

DVDs this week

By Michael Giltz

Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan Director's Edition (\$29.99; Paramount)/TimeAfter Time (\$19.98; Warner Bros.)

Any sci-fi fan who argues that this isn't the greatest *Star Trek* film of all is simply being contrary. The beloved, iconic characters of the series seemed embalmed in Robert Wise's *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. But this sequel uses their quirks as shorthand — thanks to a smart script and yeoman-like work by director Nicholas Meyer. That gives this whip-smart flick a witty and emotional undercurrent without slowing things up. It's great fun, though Meyer spoils it a bit by delivering a Director's Cut that pads a few scenes. Why second-guess himself? *STII* turned a shaky franchise into a gold mine churning out endless sequels (none as good) and numerous TV spinoffs, including one — "The Next Generation" — that would outshine the original. It's a good week for Meyer, who also sees the release of his modest '79 charmer *Time After Time*. In it, H.G. Wells (Malcolm McDowell) chases Jack the Ripper into the future of modern-day San Francisco. It's more dowdy than you might remember, but at least Meyer had the good taste not to try and fiddle with the work he accomplished more than 20 years ago. Leave well enough alone — or at least have the decency to include the original cut.

Clash of the Titans (\$19.98; Warner Bros.)

No movie genre is as difficult to do well as fantasy. Westerns, musicals, sci-fi, noir — you name it, they've all been done well a hundred times over. But fantasy films? Even decent ones are few and far between. (That's why people will be lined up on Tuesday when *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring* is released on DVD. It's one of the best fantasy films of all time and even it has flaws.) Case in point? *Clash of the Titans*. This faintly absurd 1981 tale stars Harry Hamlin (looking quite pouty) as a young, toga-wearing hero and Laurence Olivier as Zeus, the god who loves to toy with mortals. The only reason to check this out is the charmingly archaic special effects of Ray Harryhausen.



HAMLIN

Dogtown and Z-Boys (\$24.95; Columbia TriStar)

Feature films are on such a speeded-up cycle that it seems you've just attended opening weekend when the release date of the DVD is announced and it's popping up on pay-cable. That's hardly surprising when *Spiderman* opens on so many screens it can gross \$400 million in a matter of weeks. Now this tactic is spreading to niche films, the last bastion of word-of-mouth where a movie can open on a handful of screens and slowly find an audience. *Dogtown and Z-Boys* is a documentary about surfers who switched to skateboarding in the late '70s, revolutionized it and spurred the growth of extreme sports. It's narrated by Sean Penn (who manages to sound enthused and laid back at the same time) and garnered terrific reviews and relatively strong grosses. That should have meant six months to a year touring art-house theaters, perhaps with clever local owners getting skateboarders to strut their stuff on opening weekend. Instead, it's jumped to DVD in a flash, with the hope that those raves will remain fresh in the public's mind when they tour their local DVD store.

The Business of Strangers (\$26.98; MGM)

Julia Stiles didn't receive very good reviews in her star turn for Shakespeare in the Park. But this indie film — a distaff version of *In the Company of Men* — shows why she may be around for the long haul. She stars with Stockard Channing as an executive's assistant who spars with her hard-nosed boss in a battle of wills that soon sucks in an unsuspecting male. It's all very familiar and — despite a brief detour that would please Howard Stern — devoid of the bold unpleasantness that made Neil LaBute's film so memorable. But the two leads have fun sparking off one another and Stiles continues to project a compelling inscrutability.

Them! (\$19.98; Warner Bros.)

The environmentalists and peaceniks who decry atomic testing often ignore its many benefits. One of the most overlooked side-effects? This military practice proved a godsend to horror flicks, which used radioactive fallout to explain the presence of everything from *Godzilla* to giant ants. In 1954, said super-sized ants appeared in *Them!*, an effectively creepy bit of hokum that proved special effects were a waste of money. Even drive-in audiences probably didn't buy the budget-rate silliness of the monsters. But who cared when the acting was crisp, the editing taut and the score so skin-crawling?