays with the understanding that he would be considering them for review. Generally, he does not guarantee to review and he receives far more titles than he can cover.

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Liz Kozak: A Mom's Oscar Cheat Sheet

I wish I could call up every single person who told me, "Sleep while you can!" and inform them that their advice was terrible. I wish I had used all that nap time to go to the movies, because I miss it a whole lot.



Marshall Fine: Movie Review: *Chimpanzee*

A film that took more than four years and an extravagant amount of luck to make, *Chimpanzee* is an exceptional wildlife movie that should hold the interest of viewers from youngest to oldest.



Xaque Gruber: 25 Years After *Anna*, Sally Kirkland Reflects on the Oscar Race for Best Actress

In Kirkland, a star was born -- in her forties. Kirkland's *Anna*, a faded Czech star stumbling into Manhattan striving for a new beginning, is just as stunning 25 years later.



Natasha Koifman: Life: What's the Plan and Do We Need One?

Is it more important to have a contented love relationship or achieve your full potential? Which outcome will make you happiest... and does it have to be a choice?

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Steamboater

Forget hope. Agitate.

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01:42 PM on 02/23/2012

Looking for a great film and comedy to boot. Try "Queens" ("Reinas" from Spain with subtitles). From a review at Amazon. This one's a keeper and hilarious.

"Avoiding the usual pitfalls of gay stereotypes, making the focus of this film about Spain's approval of gay marriages not on the men involved, but instead on their mothers - the real Queens.

The story is fairly straightforward (if you will): there is to be a group wedding of gay couples in which three of the couples involved have frantic problems with their mothers' attending. Some of the mothers approve, others despair, others take advantage of the situation to meet their own needs. The effect of these 'double mothers-in-law' on the six men involved is packed with surprises, secrets, bizarre behavior, confessions, manifestations of life patterns less than reputable, and whirling dervish spins on acceptance.

The mothers are portrayed by some of the finest actresses in Spanish cinema: Marisa Paredes portrays Reyes, a famous actress (hysterically identified as Carmen Maura) whose class refuses to accept the cat that her son is marrying her gardener's son; Carmen Maura (yes) plays Magda, the owner of a new hotel chain catering to gays; Verónica Forqué is Nuria, a sex addicted nymphomaniac whose drives don't prevent her from bringing her lusts home to her family; Mercedes Sampietro plays Judge Helena who barely tolerates the effect of a public wedding of her son on her career but ends up being forced to perform the ceremony; and Argentine actress Betiana Blum is Ofelia, a restaurant owner/worker who arrives from Buenos Aires for the wedding with her runabout dog causing antics that threaten her son's relationship. The sons are played to perfection and without the slightest bit of stereotypical behavior we usually encounter in these films by six excellent actors: Gustavo Salmerón, Unax Ugalde, Hugo Silva, Daniel Hendler, Paco León, and Raúl Jiménez. "

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Forget hope. Agitate.

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01:41 PM on 02/23/2012

Eastwood played it safe with J. Edgar. After all, Eastwood's a republican too and didn't want to upset anyone too much. Project Nim is not something I saw or will see, as good as it's reported to be. Having an animal used for medical experimentation, although often needed is not something that's very pleasant and especially when the animal has so many human qualities. Go ape instead over, "Rise of the Planet of the Apes". It's probably the best film of the year and it was frankly quite stupid and insulting for the Academy to overlook it. The performance by the actor as the ape was absolutely brilliant too, with amazing nuances that came through at every turn.

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