

DVDs: The Travesty That Is 'The Imitation Game,' 'Tootsie' as Funny as Ever, and Much More

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First, the tragedy of The Imitation Game. Then, I get to hear -- not see, but hear -- Tootsie. (Check out my review to understand.) Plus a clutch of films people will discover or enjoy or perhaps puzzle out, tons of new TV shows collected in boxed sets, and the most popular duo of all time in concert! Read on.

THE IMITATION GAME (\$34.99 BluRay; Starz/Anchor Bay)

Okay, I do NOT go to the movies for historical accuracy. Historical accuracy is utterly beside the point. One can argue till they're blue in the face that "truth is stranger than fiction" and it is. But it rarely comes neatly packaged in a tidy tale with a beginning and a middle and a satisfying end. So to heck with historical accuracy. But making a movie about Alan Turing that undermines the most noble and dramatically exciting part of his life is like making a movie about Rosa Parks and skipping the part where she refuses to go to the back of the bus. Or even worse, shows her not bothering to get on in the first place because she doesn't want to cause a fuss. Alan Turing was a hero. He helped a team crack countless German codes -- including the Enigma machine (building on work done by Poles) -- and Turing and others significantly helped win the war. Ironically, Turing was betrayed by his country in a sense when it prosecuted him for being gay. However, while his country betrayed him, Turing never betrayed his country. He kept silent about his war work when a lesser man might have said in his defense, hey, you know I helped win the war, right? He died, perhaps by suicide and is unquestionably a gay hero whose story helped the push for equal rights in the UK. The best biography is by Andrew Hodges from back in 1983, now retitled Alan Turing: The Enigma. His life also inspired the excellent play Breaking The Code, which Derek Jacobi played on stage and for TV. Both naturally encompass his messy, memorable life with the play staying true to Turing while entertaining audiences and creating a dramatically satisfying work.

The film The Imitation Game does none of this. It shows Turing -- remarkably - being blackmailed over his homosexuality when no such thing occurred. Instead of being a hero who saved his country and refused to trade on that service to save his skin, Turing here capitulates and allows himself to be silenced and never reveal a traitor in their midst at Bletchley Park. Good God, what were they thinking? He is, essentially, a tragic homo who must of course die at the end (preferably by his own hands) so the straight people can survive and tut-tut and speak nicely of that odd, strange, utterly inhuman man. (Turing is practically autistic in the film, with an inability to handle even the smallest social niceties.) He's shown pouring his heart out to a policeman when confronted with his crime of being gay, divulging all his wartime work to -- again -- try and justify himself and perhaps save his own skin. Shame on the Human Rights Campaign for honoring this load of codswallop that actually dishonors the achievements of Turing, a key figure in the development of the computer. That's just for starters in terms of dishonest and undermining of Turing and what he did. (Others lay out a more coherent case for Turing and against the film, including [Christian Caryl with this thorough, intelligent take-down for the New York Review of Books](#). You could also check out [the 2011 UK film Codebreaker](#), a docudrama starring Ed Stoppard and the great Henry Goodman, which combines fictional scenes with interviews of experts to tell Turing's story in a more faithful manner.)

But if possible let's forget that and deal with the film. Knowing nothing of Turing's life, you'd still surely spot how

artificial and false the film seems. Keira Knightley is a lovely actress and I can buy her as smart. But when you've got Benedict Cumberbatch AND Matthew Goode AND the handsome Allen Leech AND the coltish Matthew Beard and then toss Keira Knightley on top of them all, well you've got the sexiest damn group of cryptographers in history. It beggars belief, to say the least. A cumbersome inspirational message is told to Turing as a lad (where he has a tragic first love, of course) and then it's repeated again and again and again. "Sometimes it is the people who no one imagines anything of who do the things no one can imagine" is pretty godawful (and nonsensical) the first time around. But it gets worse and worse and more freighted with symbolism with every repetition. The Imitation Game is a stiff, dull bore from start to finish. And the more you learn about Turing, the more genuinely fascinating and dramatic his life proves. And the more you feel betrayed by this movie that betrayed him. Read the Hodges book. See the play. Avoid The Imitation Game, which is exactly that. A poor imitation and a sorry game where we're all the losers.

