

August 29, 2012

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Theater: *Once on This Island* Charms; Muggles Muddle *Potter*

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ONCE ON THIS ISLAND*** out of ****
POTTED POTTER* out of ****
CHIMICHANGAS AND ZOLOFT* out of ****

ONCE ON THIS ISLAND*** out of ****
PAPER MILL PLAYHOUSE

The Paper Mill Playhouse is on a serious tear. It has the smash hit *Newsies* on Broadway (and if they've got a piece of it like I hope, that will help stabilize the venue the way *A Chorus Line* did for the Public for years to come -- though since it began with Disney I must be crazy to imagine this). And now they can boast a freshly minted version of *Once On This Island*, which has charm to spare thanks to a very talented cast and solid production. It's my first time seeing this show so I have no idea what's been refined or changed. All I can say is that the 90 minute tale of thwarted romance (a sort of Caribbean *Romeo & Juliet* with interfering gods thrown into the mix) is greater than the sum of its parts. The story is quite familiar and many of the songs by Lynn Ahrens (who wrote the book and lyrics) and Stephen Flaherty (music) blend together too quickly. But the scenic design by Donyale Werle has a wonderful home-made feel appropriate for this story and the lighting by Kenneth Posner and sound by Randy Hansen add to the fable-like aura. (I won't praise the fine costumes by Jessica Jahn because surely a tale on the islands could have shown some more skin?) And the almost uniformly excellent cast delivered the solid choreography by Bradley Rapiere with ease and made the entire evening a pleasure.

Director Thomas Kail kept a sure hand on the rudder of this pleasure boat, which begins with a little girl scared by a thunderstorm. She's distracted from her fears by being told the story of their island, which is split into two sides -- the wealthy, light-skinned descendants of the French and the poor (but happy! I didn't say it was original) dark-skinned peasants who descended from slaves. Lovely Ti Moune (Syessa Mercado -- who I admired a lot on season seven of *American Idol*) is an orphan taken in by an elderly couple.

One day the handsome Daniel (Adam Jacobs) gets in a car accident and Ti Moune rescues him. She follows the young man back to the hotel/palace where he lives because she's convinced the gods want her to nurse him back to health. They fall in love, sort of, but he is already promised to another. This is a fairy tale, but a real one. And in real fairy tales people die and bitterly sad endings often take place. So

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don't assume everything will turn out all right in the end.

The pleasure of this story is in the telling, which uses simple props like masks and bolts of cloth to simulate the strangeness of the city or a rainstorm and so on. Opener "We Dance" is delivered strongly by the entire cast, as are many of the tunes. But first among equals is Mercado, who really blossoms here. She captures the sweet naivete of an innocent girl on the cusp of womanhood very nicely and without overdoing it. She looks lovely, has a voice that easily fills the Paper Mill's big space, dances well and has excellent stage presence. Mark her down as yet another Idol contestant who can and should establish herself on Broadway.

A high point in the songs is "The Sad Tale Of The Beauhommes," which uses the entire cast, puppetry, dance and more to put over this story song about the origins of the two separate classes of people on the island. Other tunes don't always stick out, even when delivered with style, like Aurelia Williams doing her best to turn the rather pat "Mama Will Provide" into a showstopper. (She darn near succeeds.)

Kenita R. Miller and Kevin R. Free are very good as Ti Moune's guardians. Alan Mingo Jr. has fun as Papa Ge, the God of Death, adding a much needed sense of menace to the climax of the story. Courtney Reed is strikingly pretty and makes the most of her brief scenes as the intended of Daniel. Jacobs as Daniel, however, is the weak link. He's notably stiff in his brief bits of dialogue and we feel no real connection between him and Ti Moune, so very little feels at stake. On the plus side, he sings his big solo number "Some Girls" quite well in a classic Broadway ballad style. (It's also one of the show's best songs.) And he unquestionably looks the part of a Prince Charming.

