

DVDs this week

By Michael Giltz

SpongeBob SquarePants: Nautical Nonsense and Sponge Buddies (\$19.99; Paramount)

Most cartoons that gain an adult following come loaded with pop cultural references that go over junior's head. (Think "Bugs Bunny" or "Powerpuff Girls.") "SpongeBob" has its in jokes, but the real appeal of this delightful series is our hero's unquenchable optimism and high spirits. SpongeBob is also very much a kid - utterly ecstatic one moment, dependent the next, and moving on to a new obsession right after that. Besides, it has the best gotta-sing-along theme song since "The Muppet Show."



SPONGEBOB

Sexy Beast (\$29.98; Fox)

Director Jonathan Glazer's feature debut is a fun gangster flick with an elaborate London heist at the climax. But the real tension comes before the big score, when Ben Kingsley comes calling on an old association (Ray Winstone) who thinks he's "retired." In the real world, people are forced to leave their jobs before they're ready. In the criminal world, people keep trying to leave only to get pulled back in again. Kingsley plays marvelously against type, but Winstone holds the film together with his desperate unease.

Zoolander (\$29.99; Paramount)

Ben Stiller made an amusing short about the world's greatest male supermodel. Sadly, they turned it into a feature film. The collagen injections necessary for this transformation leave Zoolander puffy and misshapen — like so many "Saturday Night Live" skits before it. Of course, Stiller is a much better actor and director than the current "SNL" batch, so there are amusing moments. (Especially when Owen Wilson is on screen as rival supermodel Hansel.) Five minutes with a dumb, vain, vacuous Ken doll can be fun. But an hour and half with one is just torture.



STILLER

George Washington/Juliet of the Spirits (\$39.95/\$29.95; Criterion)

These two releases exemplify why Criterion flourishes in the brave new world of DVDs where every two-bit B-movie gets loaded with commentary tracks and other extras. *George Washington* is a promising debut by David Gordon Green about a group of kids in the South. Like "In the Bedroom," it takes a dramatic turn I found unnecessary and off-putting. But he pulls fine performances from unknowns and the DVD has loads of extras. *Juliet of the Spirits* is Fellini's first color film. Once you've seen one of Fellini's prime fantasias (*La Dolce Vita*, *8 1/2*) you've seen them all. But this still has a foothold in the reality of *Nights of Cabiria*, thanks to the leading lady they both share: Giuletta Masina.

Heist (\$19.96; Warner Bros.)

At this stage, the only way writer-director David Mamet could surprise us would be if he *didn't* use cons-within-cons and double-crosses that turn into triple-crosses and then double back yet again. One other element, however, remains happily consistent: his top-notch ensembles, including the redoubtable Gene Hackman (who must be exhausted after appearing in about 47 movies in 2001), Danny DeVito, Delroy Lindo, Ricky Jay and Mrs. M, Rebecca Pidgeon.



MAMET

Less Than Zero (\$19.98; Fox)

Director Marek Kaniévka made a brilliant debut with *Another Country*, a British classic that launched the careers of Rupert Everett, Cary Elwes and Colin Firth. He seemed an unusual — and possibly inspired — choice in 1987 to helm this screen adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis' acclaimed and then dismissed novel. The movie was glossy, visually ravishing and featured perhaps the best performance ever by Andrew McCarthy and a tremendous turn by Robert Downey Jr. But boy did it flop. Kaniévka disappeared for 13 years. He returned in 2000 with the crime flick *Where the Money Is* starring Paul Newman and Linda Fiorentino - it too sunk without a trace. So has Kaniévka, a talented director who can't get a lucky break.