

DVDs: When Meryl Streep Still Astonished

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One can always count on Criterion. They've returned *The Black Stallion* -- one of the best looking films of all time -- to its full glory. And by giving its stamp of approval to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, they've reminded us both of the film itself (which has slipped off the radar a bit) and the remarkable career of Meryl Streep. They're two of the best releases of this TV-heavy week.

THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion)

FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD (\$39.99 BluRay; Fox)

THE BLACK STALLION (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion)

Remember when we didn't take Meryl Streep for granted? Remember when her receiving Oscar nomination after nomination wasn't a punchline but the only sane thing that could happen for anyone who appreciated great acting? Remember when Meryl Streep still astonished? Yes, it's hard to remember such a time. But that was certainly the case back in 1981. Streep was just beginning really, but she'd already developed an impressive body of work. Not only did she star in the landmark, Emmy winning miniseries *Holocaust* (which to this day is not available in its original broadcast length!), Streep had also acted in *Julia* (which was nominated for eleven Academy Awards), *The Deer Hunter* (winner of five Oscars including Best Picture and the source of her first Oscar nomination), Woody Allen's *Manhattan* and *Kramer Vs. Kramer* (which won five Oscars including Best Picture and Streep's first win for best supporting actress). That happened from 1977 to 1979, when she was also acting on stage. Anyone who rolls their eyes at hearing about how great Streep is need only look at her credits. So here comes *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, a film based on the unfilmable novel by John Fowles that solved the challenge of the book by making a movie about the making of a movie of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Streep starred alongside Jeremy Irons (who had *Brideshead Revisted* out the same year) and they reveled in the opportunity to switch back and forth from contemporary actors having an on-set romance to doomed lovers in the 1800s. It was clever, smart, gorgeously shot, critically acclaimed and Streep received a well-deserved Oscar nomination for Best Actress. The following year she would deliver one of the all-time great screen performances in *Sophie's Choice*, a performance that would overshadow most anything else forever. It certainly did that for *French Lieutenant's Woman* since *Sophie's Choice* is the automatic touchstone for anyone discussing her talent. So many more films arrived in the years to come, a cornucopia of accents, dramas, comedies, singing (though not enough), but it's high time this early triumph was given renewed attention. Criterion has delivered an excellent print (the cinematography is by Freddie Francis) and among the extras are new conversations with Streep and Irons who are rightly fond of this film that has become lost in the shuffle of two excellent careers.

Carey Mulligan is making the sort of interesting, smart choices Streep did early on. No one will match the extraordinary run Streep enjoyed right off the bat, of course. But Mulligan has gone from her breakthrough *An Education* to the sci-fi drama *Never Let Me Go* to the quiet thriller *Drive* to the 1960s folkie flick *Inside Llewyn Davis* to the TV spoof *The Spoils Of Babylon* and now this period drama *Far From The Madding Crowd*. (Oh, and starred on stage in a fine revival of David Hare's *Skylight*.) The latest adaptation of the Thomas Hardy novel, this film is strong on all levels, from the direction of Thomas Vinterberg to the score by Craig Armstrong and the cast that includes Michael Sheen, Tom Sturridge, Matthias Schoenaerts and at the heart of it Mulligan. Forget Streep; she has to stare down comparisons to the luminous beauty of Julie Christie in the classic 1967 take. Yikes. Like Streep, Mulligan is showing one of the most important elements in a successful career: picking

good projects. This one hasn't been a commercial hit, but it's proven her versatility, allowed her to anchor a film and given Mulligan one of her best roles. And next we can see her opposite Streep in the feminist movement chronicle *Suffragette* due out in October.

And here's another recent gem from Criterion. *The Black Stallion* is now a classic family film and rightly praised as one of the best looking movies of all time. Indeed, it married an arthouse sensibility to the story of a boy and his horse to glorious effect. And the original release of the film on DVD sucked! Not only was it not gloriously beautiful, it was a shamefully weak print. After years of misery, that dreadful situation has been rectified with this excellent 4K restoration. Director Carroll Ballard is in top form on his directorial debut, alongside child actor Kelly Reno and the champion Arabian stallion Cass Ole. True, one never wants to leave the island where the boy is stranded with the horse. But the more conventional second half of the film (featuring Mickey Rooney in one of his last hurrahs) is fun on its own terms. Astonishingly, cinematographer Caleb Deschanel wasn't even nominated for an Oscar but boy does this film look spectacular. And what does that mean? That it's pretty? Well, yes it is. But what it really means is that cinematography and the framing of visuals (along with the editing and score and other elements) tell the story in a way that is fresh and captivating and alive to the moment, turning a familiar chestnut of a children's book into a masterpiece. Obviously, Criterion has done it right, but beyond the excellent print they've included a number of Ballard's earlier shorts leading up to this debut as well as chats with Ballard and Deschanel.

