



THE GOD WHO WASN'T THERE

"Irreverently lays out the case that Jesus Christ never existed." -Newsweek



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Michael Giltz

Posted November 18, 2008 | 04:27 PM (EST)

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DVDs: Wall-E Vs. Panda Death Match!



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My computer was at the Apple Store being repaired so I'm cramming in two weeks of columns in one week and I'll try to be less windy than usual. So here goes....

The Best TV Box Set of the Year -- Studio One Anthology (\$99.98; Koch/Archive Of American Television) is easily one of the most welcome TV boxed sets in years.

anything about the early days of television except for what we've read in books. A classic example is Studio One, the great live drama anthology that ran on CBS for almost a decade from 1948 to 1958.

Wall-E vs. Panda Death Match -- Two terrific animated films come to DVD. I knew Wall-E (\$39.99 for the Special Edition; Disney) was a knock-out.



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The real surprise for me was *Kung Fu Panda Two Pack* (\$34.98; Dreamworks), a massive blockbuster that I wanted to see but somehow missed. It turns out to be a delight as well. I didn't expect it to rival *Wall-E* and it's not *quite* that good but it might very well make my list of the best films of the year. The animation is slyly amusing, the storyline witty and sweet and -- here's the kicker -- the action set pieces are probably the best I've seen all year (including Indiana Jones and Bond). The fight over a dumpling is a particular highlight. Jack Black, Dustin Hoffman, and David Cross are among the voice talents that shine. The only problem is that Angelina Jolie and Lucy Liu are stars but not voice actors and so their characters make little impression. Movie star does not equal talent for cartoons. This bonus set includes a separate DVD with most of the same talent in a 24 minute short called *Secrets of the Furious Five* that is not as elaborately animated but engaging and fun, along with other extras.

Diminishing Returns -- Several franchises faltered creatively. The animated *Star Wars* shorts on TV were fun in small bites. But *Star Wars: The Clone Wars Special Edition* (\$34.98; Warner Bros.) proved repetitive and dull on the big screen. *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (\$34.98; Universal) failed to capture the modest, B movie charm of the original, though I'm still confident Guillermo Del Toro is the right man for *The Hobbit*. Both of these movies are stuffed with extras and include a bonus digital copy you can download for your computer or other device. And *The Sisterhood Of The Traveling Pants 2* (\$28.98; Warner Bros.) was like a high school reunion. Everyone's a little older and doing their own thing and you want to hang out but just don't have as much in common anymore.

Comedy + Big Budgets = Disaster -- Why are big budgets the enemy of comedy? From the exhausting all-star efforts of the 50s and 60s like *It's A Mad Mad Mad Mad World* to Steven Spielberg's *1941* and now Ben Stiller's *Tropic Thunder Director's Cut* (\$34.98; Dreamworks), there's something about a big budget that just kills the spontaneity and lightness that comedy demands. *TT* has a painfully convoluted plot (actors in a war movie on location are sent into the jungle to be filmed while facing hardships only to be facing real drug runners who are actually big fans of the action film star's godawful stab at an Oscar by playing a mentally challenged farm hand...) that goes to a whole lot of bother for very little. Robert Downey Jr. is indeed hilarious playing a Russell Crowe-type actor in black face but it's hardly worth slogging through the film to see it. Do any big budget comedies work? *Ghostbusters* springs to mind, but precious little else.

Disney Gems -- Few studios do as good a job presenting the titles in their catalog with care and enthusiasm as Disney. Case in point: their Walt Disney Treasures series, which packages cartoons and TV shows and specials in tin collectable cases that make a fanboy's heart beat fast. The best here is *Dr. Syn: The Scarecrow of Romney Marsh* (\$32.99; Disney) a three-part TV special about a British man of the cloth by day and smuggler by night in the 1700s who protects the villagers in his seaside town from the rapacious King of England. Patrick McGoohan (just before *Secret Agent* and *The Prisoner* ensured his fame) is notably good as the do-gooder. What's striking today is how adult and mature this "family fare" seems. There's no comic relief, no pandering to children; just a daring tale told with seriousness. Extras include the UK theatrical edition. *The Mickey Mouse Club Presents Annette* (\$32.99; Disney) is the entire 20 episode series of shorts that aired during the show's third season telling the story of a girl who moves from the country to the suburbs. Annette was always the breakout star of the show and this showcased her perfectly, even launching her music career. Finally, *The Chronological Donald Volume Four: 1951-1961* (\$32.99; Disney) contains 31 shorts, some of them Oscar-winning and shown in their widescreen format for the first time since originally airing in movie theaters.

