

DVDs: 'The Great American Dream Machine' Turned TV 'Inside Out'

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Ok, the holidays are approaching. So we've got repackaged holiday TV classics slapped together so they can be restocked in the big box stores. We've got complete sets of "classic" (or just popular or just cult-y enough) TV shows in cheaper than ever sets. We've got some hit films. We've got pirates fighting over treasure in "Black Sails" and thank God we have Criterion and their Eclipse label to uncover some treasures from the cinematic past. Arghhhh!

THE GREAT AMERICAN DREAM MACHINE (\$39.98 DVD; Entertainment One)

BEST OF ENEMIES (\$29.98 BluRay; Magnolia)

BLACK SAILS SEASON TWO (\$59.99 BluRay; Anchor Bay)

BETTER CALL SAUL SEASON ONE (\$65.99 BluRay; Sony)

Great television has been produced since they started broadcasting in the 1940s. (The Nazis delayed the spread of TV, actually, or it would have been dominant even sooner.) The decline of TV began at just about the same time. Sometimes, strangely, both happen at the same moment. Certainly The Great American Dream Machine was a landmark work, the smart person's Laugh-In. It didn't just satirize politics and offer up sketches a la Saturday Night Live. It didn't just give everyone from Chevy Chase to Andy Rooney a national platform. It also included Elaine Stritch singing Sondheim, a terminally ill person discussing the freedom of knowing their life is ending, savvy satire of pop culture and a hundred other odd bits and pieces. This set includes compilations of its greatest hits plus some complete episodes. (Presumably, rights issues kept them from including every single episode of its brief run. Segments popped up in the movie The Groove Tube and of course the talent involved (also including Albert Brooks among others) spread far and wide. Not a time capsule but funny still and a vibrant reminder of long TV has been genuinely provocative in every sense.

The very entertaining documentary Best Of Enemies captures both a peak and a nadir for TV. ABC was so low down in the ratings they decided that their coverage of political conventions of 1968 would include a series of debates between William F. Buckley Jr. and Gore Vidal. The two men were polar opposites in almost every way, but what they had in common were wicked and nimble minds and a gift for intellectual debate. Looking back, their debates seem almost surreally intelligent fare -- if only TV could reach these heights again. On the other hand, they were clearly a precursor to personality TV where the people sniping at each other became more interesting and important than the issues. This film shows substantial portions of the debates, offers commentary from Dick Cavett and many others and shows the long-term effects it had on the two men. One immediately wishes this set included the complete debates of course, but I suppose that's what YouTube is for.

As for TV dramas, they really only came into their heyday in the 1970s with Upstairs, Downstairs and Hill Street Blues soon after it ended. (Anthology shows had great works but ongoing dramas proved far more difficult to craft than sitcoms.) Now we're enjoying such a glut of good shows it's likely you haven't watched The Americans and Rectify and (fill in your own favorite current show). Certainly Black Sails has a few strikes against it. This period pirate drama is on Starz, which hasn't launched a big hit since Spartacus. And it's from producer Michael Bay. With his name attached, I like many others expected schlock. But after a slow start, season one got better. Then season two deepened its cast and storyline considerably, with enough backstabbing and conspiracies to

put Game Of Thrones to shame. Plus, it broke ground with gay and lesbian characters in a far bolder way than Spartacus and -- frankly -- almost any other show I can name. Not via explicitness, but in letting us identify with a character and then reveal to us this person is gay. It's not a twist a la a soap but a genuine revelation that makes the show and the character a lot more interesting for taking such a bold approach they clearly intended from the start. (At least, thinking back, that's how it seems.) Season Three begins in January if they can keep getting better, Black Sails will demand attention.

Black Sails probably began with little to no expectations from audiences. Better Call Saul on the other hand began with the highest expectations. Strike that -- it began with a cynical, jaundiced, "why are you creating a spin-off of the brilliant Breaking Bad and why is it centered around Saul? I didn't even want to watch it. But the reviews and the ratings and continued reports that it was somehow good and finding its own quirky rhythm and becoming its own admirable show that stood not in the shadow of one of the best shows of all time but easily one of the best spin-offs in history. Season two is coming so even if you wanted to think you could avoid adding this to your list of "shows to watch," you can't.

