

# THE DVD- LAGER DISC NEWSLETTER

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## **Reach out to touch a bug**

As you've probably heard, the outstanding computer animation feature from Walt Disney Home Video, A Bug's Life (16698, \$35), has been issued as a single-sided dual-layer program, with a letterboxed presentation on one layer and a full screen presentation on the other, the full screen version having been digitally altered to improve its composition and framing. Don't get too excited though. The picture still looks cramped, and the emotional flow of the images is not as smooth. The bird, for example, is too big to fit properly in the full screen version, so it isn't as realistic or as involving as it is on the letterboxed version. About the only advantage to the full screen version is that it fills your monitor with the exquisite picture. Do get excited over the sticker on the jacket that claims Bug's Life is the "World's First DVD Created Directly From The Digital Source." The image quality is breathtaking, and the backgrounds have a photo-realistic vividness that is astounding. Every color is exact and solid, creating incredibly real perspectives and textures. The letterboxing has an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and no 16:9 enhancement.

The film's narrative, an uncredited adaptation of Seven Samurai, only with klutzes, is inspired, and the characters are amusing. The stereo surround sound is okay and the Dolby Digital track has a stronger dimensionality and more thrust. The film's sound mix is not intense, but there is a decent amount of detail and flourish. The 95 minute feature can be supported by English subtitles. There is a trailer, and the film's original end credit sequence is replayed, along with an alternate end sequence, released after the initial one became so popular, that contains a different set of gags.

## **We're ready to part the Red Sea, Mr. DeMille**

The jacket containing Paramount's two-platter 220 minute Cecil B. DeMille Biblical epic, The Ten Commandments (155087, \$35), came apart as soon as we opened it and we never could get the \$#@\*\*\$!! thing back together, but the DVD is worth the effort. The picture looks gorgeous. The transfer is the same as the beautiful Paramount LD (May 98), and with DVD playback the image is even crisper and more dazzling. The Technicolor hues are splendid and the film's color design is glorious. Fleshtones are rich, and the 1956 film's elaborate costumes and set decorations are vivid. The picture is letterboxed, with an aspect ratio of about 1.75:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The Dolby Digital sound is much more enjoyable than the standard stereo surround soundtrack and even sounds a little sharper than the LD's Dolby Digital track. The film does not have constant separation effects, but there are a number of enjoyable directional moments, and the whole soundtrack has substantially more flourish on the Dolby Digital track than on the standard track. The film also has a French standard stereo soundtrack and is closed captioned. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are fine. The platter break is set at the

Intermission, and the film is accompanied by trailers for three different theatrical runs.

Charlton Heston stars as Moses, with Yul Brynner, Edward G. Robinson, Anne Baxter, Yvonne De Carlo and others (we have often made note of how movie directors sometimes form certain actors in their own image, but this was the first time we noted how much Sir Cedric Hardwicke was being DeMille). The film is terrifically entertaining and time has not cheapened its special effects. It had several scriptwriters and is not necessarily admired for its screenplay, but check out how beautifully executed the scene is where Heston's character first learns of his birthright. There are two characters, each with different goals that would be better served if they did not interact, and yet their personalities compel them to keep probing and to spill the beans. You would be hard-pressed to find a scene in contemporary film that is so firmly psychological in its execution. Love that Red Sea split also—it makes a fabulous demo sequence.

### **More ways to entertain**

We spent an entire day watching the DVD International release, Tender Loving Care (DVDI0719, \$30), and we'd probably still be fooling with it if we didn't have to get back to real life. The single-sided platter contains a legitimate erotic thriller that has been broken up into sixteen segments, separated by computer game-type sequences (in which one navigates through a house, examining clues) and pieces of a lengthy 'personality' test that governs which footage from the movie you will view. The test itself takes two hours, the film runs close to 90 minutes, and you can spend who knows how long wandering through the house; but, since the responses to the test alter not only the movie, but the test itself, the temptation to 're-take' the test and re-run the film using different personalities (you do have more than one personality, don't you?) is quite compelling.

The film features John Hurt (who gives a nice, crisp performance), Michael Esposito, Beth Teggarden and Marie Caldare. Esposito and Caldare portray a married couple who have recently experienced a tragedy and Teggarden is a live-in nurse/therapist playing psychological games to help them through their grief. Hurt is the doctor in charge of the case, and the show's narrator. The program is very erotic—at last, a video game you can play with a date!—not only within the film (if you say, during the 'test,' that you don't like sex, though, the nude scenes are truncated), but within the house tour, which contains extensive texts about eroticism in art, the psychology of sexual deviants, and Eastern sexual literature. These digressions add to the depth of the program's themes, and also heighten anticipation for the film's erotic sequences. So, on the other hand, this is probably not a DVD for the whole family to play together.

You can stop the program at any time and acquire an 18-digit code that will let you start up where you left off. When the cinematography is good, the picture quality is as well, but there are many instances where the film is over lit or out of focus, and you can even catch the film crew in reflections in several places (or is that part of the game?). The program is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.9:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The stereo surround sound is passable and the program is not captioned.

The changes activated by alternate answers in the test often don't amount to much, though we were able, eventually, to activate a different ending. Response times to movement through the house or answering the test can be exhaustingly slow, which is probably the DVD's biggest drawback. It's taxing enough to be locked into the thing as dinner and bedtime slip by unnoticed, but to be sitting there tapping your foot while each new screen gradually arrives is frustrating. Within the house tour, there are a number of film clips from public domain materials, such as a Betty Page striptease, and other amusements.

The test has questions about the story, about art and about one's beliefs and one's personality. You can access a personal 'analysis,' based upon your answers, in each section, but it is rarely penetrating. On the other hand, if enough people get the DVD, you could use the access codes as a personality reference in singles ads and such.

### **A collector's Armageddon**

In addition to everything that was on the LD we reviewed last month, the Touchstone Home Video Criterion Collection DVD release of Armageddon (16720, \$50) has a Dolby Digital soundtrack. The film runs 153 minutes, adding about 3 minutes of extra footage over the standard release, most of which involves a poignant scene between Bruce Willis' character and his father. The picture is identical to the LD, except that it is a bit sharper, and is also identical to Touchstone's standard DVD release (Feb 99). The frame transfer rate appears to be similar to the previous DVD, as well. The image is letterboxed with

an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The colors are accurate and the image is crisp, even under difficult lighting conditions. The DVD's Dolby Digital track has more detail and more energy than the LD's standard stereo surround soundtrack, and is a more appropriate accompaniment to the film. The DVD's standard stereo track has less flair. The film can be supported by optional English subtitles.

The earth-is-threatened-by-an-asteroid-and-gets-saved-by-oil-drillers-turned-astronauts movie is presented on one platter, accompanied by two commentary tracks, one from director Michael Bay, producer Jerry Bruckheimer, Willis and Ben Affleck, and one by cinematographer John Schwartzman and space experts Dr. Joe Allen and Ivan Bekey. Combined, the commentaries present a fairly complete view of how the film was put together, what it was trying to achieve, and even where it comes up short (the experts, though happy to be involved with the project, take a dim view of some of the film's premises).

