

August 29, 2012

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Freelance writer

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DVDs: War Horse Stumbles

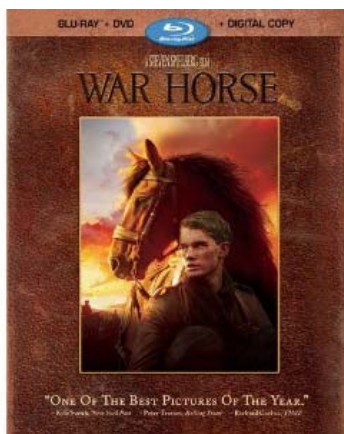
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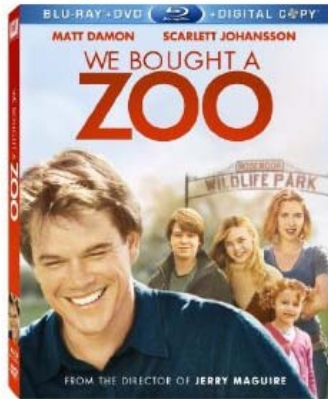
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War Horse (\$45.99 BluRay combo; Touchstone/DreamWorks)

The Iron Lady (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Weinstein)

We Bought a Zoo (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Fox) -- It's been a decade since *Catch Me If You Can*, director Steven Spielberg's last truly satisfying film. But *Tintin* and now *War Horse* are misfires on the level of career low points like *Hook* and *Always*, films so out of touch you can hardly believe they came from someone who at the very least always had a populist touch. These two were both appropriately rejected not just by critics but by audiences as well.

War Horse is based on the novel by Michael Morpurgo, a solid young adult novel with classic status in the UK. It was turned into a brilliant bit of theater (really, you should see it if at all possible). But Spielberg's film fails on every level. I'll focus on just one: the cinematography by the great Janusz Kaminski is laughably over the top, dolloping every scene in such a hazy, "pretty" manner that it becomes self-satirizing...until the would-be tear-jerker of a finale raises the ante even higher and bathes a simple scene of quiet homecoming in such lurid color, it's like reading a preteen's diary where every emotion and sentiment is underlined and followed by a string of exclamation points. Shameless, terrible work.

Meryl Streep on the other hand does sterling work as always in depicting British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady*. It's a pity the movie isn't remotely worthy of her performance. Some object to the film humanizing the divisive Thatcher. I wish the movie had embraced Maggie more strongly: show her as the political steamroller she was. Or demonize her! But do *something* other than generally ignore what made Thatcher as interesting and compelling as any Shakespearean king. Instead, people who don't know their history would look at this story of a nice little old lady and wonder why people on the street are screaming at her and bombing the places where she stays. Toothless.

Finally, Cameron Crowe is utterly lost. At least *Elizabethtown* flopped with originality and a sense of purpose. *We Bought A Zoo* is just an anonymous, family friendly film that might have been (mis)directed by anyone. Someone help this man.



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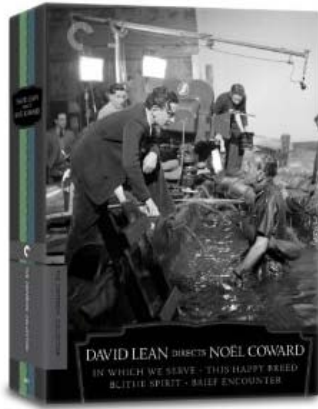
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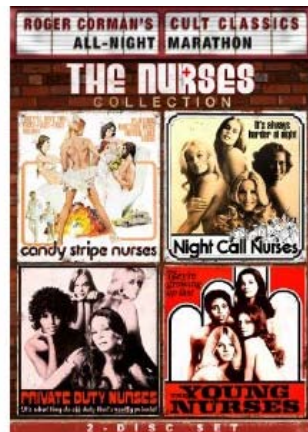
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David Lean Directs Noel Coward (\$79.95; Criterion) -- Another impeccable boxed set from Criterion, this one celebrating the collaboration between a young David Lean and writer/actor Noel Coward. Before Lean turned into a specialist in smart epics like *Lawrence Of Arabia*, he was a tight, economical director. His first truly exceptional movie was *Great Expectations*, but you can see him building to that masterpiece in these four earlier films.