TOOTSIE (\$39.99 BluRay; Criterion) -- Tootsie came out in 1982 and was a deserved smash hit, thanks in part to a career best performance from Dustin Hoffman (who has given a lot of great ones, of course). It came out on laser disc, which contained an audio commentary track from director Sydney Pollack. Everyone raved about what a thoughtful, illuminating commentary Pollack gave. Director commentaries were pretty new then and so that in part perhaps added to the praise; it was a novelty of sorts, rather than the given it is for so many films today (except Steven Spielberg, for some reason). I loved laser discs. I loved Tootsie. I couldn't wait to hear it. But somehow I never got near a laser disc player (my brother had one) with an actual copy of Tootsie at hand. Laser discs faded, DVDs and BluRay took their place and I hopped on board right away. I bought Tootsie! But the director's commentary? Missing. Gone. Some sort of rights issue. (Ain't it always?) Some 30 years later (thirty!), the movie and the commentary have finally been reunited by everyone's favorite classic film label Criterion. And you know what? It's pretty damn great. Pollack instinctively avoided the trap most directors fall into of describing the action on the screen or getting caught up in technical issues ("Oh, we had to move the camera over there to....") He talks about the scenes on screen but always in the context of the bigger picture, the arc of the script, the performance of the actor, the direction of the story. Pollack offers up tidbits (like the scenes where Teri Garr forgot her line or Jessica Lange and Bill Murray started to laugh. But Pollack is very good at elucidating the laborious process of creating a screenplay, pointing out what scenes are doing (like laying the groundwork for convincing the audience Dustin Hoffman was playing a great actor who couldn't get work right from the start). He credits Elaine May's contributions, Garr's improvs and praises Bill Murray's performance, while admitting he had no real knowledge of Murray's work before this. Pollack doesn't like the way Murray delivers "You slut!" one of the film's biggest laughs. I think it's because this is clearly a "joke" and the movie didn't traffic in jokes; the humor arose naturally out of the predicaments of the characters. (In fact, it was natural for Murray's character to rib Hoffman's so in that context the joke was fine.) Pollack said Dabney Coleman was convinced the movie would flop because virtually nothing got a laugh on the set. In ways large and small, his commentary shows all the thought and care that went into crafting what might just seem a silly comedy about a man dressing up as a woman. You do know the film, right? Hoffman is an out of work actor who somehow ends up auditioning for a role on a daytime soap and winning the part. Of course, the part is for a woman. Even with the dialogue turned off and Pollack talking, I still kept giggling at this exceptionally well acted movie and its brilliant climax. Criterion doesn't just offer up Pollack's commentary, of course. They also unearthed Gene Shalit's interview of Dorothy Michaels (the Hoffman character) which was cut from the film, two making-of documentaries and more. It's a classic given Criterion's usual classy treatment.

WILD (\$39.99 BluRay; Fox)

A MOST VIOLENT YEAR (\$24.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

INTERSTELLAR (\$39.99 BluRay; Paramount)

THE WAY HE LOOKS (\$32.99 BluRay; Strand)

THE REWRITE (\$29.99 BluRay; Image)

Here's a clutch of movies made for rediscovering at home. Some deserve wider audiences, some demand repeated viewing and some are just good movies unfairly dumped by their studios. *Wild* is all about Reese Witherspoon. Yes, Laura Dern is good as always playing her mom in flashbacks. But it's all about Witherspoon's voyage of self-discovery by hiking alone on an arduous trail. Nicely, *Wild* is no more or less than what it purports to be and that's its best feature. Witherspoon is very good and the story's modest strengths will play better at home, I think, than on a big screen. By the way, the audio mix and use of tunes floating in and out (especially Simon & Garfunkel) is very clever and effective. It pays off handsomely when you finally hear "El Condor Pasa" in full for the first time during the closing credits. That flourish sadly probably won't have the same impact at home.