There is also a second platter, which has no Dolby Digital sound or captioning. It contains a few deleted scenes, a gag reel, a reasonably lengthy segment on the making of the music video, I Don't Want to Miss a Thing, an extensive breakdown of the film's special effects, production sketches, a storyboard comparison, and a collection of trailers and TV commercials.

### **Dead details**

Sam Raimi's disturbing 1982 horror feature about horrible spirits haunting a cabin in the woods, The Evil Dead, has been released by Elite Entertainment (EE7265, \$35) with a number of extra features. The picture quality is identical to the Anchor Bay release (Mar 99). Presented in full screen format, the image is sharp and colors are as fresh as one can hope for. The low budget feature still looks a bit murky in places and fleshtones are a little dull, but the presentation is admirable. Anchor Bay's release was in standard stereo only, but the DVD has a remastered Dolby Digital track that is a lot more fun, with more dimensionality and clearer details. The 85 minute program is not captioned.

There are also two commentary tracks. On one, Raimi and producer Robert Tapert reminisce about the shoot. They don't go into too much detail about the special effects, and say even less about how the story was developed, but they do have interesting anecdotes about securing funding, shooting on 16mm with a skeleton crew, what the cast was like behind the scenes, and about how audiences first reacted to the film, which achieved a level of terror that has really never been surpassed. There are stretches, however, where they get to watching the movie and forget to talk. On the other track, one of the stars, Bruce Campbell, shares his memories of the production, with a lot more flair. His vocal inflections bring delight even to the passages where he is merely reporting upon what is happening on the screen. He provides a lot more details about how things were shot and what was going on during the shoot. You need to hear the other track to get a little background, but Campbell's is the talk that entertains.

Also included on the DVD are a very gory trailer, some production stills and 18 minutes of behind-the-scenes shots (actually, 'raw footage'—takes where you can see the crew as well as the actors). Along with Campbell's detailed explanations, the footage gives one a clear idea of how some of the special effects were accomplished and what it was like on the set.

### **Epic comedy**

We continue to read negative comments about Steven Spielberg's wonderful 1979 comedy, 1941. Even Spielberg himself, trying to be cool or something, puts it down, but it is a terrific exercise in frantic comical excess and is amenable to multiple, multiple viewings, as we can attest. Universal has released the 145 minute version of the film as a Collector's Edition (20550, \$35), with substantial additions to its original theatrical running time of 118 minutes. The presentation is a duplicate of Universal's superb LD release (Jun 96), including an extensive 103 minute retrospective documentary, a few extra deleted scenes, an isolation of John Williams' musical score in standard stereo, production stills (including some that are captioned with 'in' jokes), ad materials, reviews, production notes, a limited cast-and-director profile section and a number of trailers.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The image is pretty much identical to the LD and has the same problems the LD had with the movie's very hazy cinematography. Although there are shots where the picture does look a little crisper than the picture on the LD, for the most part they are identical, and in many sequences, fog or haze surround the characters and make bright hues fuzzy. Even with the addition of Dolby Digital encoding, the dialog track is a bit weak

and the sound is a little harsh, with limited separation effects. Again, the audio quality seems identical to the LD. The film can be supported by English, French or Spanish subtitles (“Oh, regarde. Un louveteau.”), and the documentary can also be supported by English subtitles. John Belushi, Tim Matheson and Bobby DiCicco receive the most screen time among those in the extensive, all-star cast.

### **The noir noir**

Denzel Washington is an unemployed machinist in post-War L.A. who is hired as a gumshoe in Devil in a Blue Dress, a Columbia TriStar Home Video release (51349, \$30). We’ve seen the 1995 movie a couple times and we still haven’t completely figured out the plot, but the characters are engaging, the period atmosphere is marvelous, the ethnic conflicts are compelling, and there’s some good sex and violence, too.

The picture is presented on one side in letterboxed format, with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback, and in full screen format on the other side. The letterboxing, which has a nicer framing, adds a little to the sides of the image and masks picture information off the bottom in comparison to the full screen release. The picture transfer looks super, with crisp, solid colors and carefully detailed contrasts. We reviewed an LD in May 96. The colors on the LD look about the same, but the image is much softer, and the crispness of the DVD picture accentuates the film’s atmosphere considerably. The standard stereo surround soundtrack is much blander than the LD’s stereo track, but only the DVD has a Dolby Digital track and it sounds much livelier, with more detail, more complex separations and more energy. The 101 minute feature is also available in Spanish and Portuguese and can be supported by English, Spanish or Portuguese subtitles (“Mijavam na minha cabeça e diziam que era chuva.”). There are trailers for this movie and a couple others.

The film’s director, Carl Franklin, provides a commentary. He talks a lot about the changes made from Walter Mosley’s book, about black culture and society in Los Angeles in the late Forties, about the personnel who worked on the film and a little bit about the production. He supplies some of the backstory and explains a little more of the mystery than what is readily apparent on the screen. He also has some very interesting things to say about the Los Angeles music scene during that era and how it shifted from swing to a virtual rock ‘n roll. On the whole, though, his talk is adequate, but not elaborate. Also included on the DVD is some interesting footage from Don Cheadle’s screen test, in which it was discovered that the character fit perfectly the first time he tried him on.

### **Life is too short**

Martin Brest’s first feature film, Hot Tomorrows, was so obsessed with death you really wondered if the prodigious director would make it to middle age, and it was a relief when he let go of the subject to turn out a sparse but consistent string of box office bonanzas, the most notable, of course, being Beverly Hills Cop. His magnum opus, Meet Joe Black, has not fared as well, but it is clearly a project from the heart and it cannot be discounted simply because it failed to pull in the big bucks.

At 180 minutes, the film is excessive, but it is not the sort of excess one would expect from the creator of Hot Tomorrows. It is an intensely urbane and dry work of drama, basking in pleasantries instead of comedy and romantic ideals instead of romance. The narrative is fueled by a standard plot about a corporate takeover, and while the movie may have had viewers squirming in the theaters, there is more than enough story to hold one’s attention in the comfort of home.

The premise, markedly similar to that of City of Angels, is about a spirit, identified as Death, who takes possession of a human body (naturally choosing Brad Pitt—who wouldn’t want to walk around for a while as Brad Pitt?) to find out about why all this living stuff is so important to us humans. Anthony Hopkins, a super-rich financier, becomes his guide, putting the film in Sabrina territory, which mass audiences apparently have a tough time relating to—something about wearing tuxedos to dinner all the time. Had Meg Ryan played his daughter maybe the movie would have done better, but Claire Forlani is cast as the romantic interest, and her moderately intelligent, restrained performance exemplifies why the film failed in the outside world, as well as why it succeeds on its own terms. The movie’s metaphysics are nonsensical, but its emotional wash is refreshing. In contrast to the high camp of Death Takes a Holiday, upon which the film is directly based, there is nothing brooding or tango-like about the relationships among the characters. There are, instead, calm but determined searches for affirmations of life and, across the

three hours, Brest creates an emotional momentum that supersedes the story's magic—the moral being that just because Death has stopped doesn't mean Life should be called to a halt.