Blithe Spirit is based on a stage smash about a husband haunted by the ghost of his first wife while trying to get along with his second. As a play, it must have seemed awfully clever. But Coward's essential disinterest in humanity shines through in this silly froth: any writer worth his salt would have grounded the comedy in some sort of purpose, such as having the ghost helping the husband set aside his first love and commit wholly to the new wife or dumping a harridan that was no good for him or... well... something! This comedy just bounces about to no purpose and without nearly enough humor to let it coast on charm.

This Happy Breed is a lower class spin on Coward's Oscar-winning *Cavalcade*. Both tell the recent history of Great Britain through the eyes of a family. *This Happy Breed* is solid agit prop to gin up soldiers by reminding everyone of exactly what England was fighting for (hearth and home and all that mush). It's no *Mrs. Miniver* but interesting nonetheless. *Brief Encounter* is the best of the bunch, a terribly stiff upper lip drama in which the romance is painfully, beautifully unsatisfied in the most British of manners. After seeing numerous Coward plays, hearing many of his songs and watching these movies, I must admit he leaves me cold. Gilbert & Sullivan are sillier, Oscar Wilde and Shaw more pointed, while Coward is just archness and "sophistication." But Coward certainly couldn't ask for a better presentation of his work. Criterion includes bountiful extras, from a UK TV show about Coward's career to a 1971 documentary about Lean and even a rare audio chat from 1969 between Richard Attenborough and Coward. Clearly, Coward was at his best in small talk.



Roger Corman's Cult Classics: The Nurses Collection (\$19.93; Shout) -- In this feminine critique of gender roles and the medical society's historic tendency to marginalize, ignore or dismiss as psychological the physical ailments of women, the white uniforms of the nurses represent not purity and innocence but its opposite, the blank slate of desire on which.... Okay, just kidding. This is more Roger Corman B movie silliness. If titles like *Candy Stripe Nurses*, *Night Call Nurses*, *Private Duty Nurses*, and *The Young Nurses* sound like they're up your alley, by all means dive in. Be prepared for less nudity and naughtiness than you're hoping for but hey -- in the early 1970s there was no Skinemax, so what else did you have to watch?



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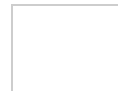
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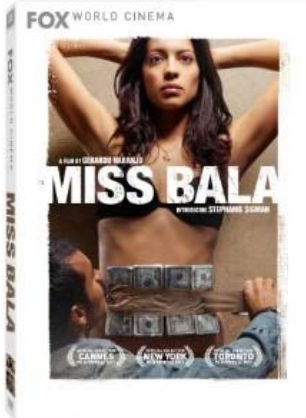
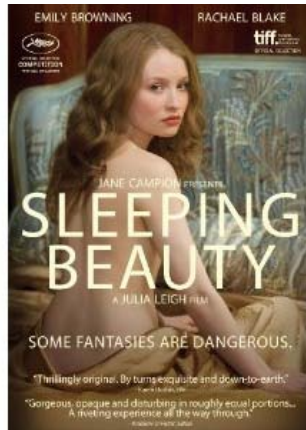
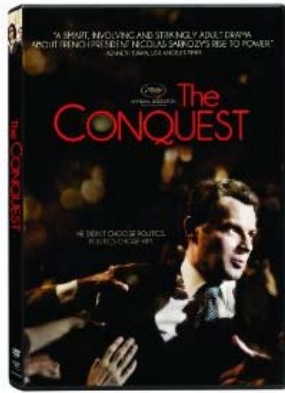


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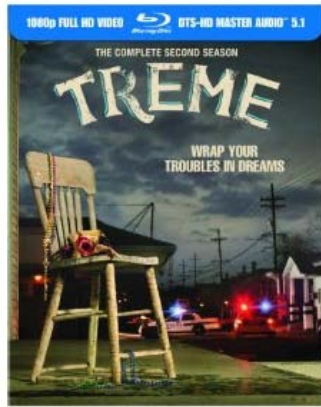
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The Conquest (\$29.95; Music Box)

Sleeping Beauty (\$24.98; MPI)

Miss Bala (\$29.99; Fox) -- *The Conquest* is a fun, smart political drama about Nicolas Sarkozy's unlikely rise to power. I boned up on French politics to prepare myself for this movie but the performances are sharp enough and the lust for power universal enough to translate into any language. *Sleeping Beauty* is a rather silly tale of a young woman's almost passive descent into the sort of kinky netherworld that only exists in movies. However, the lead Emily Browning is totally committed to her part and director Julia Leigh is so completely in control of the story on a technical level that you just know they both have real talent and are ones to watch. *Miss Bala* never quite lives up to its catchy premise -- beauty queen wannabe gets caught up in drug wars -- but is a serviceable thriller nonetheless. I expect a U.S. remake with a comic spin.



