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This Week in DVDs: Undermining Expectations

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Director David Fincher spent his entire career building towards the engrossing, brilliant film *Zodiac* (\$29.99; Paramount), out on DVD today. We just didn't know it. He broke into the movies with the flashy camerawork and confused plotting of *Alien 3* (1992). Then came the spooky atmospheric of *Se7en* in 1995, a movie that enjoyed its serial killer trappings a little too much for comfort. You probably forgot about 1997's *The Game*, with Sean Penn, Michael Douglas and a twisty script straight from the O. Henry playbook. Why? Because it was overshadowed by the cultish sensation *Fight Club*, a 1999 film that reveled in more surprises and a career best performance from Brad Pitt.

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Just when his talents seemed to be deepening, Fincher turned around and delivered the bland, woman-in-distress flick *Panic Room* in 2002, a movie that managed to make Jodie Foster boring to watch. So you might have expected a popcorn flick from Fincher or maybe he'd just become a gun for hire.

When Fincher's next project was *Zodiac* -- yet another stab at serial killers -- it seemed clear he had run out of ideas. Anyone who went to the film (and there weren't many) probably expected frights and grotesqueries. Fincher did stage some early killings with discrete aplomb. Viewers soon found themselves wrapped up in a movie delivered with the panache, substance and intelligence of the best 70s movies. *Zodiac* isn't *The Silence of the Lambs*, which is what we expected. It's *All The President's Men*.

The story revolves around the terrible unsolved crimes of the Zodiac killer in the San Francisco area. Knowing in advance that the killer was never officially identified, how can Fincher hold our attention for a meaty two hours and 37 minutes? He does it by focusing on the people caught up in the drama, the cops (Mark Ruffalo), journalists (Robert Downey Jr.) and bystanders (illustrator Jake Gyllenhaal) who can become obsessed with a case like *Zodiac*, who find it taking over their lives.

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This quiet, thoughtful movie is brimming with great performances that will probably be forgotten come Oscar time. Like the best Hollywood studio films of yore, even the smallest role is filled by top caliber actors. The lack of extras on the DVD is surprising. They'll get around to it eventually, I'm sure. But for now, *Zodiac* all on its own is enough, one of the best movies of the year and Fincher's finest to date.

Casual fans might have their expectations undermined by *The Doris Day and Rock Hudson Comedy Collection* (\$19.98; Universal). (Their three films - headed by the cotton candy perfection of 1959's *Pillow Talk* - have been packaged together in a more lavish set called "The Romance Collection." This one is for fans who just want the films and no frills.) Some might expect kitsch. Other might look forward to the frisson of sexual politics complicated by our knowledge that Rock Hudson was gay.

But those expectations will be up-ended by the realization of how delightful the films are, how little they need a modern sensibility to create retro-fun. Hudson -- even more than in his fine melodramatic work for Douglas Sirk -- is in his element here. And Day? Her talent is simply effortless. Gossip columnist Liz Smith has been campaigning for Day to get an honorary Oscar for years. One look at these films (not to mention her dramatic chops and decades-long career as a terrific singer) and you'll agree it's a crime she hasn't been given one already.

Finally, monster movie *The Host* (\$29.98; Magnolia) up-ends expectations simply by being so good. Surely a movie that sounds this fun -- a giant lizard-y sort of creature goes trampling through South Korea -- couldn't actually be that fun? But it is. You get a great beast, shadowy government conspiracies to explain its appearance, comic relief, a family united in their desire to rescue a little girl trapped in the creature's lair...and did I mention that a giant lizard goes stomping all over the place? Scary, funny and gripping, this is what drive-ins were made for.

Also out this week: the overseas smash hit drama *Perfume* (\$29.99; Paramount), with stage actor Ben Whishaw showing notable promise on film; *The Ultimate Underdog Collection Vol. 1* (\$1295; Classic Media), just in time to cash in on the woeful-looking feature film version; and Jean-Pierre Melville's *Les Enfants Terribles* (\$39.95; Criterion).

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