The set designs are lavish and the picture looks gorgeous, with glossy, finely detailed hues and rich fleshtones. The picture is letterboxed, with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The stereo surround sound is okay and the Dolby Digital sound is very good, with elegant separation effects and a strong dimensionality. The film is also available in French in standard stereo and can be supported by English or Spanish subtitles. There is a cast-and-director profile section, some production notes, a trailer and a brief featurette (Hopkins complains, obliquely, about the number of takes Brest demands).

### **Formula Sandler**

Adam Sandler portrays a late bloomer who channels his anger into playing effectively at defensive positions on a college football team in The Waterboy, a Touchstone Home Video release (16540, \$30). We have to admire that the screenwriters made the hero a defensive player instead of an offensive player, though sure enough, by the end, they couldn't resist putting him on offense. The film is a comedy, with a broad humor that scores plenty of laughs, and the narrative is playfully uplifting. It's a formula star vehicle, but it demonstrates why there are successful formulas and stars.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The picture is sharp and colors are bright. The stereo surround sound and Dolby Digital sound are okay, delivering an adequate audio mix that enhances most of the scenes without calling too much attention to itself. The 90 minute program is also available in French in standard stereo and can be supported by English subtitles. There is a trailer that methodically spells out the film's premise and a featurette that pretty much does the same thing, but with a few behind-the-scenes shots and a couple quick interviews.

### **Anywhere he wants**

The colors are a little light, the image is soft in places and the standard stereo surround soundtrack is bland, but the Dolby Digital track the Walt Disney Home Video release, Mighty Joe Young (16538, \$30), is super-duper. Joe gets those woofers a' shakin', and there are lots of enjoyable rear channel activity and left-right separations to keep you wondering where he's going to jump next. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The sequences with Joe look fine, but the film's budget has clearly been held in check, with bland lighting and other compromises outside of the special effects scenes. The film plays the same way. It is a very entertaining movie, but the acting is awful, the editing cheats like crazy and the script is a patchwork of contrivances. It doesn't matter. The story works, the special effects work and the sound is worth turning up to the max. The 114 minute feature can be supported by English subtitles and is accompanied by a trailer and a featurette that is really just a trailer with a couple interviews thrown in.

### **Nuclear excitement**

John Woo's enjoyable 1996 thriller in which John Travolta is a renegade Air Force colonel trying to unload some nukes and Christian Slater is the only one who can stop him, Broken Arrow, has been released by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment (4110420, \$30). Except for the inherent sharpness of the DVD playback and a slightly enhanced purity in the black portions of the screen, the picture is identical to the LD. It is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The colors look super, fleshtones are accurate and the image is very sharp. The stereo surround sound and Dolby Digital sound are slightly weaker than the LD's audio, but the film's sound mix packs a lot of punch and the DVD's sound is still quite enjoyable, particularly the highly detailed Dolby Digital track. The film is also available in French in standard stereo and can be supported by English or Spanish subtitles. A trailer has also been included with the 108 minute feature.

### **Charming romance**

A very charming romantic comedy with a plot that is best kept secret, Home Fries, has been released by Warner Home Video (15169, \$25). What we can say is that Drew Barrymore is a very

pregnant fast food cashier and Luke Wilson is an Army reserve pilot who falls for her. It isn't that straightforward, however, as there are a couple of well-placed coincidences and a lot of marvelous, logical links between the characters. Catherine O'Hara and Jake Busey are both quite amusing as Wilson's mother and brother, and Shelley Duvall makes a rare appearance, as Barrymore's mother. There's even a murder—well, sort of—and a couple other life-threatening situations to maintain the film's vitality.

The picture is presented on one side in letterboxed format, with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback, and in full screen format on the other side. The letterboxing adds nothing to the sides and masks picture information off the top and bottom in comparison to the full screen presentation, and we tended to find the full screen framing more pleasing. Shot in a small Texas town, the film is a bit dusty looking on purpose, with light hues. Flesh tones are okay and other colors are workable. The stereo surround sound and Dolby Digital sound do not have extensive mixes, but the audio delivers the goods when it is supposed to. The 95 minute program is also available in French in Dolby Digital and can be supported by English or French subtitles. There is a cast-and-director profile section and a trailer that effectively extracts the love story from the film without revealing the plot twists.

### **Inner city cult hit**

The surging popularity of Chris Tucker has inspired New Line Home Video to release the 1995 inner city comedy, Friday, as a Platinum Series title (N46680, \$25). Tucker stars with Ice Cube in the amusing look at a day in the life of two slackers in South Central Los Angeles. Some of the film's thunder was stolen by the more blatantly parodistic Don't Be a Menace... (Feb 99), but it is still a funny concoction with enjoyable characters and a touch of insight, and it has developed a strong following. John Witherspoon is also featured.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. Like the LD (Mar 96), the low budget film has a somewhat deliberately drab color scheme, and is a little grainy and reddish. The picture is very sharp, though, and colors are adequately delineated. The stereo surround sound is passable, though the bass could use a little more color. The 91 minute feature can be supported by English, French or Spanish subtitles and is accompanied by a cast & crew profile section, a green tag and a red tag trailer, music videos by Ice Cube and Dr. Dre, and several funny deleted or alternate (longer) take sequences. There is also a 20 minute interview with the director, F. Gary Gray, and another interview that is almost as long with the producer, Patricia Charbonnet. Charbonnet explains that she wanted to create a 'cult' hit and talks about bringing the personnel together. Gray shot the film on the block where he grew up, and talks about working with the cast and the limited budget (it was so tight, they literally couldn't afford to laugh at Tucker's improvisations).

### **Another simple plan gone awry**

Two small town cops come across a drug deal massacre and decide to steal some of the money before calling it in, but as they attempt to cover their crime they start getting deeper and deeper into trouble in Route 9, a Sterling Home Entertainment release (7195, \$25). Kyle MacLachlan, Peter Coyote and Wade Andrew Williams star in the enjoyable drama, which you know can't possibly end well for the heroes. The performers are appealing and the narrative pulls you right along, down the road to ruin.

The picture looks okay, although hues come off a bit light at times. The stereo surround sound is fine, and there is a Dolby Digital track with more sounds and better detail. The 102 minute feature can be supported by Spanish subtitles, but there is no English captioning. There is a trailer, an extensive cast & crew profile section, and a commentary track by MacLachlan and director David MacKay. MacLachlan and MacKay talk about the production, the characters and working with the other members of the crew. There are scattered tidbits about filmmaking that are worthwhile, and a few interesting anecdotes.