Treme Season Two (\$79.98 Blu-ray; HBO) -- I'm still rooting for *Treme*, the drama about life in post-Katrina New Orleans. I haven't finished with season two yet and I'm still waiting for it all to click into place the way *The Wire* did about half way through its first season. For the moment, it remains in shambles with an excellent cast as the saving grace of a frustrating, meandering storyline. The bountiful extras look promising, with a focus on the music, the art, the food, the Mardi Gras Indians and most unusual of all a commentary track devoted to the musical performances. You can't fault them for their passion.

Most titles listed here will be available in multiple formats and in multiple combinations, including DVD, Blu ray, digital download, video on demand, streaming and the like. The format listed is the format provided for review, not all the formats available. It is often the most expensive version with the most extras. Do check individual titles for availability in all their various guises and price points.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of [Showbiz Sandbox](#), a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

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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sureofit
2 Fans

02:37 PM on 04/19/2012

His bio says the critic is an "expert on pop culture," yet he didn't know that War Horse was very warmly received by critics. I'm still suspicious of the quality of most writing for The Post. That has nothing to do with politics, but quality. I generally stick to the aggregated pieces in the middle of the pages..

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rp2par
236 Fans

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09:30 PM on 04/20/2012

My teenage granddaughter thought it was very good. She told me to be prepared though. I adore horses and use to own them....she feels that I will get too emotional at the gore and violence. Since I've read the book, I know what to expect. It's just sitting on my desk.....waiting for me. I would have loved to see the stage play.

It's funny, my grandfather served in WWI and never mentioned horses. He was an ambulance driver and auto mechanic during his time 'over there'. Oh, the stories he would tell.....

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER
Wistfulinking
World traveller, bon-vivant, writer..
702 Fans

01:58 PM on 04/19/2012

War Horse review by the New York Times is a bit more professional.

It's a top critics pick amongst all PAID movie critics.

<http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/12/23/movies/war-horse-directed-by-stein-spielberg-review.html?pagewanted=all>

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rich3324
Likes: Chasing villagers. Dislikes: Fire
696 Fans

09:03 AM on 04/19/2012

I thought War Horse was worth the watch.

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ScottHarrigan
2 Fans

03:40 AM on 04/19/2012

This is a good analysis, if not in argument at least in intent. Articles that ask "Is it worth the money?" are extremely useful. In my personal opinion, it takes quite a bit to warrant buying a film. It seems frivolous to own lots of movies that just sit on the shelf collecting dust. Putting up the prices of these films is a nice touch.

As for Spielberg, he seems to be a bit past his prime when it comes to making films. War Horse does not look like a terrible film, but it fits into the standard niche of the inspirational film. With how tired the genre is, expectations for these types of films are exceptionally low. People have seen what happens when Spielberg makes a truly inspirational film. War Horse looks very saccharine; Spielberg needs to step it up if he wants silver screen glory again.

<http://www.videodetective.com/movies/schindlers-list/5037>

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FirstGame72
The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters
564 Fans

07:34 PM on 04/18/2012

I will admit I have not seen "War Horse."
But I do have a strong opinion of the directorial career of Mr Spielberg.
As Mr Giltz points out, Stephen Spielberg's career as a major director has had his ups and downs.

Although he is easily one of the top 3 or 4 best American directors of the last 40 years, he spent most of the 1980's - while American film as a whole was enjoying one of its finest decades - trying to get in the "zone," as they say. After ET (1982) Stephen struggled to find his "vision" and he did not turn it around again until Jurassic Park (1993). So there is plenty of precedent for a misstep now with "War Horse."

I do disagree with Mr Giltz dismissal of Mr Speilberg's films of the last decade and feel this may have even hurt his argument against War Horse (which i might like when i see it). In the last ten year's (since catch me if you can) I feel that both "War of the Worlds" and "Munich" are both excellent films - right on par with Mr Speilberg's finest. I feel that both were dismissed by critics for more political reasons than artistic ones which lead to both of them being somewhat ignored by the public.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz

freelance writer

127 Fans

01:20 PM on 04/19/2012

Thanks for commenting. I'm not sure what any political objections would be to War Of The Worlds. it had some great tense moments but like the novel and previous film versions, it just peters out at the end in a rather deflating manner. As for Munich, it's the most noteworthy of his films from the past decade but still didn't make my best of the year list, unlike so many other Spielberg films of the past. That's my standard for him; I expect a great film and when it's merely good or okay, I consider it a disappointment.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

Wistfulinking

World traveller, bon-vivant, writer..

