

DVDs this week

By Michael Giltz

Amelie (\$29.99; Miramax)

What a strange career path for director Jean-Pierre Jeunet. First he and collaborator Marc Caro make the black-hearted cannibalism comedy *Delicatessen*, which is set in some bleak near-future. It has some of the most elaborate, flashy, "look-at-me" camerawork since the Coen Brothers got drunk on the possibilities of cinema with *Blood Simple*. Then the two men deliver the opaque *City of Lost Children*, a full-out sci-fi epic that plays more like a Rube Goldberg contraption than a movie. Jeunet and Caro split up and Jeunet is seduced by Hollywood into making *Alien Resurrection*, a flop that kills a franchise. So what does Jeunet do? He turns around and delivers *Amelie*, starring Audrey Tautou and Mathieu Kassovitz. It's a valentine to love and possibility that delights in romance almost as much as it delights in filmmaking itself. Tautou becomes a star and Jeunet is redeemed as surely as her insecure but lovable waitress. The witty voice-overs make this an ideal double-bill with *Y Tu Mama Tambien*.



KASSOVITZ

Storytelling (\$24.98; New Line)

Todd Solondz is a good director; now if he could only get over the desire to shock. I liked *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, which had some great performances and ended beautifully. I loved *Happiness*, but at the same time it made me a little nervous. Though highly accomplished, a few scenes seemed gratuitous, designed only to scandalize. That tendency is the driving force behind *Storytelling*, a movie that tells two different stories. One involves a white female college student who willingly sleeps with her writing professor and then plays victim. (Some might disagree with that description.) The other is about a hapless high school student being the study of a documentary. The film was blessed with a ratings controversy that had Solondz wittily superimpose a large black box over the explicit sex scene that caused it. But even that wasn't enough to create audience interest. This is juvenile, though not unfortunately juvenilia. Can we just pretend this is his first film and Solondz is getting better instead of the other way around. (And where are the DVD extras? Solondz shot an entire other segment starring James Van Der Beek; why not include it as a bonus?)

Robin and Marian (\$24.95; Columbia TriStar)

Director Richard Lester sure knew his way around icons: the Beatles, the Three Musketeers and Robin Hood all benefited from his loving touch. This overlooked gem stars Sean Connery as an aging Robin back in Sherwood Forest after many years. Maid Marian is now Sister Marian (she always did seem a bit virginal to me) and the Sheriff (a marvelous Robert Shaw) is out to trouble her one last time. Connery has a great time playing off of Robin's old age (aided greatly by Nicol Williamson as a caustic Little John). It's a gentle film, short on action and long on wistfulness.

Our Man Flint/In Like Flint/Fathom/Modesty Blaise (\$14.98 each; Fox)

These romps from the mid-'60s are brightly repackaged to seduce fans of Austin Powers. (James Coburn's *Flint* is billed as "the original man of mystery" in case you don't get the point.) But they aren't out-and-out spoofs so much as Bond flicks taken to absurd extremes. The women all look like airline stewardesses — including the delectable Raquel Welch as *Fathom*, the dental assistant turned parachutist turned spy. But unlike those beauties, the movies themselves are unwatchable. I prefer Dean Martin's similar *Matt Helm* flicks. They're just as bad, but Martin's complete disdain for moviemaking gives *Helm* a post-ironic flair *Flint* can only dream about.

Better Off Dead (\$24.99; Paramount)

In 1985, the same year John Cusack made the marvelous romantic comedy *The Sure Thing* and the fine Disney flick *The Journey of Natty Gann*, he delivered this oddball flick about a teenager desperately trying to commit suicide and only embarrassing himself in the process. *The Sure Thing* is the better film, but *Better Off Dead* proved Cusack was one to watch. The mere fact that he made a film with someone called Savage Steve Holland proved Cusack wasn't willing to play it safe. And his earnest charm grounded the bizarre, scattershot storyline (including that hilarious running gag about the newspaper delivery boy). After this, anyone paying attention knew Cusack had the smarts to forge a career. What would follow? Just *Eight Men Out*, *Say Anything*, *The Grifters*, *Bullets Over Broadway*, *Grosse Pointe Blank*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Being John Malkovich* and *High Fidelity*, to name a few. And Cusack is only 36.