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Michael Giltz

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DVDs: It's Tina Fey's World...

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...and we just live in it. Seriously, has any female comedian ever dominated the zeitgeist the way Tina Fey is doing right now? (Certainly almost no men have done so either.) Fey isn't just starring in the Emmy-winning *30 Rock Season 2* (\$39.98; Universal), the way Roseanne and Mary Tyler Moore and Lucille Ball did on their defining shows in decades past. It's her baby in every way, with Fey also writing and producing. Fey also has hit films to her name like the modest comedy *Baby Mama* and the more successful *Mean Girls*.

A multi-million dollar bidding war ensued over her upcoming memoirs. And to top it off, she is a dead-ringer for VP candidate Sarah Palin and has done double duty by imitating Palin on easily the funniest political humor on *Saturday Night Live* that we've seen in decades. If there's ever been a funnier, more spot-on imitation of a political figure, stretching from Rich Little's Nixon to Will Ferrel's George Bush, I can't think of it. Nonetheless, despite the inherent pleasure in being contrary and attacking conventional wisdom, I take no pleasure in saying that *30 Rock* just isn't that funny for me. I want to like the show; I SHOULD like the show. But I don't. I find the humor too broad, the acting too cartoonish and the situations both too knowing and too dumb. Yes, Alec Baldwin finds genuine humor in his role as the suit and I can usually find something to make me smile in every episode. It's certainly a smart show made by smart people. But even watching again Emmy-honored episodes like the Carrie Fisher guest spot or Baldwin getting all ghetto in Tracy Morgan's therapy session can't compare to the heart of say *The Office* or the stronger, more believable ensemble on *How I Met Your Mother Season 3* (\$39.98; Fox). That show is a solid comedy that's found its signature by reveling in complicated flashbacks and an ensemble that feels like a family, the way so many of the best sitcoms seem to do. (And Neil Patrick Harris was robbed at the Emmys, but the rest of the gang elevates their material just as much.) *30 Rock* follows in the tradition of shows I've loved from *The Dick Van Dyke Show* to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to *Buffalo Bill* and *NewsRadio*, so I'll keep tuning in every once in a while. And it's no big deal: Fey's got the world on a string -- she doesn't need me too.

So tell me, what do you think of Tina Fey?

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Maybe Some People Shouldn't Be Forgiven -- The intriguing British drama *Boy A* (\$24.95; Weinstein/Genius) tells of a young man released from prison, given a new identity and struggling to mainstream back into society. Slowly, we learn the horrific crime he committed as a child, the miserable life that shaped him and watch as the protagonist shyly builds a new life even as he (and we) wonder if he deserves it. Nicely acted and well directed, *Boy A* is similar in a way to Kevin Bacon's *The Woodsman*, a movie that showed a pedophile and made us empathize with the man while not ignoring the dark urges that would always be with him. *Boy A* is quite different: the deck is stacked wholly in favor of our hero who is handsome, charming, smart, bashful, wholly regretful and shown to be the reluctant pawn in the terrible crime that has defined him. It doesn't wholly let him off the hook (we see glimpses of his violent nature, for example), but you could hardly make a stronger case for wanting to see the perpetrator of such a crime get rehabilitated. But what makes the film worthwhile, beyond its intelligence and fine supporting cast led by Peter Mullan as a mentor, is Andrew Garfield as Boy A. He is remarkably good and clearly a talent to watch. Boy A may or may not have a future, but Garfield surely does.

Good Night, Shyamalan -- M. Night Shyamalan's new movie *The Happening* (\$29.99; Fox) is surprisingly bad. I say "surprisingly" because even as others have piled on his increasingly unsatisfying movies, I've always defended the inherent gifts he has as a filmmaker -- the visual flair, the ability to sustain suspense, and the impressive technical command exhibited at times in *The Village*, *Signs* and of course *The Sixth Sense*. And yet here we have a movie about some sort of mysterious plague sweeping the Northeast United States -- it's like Hitchcock's *The Birds*, but with plants instead of pigeons -- that is hapless on every level. It's not just the leads Mark Wahlberg (who is generally very good) and Zoey Deschanel who are coached into giving awful, wide-eyed performances. It's every single actor in every single role, from the construction worker at the beginning to the soldier in the middle to Betty Buckley at the end. Watching people commit suicide, it turns out, is deeply ununsuspenseful. And for all of Shyamalan's angry denials he likes twist or surprise endings (as if being the new Rod Serling or O. Henry were a bad thing), the movie again ends with just the sort of gesture you would expect. Some have suggested the movie includes a stealth defense of Intelligent Design, the anti-science, anti-fact argument that religious beliefs in Creationism must be defended by mocking and belittling science. It's possible, though that religious argument is undercut a bit towards the end when Buckley's wacko is shown wiggling out in a room filled with iconic images of Jesus. In any case, the movie is almost bizarrely inept, such as a scene where Wahlberg decides to brave the potentially poisonous outdoors to reach his wife. Instead of running outside with a wet cloth covering his mouth like any sane person would, he walks out slowly and deliberately and breathes in as much air as possible. Maybe it was an act of faith? Perhaps. But I'm losing faith in Shyamalan.

