

DVDs this week

By Michael Giltz

I Am Sam (\$24.98; New Line)

I have no idea how writer-director Jesse Nelson managed to corral some of the biggest names in Hollywood for this painfully earnest tale about a mentally challenged father who might have his daughter taken away by the courts. The movie is so confused that during the climactic trial scenes, I couldn't help thinking the little girl (a robotic Dakota Fanning) probably *did* belong with someone more capable of seeing to her needs. Still, Sean Penn is unerring — straightforward and unsentimental. He's more hard-headed and interesting than the film could ever hope to be. It's poor Michelle Pfeiffer who comes off badly. Her tough-as-nails lawyer who learns to be a better parent thanks to Penn is an embarrassing role that sinks this usually fine actress. Like the film itself, the use of songs by the Beatles is crushingly obvious: if the little girl is taken away, you can be sure they'll cue up "She's Leaving Home" — even though that song is about a daughter who wants to leave her parents and so is wildly inappropriate. Many of the covers are good, however, so buy the soundtrack but avoid the movie.



PENN, FANNING

The Oscar Wilde Collection (\$39.98; BBC)

The current hapless film version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* makes us long even more for the classic 1952 British movie starring Michael Redgrave. Until then, we can make do with the 1988 TV adaptation — basically a filmed play for the BBC — highlighted by Joan Plowright. It's one of four plays captured on film; the others include *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1976), *An Ideal Husband* (1969) and *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1985). None of them are definitive but all are fine. Most notable are the performances of Jeremy Brett in *Dorian Gray* and *Husband*. He would be trapped by the success of his Sherlock Holmes; these show us the fine actor we missed.

The Shipping News (\$29.99; Miramax)

Yes, this is another poor film by director Lasse Hallstrom. But there's no reason to be dismissive — this is clearly a bad movie made with good intentions. And it does offer some pleasures: Cate Blanchett delivers a jagged, messy performance in a brief turn, Judi Dench is always formidable and Kevin Spacey is acting again after a number of roles where he seemed to be coasting on his trademark quirks. Pity about the tired plot, though.

Place Vendome (\$24.98; Wellspring)

French icon Catherine Deneuve (she symbolizes her country the way the Statue of Liberty symbolizes ours) is of course magnificently beautiful. But she's also a tremendous actress. Sure, it was silly of *Dancer in the Dark* to try and pass her off as working in a factory that makes sinks. But this 1998 film knows where she belongs — in the lap of luxury as the wife of a diamond merchant. Deneuve plays Marianne, a downtrodden (but gorgeous) alcoholic who must snap into action when her husband commits suicide. A cache of stolen gems is her only hope, and Deneuve's transformation into the capable woman she used to be while fending off entanglements from all sides is truly memorable. Adult entertainment of the first order.

Orange County (\$29.99; Paramount)

I expected something a little more oddball than this conventional teen comedy. After all, director Jake Kasdan made his debut with the eccentric *Zero Effect* and writer Mike White wrote and starred in the terrific *Chuck & Buck*. This gotta-get-into-college romp, however, is thoroughly anonymous. The saving grace? Jack Black doing his shtick yet again. Sure, we've seen it before in *High Fidelity*, *Jesus's Son* and so on, but it still works.

Getting There/Switching Goals/Billboard Dad/It Takes Two (\$19.98 each; Warner Bros.)

The Olsen twins, Mary-Kate and Ashley, will be President one day, mark my words. They're certainly savvy enough: the Olsen media empire includes a magazine, "Hanging out with the twins" videos, all sorts of merchandise and movies. *It Takes Two* is a feature from '95 that remakes *The Parent Trap*; *Billboard Dad* features a widowed pop needing a new love; *Switching Goals* has them playing soccer and *Getting There* shows the excitement of receiving a driver's license.