The star of *A Most Violent Year* - at least for me -- is director J. C. Chandor. Three films in, perhaps none of his movies is a stone cold classic. But he's the real deal: a very good director making very good films that are varied and challenging and sure to endure. First came his calling card *Margin Call*, which set records for revenue on a movie released in the home day and date with its theatrical release. Then came *All Is Lost*, the very bold film in which Robert Redford said virtually nothing except a few brief voice overs while holding our attention as a storm threatened him while alone on a sailboat. Now comes what could be dismissively called *The Godfather Jr.* Certainly the aura of that classic hangs heavy over this tale of corruption. But Chandor elicits excellent work from his actors (Oscar Isaac shows he's the real deal, too) and again proves he's here to make films, serious adult films. Here's hoping they keep coming like clockwork.

No one is going to discover *Interstellar* at home. Everyone who wanted to see it can and should have seen it on the big screen. But did they understand it? The fanatic can analyze it over and over again. They can dive deep into the cornucopia of extras films like this always offer. They can argue and debate with their friends without annoying other moviegoers. Or, perhaps, they can just show off their widescreen TV and sound system.

But *The Way He Looks* is ideal for people to catch up with at home. Though well reviewed, this sweet romance didn't play in most markets. Writer director Daniel Ribeiro makes an impressive feature debut with this expansion of an earlier short. It doesn't reinvent the wheel of first love, though the fact that our hero is gay and blind certainly adds a twist. The complications have nothing to do with sexuality and everything to do with the usual awkwardness of high schoolers. And that's precisely the appeal of the movie, which is sharply observed and charming. It helps to have Ghilherme Lobo as your winning lead character. For once, the pretense that the handsome hero doesn't realize exactly how adorable he is actually rings true.

Finally, there's *The Rewrite*. This is the sort of movie people take a flier on when it comes to DVD rentals via Redbox and Netflix and the like. Hey, look at this cast: Hugh Grant, Marisa Tomei, Allison Janney, Chris Elliott, and isn't that the guy who just won an Oscar (J.K. Simmons)? That's worth a shot, they'll say. In many cases, this sort of attitude -- hey, I just saw an ad for it and couldn't be bothered to go see it in the theaters but I'll watch it now -- usually ends in misery. But in this case *The Rewrite* is a romantic comedy that for whatever reason got lost in the shuffle. With more care, it would have been a solid hit with Hugh Grant in full, charming/stammering mode and virtually every role filled with a talented actor. Take a chance and for once, you won't be let down.

MASTERPIECE MYSTERY!: GRANTCHESTER (\$39.99 BluRay; PBS)

Such dedication! In anticipation of this new series on PBS, I checked out the first book in the mystery series by James Runcie. Called *Sidney Chambers and the Shadow Of Death*, it's a modest collection of six stories involving an exceptionally handsome priest, the many women in his parish (and outside it) who might like to become his wife and the occasional...murder! Actually, murder rarely occurs, since this is a gentle series of tales with mostly modest mysteries at their heart. I found the book rather thin, with most of my interest held by the man of the cloth's more priestly duties. His detective work didn't inspire. Of course bringing that to life means you get to cast an actor and it must be said that James Norton makes a mild hour of mystery quite pleasant indeed. He doesn't quite overcome the weakness of the source material, but "diverting" is a pretty fair

assessment.

MAUDE: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$159.99 DVD; Shout)

THE BRADY BUNCH: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$79.99 DVD; CBS)

FRASIER: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$129.99 DVD; CBS)

VEEP: SEASON 3 (\$39.99 BluRay; HBO)

I feel like we're in a race against time: how many classic series can get packaged as complete sets before major studios give up on DVD and focus on streaming video with their libraries? (No I'll Fly Away complete series yet?!!) Happily, the floodgates are still open.

Maude and The Brady Bunch make a great contrast. Both were hits from the 1970s but only one was worth your time then or now. The Brady Bunch came out previously in a goofy shag carpet boxed set plagued by faulty production issues. Now it's been reissued with fewer extras in a cheaper set. Of course, it's a time capsule, not a TV show. Even as a kid, I recognized the inherent flatness of this rosy blended family. And if "jumping the shar" hadn't come along, "becoming a pop group in track suits" would have done just fine for me. You can buy it for nostalgic reasons; just don't expect to ever watch it all or entertain any but the youngest kids.

