

# DVDs this week 2/10/02

## By Michael Giltz

### **Peter Pan: Special Edition (\$29.99; Disney)**

Right now, you can go to the New Victory Theater and see the Mabou Mines' brilliant, haunting show called "Peter and Wendy." It's no surprise J.M. Barrie's sophisticated masterpiece would inspire such great theater work. But why hasn't there been a definitive film version yet? Certainly it's not Disney's lackluster animated attempt. This has some of the worst songs in studio history, such as the tiresome "Following the Leader" and "You Can Fly." ("It's easier than pie/ You can fly" is about as clever as the lyrics get.) And an uninspired Disney effort is always easy to spot: just check out the backgrounds, which are invariably flat and unmoving. There's no detail, no imagination, no love. At 77 minutes, it feels very stretched out. Even the extras are lackluster. Play the Pirate Treasure Hunt game and what do you get as a reward for solving the clues? A treasure chest that opens up to reveal...nothing. Peter Pan is still waiting for screen immortality.

### **The Royal Family (\$24.99; Image)**

This is the latest in a series of stage plays preserved on DVD. Usually culled from PBS's "Great Performances," they're documents of acclaimed theatrical productions, rather than reimagined TV movies. Filmed in 1977, this is a remounting of the creaky Kaufman-Ferber comedy "The Royal Family" starring Rosemary Harris. It's about the Cavendish theatrical clan, a Barrymore-like family devoted to the boards. The show was a smash in 1927, but already showing its limits in 1977 and continues to do so today, where it's being performed in the West End with Judi Dench and attempts to make "The Royal Family" seem more than froth are mercifully few. That inherent theatricality makes this PBS version more enjoyable than other shows that might demand to be opened up.

### **The Bad News Bears (\$24.99; Paramount)**

In memory, this seems like just another sports movie about the triumph of the underdogs, albeit with a lot more cursing from the cute kids than you would normally expect. But director Michael Ritchie — who satirized beauty pageants in *Smile* — is actually making fun of that genre. He undercuts our expectations about lovable losers who come together and learn to win as a team at virtually every turn. With Walter Matthau as the drunken Little League coach always going on about his glory days, it's hard to take much of anything seriously — certainly not the rah-rah spirit that raises its head at the end. Followed by two sequels of no merit whatsoever.



MATTHAU

### **Disney's American Legends (\$29.99; Disney)**

This release of four different animated shorts about American legends like Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan is wildly overpriced: At less than an hour, it should be \$14.99 at most. But while three of the shorts are decades old, the fourth one is recent and a real gem: "John Henry." It tells the story of the railroad man who pitted himself against a steam drill and won, though it cost him his life. Cleverly animated in a cut-paste style that mimics a quilt, "John Henry" is narrated by Alfre Woodard and powered by songs performed by Sounds of Blackness. The three older shorts seem almost stodgy in comparison. "Johnny Appleseed" is the least involving. But "Paul Bunyan" has some fun with the tall tales of the giant lumberjack and "The Brave Engineer," about Casey Jones, is frantically enjoyable, too. But "Legends" familiar to every school kid shouldn't come at such a high cost.

### **The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars & Motor Kings (\$19.99; Universal)**

1976 was a good year for Richard Pryor. He'd already made his mark on screen with a dramatic turn in *Lady Sings the Blues*. Then came the triumph of a debut comedy album that would give Lenny Bruce a run for his foul-mouthed money and later a co-writing triumph with Mel Brooks on *Blazing Saddles*. But in 1976 he would steal the show in this amiable comedy about 1939 baseball players trying to buck the system in the Negro League — no small feat considering his co-stars were Billy Dee Williams (who everyone could tell had a long career ahead of him as a superstar) and the fierce James Earl Jones. If that weren't enough, Pryor would also team up in '76 with Gene Wilder on their first smash hit, *Silver Streak*. He would enjoy four glorious years on top before having an accident while freebasing cocaine in 1980 and setting himself on fire. Nothing — not his comedy routine, nor his movie career — would ever be the same.