But that lack of sexual charge between Daniel and Ti Moune highlights the show's squeaky clean weakness. Clearly geared towards families, there's still no reason why the entire production should feel so lacking in sensuality. A show set in a Haiti-like island could surely feel more sexy. We're told Daniel has a notable scar on his chest but it's almost a surprise Ti Moune has seen it, the proceedings are so wholesome. When Ti Moune dances at the ball and raises her skirt -- just a little, mind you -- she seems to be wearing leggings or stockings (or apparently knee pads -- see the comments below) of some sort, as if even a glimpse of her legs would be too randy for us. That lack of passion, of earthiness, of sex -- and sexual attraction should be at the heart of any romance -- keeps this nicely mounted production from lifting off. Though nothing should stop Mercado from using this excellent showcase to further her Broadway ambitions. Daniel may have spurned her but I'm certain producers and directors and writers who see her will fall in love with that talent.

POTTED POTTER * out of ****

LITTLE SCHUBERT THEATRE

This two-man show that promises to condense all seven Harry Potter books into a 70 minute performance/parody does everything you would expect and less. It follows in the tradition of the Reduced Shakespeare Company's condensation of the Bard's plays into one (very long-running) bit of tomfoolery, which itself inspired all sorts of spin-offs.

This is the latest and actors/creators Daniel Clarkson and Jefferson Turner seem like affable fellows. One is a Potter fanatic; the other hasn't even bothered to read them all yet when the show begins. The stage is filled with a silly looking choo-choo train, a bookcase with the Potter books lined up, a wardrobe (oops, that's Narnia!) and so on. They goof around, play with props, turn Quidditch into an excuse to have the audience bat around a beach ball, joke about Voldemort and so on. You won't be surprised by pop culture references to *Shrek*, *The Chronicles Of Narnia*, *The Lord Of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, Lemony Snicket and so on. You won't be surprised by much of anything here unless you're very very young.



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**feliciaday**

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The disappointment is that the lads didn't really put any effort into this, other than stocking up on Silly String and bad puns. When they get to the third book, the fellow who has pretended not to have read them decides he can predict what will happen in it based on what happened in the first two. Hey, this might actually have a little substance to it, I thought, since the first three books all followed a formula which author JK Rowling finally abandoned in book four. Kids might get an amusing tweak of Rowling's world by being reminded how lock-step those first three books were by beginning with Harry being whisked to Hogwarts, facing a challenge and then Gryffindor winning top prize at the end of term (rather annoyingly, I thought at the time) > No such luck. They don't break down the formula or even try to "predict" what might happen in book three by playing off other familiar works like LOTR. They just list a few plot points and move on.

Similarly at the finale they begin by letting Professor Snape (the most complex and conflicted character in the books) sing a song based around the melody of "I Will Survive." Well if anyone deserves their own number, it's Snape. But that's quickly abandoned after a line or two and suddenly Voldemort and others are singing in a meaningless little number that doesn't comment on or amusingly toy with the characters and stories Rowling created. It's just a lazy, disco-ball finale with no more thought put into it than any other gag in this show that runs a rather long 70 minutes. The very little kids in the audience certainly weren't bored and had plenty of chances to shout out comments or thwack at a ball. Given the full house at the quite nice Little Schubert, I can see parents being tempted into an easy time-killer. But kids who have seen very little theater deserve better.

CHIMICHANGAS AND ZOLOFT[®] out of ****
ATLANTIC STAGE 2

The awkward, would-be wacky title of Fernanda Coppel's comic drama is the first hint that this would be a poorly conceived evening. Two families are thrown into chaos by the emotional meltdown of Sonia (Zabryna Guevara), who has left her husband and daughter after a suicide attempt to try and pull herself together. Easily the most accomplished actor here and an appealing stage presence, this isolation means that for most of the show Guevara is alone, delivering tepid monologues directly to the audience, and almost never gets to interact with anyone else.