Doctor Who? Doctor Who -- The BBC's Doctor Who has been an enduring fixture for decades, with countless mini-dramas behind the scenes as they transitioned from one Doctor to the next or fought with the BBC to increase their paltry special effects budget from 5 pounds an episode to ten pounds. *Doctor Who: The Trial Of A Time Lord* (\$59.98; BBC Video) captures one of those defining moments, this one from the mid-80s when a driving creative force behind the series at the time conceived of a grand trial of the Doctor (for crimes he had committed and crimes he would commit in the future) but died in the middle of writing it. Fans will debate the 14 part result endlessly. Also just out is the single disc *Doctor Who: The Brain of Morbius* (\$24.98; BBC Video), which contains one four-part adventure and lots of extras. But really, this is no way to handle such a cumbersome, long-running show. I continue to wish the BBC would stop dribbling out all these boxed sets and single discs. They're so bulky and poorly organized that it would take practically an entire library just to stock them on your shelf. Surely the only logical approach to this massive series is to give definitive boxed sets with the complete adventures of each Doctor in as compact and inexpensive a package as possible.

Masters Of Cinema -- I can't quite rank special effects genius Ray Harryhausen with Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock, but he's as pioneering as Welles and certainly as entertaining as Hitchcock. From Harryhausen, the only auteurist special effects guy (as Leonard Maltin has said), we get two releases. *Ray Harryhausen Collectible Gift Set* (\$80.95; Sony) has three previously available deluxe editions of *Earth Vs. The Flying Saucers*, *20 Million Miles To Earth* and *It Came From Beneath The Sea*. The real draw here is a wonderfully fierce collectible figurine of the monster Ymir. It's great-looking, but surely a creature like this connected to Harryhausen should be "posable" (Is that a word? I mean jointed like GI Joe so you could move it around) so fans could

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Arianna was on CBS' "Washington..."

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I'm a little embarrassed to love this show as much as...

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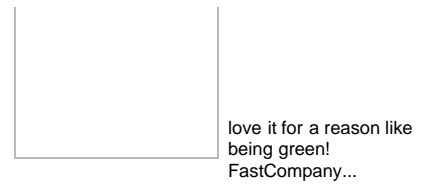
use it in their own stop-motion productions. Just a thought. Also out is the fun B-movie *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (\$19.94; Sony), with that classic battle between Sinbad and the skeleton. From Welles, we get *Touch Of Evil 50th Anniversary Edition* (\$26.98; Universal). The sound mix is stronger though I think the image is about the same as the 2000 edition. But it's great to have all three versions in one set (the preview version, the theatrical version with Henry Mancini's propulsive score dominating the opening sequence and the restored version that follows the Welles memo for how he'd like the film recut as closely as possible). Finally, we get three gems from Alfred Hitchcock in two disc sets: *Rear Window*, *Vertigo* and *Psycho* (\$26.98 each; Universal). Again, I can't see any notable difference in sound or picture quality between this and the last two reissues of these films. If you own them already, no need to upgrade. If you don't own them, of course, these are classics and you should. Me, I'd start with *Rear Window*, but you can't go wrong.

NOTE: Mike Clark of *USA Today* says that *Touch Of Evil* is disastrously cropped, just like the last reissue. (It's not clear on the DVD because most versions are different from the original studio-led theatrical release, so the usual warning about changes to the format weren't a red flag. Apparently, the proper Welles version is a little boxier, but Universal was worried that people with plasma and LCD screens wouldn't like that so they cropped off some of the image on the top and the bottom to make the movie MORE letterboxed. If this wasn't so tragic, I'd laugh. For decades, studios chopped up movies because they insisted people hated the black bars. Now they ADD black bars because they think people want movies to be more letterboxed. What people really want is to see the movies the way the filmmaker intended. Shame on Universal. How long do we have to wait for yet another DVD release that will get it right?)

