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DVDs: Why Not Remake *Citizen Kane*?

Posted January 25, 2008 | 01:49 PM (EST)

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Like pornography, an unnecessary movie remake is hard to define - but you know it when you see it. A remake of *Citizen Kane* would be ludicrous. So would a remake of *Casablanca*. (Though that hasn't stopped them from trying to spin off not one but two TV series based on that classic wartime romance.)

On the other hand, no one is going to top Errol Flynn's *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, but that character is so iconic it seems perfectly natural for each generation to give it a shot. Same with Superman, Sherlock Holmes and Tarzan - great figures in pop culture are just irresistible. If the original had a clever premise but didn't really deliver - think *Ocean's 11* or *The Thomas Crown Affair* - you've got another reason to green light a remake.

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Then there's the perfect little movie that resists any idiotic idea to improve or update it. The classic, trim little western *3:10 To Yuma* is a perfect example. The 1957 original (\$19.94; Sony) is as tight as a drum, with Glenn Ford never better as the quietly menacing outlaw and Van Heflin (never particularly good any

other time) just perfect as the stolid rancher who steps in to guard the bad guy and shepherd him to the train station and eventual justice.

Fifty years later, Russell Crowe and Christian Bale reprise those roles (\$29.95; Lionsgate). The movie is beefed up with a little more travel, a little more violence and a little more unnecessary stabs at psychological depth. Anyone who hasn't seen the original might think it's fine. But those who have can't help but think it's utterly pointless. Why remake a brilliant, specific, nigh on perfect movie that simply couldn't be improved on?

Probably no one has defended *The Invasion* (\$28.98; Warner Bros.), the Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig remake of *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* out Tuesday. I have friends who really like the

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1978 remake by director Philip Kaufman. But even before I saw the original, I found that version a little slow and unconvincing, even though the premise of "pod people" appealed to my inner Twilight Zone geek.

Then I saw the 1956 original, which I'd always heard was a great B movie, a great low budget sci-fi flick, a great metaphor for the McCarthy witch hunts and/or Communism itself, a great spin on Fifties conformity or take your pick. Forget all that. When I finally saw the original at a revival house, all I saw was a great, great movie. It's gripping, creepy, funny, utterly involving and with a dramatic ending that ranks among the most memorable in movie history. I'd gladly tackle a new Tarzan movie tomorrow and not worry in the least about comparisons with the past. But why would anyone want to remake a gem like this that's already perfect?

Also out: some boxed sets, including *4 By Agnes Varda* (\$99.95; Criterion), featuring *Vagabond* and *Cleo From 5 to 7* along with loads of extras; *The John Frankenheimer Collection* (\$39.98; MGM), a grab bag with one masterpiece (*The Manchurian Candidate*), one blast of fun (*The Train*), one decent courtroom drama (*The Young Savages*) and one good car chase (*Ronin*); two celebrations of straight-to-DVD franchises *American Pie - The Threesome Pack* (\$39.98; Universal) and *Bring It On - The Cheerbook Collection* (\$44.98; Universal) and hey, if you weren't buying and renting them, they wouldn't keep making 'em; *Monty Python's Life Of Brian: The Immaculate Edition* (\$24.96; Sony), out Tuesday, a silly romp through religion ("Blessed are the cheese makers?") that only sounds offensive to people who haven't bothered to see it; *Swamp Thing: The Series* (\$39.98; Shout), the surprisingly durable DC comic character's transfer to TV (though it's hard not to miss Adrienne Barbeau); Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (\$39.95; Criterion), in a 1951 Swedish version I'd never heard of but which is renowned; *The Odd Couple: The Third Season* (\$38.99; Paramount), a sitcom that balances perfectly on the edge of silliness and repetition without ever losing sight of the genuine characters at the heart of it all; *Make Room For Daddy Season 6* (\$39.99; S'more), starring Danny Thomas in the tail-end of one of sitcoms's defining early hits; Lars Von Trier's *The Kingdom Series Two* (\$29.99; Koch Lorber), a spooky, hospital-set supernatural drama (think *Dark Shadows* meets *ER*), which I find murky but some horror buffs absolutely love; The Rock's thoroughly unexpected switch to inoffensive family comedy is complete with the box office hit *The Game Plan* (\$29.99; Disney); *Galactica 1980* (\$29.98; Universal), the jaw-droppingly awful attempt to reboot the original series by finding Earth; and *Barney Miller: Second Season* (\$29.95; Sony), a sterling TV series that for many years was the one TV show that cops insisted got it right - forget *Hill Street Blues* and *Homicide* and *Adam-12* and *NYPD Blue*, for the day-to-day life of a cop this charmer nailed it.

And here are my favorite movies of 2007:

1. *The Assassination of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford*
2. *Lars and the Real Girl*
3. *Zodiac*
4. *The Wind That Shakes The Barley*
5. *There Will Be Blood*
6. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*
7. *L'Iceberg*
8. *Michael Clayton*
9. *Ratatouille*
10. *Once*
11. *The Host*
12. *This Is England*
13. *Superbad*
14. *Control*
15. *The Bourne Ultimatum*

So what's your favorite remake? The most pointless?