THE KNICK SEASON ONE (\$39.98 BluRay; Cinemax/HBO)

SCANDAL SEASON FOUR (\$45.99 DVD; Walt Disney Studios)

PERSON OF INTEREST SEASON FOUR (\$60.10 BluRay; Warner Home Video)

HELL ON WHEELS SEASON FOUR (\$49.98 BluRay; Entertainment One)

Solid, entertaining television is literally everywhere. Thank God for boxed sets of full seasons and streaming and on-demand or no one could keep up. Have you been watching *The Knick*? Director Steven Soderbergh said he might retire from films. So what? If he focused on TV like this we'll all be the better for it. Clive Owen stars as a surgeon struggling with tough working conditions (and an opium addiction) at the "Knick," a financially struggling hospital in New York City at the turn of the 20th century. I remember when the TV show *MASH* was considered shockingly gruesome for having a little squirt of blood hit Hawkeye. Well, *The Knick* goes in for a LOT more realism, god help us -- especially since a running plotline has Owen trying desperately to perfect a C section to deliver babies, preferably without killing the mother. It's not a great show, but it is dependably good with a solid cast and a nice jaundiced view of 1900 New York.

Have you been watching *Scandal*? Did you see where...no, I won't give any spoilers. But of course the show is nothing but spoilers, filled to the brim with outrageous plot twists and no-they-didn't moments. Unlike say *Grey's Anatomy* (another show from creator Shonda Rhimes) this one cannot run forever. To maintain any sense of self-respect, they should look at season five or at most season six as the finale and go out with a bang. Otherwise, the great fun of Kerry Washington's Olivia Pope will devolve into telenovela silliness.

Have you been watching *Person Of Interest*? No, I haven't either. But I have smart friends who love it. It began as the sort of dependable drama CBS does so well -- a show that essentially you can dive into any week. You get a nice dose of techno-paranoia along with the comforting fantasy that someone out there with all the power of the internet at their beck and call actually wants to do a little good. That changed in season three with the show becoming more ambitious and developing a season-long arc involving artificial intelligence. Season four built on that growth with some of the best episodes in its run. Now the show is coming back for a shortened fifth and presumably final season. Happily, the creators recognize this and will go for broke. So you can start at the beginning or maybe season three and catch up with one of the many, many very good TV shows that have flourished in the past decade.

Have you been watching *Hell On Wheels*? But it's a western! I love westerns and since there are so few honest

to goodness westerns being produced, you've got me as a fan just for making one. Like Person Of Interest, this AMC drama has become better and better. Once they realized they had their fans and weren't gonna get any more, they relaxed and made the show they wanted. In season four, that included a harsh winter and how this affected both the building of the railroad and the lives of everyone associated with it. Their fifth and final season has just begun so what are you waiting for? Anson Mount will never have a better role and he knows it. And the welcome fact that everyone benefits when a show can prepare for its end means more and more TV series can prepare for a satisfying conclusion. You'll have to wait until 2016 for the actual last batch of episodes but for fans, it'll be worth it.

THE FRONT PAGE (\$29.95 BluRay; Kino)

Oh I pity The Front Page. It's a classic play, revived on Broadway thanks to its hilarious dialogue and the irresistible setting of a newspaper back in the tabloid glory days of the 1930s when newspapering seemed like the most fun in the world. But the film had the bad fortune to be made in 1931 during that awkward transition from silent to sound. If any movie would benefit from sound its The Front Page and all that blisteringly funny rat-a-tat back and forth between reports and editors or reporters and politicians or reporters and reporters, because no one argues more than reporters. Sadly, the technology of the time wasn't quite up to the demands of the play and the dialogue on many earlier versions of this film has seemed a little muddy. Still, the film that resulted must have blown people away, just as early Marx Brothers made moviegoers think their heads were going to explode. Yes, The Front Page is a delight with Adolphe Menjou and Pat O'Brien in top form. Unfortunately, nine years later they flipped one of the leads into a woman and delivered His Girl Friday, a remake of The Front Page that is a stone cold classic, one of the all-time greats with top work by Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell that can't be beat. The Front Page from 1931 has been in its shadow ever since. Luckily, the film has been restored by Kino and the Library of Congress and it looks and sounds better than ever. Oh it still sounds like a movie from 1931 but it's easier to appreciate the marvelous acting on hand. Among the extras are a short about the restoration and not one but two radio plays -- one features the film's stars and the other has Walter Winchell (!) taking the lead. Maybe now, finally, The Front Page can make the front page itself, even if it's still at the bottom and His Girl Friday remains above the fold.

THE PEOPLE UNDER THE STAIRS (\$29.93 BluRay; Shout! Factory)

Some people make horror movies because it's a great way to break into film: producers are always willing to take a shot on new talent with a low-budget horror flick. Other people make horror films because it's in their blood. Director Wes Craven is the latter sort. And in fact he broke into movies making porn just so someday he could get a chance to make a horror film. When he did, the result was 1972's The Last House On The Left, a classic of its sort. Many more would follow, like the Nightmare series and of course Scream, which has produced four movies and a TV show (to date, that is). Tucked away just about smack dab in the middle of that 40+ year run is The People Under The Stairs. It's perfect for scaredy cats like me who prefer their horror laced with humor. It's an over the top tale of a kid named Fool (a very good Brandon Quintin Adams) helping burglars break into the super scary home overseen by a brother and sister who have children trapped under the stairs and believe over-acting is where good performances begin. Everet McGill and Wendy Robie are a hoot as the siblings (lovers?) who trap the would-be burglars and won't let them go. And the chase is on. Chase? In a house? Yes, because the house is filled with stairs and landings and secret passages and is rambling in the extreme. It's nutty, silly, goofy, scary and great creepy fun. I haven't dived into the extras yet but they are copious: commentary from Craven, another commentary with Adams and other actors, as well as various shorts about the making of the film.

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