Maude on the other hand still feels like a firecracker. It is unrepentantly political and all the better for it. Can you imagine Maude in the Brady household? Not for a moment, because Maude is real. Shout has done the show right, with original broadcast episodes uncut, along with varied extras. It's a pity the late Bea Arthur isn't around to celebrate one of her most iconic roles (The Golden Girls came later, of course), but Maude and its excellent supporting cast will endure. Like All In The Family, it's rebellious, though its politics are more blunt than the family arguments that powered this show's parent. A little rough around the edges, a little strident and unapologetic about it.

Frasier deserves to be packaged and repackaged, as long as they keep lowering the price and making this sterling series available to new audiences. The classic sitcom feels like an endangered species, especially when the likes of The Big Bang Theory are held up as today's gold standard. Frasier is Molière compared to TBBT. And Molière is probably what they had in mind; it's an unusually intellectual series in its attitude and references. Like most hit shows, Frasier went on far too long. But for five or so seasons, Frasier demonstrated that smarts and popular appeal didn't have to be mutually exclusive. Is this the best sitcom spin-off of all time? I'd say so. And if they'd folded up shop after season seven, it would rank even higher on the all-time best list, period.

Veep is about to launch season four and after three years of rave reviews, it needs to push itself. Many great shows prove themselves in various ways: introducing new characters and losing key regulars (MASH, The Mary Tyler Moore Show) or pushing into unknown territory. The worst thing you can do is string out a premise because you're afraid change will be for the worse. Which is to say I hope Veep doubles down on where season three takes Julia Louis-Dreyfuss's hapless politician while shaking up the cast. It's good enough to reach for greatness.

THE BOOK OF NEGROES (\$39.99 DVD; Entertainment One)

Okay, so you've watched and been entertained by Empire. Since it's gonna be a long time before new episodes come out, how about diving into another TV show? This is a miniseries based on the novel Someone Knows My Name by Lawrence Hill. Now called The Book Of Negroes, it's a six part tale with all the melodrama of that hip-hop soap opera and none of the silliness. Indeed, it's deadly serious, with Aunjanue Ellis (of The Mentalist) starring as a woman captured, shipped to the Americas before the Revolutionary War and sold into slavery. A strong cast (including Lyriq Bent, Ben Chaplin and Louis Gossett Jr.) anchors this story which is Ellis's from start to finish. It's 12 Years A Slave but almost a century and a different war earlier. Chopped into bits with seemingly endless commercials when broadcast, this should play even better on DVD.

DARYL HALL & JOHN OATES: LIVE IN DUBLIN (\$19.99 BluRay; Eagle Rock)

By many commercial standards, the most successful duo in pop music history is Hall & Oates. You might think first of Simon & Garfunkel. You might suggest the Everly Brothers as more influential. But you cannot deny the hits and the artistry of Hall & Oates. I once reduced them to a greatest hits set and thought nothing more of it. But two friends passionate about the band's career -- Sal and Pete, but especially Sal because he can talk for days about music -- turned me on to how deep their catalog truly is. It doesn't hurt that Daryl Hall has a pretty great series online performing with other artists called [Live From Daryl's House](#) that keeps him foremost in my mind. Maybe Hall feels he should have had a monster solo career but for whatever reason the special magic of their partnership is where he shines best. This is no substitute for going back in time and seeing them in their heyday. But it's a potent reminder in a mere two hours that they had a lot of great, enduring singles. If it gets you digging into their back catalog, all the better. Still, this document of their first show ever in Ireland (in 2014) is not an ideal showcase given the passage of time and contains only modest extras. It's best stumbled upon on TV for casual fans. So only the already converted need make this a purchase. (P.S. Simon & Garfunkel's "The Boxer" is playing in the diner where I'm writing this column. Can't those guys leave them alone already? :)

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