That leaves the rest of the show to her sports-loving husband Ricardo (Teddy Canez) and their daughter Jackie (Carmen Zilles) to carry on as best they can with the help of their neighbors Alejandro (Alfredo Narciso) and his daughter Penelope (Xochitl Romero). The teenage girls are bickering best friends, with Jackie worried that coming out to her mom is what drove Sonia away while Penelope is doing it with a drug-dealing loser who may have knocked her up. Penelope's dad is stereotypically gay (he even worries about drinks leaving a water stain on an outdoor wooden table that must surely get rained on) though it's not clear that he is openly gay. What is clear is that he and Ricardo are having a torrid affair.

None of this is interesting. The teenagers fight and make up every two minutes and call each other "dude" so relentlessly you want to scream. As mentioned, Alejandro is comically gay and yet even by the end of the play I wasn't quite certain if he was out or not. If there was any explanation of what happened to his wife and Penelope's mother, I missed it. (Dead? Divorced? Run off like Sonia?) Stupidities are endless -- Jackie texts her mom and says she's pregnant to try and get her to come home. When her dad finds this out, instead of simply telling the truth, she and Penelope start divulging their darkest secrets. Later, the two girls are forbidden to speak to each other ever again. Why? I haven't the foggiest.

The gay affair is utterly unconvincing. I hate to criticize any actors in a play this weak (which is why I won't comment on the anonymous sets, costumes or direction). But it's a sad truth that if you want to be a male actor in the theater you're simply going to have to play a gay role and probably kiss a guy at some point. (Hey, women have had to play whores for a hundred years on movies and tv, so don't complain.) These two actors are painfully awkward in their brief, romantic moments. But I don't blame them. In a

show that gets its biggest laugh from an actress farting when she appears on stage, I'd feel uncomfortable too.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

Chimichangas And Zoloft *

Cock ** 1/2

Once On This Island ***

Potted Potter *

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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Fern Siegel: Stage Door: Potted Potter

The "Harry Potter" books were a cultural phenomenon, spawning fanatic loyalty. They are also ripe for parody -- as Potted Potter at The Little Shubert on Theater Row makes clear.



Dan Persons: Cinefantastique Spotlight Podcast: 'Snow White and the Huntsman'

Well, forgetting to put the term "entertaining" into the precis for Snow White and the Huntsman may have been the first problem.



Lightsey Darst: The Poorest Art: Dance And Money (II)

A recent NPR Marketplace Money report cited \$60,000 as a starting salary for ballet dancers. Where this number came from, I can't fathom.

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03:19 PM on 06/05/2012

Those were not leggings that Syesha was wearing. Those were knee pads.

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Michael Giltz

freelance writer

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05:00 PM on 06/08/2012

Thanks. I wasn't sure what was going on and took my best shot. I've seen a lot of musicals and never seen an actor wearing knee pads. Maybe she has some medical issues? Her performance was very good, as I said and she looked great.

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3fingerbrown

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10:16 AM on 06/05/2012

I'd love to see Once on This Island come into New York. I think it'd do better today than when it first opened back in 1990. (It was only a marginal hit, if I recall, might've even lost money). I always thought it was a case of the right show in the right place at the wrong time.

In those days, Broadway was still in the grip of the Lloyd Weber/Mackintosh invasion, which for all its razzle-dazzle offered rather dull, predictable music -- bland operetta meets bland Euro-pop. It just wasn't a good time to ask audiences and critics to embrace a unpretentious, childlike show featuring steel drums and calypso rhythms. It was the era of the BIG MUSICAL.

The intervening 20 or so years have loosened things up -- we're hearing a wider variety of musical styles on and off B'way than ever before. Audiences have become accustomed to more modestly scaled shows that employ dance and lighting and puppetry, rather than chandeliers and helicopters, to achieve their big moments. And in these dark times, this sunshiny trifle might be just the thing audiences are looking for. It isn't a milestone in musical theater history, but I do recall enjoying it immensely and leaving the theater wishing it a long run.