### **A sharper Fish**

The very amusing ensemble caper comedy, A Fish Called Wanda, has been released by MGM Home Entertainment (906266, \$25), in letterboxed format on one side, with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and no 16:9 enhancement, and in full screen format on the other side. We tend to prefer the full screen framing, though either is workable. The letterboxing masks picture information off the top and the bottom

of the image and even a little from one side, while adding more to the other side. Fleshtones are warmer and somewhat more accurate on the LD (Mar 93), but otherwise the DVD's picture is a vast improvement. The image is so much sharper and so better detailed that it doesn't matter if the hues look a little flat in places. The monophonic sound is fine and the 108 minute film is also available in French, with optional English or French subtitles. A trailer is also included. Jamie Lee Curtis and Kevin Kline star with John Cleese and Michael Palin in the 1988 feature.

### **In the middle of the gorillas**

We don't care too much for the 1988 Michael Apter film, Gorillas in the Mist The Adventure of Dian Fossey, with Sigourney Weaver as Fossey, because the narrative lacks complexity and it just seems like there's nothing to the movie but clever shots of her and the gorillas. The Universal DVD (20421, \$27), however, is outstanding. The picture is crisp, colors are vivid and the Dolby Digital surround is all encompassing. The 130 minute feature is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The image is very sharp and hues are exact, with accurate fleshtones. Even the darkest jungle night scenes are clear, with distinctive variations in shading. The stereo surround sound is terrific, but the Dolby Digital track has more precise separation definitions and more energy. Even when characters are only sitting around talking—which they do quite a bit—the jungle sounds creep in from all corners and transport your viewing room to the tropics. Just turn up the heat and you're set (okay, these are mountain gorillas—so turn down the heat). There is a French language track in standard stereo surround sound, and optional English subtitles. There is an excellent 'making of' featurette, with footage of the real Fossey and a behind-the-scenes look at Weaver's harrowing interaction with the gorillas, narrated by Jason Robards, as well as a trailer, production notes and a cast-and-director profile section.

### **Say yes to bugs**

We are still baffled as to why the effect-filled, riotously funny and totally hip cockroach comedy, Joe's Apartment, didn't do better in the theaters, but at least now it is available to the masses on DVD, from Warner Home Video (14042, \$15). The program is presented in full screen format only, clipping a little bit of picture information off the sides of the screen but revealing more on the top and bottom in comparison to the letterboxed version on the LD (Jan 97), but due to the nature of the film, you miss effects on either version. Otherwise, the crisp, nicely colored picture is identical to the LD, as is the stereo surround sound, though of all the films that Warner does supply Dolby Digital tracks for, why couldn't they have done this one, with it's over-active, dialog-infested rear channel effects? The 80 minute 1996 film also has a French stereo track and is closed captioned.

### **TV mania**

Cinema's ravenous sibling, television, locked onto our attention, our dreams and our sense of reality from a point in our life before we could either walk or talk. It is part of our earliest memories (anybody else have a Mr. Moon where they grew up?) and part of our most vivid recollections. It was where we first saw many of our favorite films, and where we learned what would be expected of us as adults ("...leaps over tall buildings in a single bound..."). We love it. We love it so much that it has become our vocation, and we love it so much that anger stirs within us when we read of campaigns to prevent children from watching it all the time. It's like banning books, only popular.

The DVD format is ideal for the replication of beloved television programs. You can fit a lot on a platter, and jump to any episode with a fair amount of ease. The older the program, the better the picture and the sound probably are than the day they were originally broadcast, and the newer the show, the more vivid its replication. Already there are many terrific TV shows available on DVD, and they are not only an end in themselves, but represent many avenues for future releases. A sampling:

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Our heart doubled its rate of patter when first put our hands on the two boxed sets from A&E Home Video, The Avengers '67 Set 1 (AAE70014, \$45), which contains two DVDs that have also been issued as

separate releases by A&E, The Avengers '67 DVD Vol.1 (AAE70018, \$25) and The Avengers '67 DVD Vol.2 (AAE70019, \$25), and The Avengers '67 Set 2 (AAE70015, \$45), which also contains two DVDs that have been released independently as well, The Avengers '67 DVD Vol.3 (AAE70020, \$25) and The Avengers '67 DVD Vol.4 (AAE70021, \$25). Each platter holds three 50 minute episodes, along with some delightful publicity stills. The episodes have fairly consistent monophonic soundtracks that are free of significant distortion, though the volume is set a touch lower than average. There is no captioning. We will discuss picture quality specifics below, but after a poor start in the first episode of Vol.1, the transfers are generally very nice, with bright, solid hues and accurate fleshtones. The source material has some damage and, even within the best looking episodes, there are passages where the focus or stability seems tentative, but such flaws are fleeting.

Patrick Macnee and Diana Rigg star in what most consider to be the pinnacle of the several manifestations the British TV series underwent during the course of its run. Loaded with eccentric characterizations, intensely styled wardrobes and imaginative decorations, the program is a definitive portrait of ultra-suavity and savoir faire in the Sixties. On the other hand, practically the first thing a young friend asked us was, "Is Steed an alcoholic?" That's the Nineties for you.

Rigg is shockingly young and given to bimbo-style karate chops, but the quality of her British-trained acting rescues her and the show in practically every scene she is in. Fight scenes aside, her line readings, movements, turns, mannerisms and dexterity are always precise and assured, and it is her physical proficiency that communicates to a viewer's subconscious that her presence is to be taken seriously. Her appearance is mesmerizing. The angles of her nose, her lips, her chin and her cheeks are more harmonically progressive and circular than a fugue, pulling a viewer into her dizzying beauty with a gravitational force. It is fortunate the program has editing, for that is the only way to break the trance of her presence, and if your finger wanders by accident to the still frame button you could find yourself glued to her smile for an entire afternoon. She has more smiles, by the way, than Eskimos have types of snow, and each one is substantially warmer.

Many of the episodes have the same format, in which what appears to be a supernatural occurrence at the beginning is found, by the end, to have an earthbound explanation, although some of the denouements are nearly as farfetched as the supernatural explanations would have been. Almost all the episodes are murder mysteries, and there are murders even in those that are not. At its best, the show combines Pinteresque dialog with a surreal setting, spoofing the standard spy and detective films while beguiling the viewer in cleverness. When it doesn't work, the combination is just plain silly, but when the performances, pacing, humor and imaginative premise are fit together smartly, the result is singularly unique and enjoyable.

