



"About A Boy"

Hugh Grant has saved his career. The charming, self-effacing fellow who stuttered his way through "Four Weddings and a Funeral" had become a parody of himself in movies like "Nine Months." He seemed incapable of doing anything but repeating himself in increasingly lackluster romantic comedy vehicles. But first with his caddish turn in "Bridget Jones' Diary" and now with this comic drama (\$26.98, Universal), Grant has found new vigor.

He's still Hugh Grant, of course, mumbling his way through tossed-off one-liners with aplomb, but the layabout of "About a Boy" — who pretends to be a single dad just to get chicks — feels genuine and real, not just a spin on his movie-star image. The film itself is rather obvious, but amusing. However, since it's directed by the guys who did "American Pie," it counts as the happiest surprise since Bob Clark of "Porky's" turned out "A Christmas Story."

"How Green Was My Valley" **"All About Eve"**

They're two classic films (\$19.98 each, Fox) with almost nothing in common. "How Green Was My Valley" is the sweetly sentimental tale of a family struggling to survive in a small Welsh mining town. A young Roddy McDowall and Maureen O'Hara star; John Ford directs; and viewers grow to fear the tolling of church bells — it means there's been a cave-in.

"All About Eve" is the brittle, bruising classic about a Broadway star (Bette Davis) beset by a scheming fan (Anne Baxter) determined to take her place. Endlessly quotable and great fun, but why didn't Baxter have a better career?

"The Donner Party" **"Ansel Adams"**

With the ambitious, large-scale "New York," Ric Burns finally established himself on a par with his brother Ken. But anyone paying attention knew his worth long ago, thanks to documentaries like these two (\$19.98 each, Warner Bros.). "Donner" covers the oft-told tale of the pioneers who turned desperate when starving to death, but gives it new immediacy and power to shock. "Ansel Adams" brings the fabled photographer into focus, explaining exactly why he's not only popular but important.

"Naked City"

This TV show was the "Law & Order" of its day — a solid, well-made crime drama that benefited from a steady stream of New York actors on the rise while making even better use of the city itself. Instead of that distinctive theme song (da-dum!), it boasted the famous opening line "There are 8 million stories in the Naked City."

We've finally caught up population-wise, and guest stars like Robert Duvall, Dennis Hopper, Walter Matthau, Eli Wallach and Keir Dullea makes these DVDs (offering four shows per disc) worth catching up on as well (\$14.99 each, Image). Since an entire season probably wasn't worth the bother, cherry-picking episodes with famous actors makes as much sense as any other approach.

"Our Song"

This modest drama about three Brooklyn girls in high school (\$26.98, MGM) comes from the director of "Girls Town." Though more lively than that chat-fest, it still counts as merely promising, with director Jim McCay eliciting some engaging performances from Kerry Washington, Anna Simpson and Melissa Martinez, as they're put through their paces talking about boys, getting pregnant or trying to make the grade in a prestigious marching band. Producer Michael Stipe continues to use his sharp eye and financial backing to encourage nascent talent.

"Blue Crush" **"Undercover Brother"**

Sometimes, "mindless" is a compliment and sometimes it's just the sad truth, as with these two flicks (\$26.98 each, Universal). "Blue Crush" merely proves that Michelle Rodriguez's gripping turn in "girlfight" was simply the right role at the right time and not the beginning of a promising career. "Undercover Brother" is no worse a satire than the latest "Austin Powers," but that's not saying much.