INSIDE OUT (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Disney)

TOY STORY THAT TIME FORGOT (\$14.99 BluRay combo; Disney)

ORIGINAL CHRISTMAS CLASSICS GIFT SET (\$29.93 BluRay; Classic Media)

I'm one of the four people who wasn't completely besotted by Inside Out. What's wrong with me? I don't know; I think I have a small pebble where my heart should be. Plus, I wasn't crazy about the animation style used in our heroine's brain and found two of the four emotions poorly defined (I like Mindy Kaling a lot but the script simply did not deliver Disgust in any way shape or form. Valley Girl, yes; Disgust, no. But don't get me wrong -- it's amusing and has some lovely moments and is 99% more imaginative and interesting than most other animated movies not made by Pixar. It is unquestionably a commercial and artistic triumph for that company, their first real such two-fisted critical and commercial hit original since Up in 2009.

Of course their standard bearer is Toy Story, which capped a trilogy brilliantly in 2010. I'm worried by Pixar announcing they would make Toy Story 4. But I have faith they wouldn't proceed unless they were really confident of having a killer idea. After all, they've delivered two charming TV specials wholly worthy of the Toy Story name. Toy Story Of Terror! from 2013 was pitch perfect for Halloween and Toy Story That Time Forgot (while a notch lesser in quality) from last year is pegged to the post-Christmas lull. While this release is padded with extras, it's really just a 22 minute TV special so keep that in mind when purchasing. Some day soon, of course, we'll have all four films, these two specials and maybe the Buzz Lightyear stuff all in one package, so don't complain if you buy each one individually! And for the love of God, Pixar, if Toy Story 4 (due out in 2018) isn't up to snuff, tear it up and start over or ditch it! Don't spoil the crowning achievement of your company. I can handle Cars 3 (barely) but not a weak Toy Story.

Surely the crowning achievement of stop-motion kings Rankin-Bass is Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer. No, wait, actually it's Santa Claus Is Comin' To Town, an origin story to rival the Christopher Reeve Superman. To be fair, my answer changes from week to week. Luckily you don't have to choose, because this inexpensive set includes those two stone cold classics, plus the lesser animated Frosty The Snowman and a clutch of other, far lesser holiday themed specials. The first two are the ones you'll watch again and again every single year. Why wait for the TV networks or cable channels to show them? Heck, why wait for the holidays?

EIGHT MEN OUT (\$29.95 BluRay; Olive)

ECLIPSE: JULIEN DUVIVIER IN THE 1930S (\$59.95 DVD; Criterion's Eclipse)

Baseball season is over. But cheating in sports is a perennial topic (just check out the online gambling sites or Russia's indifference to being caught cheating on a grand scale). Best of all, great drama is timeless. John Sayles has produced a remarkable body of work, but the convergence of America's pastime, class warfare and

honor makes this almost irresistible when naming his best film. Thanks to a sterling cast, *Eight Men Out* remains just as clear-eyed and riveting as ever.

Even casual movie fans have probably seen some films by John Sayles. But it takes Criterion to stump the experts. Their Eclipse label is a source of little known gems and the careful presentation of films that might otherwise never be saved. Case in point: director Julien Duvivier. He helmed the classic *Pepe Le Moko*, one of the all-time greats that rivals *Casablanca* in terms of romantic and exotic atmosphere, not to mention a heart-tugging ending. As much as I love that film, I've never really explored the work of its director. Now I've got four key works from this French master to dive into. All four star the marvelous actor David Baur, making this also a boxed set celebration of that actor. *David Golder* is Duvivier's first sound film and it's based on the early best-seller by Irene Nemirovsky, now famed for *Suite Francaise*. *Poil De Carotte* is a family charmer about a little boy trying to gain the attention of his distracted father. As a mystery buff, I'm utterly intrigued by *La Tete D'un Homme*, Duvivier's take on Inspector Maigret, the famed creation of Georges Simenon. Finally, his smash hit *Un Carnet de Bal* shows an older woman paying a visit to the suitors of her youth. Criterion was at pains when it launched Eclipse years ago to make clear this label wouldn't be able to afford loads of extras or meticulous remastering of films. Nonetheless, they always take care to find good quality prints (as is clear here) and the movies they present are such unexpected finds that I almost look forward more to the latest release from Eclipse than I do from Criterion.