Of the dozen episodes A&E has issued so far, the first episode in Vol.1, *From Venus with Love*, is probably the weakest, and may lead viewers to believe the show is more dated or contrived than later episodes prove to be. The heroes investigate what is apparently a UFO that is blasting astronomers and turning their corpses white in the process. The forced absurdities just seem to outweigh the wit. It may not help that the picture isn't all that good, either. Fleshtones are pale and colors, though well defined, are generally light, with some reels looking weaker than others. The companion episodes are a little stronger. In the classic *The Fear Merchants*, individuals are frightened to death when the villain develops an effective psychological profiling program to help businessmen get rid of the competition. There's also a fairly good action sequence where Macnee battles a bulldozer in a sandpit. A very typical episode, *Escape in Time*, stretches credibility slightly, but to enjoyable results. The heroes investigate a service that is sending criminals back in time to help them duck the law. To the show's credit, they never really attempt to hide the logical explanation, just finesse it. The picture on *Fear Merchants* is still a little faded and off-color here and there, but the picture on *Escape in Time* is very pleasing.

A&E has attempted to combine episodes with like themes in several of the collections. There are two bird-oriented episodes on Vol.2, *The Bird Who Knew Too Much* and *The Winged Avenger*. With delightfully exaggerated owliness, John Wood is featured in *The Bird Who Knew Too Much*, in which spies are using avian methods to obtain and communicate state secrets. People safely ensconced in upper story offices to which there are no ready accesses are clawed to death in *The Winged Avenger*. The mystery element is a little stronger—there are a couple suspects—and since comic books also play a role in the plot, there is a cute spoof of the *Batman* TV show in the finale. It is a good example of how the show can be playful without spoiling its mystique. Roy Kinnear is featured in the third episode in the collection,

The See-Through Man, about obtaining a formula for invisibility. The picture on Winged Avenger is a little weak, while the colors on See-Through Man are quite strong.

An apparent ghost sighting leads to a plot that is both more real yet more farfetched, about an underground city, in The Living Dead on Vol.3. The picture looks somewhat yellowed and fuzzy. Puns fly like fur in The Hidden Tiger, in which victims are apparently mauled by a large vicious cat, though no such animal appears to be present. Meow. The colors are stronger, but the image is grainy and contrasts are very weak. Charles Crichton directed The Correct Way to Kill, in which the heroes join forces with a pair of Russian agents to find out who has been murdering Russian spies. There is a lot of Silk Stockings-style humor, and Crichton's assured hand allows the episode's pleasures to supersede its absurdities. Colors are a bit pale and fleshtones are a little greenish in spots.

The best episodes, however, have been saved for Vol.4. Christopher Lee stars as an apparently indestructible scientist in Never, Never Say Die, although he reacts adversely to radios. Lee's performance brings a level of seriousness to the episode that counterbalances its inherent humor quite effectively. An episode that primarily features Macnee's character, The Superlative Seven is an adaptation of Ten Little Indians, but with its own twists and turns. Not only are Donald Sutherland and Charlotte Rampling featured among the cast, but the set designs look like they are straight out of Isle of the Dead. An episode that primarily features Rigg's character, Epic, is somewhat more tiresome, in which she is kidnapped by a group of aging silent screen stars who want to make a snuff film. Conveniently, it is set in an abandoned movie studio. The epilog, however, is priceless. There is an above-average amount of speckling on Never, Never Say Die, but the colors look great. Superlative Seven is also strong, and Epic is passable.

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Agnes Moorehead, Charles Chaplin and Walter Huston would rate high up there, but we believe that James Dean is the greatest motion picture actor who ever lived. Unfortunately, he only made three movies, which doesn't give you a lot to go on, but LaserLight DVD has issued three of his black-and-white television appearances from the early Fifties on two DVDs, James Dean Hill Number One/I Am a Fool (82014, \$13) and James Dean The James Dean Story/The Bells of Cockaigne (82013, \$13).

Two of them, I Am a Fool and The Bells of Cockaigne, provide valuable looks at the young actor developing his craft. I Am a Fool is a 25 minute teleplay by Sherwood Anderson with Dean, Natalie Wood and Eddie Albert as Dean's older self, reminiscing about his one, lost chance at love. Dean's manner is evocative of Dennis Hopper. He gives a kind of sloppy, overindulgent performance, but it is fascinating to see him in the raw. The story is simple and direct, and even in these sophisticated times it pulls at your emotions because of its directness.

Dean's performance is more sophisticated in Bells of Cockaigne. He plays a warehouse worker, trying to make ends meet and support his family, who enters into a poker game on payday. Gene Lockhart stars, as a fellow worker who takes pity on him. The 1953 half-hour episode (not an hour as the jacket claims), from the Armstrong Circle Theater and replete with commercials for Armstrong tile, is a trifle of a drama that would be utterly forgotten were it not for Dean's presence. His performance, however, is very detailed and affecting, a giant leap over what he did in I Am a Fool, and it sparks your imagination for how his other performances might have been had he not died.

Dean has a small role with a handful of lines in the Family Theater ensemble religious program, Hill Number One. Essentially a dramatization of the three days between Christ's death and His resurrection, Dean is the disciple, John. Of course, your eyes are riveted to him, but he is still finding his way and not using the camera to any advantage. He functions more as an extra than anything else. As for the hour-long drama, it seems to be talking to the converted, but it does play like a low budget Biblical epic and is sporadically entertaining. Roddy McDowall, Michael Ansara and a few other familiar performers are also buried in the cast.

The James Dean Story is an excellent retrospective documentary on Dean's life and brief career, produced by Robert Altman in 1957. We reviewed an LD in Dec 88. The 80 minute feature contains many photos and interviews, along with a couple rare clips, while attempting to evoke Dean's life and times in a somewhat artistic manner.

Hill Number One was shot on film. The image is a bit grainy, and there is lots of wear, but details

are reasonably clear and contrasts are well defined. I Am a Fool appears to be a kinescope of a kinescope, depicting a re-broadcast of the General Electric Theater program after Dean's death, with an introduction by Ronald Reagan. The image is soft, the darker portions of the screen are smeary, contrasts are limited and again there is a lot of wear, but Dean's expressions are clear and the presentation is viable. The image on Bells of Cockaigne, another kinescope, is smeary but workable. The black-and-white picture on James Dean Story is reasonably sharp, but contrasts are weak, losing detail in shadows, and there is a lot of displacement artifacting.

On both DVDs, the monophonic sound is noisy but coherent (the music on James Dean Story also quivers), and the programs can be supported by Spanish, Japanese and Chinese subtitles ("La familia que ora unida permanece unida."), although there is no English captioning. A letterboxed trailer for East of Eden has also been included on Hill Number One/I Am a Fool and a trailer for Rebel without a Cause is on James Dean Story/Bells of Cockaigne.

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CBS Video and Panasonic show no signs of slowing down their industrious release of episodes from Rod Serling's classic anthology series, The Twilight Zone. We reviewed the first groups of releases in Dec 98 and Feb 99. Four 'half hour' episodes, running about 25 minutes each, appear on each volume, accompanied by a general background about the show and about Serling, along with specific background information on each of the featured episodes. The monophonic sound is fine. Except where noted, the black-and-white picture transfers look terrific, with finely detailed contrasts, rich blacks, and crisp, smooth imagery. Even when an episode opens with a few scattered speckles, the source material usually looks pristine by the end. There are a few splices as well, camouflaged by frozen frames, but the error is momentary and does not affect the crispness of the image. The episodes are not captioned.