702 Fans

01:58 PM on 04/19/2012

War Horse was fantastic and universally lauded...by the academy.

Six nominations including one for Best Picture speaks volumes ;)

[History](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Share it](#)

FirstGame72

The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters

564 Fans

02:12 PM on 04/19/2012

Why tell me? I didn't give it a bad review, Mr Giltz did. I said I haven't seen it yet and I'm reserving judgement. However I do recall a review of the film on Salon where they panned it pretty badly so acclaim was not "universal." But is it ever in the art world?

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agness nutter

What fresh hell is this?

574 Fans

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03:13 PM on 04/19/2012

War Horse was reviewed favourably by 77% of "Top Critics" aggregated on Rotten Tomatoes. Nowhere does that amount to being "universally lauded".

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AlexNYC

Pumps dont work cause the vandals took the handles

778 Fans

06:32 PM on 04/18/2012

Regarding War Horse, the finale scene of orange/red colors was in fact real and was filmed by Speilberg in a spontaneous reaction to an actual epic sunset. Some parts of the film were cliché and simple, but it was geared more as a family film than the live theater versions.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER
Michael Giltz
freelance writer
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01:24 PM on 04/19/2012

Hi Alex, anyone who quotes Dylan is good in my book. I didn't suggest that the sunset was digitally altered. But the filters used by Kaminski, the way it was captured, the choice of how actors were silhouetted and so on all contributed to what I considered the over-the-top colors of the final scene. Saying "it really happened" is not the same as how they chose to present and frame and shoot that genuine sunset. As for film versus theater, both are very appropriate for families though either one features animals in danger and animals dying as well as war scenes so young children esp sensitive to animals in pain should be taken into consideration. But I wouldn't hesitate to take a ten year old to either the film or the play.

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NHBill
673 Fans

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03:59 PM on 04/18/2012

War Horse "Shameless, terrible work."
Please!

It's a fine family film and while it comes up far short against The Black Stallion it is an excellent companion to that film.

If you have a family and are looking for a film that you can all watch together, 8 and up for the kids due to the non-bloody war scenes, then War Horse is worth bringing home.

Giltz' criticism is outrageously over the top.

He's a bit more on point regarding Iron Lady.

Streep is great.

The script is not.

We Bought A Zoo IS a disappointment from Cameron Crowe but again it's a perfectly acceptable family rental.

Treme like The Wire before it is outstanding TV.

Watching on DVD is the best way to see it.

But it's HBO and not for the kids.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER
Michael Giltz
freelance writer
[127 Fans](#)

01:29 PM on 04/19/2012

Hi NHBill, thanks for commenting. My standard of criticism is not "can this film be watched with your children without fear of adult content?" It's simply, is this a good film or not? Many films qualify as family fare, even painless family fare, but still aren't good films. The Lorax is a fine family film if you want something safe, and as a parent I might get dragooned into watching it, just as my nieces and nephews suddenly had me seeing Alvin and the Chipmunks. Terrible, terrible movie (and far worse than the bland War Horse) but was it ok family fare? Yes, in the sense of is it appropriate. Yes in the sense will adults sometime allow subpar fare be put on thier DVD players to keep the kids amused. No, in the sense of is it an enduring work of art, which the best family films can be. I'll take The Black Stallion a hundred times over rather than War Horse. I'll take Toy Story over The Lorax. Same with We Bought A Zoo. we both seem to agree it's not good; why show your kids a so-so movie? Why not rent a classic instead? I agree 100% that shows like Treme are best watched all at once in a marathon over a week or two rather than stretched out. It does improve the experience.

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NHBill
673 Fans

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02:14 PM on 04/19/2012

I was motivated to comment by your hyperbolic criticism of "War Horse" as "Shameless, terrible work."

("Human Centipede 2" or "Hostel 2" is "Shameless, terrible work.")

"War Horse" was nominated for 6 Academy Awards including Best Picture!

The biggest thing the film is guilty of is overt manipulation but as with all Spielberg films it is expertly crafted with fine performances from the cast.

Many critics seem to take umbrage at John Williams' Oscar nominated score for War Horse.

I'm not one of them.

War Horse is "B" level Spielberg which in my view makes for worthwhile family home viewing that eases children into the mature theme of the futility of war.

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