But yeah, for a Broadway musical, a little more skin is never a bad thing.

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09:39 AM on 06/05/2012

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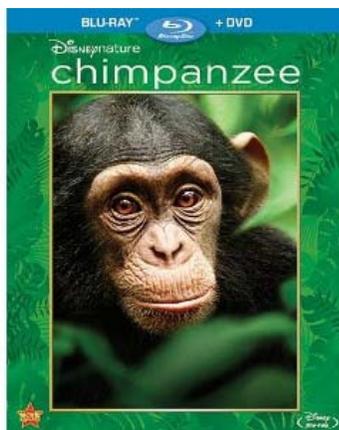
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CHIMPANZEE (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Disney) -- The political documentary *2016: Obama's America* is a huge hit for a film in its genre. But it's crazy to say it's the top documentary film of the year... except for nature documentaries. That's the caveat news outlets must make, which is kind of like saying a movie is the top family film of the year... except for animated films. Or the top drama of the year... except for ones with vampires. In fact, the top documentary of the year so far is *Chimpanzee*, the latest in what is proving an annual event. Every year around Earth Day, Disney releases a new documentary about our world. This latest was directed by Alastair Fothergill and Mark Linfield, both of whom can be found on the credits of some of the best documentaries in history, namely the *Blue Planet* and *Planet Earth* TV shows and their theatrical spinoffs. This one isn't quite up to the level of those, but it's an engaging look at the life of a little chimpanzee from birth through traumatic events and the possibility of a happy future. Parents beware: nature throws our hero Oscar a few *Bambi*-like curves. It's presented as gently as possible but is there nonetheless. The very sensitive and the very young might be upset by those

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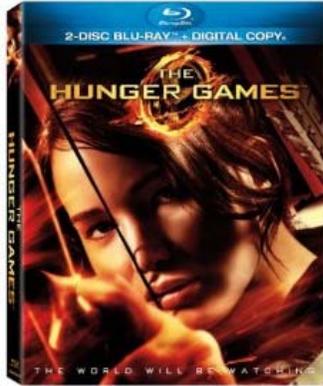
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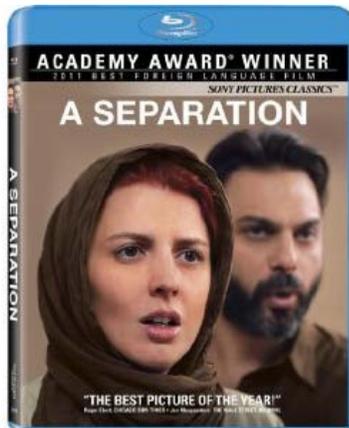
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moments, but the rest will discover a real-life adventure tale told with acute observation. I could have done without narrator Tim Allen's jokey asides, but they're modest and brief. Those who have seen the startling beauty of those other films won't be surprised when I say many of the shots -- especially the opening scene setters -- are so striking I half wondered if they were special effects. James Cameron would be jealous of the imagery on display. Overall, it is superior family entertainment and deservedly should be lauded as the biggest hit documentary film of the year, no matter what political party you're registered in.



THE HUNGER GAMES (\$39.99 Blu-ray combo; Lionsgate) -- OK, now fans breathlessly waiting for the second film installment in the series can watch and rewatch *The Hunger Games*. Some truths will emerge. The pageant towards the beginning where the contestants are on display is an embarrassment -- Katniss is supposed to be clothed in an outfit that bursts into simulated flames and the special effect is so lame (even for a somewhat low budget film tackling such a big tale) that it's literally cringe-inducing. It looks like an effect a kid would produce for their home-made YouTube video. It's not a throw-away scene but a key moment in the "selling" of Katniss to a TV audience that will ultimately have a hand in deciding her fate. It never, ever should have made it to screen in its present form. As a commercial decision, I would have stuck with director Gary Ross who delivered a massive worldwide hit on a relative dime and did a great job of finding his stars alongside casting director Debra Zane. However, Ross is much better at the earlier dramatic scenes. So on an artistic level, the action portion of the film might improve mightily. Finally, as if there were any question, Team Peeta, all the way.



