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DVD: Woody Allen Back on Top, Ready for Oscar Love

Posted: 12/31/11 10:27 AM ET

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Oh the DVDs are piling up, and these are the dog days of late December and early January when DVD releases slow to a trickle. Let's get to it.



MIDNIGHT IN PARIS (\$35.99 BluRay; Sony) -- Director Woody Allen has often expressed bemusement about why some films are embraced by the public and others don't click, and it rarely aligns with his own assessment. I'm with you on this one, Woody. Why *Midnight in Paris* should become the highest grossing film in his career is beyond me. (Keep in mind, I am not adjusting for inflation but this

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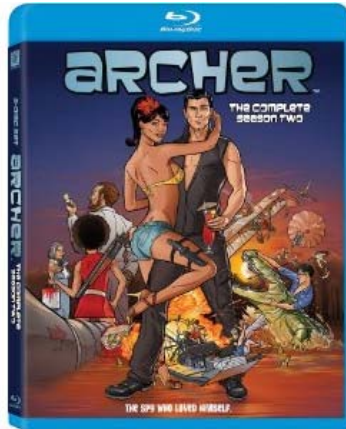
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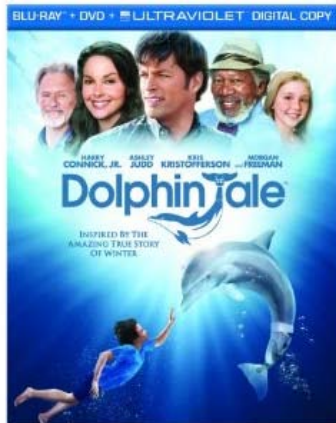
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Recommend 264


is still a very successful film.) It's one of the mild late period Woodys, not so godawful that it makes you like his work less but by no means strong. The story -- modest SPOILER -- is a banal look at a Hollywood screenwriter with a miserable marriage who wishes he could have been in Paris during its 20s heyday. Presto, he gets his wish and rubs elbows with Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and the like. The movie soon reduces to simply introducing new historical figures as if their very presence was amusing. Look! Toulouse-Lautrec! In an embarrassing finale, our hero ignores the adult woman his own age who actually seems interesting (Carla Bruni) and goes off with a minor character who is little barely out of her teens. The timing of the DVD release is good because it puts the movies in the hands of Oscar voters just as they're filling out their ballots. Audiences and older Oscar members ate this up so I expect this will be one of Woody's best showings come nomination, with Picture, Director, Screenplay all in play and perhaps an acting nod for Kathy Bates, though that's a long shot. Owen Wilson is actually a good Woody, but the film is paper-thin if harmless.



ARCHER SEASON TWO (\$39.99 BluRay; FOX) -- My favorite sitcom on TV stumbled out of the gate for an episode or two but soon redeemed itself and built on the silly, raunchy and hilarious work of season one. The voice cast is simply terrific -- special kudos to... well everyone, including H. Jon Benjamin, Judy Greer, Jessica Walter, Chris Parnell and the rest. If any voice cast deserved to be nominated for acting Emmys, these are the guys. The setup of a super agent spy that works for an independent company run by his mom remains surprisingly rich in bringing new life to familiar situations like office politics and the like. Sexy, hilarious and you'll want to watch it again and again.



DOLPHIN TALE (\$35.99 BluRay combo; Warner Bros.) -- This year hasn't been a total wash for the talented Harry Connick Jr. He released a live album of his Broadway concert show in March. Now at the end, he is stranded on the Great White Way in the woebegone rethought revival of *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever*. But in between he enjoyed a solid family hit with this movie about a kid who finds an injured dolphin and convinces Connick Jr. to help the animal make it back into the ocean. The big names include Kris Kristofferson, Morgan Freeman and Ashley Judd, but it's Connick, the kid and the dolphin front and center.