BATMAN: THE COMPLETE THIRD SEASON (\$39.98 DVD; Warner Home Video)

MANIMAL: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$26.99 DVD; Shout! Factory)

AUTOMAN: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$26.99 DVD; Shout! Factory)

Not every TV show that gets revived because it's good. Sometimes it's sheer nostalgia or a perverse desire to watch again a show you enjoyed during your youth but know -- absolutely know -- that even then a small part of your brain was thinking, "this is pretty dumb." Certainly no one hates the campy TV show *Batman* more than fans of the *Dark Knight*. It turned the crime fighter into a joke for years and years. But it also has a loopy charm that is undeniable, from the Pop Art approach to fights (POW! BAM! BOP!) to Adam West's idiosyncratic delivery to the behind-the-scenes fact that Robin The Boy Wonder was sleeping with seemingly every female co-star that came along. It's terrible, it's wonderful and it was a huge huge hit that ran twice a week until the entire country rose up and said, "Enough!" After three seasons, the TV show that launched a million lunch-boxes was history but would haunt comic books for years. They could handle being seen as a threat to the nation. They could deal with the suggestion that *Batman's* ward was more than just a sidekick. But being the butt of jokes? Being laughed at? That hurt. Happily, now that the character has been completely rehabilitated, we can dive back into the show itself and shake our heads at its loopy nature.

But no such pop cultural context can explain away *Manimal* or *Automan*. They are quite simply dumb television, awful shows memorable for goofy concepts that were played straight. *Manimal* has an undeniably appealing name. It's catchy, right? *Automan* has what I always took to be some weird gay subtext in the banter of its characters. (But that's just me.) Nonetheless, no matter how you slice it they are pretty awful TV created at that 1970s, early 1980s nadir when major networks had dominated the world and pretty much given up on any pretense of quality. Still, some men and women watched these shows (and bought the inevitable lunch box) and withstood the mockery of their friends when dressing up as *Manimal* for Halloween or asking if anyone saw last night's episode. And these collections are for them. Enjoy! But please don't ask me to watch more than the pilot.

TRAINWRECK (\$34.98 BluRay combo; Universal)

TERMINATOR GENESYS (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Paramount)

MR HOLMES (\$24.99 BluRay combo; Paramount)

It's the year of the Schumer, of course. Amy Schumer is on top of the world, with stand-up specials at the Apollo (directed by Chris Rock!) and her sketch show hotter than ever and winning Emmys, a book deal and even a

feature film she wrote and starred in. Judd Apatow directed but he's smart enough to know he was the lucky one here. I remain mystified why Bill Hader keeps getting big roles; I find him without interest. And Trainwreck is no great shakes as such. I hope she's smart enough to avoid a Melissa McCarthy focus on just playing female versions of the male slob. But it sure is fun to see her becoming the Queen Of All Media. Maybe a radio show is next?

As for Arnold Schwarzenegger, he's entered "whatever" territory with franchises like Terminator. They've got a new one out? Whatever? At best, some fans thought this wasn't so bad. It's sort of the same expectations people are bringing to Creed, the latest iteration of the Rocky franchise. On the plus side, expectations are low. On the minus side, expectations are low for a reason. I can't argue about how this does or doesn't fit into the Terminator storylines as set by the original and its many variations. If you want to make sense of it, you're putting too much thought into it. Put your mind on cruise control and maybe you can squeeze out a few "that was cool" moments. But they haven't made a good one since T2 and nothing here changes that.

One should have high expectations for actor Ian McKellen and director Bill Condon. However, I was not a fan of Mitch Cullin's novel, which depicts the great detective Sherlock Holmes in his dotage. Nonetheless, this is a poor film and easily the weakest of Condon's career to date. It is badly shot, looking little better than a subpar TV movie. And while the novel might have been given a more subtle spin, instead its blunt nature remains intact. Laura Linney (also a marvelous actress) is given a caricature of a mother to play, tiresomely stupid for Holmes to disdain and pass on that disdain to the young boy who looks up to him. A few brief moments between McKellen and that child (played ably by Milo Parker) have charm. But it barely feels like this Holmes has any but the vaguest connection to the actual creation of Arthur Conan Doyle. And on its own, the tale has almost no mystery and even less interest. McKellen can't be uninteresting, but he can't elevate an unremarkable story either.