A SEPARATION (\$35.99 Blu-ray; Sony Pictures Classics) -- This sensational drama was my introduction to the talents of director Asghar Farhadi. Rightful winner of the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film (when will they change the name to Best International Film, by the way?) it's a penetrating, utterly involving drama of life in contemporary Iran. A wife who decides she wants a separation from her husband begins a cascade of events that include hiring a woman to watch after her husband's elderly father and soon one action leads to another and the consequences become more and more dire. It's superlative drama of the highest order and now that I've been able to see two more of Farhadi's films, I know it's not a fluke either. He's a world class director. Anyone interested in drama, cinema or just a good family drama should watch this immediately.

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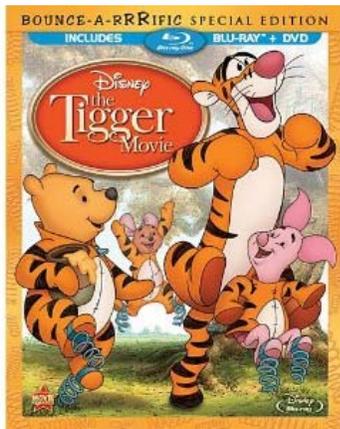
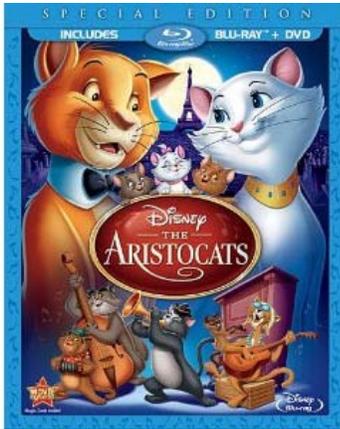
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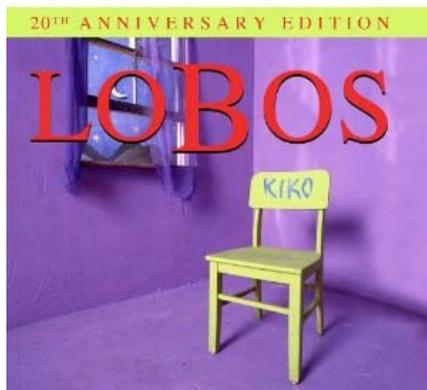
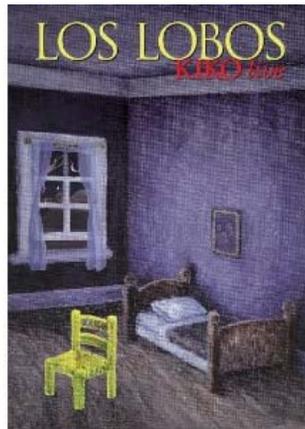
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THE RESCUERS/THE RESCUERS DOWN UNDER (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Disney)