All four episodes on The Twilight Zone Vol.6 (PDV0012, \$25) have a common theme of life after death. One episode, Deaths-Head Revisited (Episode 74 from 1961), appeared previously on LD. About a former Nazi general who becomes trapped in a haunted concentration camp, the program was exceptional in its time for addressing the subject of the Holocaust, and is still very moving and unnerving. Lee Marvin, Lee Van Cleef and Strother Martin are featured in the cast of The Grave (Episode 72 from 1961), about a gunfighter who is apprehensive about visiting the cemetery where his rival is buried. It has a terrific atmosphere and you can't beat the all-star cast (Marvin has some nice moves with a gun). A man may or may not have come back from the dead in The Last Rites of Jeff Myrtlebank (Episode 88 from 1962). It is an amusing little tale, deriving a lot of humor from its hillbilly setting. Dub Taylor and Edgar Buchanan have supporting parts. An interesting allegorical piece, The Passerby (Episode 69 from 1961), is about soldiers returning home from the Civil War on a long and weary road. One, played by James Gregory, stops to help a widow. It is by no means a classic episode, but it does demonstrate how stimulating, eerie and just plain different an average episode could be in comparison to most of what was on television in those days. That is why it is appearing on DVD and the other stuff is not.

Two of the episodes on The Twilight Zone Vol.7 (PDV0016, \$25), which has a dream theme, appeared on LD, the classic Inger Stevens episode about a woman driving cross-country and being followed by a mysterious figure, The Hitch-Hiker (Episode 16 from 1960), and Perchance to Dream (Episode 9 from 1959), which has vague similarities with Nightmare on Elm Street. Richard Conte portrays a patient trying to convince his psychiatrist that a beautiful woman is trying to kill him within his dreams. In Shadow Play (Episode 62 from 1961), Dennis Weaver is trapped in a sort of Groundhog Day cycle, in which he is repeatedly sentenced to death and sent to the electric chair. Everybody has a Twilight Zone episode that scared the bejeezus out of them as a child, and with us it was King Nine Will Not Return (Episode 37 from 1960), in which Robert Cummings portrays a downed bomber pilot having hallucinations. It still gives us the willies.

Stories about aliens and UFOs inhabit The Twilight Zone Vol.8 (PDV0017, \$25), including the classic tale about unusually hospitable visitors to Earth, To Serve Man (Episode 89 from 1962), and Third from the Sun (Episode 14 from 1960) with Fritz Weaver as an armaments worker who attempts to take his family away in a spaceship before a war begins. Edward Andrews co-stars. Both episodes appeared previously on LD. A variation on a common tale, The Shelter (Episode 68 from 1961) is about the sudden panic among friends and neighbors when it looks like the country is under attack and only one family is

prepared. A little girl has an unusual friend with magic powers in *The Fugitive* (Episode 90 from 1962), but two mysterious men are looking for the friend. The conclusion is somewhat unexpected. A couple of the episodes have some minor speckling.

Three of the 'mind control' episodes on [The Twilight Zone Vol.9](#) (PDV0018, \$25) have appeared on LD. William Shatner stars in *Nick of Time* (Episode 43 from 1960), about a man who becomes addicted to a fortune telling machine. It's a *Good Life* (Episode 73 from 1961) was the episode that inspired the Joe Dante segment in the feature film. Billy Mumy portrays a domineering child who exerts an unusual influence over his family. Shelly Berman stars in *The Mind and the Matter* (Episode 63 from 1961), about a man who is able to define the world around him, but never without glitches. Buddy Ebsen stars in the fourth episode, *The Prime Mover* (Episode 57 from 1961). Sort of a cross between *Phenomenon* and *Rain Man*, Ebsen plays a cafe owner with psychokinetic abilities who gets dragged to Las Vegas by his best friend.

Buster Keaton stars in the most memorable of the four episodes on [The Twilight Zone Vol.10](#) (PDV0019, \$25), all of which deal with time travel. Keaton is a janitor in the 1890's in *Once upon a Time* (Episode 78 from 1961), who is transported to the Sixties (he's shocked to see that steak is selling for \$1.49/lb.). The 1890 sequences are executed in the style of a silent film, and Keaton gets to do many wonderful routines during the course of the show. Jesse White is also featured. A World War I pilot lands at a modern airbase in *The Last Flight* (Episode 18 from 1960), the only episode in the set to have previously appeared on LD, and the experience shows him his destiny. Cliff Robertson is a pioneer in *A Hundred Yards over the Rim* (Episode 59 from 1961), who needs medicine for his child and is able to get it, in the *Twilight Zone*. An aging actor with a bad marriage is given a chance to relive his past, but he finds that it really wasn't all that much better than the present in *The Trouble with Templeton* (Episode 45 from 1960). Brian Aherne stars.

Robertson is back again as a ventriloquist whose dummy apparently has a mind of its own in *The Dummy* (Episode 98 from 1962) on [The Twilight Zone Vol.11](#) (PDV0020, \$25), a collection of animate inanimates episodes. Usually in such stories, it's the ventriloquist who is mad, but when you enter the *Twilight Zone*, it's the dummy who's flipped. A famous episode that appeared on LD, *The After Hours* (Episode 34 from 1960) stars Anne Francis as a shopper who gets the ultimate run around in a department store. Telly Savalas is a step-father being hounded by his step-daughter's toy in *The Living Doll* (Episode 126 from 1963), another episode that appeared on LD, though the DVD presentation includes a spoken trailer by Serling that wasn't on the LD. Everett Sloane is a tourist in Las Vegas who becomes obsessed with playing a slot machine in the fairly simple psychological drama, *The Fever* (Episode 17 from 1960).

'Second chances' is the binding theme of [The Twilight Zone Vol.12](#) (PDV0021, \$25). One episode, *The Trade-Ins* (Episode 96 from 1962) appeared on LD, about an elderly couple who want to move their minds into youthful bodies. *Mr. Denton on Doomsday* (Episode 3 from 1959) is another western (which also appeared on LD), with Dan Duryea, Martin Landau and Doug McClure, about a washed up gunfighter who receives a potion that allows him to once again hit his mark, for a limited time, at least. Ida Lupino is a former screen star past her prime who wishes she could perform a reverse *Purple Rose of Cairo* in *Sixteen Millimeter Shrine* (Episode 4 from 1959). Martin Balsam co-stars, as her agent. The cinematic qualities of the episode are exceptional and the image is often striking. Shot on videotape, the picture on *The Lateness of the Hour* (Episode 44 from 1960) is incredibly immediate and vivid. There is some smearing in the quicker camera pans, but otherwise the presentation is gorgeous. Inger Stevens is featured again, as the restless daughter of a doctor who has a number of android servants. The denouement is guessable, but the execution is still intriguing.