Animation: From Disney To Cartman -- Any Disney animated movie not named *The Black Cauldron* is usually referred to in a knee-jerk fashion as a classic. I wouldn't say that about *Sleeping Beauty* (\$29.99; Disney), however. The film is presented in the widescreen format it was originally intended with some fine extras. But to me, it's clearly second-tier Disney. Though it's described as Disney's most expensive animated film to date, that certainly isn't demonstrated on screen. In classics like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Pinocchio*, every inch of every frame is alive with subtle touches. In *Sleeping Beauty*, cheap work-arounds are just as prominent. Look at the opening scenes where the three good fairies and one evil one come to bless the new baby princess. The grand scene of a castle's fairest and finest is merely a painted, unmoving backdrop - even courtiers and banners aren't animated but just stiffly pose in one position with only the central two or three people on screen even moving at all. It's the same labor-saving device used on cartoons like *The Flintstones* and to me it's a blot on the entire film. On the plus side, "I Wonder" is a nicely unconventional tune and the final battle ain't bad. It's all fine for kiddies, but not nearly imaginative enough to deserve the title of "classic." *The Simpsons* do, and their *Eleventh Season* (\$49.98; Fox) finds the show still in relatively top form and the set is loaded with the extras fans have come to expect from them. If you didn't buy the single volume sets of *Speed Racer* that came out recently, you're in luck: *Speed Racer: The Complete Classic Collection* (\$49.98; Lionsgate) has a nifty Mach 5 design (albeit one too bulky to fit on most shelves) and every episode along with some extras. This is how they should have released the show in the first place -- not in those modest, single volume sets. It remains an intriguingly sober series for one essentially geared to kids. *Speed Racer The Next Generation: Fast Track* (\$19.98; Lionsgate) shows how hard that tone is to recapture, even with a plot ripped off of *Tron*. *Care Bears Flurries Of Fun* (\$26.98; Fox) repackages three individual DVDs filled with the fluffiest, tamest fun. *The Smurfs Season One Volume Two* (\$26.98; Warner Bros.) seems positively subversive in comparison. And in comparison to that, *You're Not Elected Charlie Brown* and *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.) seem like sophisticated arthouse fare. Luckily, there's always the foul-mouthed, closeted Cartman, who is celebrated in *The Cult of Cartman: Revelations* (\$26.98; Paramount), which contains 12 notably vulgar episodes of *South Park* focused on Cartman along with Life Lessons preferred by Cartman himself.

Monsters Vs. Munsters -- They came out at the same time and after a very brief popularity flamed out in just two season. Nonetheless, I've always considered *The Addams Family* to be the "smart" version of your friendly neighborhood monster when compared to *The Munsters*. But this is splitting hairs since both are low-brow comedies of the most obvious sort, enlivened only very modestly by fine actors like Fred Gwynne as Herman Munster and John Astin as Gomez Addams. *The Munsters: The Complete Series* (\$69.98; Universal) is a nicely thorough compilation for those who care, including every episode, two TV movies, the unaired pilot and more.

In The Mood -- I think being in the right mood to see a particular movie is an under-appreciated



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element of liking a film. Sometimes, you just want to see a dumb stoner comedy and that's when a silly movie like *Harold & Kumar Go To White Castle* seems like genius. Other times, you're ready for an austere, four hour art house movie. Being in the right mood is important and recognizing when you're NOT in the right mood is equally significant. Critics don't always have the luxury of waiting until they can give a film its best shot. But that's the beauty of DVD. The movie will always be there, just waiting for you to say, ok, I'll give it a shot. And so, *The Visitor* (\$29.97; Anchor Bay). I really liked director Tom McCarthy's *The Station Agent*. I also like Richard Jenkins in *Six Feet Under*. But just the trailers for this movie put me off. I was not receptive to the seemingly heartwarming story of a widowed college professor (Jenkins) who gets in touch with his humanity again thanks to the dark-skinned immigrant who is more in touch with the elemental in life, as symbolized by his drumming. So I waited and waited, even though the movie was solidly reviewed and did quite well at the box office for an art house movie. When it came out on DVD, I held onto it until I felt as open to the movie as possible and then gave it a shot. And disliked it immensely. (But at least I tried.) Indeed, the movie was everything I feared -- as unconventional and surprising as *The Station Agent* was, this one embraced every cliché and took the most obvious route possible. I'm not sure what offended me more: the idea of a college professor having a gigantic, empty spare apartment in New York City (dude, I could really use that place) or the absurd suggestion that a man who found strangers illegally living in his home would immediately rush outside to find them and invite them back in again. For a man so closed off to his feelings since his wife had died, that was a pretty remarkable moment early in the film. And couldn't they have offered at least SOME excuse for this fantastic event? Maybe it could at least have been raining or the woman could have been visibly pregnant. Just give me some reason to forgive the essential plot twist that a man would find two people in his home and ask them to stay for as long as they want. Truly, it boggles the mind. Of course, the young couple aren't so much illegal immigrants as cultural exchange ambassadors. He's a sexy and handsome drummer in a jazz trio and she's a beautiful artist who creates jewelry and the such. The anger over their illegal status is heavy-handed and trite ("He's a good person!" thunders our hero at one point) and the symbolic finale is too much to bear. Many others enjoyed this movie more than me and it's certainly not incompetent in the vein of *The Happening*. But you better be in the right mood to see it. For me, apparently, that mood will never come.