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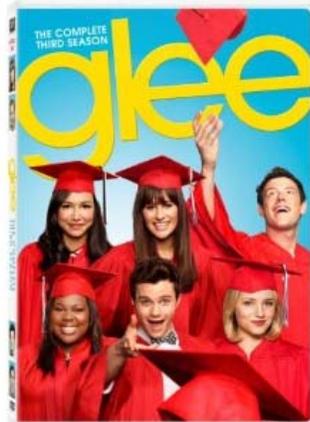
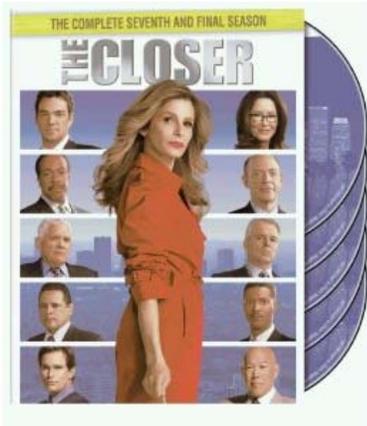
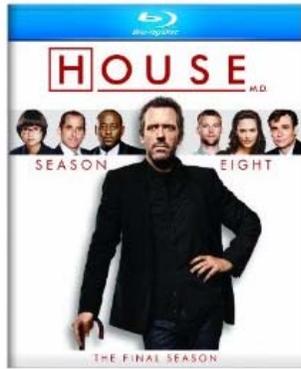
THE TIGGER MOVIE (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Disney) -- *The Rescuers* and *The Aristocats* were made during the dark days of Disney animation. They are cheaply produced, with flat, static backdrops and the modest stories are geared strictly at tykes. It's depressing to see movies with the Disney name that have animation more appropriate for a cheap Saturday morning cartoon. But that's no excuse for the paucity of imagination on display, especially with fine voice actors like Bob Newhart and the inspired choice of Eva Gabor on tap. Even the Sherman Brothers can't rescue *The Aristocats*, despite a few decent songs. *Pocahontas* is an overshadowed entry from Disney's second golden period (before they were outclassed by Pixar). It's awfully politically correct but gorgeously animated and proudly embraces a rare downbeat ending. It's puzzling and annoying that Disney doesn't allow fans the option to watch the movie with the duet reinstated for the 10th Anniversary DVD. Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz always wanted it in and they did it the last time around but now it's relegated to an extra. The movie doesn't become a classic but it's certainly better without it. Like *The Rescuers* set, it includes an inferior sequel. Finally there's *The Tigger Movie*, a glorified straight to DVD release that ended up being released theatrically and doing quite well. It falls somewhere in the middle here, not a cheap sad tale but a good proving ground for young Disney talent, albeit not so good that it makes you forget how good Disney can truly be. Still, it was the Sherman Brothers again to the rescue, with some superior songs.

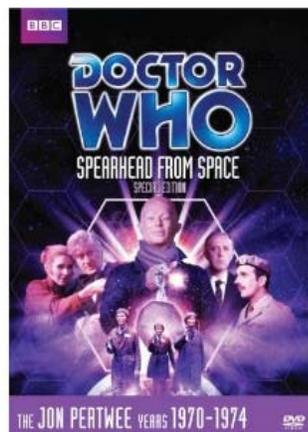
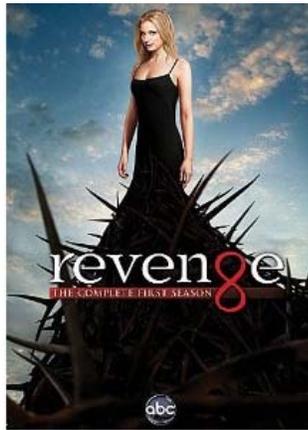


LOS LOBOS KIKO LIVE (\$16.98 DVD; Shout)

LOS LOBOS -- KIKO 20TH ANNIVERSARY (\$9.99 CD; Shout) -- Los Lobos is a great roots rock band that threw everyone for a loop with their sonic masterpiece *Kiko*. Fans and critics still haven't quite recovered, and though it's a favorite of the cognoscenti, *Kiko* still hasn't entered the pantheon the way it deserves. Let's face it, you wouldn't have expected a psychedelic masterpiece from Creedence Clearwater Revival and you didn't expect this left-field beauty from the ferociously rocking band behind "Will The Wolf Survive?" But, boy is it a great album. It's been 20 years and people need to take a deep breath, listen to this album with fresh ears and realize what a landmark it is, every bit the equal of Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, Radiohead's *Kid A* and other oddball classics. It's lyrical, shimmering, strange, lovely and haunting. You can rock out to the CD (headphones preferred, thank you very much) or you can buy the DVD and enjoy a live performance with the album played in its entirety. The band is at the peak of their powers (though I'd love to see them again today -- [they're touring](#) on their own and with Neil Young & Crazy Horse, which is a terrific double bill). The live DVD isn't edited crazily like so many concert films and gets the job done. You can watch just the concert or a fuller version along with interviews and other extras wrapped around the performance. In any format, you'll appreciate anew a

great American band and their greatest album.