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3fingerbrown See Profile I'm a Fan of 3fingerbrown permalink

The greatest remake of all time? Easy. It's "The Maltese Falcon." Hammett's novel was shot not once but twice before John Huston's 1941 remake. Huston's version so completely overshadows the first two that people don't even think of it as a remake. (When "The Maltese Falcon" comes up in a discussion of great films, no one asks "Which version?") All these years later, it still sparkles. It's the film equivalent to Hammett's prose (detective story as art), but there isn't a dull or self-indulgent frame in the entire picture. Truly the third time was the charm.

As for the worst: I'll second, or third, the motion: Burton's "Planet of the Apes" was the most inept major motion picture I ever paid money to see. It wasn't released, it escaped.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 07:20 AM on 01/29/2008

AlexRemington See Profile I'm a Fan of AlexRemington permalink

My least favorite movie of all time is Michael Almereyda's Hamlet, with Ethan Hawke, Julia Stiles, and Bill Murray all falling flat on their faces trying to pull of Gen-X Shakespeare and failing more miserably than I can possibly describe. I guess you'd call it a remake.

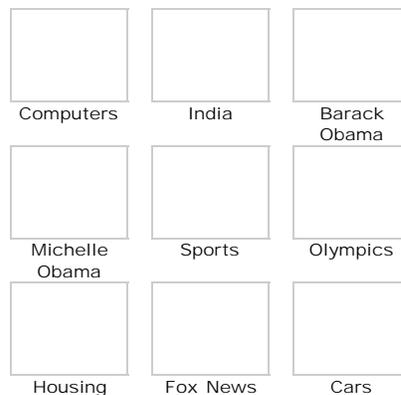
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TheWesternBreed See Profile I'm a Fan of TheWesternBreed permalink

I like old film noir movies. I made the mistake of seeing the remake of "D.O.A." some years ago. That helped to avoid the mistake of seeing the remake of "Gun Crazy" during the five minutes it was in movie theaters. By all accounts I made the right choice.

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You appear to know more about this than I Michael, but I find the Scorsese Cape Fear a little more suspenseful and interesting to watch than the original.

I feel Psycho should have been left alone though. Too perfect to mess with.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 04:01 PM on 01/25/2008

mbafromharvard See Profile I'm a Fan of mbafromharvard permalink

favorite: Scorsese's version of "Cape Fear".
most pointless: Gus Van Sant's do-over of "Psycho".

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 03:43 PM on 01/25/2008

JustAnotherJoe See Profile I'm a Fan of JustAnotherJoe permalink

Most pointless I've recently heard about but hasn't yet been released (Phew!): The Day the Earth Stood Still - another 50's classic sci-fi movie

Favorite Remake: 12 Monkeys (a remake of a French film "La Jetee") The original was a classic, shot except for maybe one scene as a slideshow. The classic status alone makes a whole lot of critics cringe at Terry Gilliam's remake, but I think he updated the film nicely. It's still a mess, but an enjoyable one with Bruce Willis cast as the reluctant anti-hero and a Brad Pitt as his psychotic antagonist.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 03:34 PM on 01/25/2008

grendl See Profile I'm a Fan of grendl permalink

" Planet of the Apes", and "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory"(Willy Wonka was the original's title) were both pointless exercises in narcissism for Tim Burton. Why he felt the need to invade such sacrosanct territory, whilst removing the best moments from each film is, well, typical.

One of the greatest moments in the original " Planet of the Apes" happened when Taylor, the astronaut played by Charlton Heston is finally caught, netted and strung up. Hampered by strained vocal chords up until that point he utters the words which shock the monkeys into silence. " Get your stinking paws off me you damned dirty ape." A fine fine cinematic moment, which Tim Burton sought to ignore, as well as the appearance of the Statue of Liberty on the beach. Why remake a story and remove the best parts?

So too with " Charlie and the Chocolate Factory". Although Burton's version adheres to the Dahl story in some instances, like the reveal that Charlie has won the Chocolate factory which in the book is not a very dramatic moment. He simply looks down and sees that all the other children have been weeded out, fallen into chocolate rivers, or turned into fruit, then says...oh, you're left. okay, the factory's yours.

The brilliance of the screenplay and movie version was in Charlie's returning of the gobstopper to the desk of Willy Wonka, a redemptive even heroic moment which sets him apart from the rest of his greedy selfish gluttonous ilk, earning him the keys to the factory. Burton's adherence to the book, while accurate fell flat onscreen. Plus he added a bunch on nonsense with Willy Wonka's backstory, something entirely unnecessary as Charlie Bucket was the protagonist, and Wonka the bit of cinematic invention who needs no explanation.

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hapkidokid See Profile I'm a Fan of hapkidokid permalink

Because of the high probability it would suck?

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