The episode that inspired the John Landis segment of the feature film, *A Quality of Mercy* (Episode 80 from 1961), has been included on [The Twilight Zone Vol.13](#) (PDV0022, \$25). Dean Stockwell stars as a lieutenant in the South Pacific who suddenly finds himself literally in his enemy's shoes. Leonard Nimoy appears, briefly, and Albert Salmi gives one of his reliable performances (he was a terrific actor who never broke out of television the way his contemporaries did). Or maybe it was *Judgement Night* (Episode 10 from 1959) that inspired the Landis sequence, since it is about the same thing, a German U-Boat commander who suddenly finds himself on a British ship in the Atlantic that has broken off from its convoy (Patrick Macnee has a small part). Both episodes are entertaining, not so much for how they end but for the drama along the way. The other two episodes in the war-themed DVD have appeared previously on LD, *The Purple Testament* (Episode 19 from 1960), about a lieutenant who can see which of his men is

going to die, and *The Obsolete Man* (Episode 65 from 1961), with Burgess Meredith and Fritz Weaver in a Kafkaesque tale about a librarian who turns the tables on his executioner after being sentenced to death because society no longer needs him.

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The conventional memory is of Milton Berle running around in drag doing warmed over burlesque routines, but Milton Berle's *Buick Hour* (the show is really titled *The Buick Berle Show*), episodes of which are being issued by Best Film & Video Corp and Image, is actually much more intelligent. For one thing, although the program, from 1954-55, has a variety format, it also has a narrative, a sort of show-within-a-show in which Berle frets and struggles to put together his next broadcast, meeting his guest stars, rehearsing, and that sort of thing. The premise is both clever and flexible, letting Berle explore all comic parameters with a sense of purpose that keeps the viewer wondering what will happen next. During the course of the episode, there are also several musical sequences, often featuring classics by Cole Porter, Irving Berlin and such (Herbert Ross did some of the choreography).

Each DVD contains two 50 minute episodes, with full opening and closing credits and sponsor plugs. The black-and-white kinescope source material is in an expectedly variable condition, with splices, smears, grain and unreliable contrasts, though more often than not it looks sharp and reasonably clear. The monophonic sound is also inconsistent, usually improving a bit after a weak opening. The dialog is coherent and most of the music has no significant distortion. The programs are not captioned.

Anybody with an even passing interest in the stars of the bygone era will not want to miss Milton Berle's Buick Hour Volume One (ID4806BFDVD, \$25) and its opening episode (the premiere of Buick's sponsorship), featuring Tallulah Bankhead and Frank Sinatra. Bankhead spent most of her career on the stage and made very few films, so any footage of her strutting her stuff is precious, but the scenes the three of them share go well beyond that. Their timing and by-play are exquisite, and they even do a 'serious' dramatic skit that is totally captivating. Martha Raye guest stars in the companion episode, and the more often she and Berle flub their lines, the funnier it becomes.

Vic Damone and Jackie Cooper show up in the first episode on Milton Berle's Buick Hour Volume Two (ID5467BFDVD, \$25), and they all get some good burlesque material out of Dagmar and Denise Darcel (think Charo). It is more of an ordinary episode than the two in the first volume, but the music is good and the comical mix-ups are enjoyable. The sound is especially weak on the second episode. Not only is the volume low, but the audio is exceptionally noisy. What's more, the show's motif is 'culture,' and, along with actor Paul Douglas, opera singer Margurite Piazza guest stars. The flaws do not interfere too badly, however, with Piazza's arias.

Berle is ready to unveil the newest Buick, when it is apparently stolen from the set on one of the episodes in Milton Berle's Buick Hour Volume Three (ID5468BFDVD, \$25). He calls on famous detectives to help him find it, including Mickey Spillane (plugging his 'latest' bestseller, *Kiss Me Deadly*) and Sherlock Holmes, as played by Basil Rathbone. They get away with jokes they could never use today ("Watson's been giving you too much of that needle. It sounds like 'Drugnet.'") and Rathbone is hysterical ("Is this a Dagmar that I see before me?"). It's a gas. The companion episode features Peter Lawford and a very young Carol Channing.

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No television show fills us so simultaneously with joy and anxiety as *The Wonder Years*. Capturing with absolute perfection the adolescent years of a certain subset of suburban Baby Boomers, the program explored all the ins and outs of growing up in the Sixties. The plots were often little more than situations, though they were executed with the sort of surprising and witty turns that are apt to happen in real life. The show gave us anxiety because the hero, played by Fred Savage, is a normal person and subject to the flaws and mistakes and tragedies big and small that befall normal persons, but just as often he succeeds, and regardless of the emotional highs and lows the show gets all the details so right.

We would love to see *The Wonder Years* released in the same manner that A&E is issuing *The Avengers* and Panasonic is doing *The Twilight Zone*, but that hasn't happened, so we have what we would consider the next best thing. LaserLight has issued The Best of The Wonder Years (82001, \$20), which contains three episodes from the TV series, a 'highlights' program that conveniently replayed the show's

major turning points and the most significant events in the hero's love life, combined with a few of the show's funniest scenes, followed by the program's two-part finale (the hero takes off for a vacation resort where his girlfriend is working for the summer), of which the highlights show serves as an ideal prelude. Hence, the 71 minute program works quite well as a freestanding coming-of-age comedy that will delight newcomers as much as it will warm the hearts of fans. The concluding burst of fireworks in the last shot of the final episode brought us to tears.

Two 41 minute episodes with a holiday theme are combined on The Christmas Wonder Years (82002, \$20). In both, the hero worries about what to get his girlfriend, while his family undergoes a minor crisis, particularly in the second episode, in which the hero's father has quit his job to start a new company, only to have the loan fall through.

Each episode is presented with complete opening and closing credits. The picture is often grainy or hazy. Colors are reasonably strong in well-lit scenes, but murkier in darker sequences. We wish it could look better than it does, but it is not a complete disaster. Some of the music has a faint dimensionality, but almost all of the sound, including the music, is centered. The bass is a bit distorted in places, but generally the audio is acceptable. The program is not captioned. Best is time encoded, but Christmas is not.

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Madacy Entertainment has released a box set of five episodes from the venerable western television series, Bonanza (DVD99047, \$50). The episodes are also available individually. The show's opening and closing theme song has been replaced by a godawful electric guitar thing, probably because of rights conflicts, though the theme does percolate through the scoring within the episodes. The picture quality is generally sharp, though colors are subdued and the source material has occasional scratches and similar-type flaws. The monophonic sound is very harsh, with a limited range, though the dialog is coherent. Each episode runs about 50 minutes and is accompanied by a minor trivia game and brief notes about the series that often have nothing to do with the episode at hand. The episodes are not captioned.