HOUSE SEASON EIGHT (\$74.98 BluRay; Universal)

THE CLOSER SEVENTH SEASON (\$59.98 DVD; Warner Bros.)

GLEE THIRD SEASON (\$59.98 DVD; FOX)

MIKE & MOLLY SEASON TWO (\$44.98 DVD; Warner Bros.)

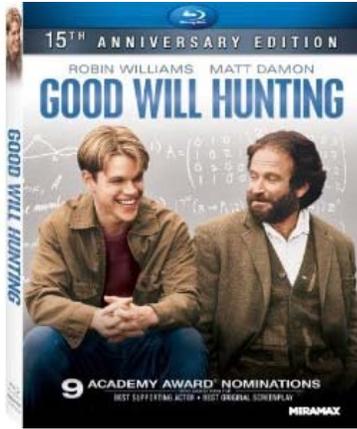
MIGHTY MORPHIN POWER RANGERS SEASON 1 VOLUME 1 (\$19.93 DVD; Shout)

REVENGE FIRST SEASON (\$45.99 DVD; ABC)

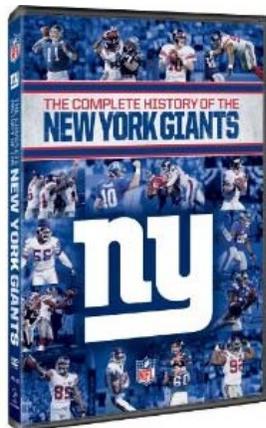
DOCTOR WHO: THE GREATEST SHOW IN THE GALAXY/ DOCTOR WHO: SPEARHEAD

FROM SPACE (\$24.98 each on DVD; BBC) -- It's hard to know when to say goodbye. *House* clearly got it wrong; one season earlier and I think fans and critics would have mourned the show more. As it was, eight seasons was clearly more than enough, though that doesn't dim Hugh Laurie's fun in creating one of TV's most indelible pains in the ass. *The Closer*, however, got it just right, with the show leaving at the top of its game ratings-wise and Kyra Sedgwick brandishing that crazy Southern accent to great effect right up to the end. *Glee* can't say goodbye because it has something to prove after a creatively disastrous season two and a not much better season three. Like clingy parents, they refuse to let go of key characters after they graduate and that does not bode well for season four. But here's hoping they get back on track.

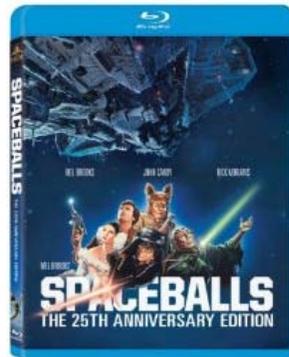
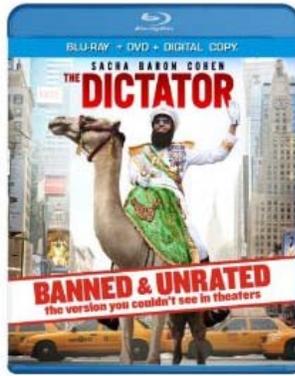
(Start by insisting the songs actually have something to do with the scenes at hand, guys!) *Mike & Molly* moved a bit beyond the incessant fat jokes to allow Melissa McCarthy to blossom even more as a full-bodied woman in love. Fans of *Power Rangers* are ga-ga for the 20th anniversary reunion that's going to bring together every surviving Power Ranger that they can for the ultimate showdown. Until then, the hardcore fans can begin again where it all started with this economical first half of season one. It contains 30 episodes and no frills but who needs frills when you've got the MMPRs? The guilty pleasure of last season deserves a wider audience and this DVD release of Season One of *Revenge* leaves you no excuse. Dive in. Finally, I continue to plead for complete boxed sets for each Doctor, but fans will enjoy these single releases of prior Doctor Who adventures with entire tales and loads (I do mean loads) of extras. What better way to prep for the new season starting Saturday on BBC America?