FOYLE'S WAR: THE COMPLETE SAGA (\$199.99 DVD; Acorn)

THAT 70S SHOW: COMPLETE SERIES (\$149.98 BluRay; Mill Creek)

STAR TREK: THE COMPLETE ORIGINAL SERIES (\$79.99 DVD; Paramount)

THE DICK VAN DYKE SHOW COMPLETE REMASTERED SERIES (\$199.98 DVD; Image)

I wish every single TV show ever made would get a complete boxed set. I also wish they were all compact, inexpensive and up to the highest quality standards. Inevitably, there are compromises along the way -- some shows that should be available aren't, others that are available don't always hold up and on and on. But thank god we've got complete sets to argue about. Thirty years ago, getting a complete collection of an entire TV series that actually ran for more than ten episodes was virtually impossible. So I'm delighted that Foyle's War is out in a new, compact set collecting the entire run of this series. Now in retrospect, I can see it started out at a peak, and then slowly but inexorably declined. That doesn't detract from the accomplishment of Michael Kitchen as the tight-lipped but marvelously expressive and eagle-eyed Foyle. Forced to keep doing police work on the home front during World War II, Foyle pulls together a casual team just as devoted to good fighting crime as they are to him. Sam (Honeysuckle Weeks) is his very capable driver, Paul Milner is the intriguingly stoic Milner and Julian Ovenden is his impossibly handsome son. Each episode illuminated some aspect of the home front during war: the black market for food, the fascists who sympathized with the Nazis, anti-Semitism, prejudice against Yankee soldiers and so on. For two or three years, it was the best show on TV. The quality dipped and by the end was almost distressingly low. (Sam was stuck in the same role by the end as she was at the beginning. Milner disappeared. The son went away.) Oh well. Rather than worrying about what might have been, it's still a show with a great deal to savor.

That '70s Show was never a sitcom to savor. It had a broad appeal and ran for years and years. But like WKRP In Cincinnati and other lesser but popular sitcoms, it was blessed with a terrific cast. It's all-star casting, from Debra Jo Rupp and Kirkwood Smith as the parents to Mila Kunis, Wilmer Valderrama, Danny Masterson and of

course Ashton Kutcher. Best of all the marvelous chemistry between Laura Prepon and Topher Grace makes the show an actual pleasure at times. It's dumb, it has a loud laugh track, like many lesser sitcoms it repeats itself in uninteresting ways. (Great sitcoms repeat themselves in interesting ways, usually.) But with this cast, almost any random episode can pass by painlessly. I'm still waiting for Topher Grace to fulfill the promise he displayed here and in a string of early film roles. He could be the Jack Lemmon of our time, an actor who can move effortlessly between comedy and drama with aplomb. Anyone with an eye for talent could spot that starting right here. It's out now on BluRay, with the original broadcast length episodes and virtually all the music cues used at the time.

Star Trek is slightly more problematic. Casual fans won't know or care but I'm not sure Star Trek HAS casual fans. To be clear: this is a compact, inexpensive boxed set of the original three seasons of Star Trek that have launched a thousand cartoons, books, movies, TV shows, fan fiction and for all I know puppet shows as well. This isn't the original, original show. It's the most recently remastered editions created with new special effects modestly sprucing up the original. In general, I'm opposed to such fiddling, even if the creative people who created it are involved. At best, if you want to spend money on new effects, at least make both versions available together so people are denied the chance to see the show it was first seen. And classic works don't age because the special effects become dated. The original 1933 King Kong is far superior to anything that came later, no matter how "improved" the effects may be. So all you get here are the revamped versions. But the heart of the show remains and it is awfully inexpensive.

No one should have any complaints to make about The Dick Van Dyke Show. If anything, this classic sitcom needs to be rediscovered as the ground-breaking work it remains and this is the set to do it with. They've got extras. They've got the original broadcast length episodes remastered to look better than ever. That's saying the least: this may be DVD, but it still certainly looks better than what people were watching when it first debuted. And the combination of sketch show writer Rob Petrie's home and work life (and how they both bled into each other, informed each other, harmed each other and of course influenced each other) is a trick most shows never even attempt. Usually, it's too hard and inevitably one aspect proves much more compelling than the other. They focus entirely on work or entirely on home and the other half of someone's life becomes utterly unimportant. Not here. It doesn't matter where the episode takes you. Is it focused on little Richie telling fibs or using a bad word? Is it focused on Rob working late to try and come up with a new sketch? Is it focused on his wife Laura's natural curiosity over a package that arrives for Rob or waking up after a creepy nightmare? Is it the workers growing dissatisfied with the respect and pay they get for toiling away for the egotistical Alan Brady? It simply doesn't matter. On most other sitcoms, even good ones, when an episode focuses on a secondary character or an unexpected corner of the sitcom's world, your heart sinks. Uh-oh, this won't be a good one you think. (Just remember any episode of Family Ties that wasn't centered solely on Alex P. Keaton.) But The Dick Van Dyke Show was so well written, so well-cast, so damn good that it didn't matter. You like 30 Rock? You need to watch The Dick Van Dyke Show. It's on any reasonable list of the greatest sitcoms of all 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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