TV Boxed Sets Done Right, Done Okay, and Done Horribly Wrong -- My campaign against stupidly designed, bulky boxed sets that prove wildly impractical for the people who own them continues. *I Dream Of Jeannie: The Complete Series* (\$174.95; Sony) is an almost laughably good/bad example of what I'm talking about. The show itself has a certain dated, sexy charm but fans will only be frustrated by this set's design. It's a cheap, cardboard giant genie bottle, complete with a goofy cardboard stopper to insert in the top. You'd literally have to clear off a mantle to put this anywhere; it certainly won't fit on a bookcase or DVD rack. It's also very flimsy, with the DVDs themselves resting in an accordion-style case that flops over and threatens to tear every time you take it out. The DVDs are color-coded so you can see them by season but simply taking out a disc to play it is a laborious, dangerous affair. Disastrous. *Get Smart: The Complete Series* is the exact opposite. Yes, it's encased in a goofy sort of phone booth with doors that slide open or pull aside. But it fits neatly onto most shelving, takes up relatively little space and best of all each season is contained in its own beautiful looking cases that can be pulled out and stored in your library with

"Washington Unplugged"

Arianna was on CBS' "Washington..."

Alex Leo The "Real Housewives Of New York City" Flowchart Of Hate

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

"BRUNO" TRAILER! Calamity, African Babies, Chase Scenes And More (NSFW VIDEO)

IT'S HERE! The trailer for this July's Sacha Baron Cohen...

NATO Leaders Focus On Afghanistan, But Most Reject Obama's Plea For Troops (SLIDESHOW)

STRASBOURG, France — On the eve of the NATO...

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

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

Diana Palin, Sarah Palin's Sister-In-Law, Arrested For Breaking Into Home

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Police say Alaska Gov....

John Oliver Explains The Real Reason You Never Touch The Queen (VIDEO)

John Oliver was upset enough to drop his monocle when he...

Obama Teases Reporter From India During Press Conference (VIDEO)

Obama held a conference packed with press from around the world on Thursday. He called...

Jim Cramer Declares The Depression "Over" (VIDEO)

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

Scientists Find Rocket Fuel Chemical In Infant Formula

ATLANTA — Traces of a chemical used in rocket fuel were found in samples of...

Least Wasteful Cities In America (SLIDESHOW)

It's great to love the city you live in, and better to

ease. The show itself hasn't dated so well. A best-of disc would give me everything I want. But for fans, this is lovingly presented, with commentary from Mel Brooks and Buck Henry among others adding to the fun. *Star Trek Season Three Remastered Edition* (\$84.98; Paramount) is the third and last season of the original classic sci-fi show. I hate the new special effects they've added in to "spruce up" a show that didn't need any sprucing. Classic sci-fi doesn't endure because of cutting edge special effects. It endures because of great characters and a great story. On top of that, the casing for this is compact and well-sized but the DVDs themselves are a real pain to pull out. As you can see, I like compact packaging and a low price with the entire series available in one set. Sony came through with some classic TV shows, almost to a fault. *NewsRadio*, *Good Times* and *Sanford and Son* (\$59.95 each; Sony) fulfill all my wishes almost too well. The casing is a cardboard exterior with the discs themselves housed in an ultra-cheap plastic tray with every disc stacked on top of each other like LPs on a spindle. I'm not sure what that will mean for scratching down the road. But you know what? I don't care. You get the entire series of each show for a very cheap price and they'll fit on your shelf neatly and compactly with no fuss. Loads of extras come on the discs themselves. Would a giant radio housing all of *NewsRadio* in a plastic case that would have to go into my closet and bump up the price \$20 more make it better? Not to me. Keep 'em coming, I say.