GOOD WILL HUNTING (\$14.99 BluRay; Miramax/Lionsgate) -- This is a corny sentimental film. But if it makes you cry, who am I to spoil your pleasure? And it made Oscar-winning stars out of Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, both of whom have acquitted themselves very nicely as actors and in Affleck's case especially as a director. On the other hand, it gave the very talented director Gus Van Sant a dual track of intriguing indies and bland studio pictures. But since he uses his Hollywood juice to make flicks like *Elephant*, at least he's used his power for good. And I still quote the "How do you like *them* apples?" line.



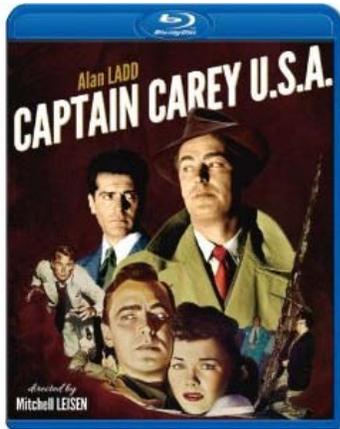
THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF THE NY GIANTS (\$26.97 DVD; NFL/Vivendi) -- This is a rerelease of the 2004 documentary about the Giants, modestly updated to fill in the last eight years. Strictly for fans, though NFL Films always has great footage you've never seen before in their releases. You used to have to wait for a weekend TV broadcast; now fans can enjoy their access any time.



THE DICTATOR (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Paramount)

SPACEBALLS (\$19.99 BluRay; MGM)

POST MORTEM (\$29.95 DVD; Kino Lorber) -- What's a comedy? Here are three pretty radically different responses. Sacha Baron Cohen likes to mix the forms of reality TV when mining his cultural collisions between Western society and the "foreign," in this case a brutal dictator who is deposed and must go to work in a health food store. I'm sure he and Mel Brooks would get along mightily, but Brooks is doing a very different sort of comedy with *Spaceballs*, his spoof of *Star Wars* and *Alien* and Indiana Jones and anything else that comes to mind. He'd rather trade in one top drawer joke for ten cheap ones because a laugh is a laugh, right? *Young Frankenstein* it ain't but time has actually helped this one not seem so out of step because when it first came out *Star Wars* seemed to be pretty passe as a target. Finally, the very (very) different comedy *Post Mortem* is the second in a trilogy of films looking at Chile through a mordant, unexpected lens. It focuses on a man who takes notes during autopsies but is often daydreaming about his leftist neighbor. When the government is overthrown, the bodies of her compatriots begin to dominate his job and the man can't keep political reality at bay any longer. No one, I think, would like all three of these films. But hearing who likes which two and why would be fascinating.



MY SON JOHN (\$29.95 BluRay; Olive/Paramount)

CAPTAIN CAREY U.S.A. (\$29.95 BluRay; Olive/Paramount)

PRIVATE HELL 36 (\$29.95 BluRay; Olive/Paramount) -- Another batch of catalog titles from Paramount rescued and brought to life by Olive Films. *My Son John* is a relic of the Cold War, with parents Helen Hayes and Dean Jagger petrified that their eldest is a dirty commie. it's especially notable for being the final film of Robert Walker, who died during production at the age of 32 years old, one reason at least the film is unsatisfying. Alan Ladd is very satisfying in *Captain Carey*, in which a WW II operative returns to his stomping ground in Italy and discovers there are still wrongs to be righted and deaths to be avenged. Finally, there's the trim noir *Private Hell 36* in which two cops keep a stash of money from a crime and are ridden with guilt. Ida Lupino co-wrote and stars; the more I see of her fascinating career, the more I like her.

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