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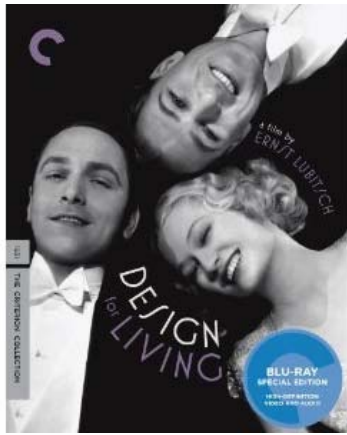
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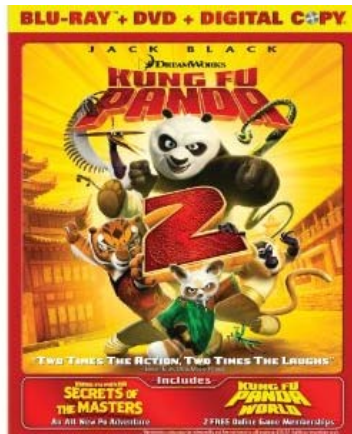
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DESIGN FOR LIVING (\$39.95 BluRay and \$29.95 DVD; Criterion) -- This isn't pure Ernst Lubitsch because it's based on a Noel Coward play. But this pre-Code romp allows Lubitsch to add his light touch to a frothy, slightly risqué tale of Miriam Hopkins refusing to choose between writer Frederick March and painter Gary Cooper. Cooper is about as convincing as a painter as I would be as a football lineman and this lighter than light comedy isn't quite his speed. But it's presented with care and the extras are great as always with Criterion, including a short starring Charles Laughton that Lubitsch directed and an entire 1964 British TV production of the play introduced by Noel Coward for comparison sake.



KUNG FU PANDA 2 (\$49.99 BluRay combo; DreamWorks)

DETECTIVE DEE AND THE MYSTERY OF THE PHANTOM FLAME (\$29.95 BluRay; Vivendi) --

Kung Fu Panda was better than I expected and the sequel wasn't quite as good as I hoped. But both are fun, entertaining flicks. *KFP2* was painted as a disappointment at the box office but in fact it grossed even more than the original worldwide. Since they both hit more than \$600 million, you can bet there will be a *KFP3*. *Detective Dee* is pure martial arts fantasy flash, with an empty action mystery presented with superior flare. It's fun if you check your mind at the door and don't mind implausibility and empty spectacle. Just wait for the action scenes, though post-*Crouching Tiger*, we expect more.

HOT ON TWITTER

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Oh man. Gorgeous, touching obituary for Tony Scott by @KevinFCorrigan. This one's a gut-punch: <http://t.co/ajVp7K1L>
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THE BORGIAS SEASON ONE (\$65.99 BluRay; Showtime/Paramount) -- Whether you're jonesing for *The Sopranos* or *The Tudors*, this costume drama about the sleazy, power-mad Borgias (led by an oily Jeremy Irons) delivers the goods according to my brother Chris, who recommends it highly. Overseen by director Neil Jordan who planned a feature film for years but decided he needed a wider -- bigger? Lengthier? -- canvas in which to do the story justice.



SEVEN CHANCES ULTIMATE EDITION (\$29.95; Kino) -- The specialty label Kino has been on an extraordinary tear recently, putting out DVD after DVD devoted to the shorts and films of Buster Keaton. He's practically their mascot. Lucky him and lucky us because that means we have access to top-notch prints of some of the best comedies of all time. *Seven Chances* is the one where Keaton must get married to inherit millions and we get the famous shot of him running down a street being chased by seemingly thousands of women in wedding gowns. It's surreal and unforgettable. The strong extras include two more shorts devoted to quickie marriages, including a Three Stooges entry, audio commentary by historians Ken Gordon and Bruce Lawton and more.





THE DEBT (\$29.98; Universal/Focus)

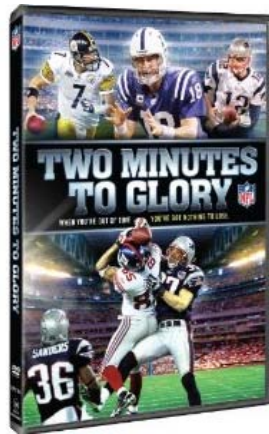
BRIGHTON ROCK (\$24.98; IFC) -- Helen Mirren is always good, even if the movies she is in don't quite click. *The Debt* is an unnecessary remake of a fine Israeli film anchored by good performances by Mirren and It Girl Jessica Chastain as the same character at different points in her life. *Brighton Rock* is a necessary remake that bungles the chance. An earlier version by Carol Reed wasn't faithful enough to the tale by Graham Greene so here was a chance to get it right. Nope. Written and directed by Rowan Joffe, it exhibits none of the subtlety he showed on *Last Resort* (a gem) or even the George Clooney flick *The American* (which I'm also not fond of). The cast is certainly top-notch. Sam Riley (from *Control*) plays Pinkie, the young thug desperate to cover up a murder and maintain control of his gang. Helen Mirren is Ida, the tea shop owner who suspects the worse of him and is determined to get justice. Andrea Riseborough is the timid but determined Rose. Only Riseborough's character captures the character on the page. The first big problem is the casting: the two leads are good but Pinkie and his girl are supposed to be 17 and 16 years-old. Yet Riley is 30 years-old and Riseborough nearly 29. There's a world of difference between those ages. And the time has been moved from the late 30s to the early 60s, which makes their older age all the more significant. A 29-year-old woman in 1964 is a far different creature than a 16-year-old girl in 1938. It throws the entire film off balance. Pinkie's most notable aspect in the book is his disinterest and even disgust with sex and women in general, though he's not necessarily gay so much as creepily asexual. Other than a small twitch in his cheek when he kisses Rose, that crucial lack of humanity is lost. Mirren's character is changed even more. In the book, she's so compelling (and frightening to Pinkie) precisely because her desire to see justice done over the dead man is so random. She doesn't know the victim from Adam, really. In the movie he's a dear friend so her motivation is understandable and thus less disturbing. So without these insights, what are we left with? A young thug and his gal driven to despair by a nosy woman and their past crimes, all of it laid on thick with an over-the-top score that warns of doom and gloom and eternal judgment at every turn. They even change the ending to avoid Greene's final hammer blow to optimism. Not even false hope has a place in his world. What a missed opportunity.