An Open Mind And An Open Heart -- Perhaps the best way to bridge cultural differences in the world is to learn more about each other. The US, of course, dominates pop culture around the world with its movies and TV shows and music and books. Two modest DVDs give us glimpses into the rest of the world. *Sufi Soul: The Mystic Music Of Islam* (\$19.95; Riverboat) is a fine, if brief look at the music of the followers of Sufi, the most tolerant and celebratory strand of Islam which dominates in Senegal and elsewhere. Hosted and written by the excellent travel writer William Dalrymple, we meet and learn and especially see performances by artists like Rahat Fateh Ali Khan, Mercan Dede, Abida Parveen and (briefly) the great Youssou N'Dour. Only 50 minutes long, the documentary film does include extras with complete performances that last another 36 minutes, though given the capacity of the DVD it's a shame that it isn't twice as long. If nothing else, the movie will send you to the world music section of your music store. Even more barebones is the travel documentary *The Sacred Sites of the Dalai Lamas: A Pilgrimage To The Oracle Lake* (\$24.95; Michael Wiese). It's one in a series of films traveling to parts of Tibet and elsewhere that are prominent in the hearts of those who practice Buddhism.

Also out this week: *Lou Reed: Berlin* (\$24.95; Weinstein/Genius), the concert film of his underappreciated song cycle; *Mobile* (\$39.99; Acorn), a British miniseries that proves Michael Kitchen is more than just *Foyle's War* but can't overcome a so-so story any more than the next actor; *Mission: Impossible Fifth Season* (\$49.99; Paramount) finds Lesley Ann Warren joining the IMF; *The Three Stooges Collection Volume Four 1943-1945* (\$24.96; Sony), which collects the slapstick that kept people smiling through the end of WW II, even as Curly suffered strokes and became incapacitated; *Body Heat* (\$28.99; Warner Bros.) is so steamy on Blu-Ray you'll try to wipe the sweat off your TV screen even as you shy away from Kathleen Turner's man-eating brilliance; *Halloween* (\$24.95; Dimension/Genius) is a 3 disc set of the Rob Zombie remake which unfortunately does not contain the original theatrical cut but only his unrated director's cut, a disc of extras and ANOTHER disc with a 280 minute (!) making-of documentary that must set some sort of record for one movie; *Mister Roberts* (\$24.99; Acorn) is an ok TV movie version starring Robert Hays and Charles Durning and Kevin Bacon of the classic play filmed more famously by Henry Fonda and Jack Lemmon; *Cesar Millan: Mastering Leadership Vol. 1-3* (\$49.99; R2) is the TV host's guide to dog whispering your pet; time hasn't been overly kind to *Beetlejuice* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.) which seems less anarchic and more sitcomy today but still has to be one of Michael Keaton's shinier moments; *Hell In A Cell* (\$34.95; WWE) contains 15 complete pro wrestling matches, with Mick Foley talking you through the highlights; *The Alice Faye Collection Volume 2*

(\$49.98; Fox) collects five more musicals starring the competent Faye -- all of them just "okay" at best; *Sidney Crosby: On The Ice And Beyond* (\$24.98; Warner Bros.) is a generous, nearly four hour look at the youngest captain in league hockey history; *Slacker Uprising* (\$9.95; Disinformation) is a look at Michael Moore's noble effort to increase voter turnout in 2004 and he's making it widely available to goose young people again but frankly it seems like old news and even bad luck to talk about 2004 right now; *Midsomer Murders Set Eleven* (\$49.99; Acorn) features more grisly goings-on in Midsomer County, which must have a high immigration rate or there'd be no people left by now; and *Michael Palin's Full Circle* (\$49.98; BBC Video) is his latest, absorbing travelogue -- this one focused on the Pacific Rim.

So tell me, what do you think of Tina Fey?

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