

# DVDs this week



## Ellen Degeneres: The Beginning and Jerry Seinfeld: Live on Broadway (\$14.98 each; HBO)

Ellen and Jerry have a lot in common: they both specialize in sly, observational humor that avoids crassness, vulgarity, political jibes, sex and the thousand other obvious topics that fuel late night standup. Their humor is both more basic and more clever than that. Sure, it's easy to say, "Did you ever notice how" and talk about airline travel or driving a car with your relatives in the passenger seat. But it's hard to do that and sound fresh. They both do that time and again in their very funny acts, typified by the lovefests in these HBO specials. They're also opposites in some ways: Ellen has plumbed her private life for material; Jerry's private life is in the papers, but not in his act. More interestingly, Ellen was always better than the sitcom she starred on, while Jerry's sitcom was always better than him. That's why her new show is intriguing (even if it's already morphed once or twice in development). She's so funny that you can imagine the networks might finally get it right and give Ellen the vehicle she deserves (minus the agitprop). If Jerry did a new sitcom, it would inevitably be a disappointment. Look at Michael Richards, Jason Alexander and Julia Louis Dreyfus — the pressure on them to create a classic is tremendous, but nothing compared to what Jerry would face. Happily, both he and Ellen can always find respite in standup, even if their audiences love them so much now that they can hardly begin a joke before the laughs start flowing. It's to both their credits that those laughs are still deserved.



SEINFELD

## My Man Godfrey (Criterion)

Butlers are a Hollywood mainstay and Godfrey (William Powell) is still one of the best. Carole Lombard is a madcap society gal who picks up Powell during a treasure hunt, thinking he's a bum she can turn into a man servant. You would think audiences in the Depression would hate the super-wealthy; but the rich have never been portrayed more lovingly than during those hard times. And Powell — hot off the brilliant detective comedy *The Thin Man* and its sequel — is a man servant's manservant and man's man all rolled into one. Screwball comedies don't get any better than this. But one butler does: John Gielgud in *Arthur* (Warner Bros.). They make a great double bill, even if *Arthur* is still offered only in a cropped version. You can actually keep your back to the screen and still never stop laughing. The same could be done with *Godfrey*, but with Lombard in the cast, why would you want to?

## Halloween (\$24.98; Anchor Bay)

Clearly, Halloween is on the minds of the studios. That holiday is 12 weeks away, but horror flicks are already popping up on shelves. The modern granddaddy of them all is *Halloween*, with



CURTIS

Jamie Lee Curtis gamely screaming her way through the entire creepy film. But unlike the heroes of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and the its even dopier sequel *I Still Know* (\$14.95 each; Columbia TriStar), Curtis actually behaves smartly. She fights back and uses every trick at her disposal to get away from the killer, which makes his relentless stalking all the more horrifying. In *I Still Know*, you spend all your time laughing at how stupid the cast is. (Everyone knows you don't split up into small groups or leave people alone when bodies start piling up.) In *Halloween*, you can't help thinking Curtis has done everything you would have and she's still in mortal danger. My God,

what would you do? For more honest laughs than *I Still Know*, try the 1985 cult classic *Fright Night* (\$14.95; Columbia TriStar), which took a knowing swipe at horror movies long before *Scream*. It gets laughs and chills, thanks to a smart script and a marvelous performance by Roddy McDowall. — Michael Giltz