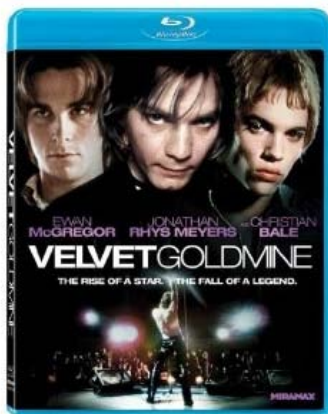
MICHAEL FEINSTEIN: THE SINATRA LEGACY (\$24.98; Image) -- Feinstein is more of a curator than a performer, but his sincerity can win you over. This tribute to Sinatra and other Sinatra-era singers is nothing if not worshipful and peppered with anecdotes about the artists and the songs. Feinstein doesn't convince me when he swings (here he's backed by a full orchestra) but on the quiet moments he captures a unique, sensitive style finely tuned to the lyrics that serves him very well, such as on the stand-out track "So in Love." The quieter the better. On the positive side, the direction and editing isn't manic so you get a good sense of the show without constantly whip-cutting from camera to camera. A solid record of his work and if you like him you'll certainly like this.

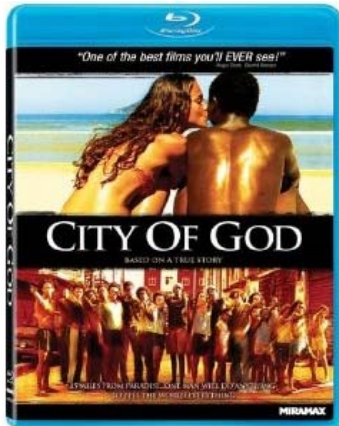
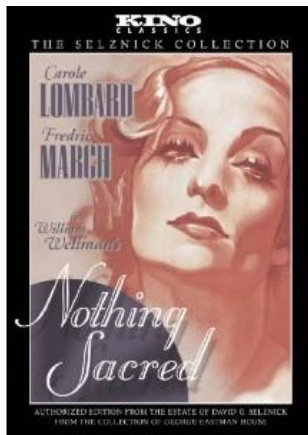


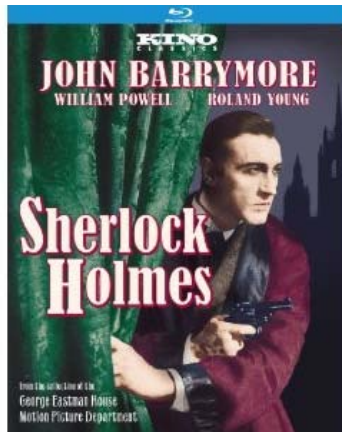
VIETNAM IN HD (\$34.95 BluRay; History/A&E/New Video) -- the first series *World War II in Color* seemed like an interesting gimmick. They kept coming thanks to big ratings and now we have *Vietnam in HD*. Really? What's next? *World War II in 3-D*? (Yes, actually!) Putting aside the meaningless hook, this is Vietnam seen through home movies and other footage alongside the stories of 13 people who were there. Fine as far as it goes, but nothing you haven't heard before.



TWO MINUTES TO GLORY (\$19.99; NFL/Vivendi) -- If you're a football junkie, the NFL is determined to package and repackage its footage in every way imaginable. I love the complete Super Bowl sets. But these themed highlight reels are more suspect. They're fine for killing time on TV but do you really need to own more than two hours devoted to analyzing and celebrating the greatest last minute drives in NFL history? You do? Let me get out of your way.