Classic Movies -- "Mastered in HD" is the new calling card for reissues of classic films they want you to buy again. And frankly, if you're a big fan of the films it's worth it since DVDs remastered with care in high definition from an original camera negative do look terrific. I don't need any other reason to watch Buster Keaton's *The General* again ((\$29.95; Kino). It's one of the all-time greats (and maybe an example of a big budget comedy that actually works?) and this new HD print includes three different scores to choose from, intros by Gloria Swanson and Orson Welles, video tours of the train and filming locations and more. An essential. Paramount has three gems also mastered in HD. More recent movies don't show as dramatic an improvement but they still look great. *Roman Holiday* and *Sabrina* show Audrey Hepburn in top form (though I find *Sabrina* a tad dated today, she still charms) and *Sunset Boulevard* is a gothic gem from Billy Wilder. All are two-disc editions loaded with extras (\$24.99; Paramount) but *Sunset* is the only one with a commentary track, this one by my friend **Ed Sikov**, the author of the acclaimed, best-selling Wilder biography **On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times Of Billy Wilder**. *Roberto Rossellini: Director's Series* (\$29.98; Lionsgate) contains two movies (*Where Is Freedom* and *Escape By Night*) from the neo-realist director I've never been terribly fond of. I am however a huge fan of the iconoclastic *Derek Jarman Collection* (\$79.95; Kino), which includes three of his groundbreaking films (*Sebastiane*, *The Tempest* and *War Requiem*) and the loving 2008 documentary by his friends Isaac Julien and Tilda Swinton. I confess I've yet to watch the classic French swashbuckler *Fanfan La Tulipe* (\$29.95; Criterion) because I can't get the awful recent remake with Penelope Cruz out of my head yet. But the print looks great and Criterion always take tremendous care. If you like *The Three Musketeers*, check it out. Isabelle Huppert always pushes boundaries and that's never more compelling than when the restrictions are great. Hence the success of her *Madame Bovary* (\$29.98; Koch) with Claude Chabrol. This new edition includes a substantial documentary on Huppert herself. Finally, *The Boys In The Band* (\$26.98; Paramount) has had a strange career. It began as a groundbreaking film, turned into a relic that people saw as horribly dated but has now become a sometimes camp sometimes poignant record of a time and place when depicting gay people openly on screen (however self-hating) was revolutionary.

More TV Done Right -- *The Complete Monty Python's Flying Circus Collector's Edition* (\$159.95; A&E) is no more than the lads deserve, a new slightly more compact edition of their groundbreaking, wall-breaking and indeed ceiling-breaking TV series, along with loads and loads of extras. It's got some new fine extras, but if you have the previous slightly more sprawling edition, you needn't feel envy. But if you don't own that one, this set is essential -- TV sketch comedy doesn't get and won't get and couldn't get any better than this. But that's the sort of care you'd expect someone to take with such a massively influential and popular show. How nice to see care taken with something as relatively obscure as *M Squad: The Complete Series* (\$119.98; Timeless/Universal). Lee Marvin's no-nonsense cop show set in Chicago and running for 117 episodes captures a grittiness and jazzy insouciance that later shows can't match despite all their flailing camera angles. You get every episode in a nice compact box and even a CD soundtrack including the classic theme by Count Basie. Well done.

Can you think of any big budget comedies like *Ghostbusters* that were actually funny?

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FastCompany...

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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)
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blonde, or when he's in the Mayor's office ranting about cats and dogs falling from the sky.

In fact, even with dramas, the big budgets are often misplaced. We're at the point now where studios have convinced themselves that any big franchise film MUST have a huge budget. I'll bet the new Star Trek will be a huge disappointment, because it should be about the characters, but instead they'll make it all about the whiz bang effects.

Most people don't watch movies to see a fireworks display -- that's what the 4th of July is for. You don't need a huge budget to make comedy, nor to create suspense and tension.

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Michael Giltz - Huffpost Blogger I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink



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Thanks for reading. I have to admit the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man does make me giggle though.... And yes, movies would be far better if their budgets were lower and people were freer to concentrate on character and story rather than elaborate set-ups.

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If it doesn't have fireworks, i'll wait until it's on TV. And I bet I'm not alone in that. I haven't paid retail to see a comedy in decades, but I paid 8 times to watch The Matrix in the theatre. So if box office matters (and it still does), movies will continue to have expensive FX.

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