VELVET GOLDMINE (\$19.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

NOTHING SACRED (\$24.95 ; Kino)

CITY OF GOD (\$19.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

A FAREWELL TO ARMS (\$24.95 ; Kino)

HEAVENLY CREATURES (\$19.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

TORA! TORA! TORA! (\$34.98 BluRay; FOX)

SHERLOCK HOLMES (\$34.95 ; Kino) -- *Velvet Goldmine* looks better all the time. It's a wacky updating of *Citizen Kane*, with the mysterious figure a Bowie-like glam rock star played well by Ewan McGregor. I'd love to think some fans of the *Dark Knight* will watch this Christian Bale film and discover he's enamored by this god of pansexual freedom. Great soundtrack, too! *Nothing Sacred* is a long overdue decent print of a very fun Carole Lombard comedy that satirizes a public's hunger for scandal. Some things never change. *City Of God* remains a vivid crime flick about the struggle to survive in Rio. No wonder it spun off a sequel and a TV series. Gary Cooper tackles Hemingway and since he's so reticent in general you'd think the fit would be better for *A Farewell To Arms*. But they both get tamped down here. Peter Jackson unintentionally helped make the case for his directing *The Lord Of The Rings* via the fantasy sequences in this lurid, fascinating tale *Heavenly Creatures*, the story of two girls urging each other on to murder. *Tora! Tora! Tora!* is dutifully accurate in depicting the events leading up to Pearl Harbor. It makes the Michael Bay *Pearl Harbor* seem positively sprightly in comparison but the BluRay is handsome. Finally, John Barrymore doesn't quite ham it up as Holmes in this 1922 silent film version of a popular stage play that is somehow off just a tad, making the whole exercise not nearly as fun as it should be.

MOST TITLES LISTED HERE WILL BE AVAILABLE IN MULTIPLE FORMATS AND IN MULTIPLE COMBINATIONS, INCLUDING DVD, BLURAY, DIGITAL DOWNLOAD, VOD, 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.

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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pastgone
510 Fans

04:32 PM on 01/01/2012

Midnight In Paris is a gem. This guy just didn't get it.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Sal Nunziato
58 Fans

08:06 AM on 01/01/2012

I couldn't agree with you more, re: Midnight In Paris. As a somewhat embarrassingly devoted Woody fan who has even defended "Anything Else" and "Everyone Says I Love You"---I really did enjoy both--"Midnight In Paris" was cute, but nothing more. I just don't get the accolades. Why this film, over say, "Hollywood Ending," which had twice as many laughs," became the success that it did, is mind-boggling. All those clever appearances by Hemingway and the Fitzgeralds had the potential to be riotous with some classic Woody writing. Instead, each historical figure said exactly what you'd think they'd say. "I'm Dali! Dali!" Epic fail. Still, on second viewing, I enjoyed it a bit more as a whole, but still the laughs were few and far between.

And to Plus15, so you're saying what? One must be a filmmaker in order to form an opinion on a film? Or a musician before one can like or dislike Bob Dylan? Just curious.

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FirstGame72

The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters
564 Fans

09:18 AM on 01/01/2012

With all due respect, Mr Allen - who was hands down the best American filmmaker of the last quarter of the 20th century - has not made a quality film in the 21st century. His last fully realized work was "Sweet & Lowdown" in 1999. After that he fell off an artistic cliff, never to recover.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

Plus15
57 Fans

06:33 AM on 01/01/2012

Of course relative to Michael Giltz adjusting the classic phrase a bit: those who can do, those who can't become critics - fits like a glove.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz

freelance writer

127 Fans

02:25 PM on 01/06/2012

Plus 15, I'd be more interested to hear what you do or don't like about a particular film or TV show than simply insisting that only people who have worked on commercially released movies are allowed to review or form an opinion on them or only published authors should review books or only people in bands that have toured outside their home town talk about music. That's always been a rather silly idea, proven by the fact that I imagine you have voiced an opinion on movies or music or TV or theater or novels in your lifetime and presumably not done more than one of them professionally), and if you have, congrats! By the way, does playing Tiny Tim in grade school count as doing? I limped nicely and think I delivered the awkward line "God bless us everyone!" quite well actually; not a dry eye in the house.

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see-ellen2001

342 Fans

11:52 PM on 12/31/2011

Woody Allen back on top! Does that mean he's found a new sweet young thing to bed and wed?

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littlebrowngirl

945 Fans

05:56 PM on 12/31/2011

Midnight in Paris was a darling movie.

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