The Baby Boom generation was in all likelihood the last generation to be inundated with Westerns to a point that it is in our blood. The pre-technological setting was an ideal one for removing the complications and distractions from drama or action (or even comedy, though less often—and let's not forget the singing cowboys), but it is that very lack of technology that prevents westerns from being as widely popular today. There was a time when such programs dominated the top-ten Nielsens, and that time is rapidly becoming as distant as the Old West itself. Bonanza is set on a ranch at the north of Lake Tahoe and depicts the adventures of the rancher, played by Lorne Greene, and his three grown sons, played by Michael Landon, Pernell Roberts and the steer-sized Dan Blocker. The show was oriented toward drama instead of action, though there is inevitably a fight or two of some sort during the course of an episode. The four stars essentially had equal standing within the show, which was able to vary its appeal by focussing substantially on one character or another in various episodes.

Claude Akins portrays a sheriff, in Bonanza Desert Justice (DVD990471, \$10), who arrives at the ranch one day to arrest a hired hand. He's rough with his prisoner, however, so Roberts' character accompanies them to prevent his friend from being harmed before he stands trial, and during the journey the true nature of the relationship between the sheriff and his prisoner is revealed.

Dan Duryea (who talks like Jon Lovitz) portrays a marshal in Bonanza Badge without Honor (DVD990472, \$10), arriving in town to take a friend of the heroes back for a trial. Similarities to the previous episode end there, however, since it turns out Duryea's character is also a hired assassin. The drama is fairly effective and the conclusion is exciting.

Neville Brand portrays an errant relative who suffers a conflict of interest when the bandits he leads raid a ranch and kidnap one of the heroes in Bonanza The Last Viking (DVD990473, \$10). Although the situation is unlikely, the episode is fairly entertaining. Landon and Blocker, who aren't seen too much in the first two episodes, get more screen time. Greene's character shoots a man in self-defense in Bonanza The Blood Line (DVD990474, \$10) and must then cope with the man's understandably distraught teenage son. Jan Sterling is featured, and Greene has a terrific shoot-out with Lee Van Cleef (see The Twilight Zone) near the end.

It is best to view all these episodes first to appreciate how much better the episode directed by Robert Altman, Bonanza The Silent Thunder (DVD990475, \$10), is. Stella Stevens portrays a deaf girl

who lives in a isolated cabin with her father, a trapper. This is the only episode in the group to highlight Landon (Greene appears briefly, the others not at all), who teaches her rudimentary sign language, and Albert Salmi is on hand as a grisly villain, pawing Stevens whenever he gets within an arm's length of her. The episode is loaded with sexual tension, pathos and other pleasures. There is a psychological precision that is completely missing from the other episodes, and there are experiments (Altman shows one sequence from Stevens' point-of-view, i.e., without sound) and creative uses of the screen's frame. Indeed, film students could probably learn a lot of basic, intelligent cinematic storytelling by analyzing the episode on a shot-by-shot basis. We encountered the same sort of brilliance in Altman's *Combat!* episodes (Oct 94) and wish that someday someone would collect his TV work in a boxed set or something. After all, he didn't make M\*A\*S\*H until he was in his mid-forties, and he did a lot of work before then. The colors on the episode are a little faded, but damage is minimal.

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The first TV drama to pair a black actor and a white actor as heroes, *I Spy*, stars Bill Cosby and Robert Culp. With extensive location photography, Culp's character travels the world as a tennis pro, with Cosby as his what? Lover? It's never clear, but the two actually work for the government, fighting communism and that sort of thing.

Two 50 minute episodes of *I Spy*, circa 1968, have been released by Bridgestone Multimedia and Image (ID5021BRDVD, \$25). Neither episode is very good. A young but still towering Richard Kiel is one of the guest stars in the first episode, *A Few Miles West of Nowhere*, in which the two heroes investigate a town's reluctance to accept a nuclear power plant in their neighborhood, and find a group of right wing fanatics trying to keep the plant out of town (Barry Commoner was obviously not involved with the script). The heroes get beat up a lot, but eventually save a little girl from a well, proving to the townspeople that they are good guys and the right wing fanatic is the bad guy. The plant should be up and running in no time.

In the second episode, *The Trouble with Temple*, which is set in Spain, they meet an Errol Flynn-type actor, played by Jack Cassidy, who is selling NATO secrets. Cosby's character gets captured and drugged, while Culp's character convinces the actor's bimbo girlfriend (we're not speaking pejoratively—she's supposed to be an airhead, for plot purposes) that she should stop living a life of luxury dressed like a sexpot and finish her high school education so she can become a history teacher. She likes the idea, and eventually moves back to Ohio.

On both episodes, the colors are fairly nice, with reasonably bright hues and accurate fleshtones, and the image is reasonably sharp as well, with minimal wear. The monophonic sound is a bit scratchy, but tolerable. There is no captioning.

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Four half-hour episodes from Lucille Ball's sitcom that played in the Sixties and early Seventies, *The Lucy Show*, have been issued by Madacy as a Collector's Choice Double Feature (DVD99099, \$13), though oddly, they placed two episodes on each side of the platter when four could very easily have been fit onto one side. The opening credit sequence has been messed with a little, but the end credits are in tact, with the original theme song. The episodes are not time encoded and are accompanied by some minor trivia. Neither the picture nor the sound is any good, but at least the shows are in color. The monophonic sound on all the episodes is harsh, with a very limited range and numerous dropouts. There's also an overindulgent laugh track, and the episodes are not captioned. The show's premise has Ball portraying a widow who works as a secretary for a bank VP, played by Gale Gordon.

The worst looking episode is also the most precious. Jack Benny guest stars as himself, and Ball's character takes him on a tour of the bank's vault (replete with gorillas, quicksand and piranhas) to show him how safe his money will be if he deposits it. The situation is farfetched, but the timing between Benny and Ball is wonderful. Too bad the source material has such lousy contrasts. Details are totally obscured by the washed out image and colors are weak. There are also plenty of speckles.

Ball's character has to pretend to be an elderly woman to keep a wealthy elder depositor happy in the companion episode. It is a typical effort (the old guy starts to put the moves on her) and reasonably amusing. Colors are a bit faded, though stronger than the Benny episode, and contrasts are fairly normal.

There is a splice, however, that cuts into a joke, and other damage scattered throughout the program, which even slips out of frame at one point.

The two episodes on side two are both so badly out-of-synch the show plays like a dubbed Italian comedy. The source material also has a number of splices, but the colors, though still aged, are fresher and richer than those on side one. In the first episode, Ball's character sneaks away from her job to attend a department store sale and ends up winning a prize and getting her picture in the paper. The funniest sequence, however, is when she accidentally but methodically destroys a china and refrigerator display. In the second episode she baby-sits three chimpanzees, who pretty much steal the show from her.

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The popularity of professional sports in the Twentieth Century is symbiotically tied to radio (the simpler baseball) and television (the more complicated football). In sports, a viewer sees more events of historical importance (well, cultural historical importance) occurring live, on television, than in any other category. Thanks to TV, the entire world has become a Coliseum for the quadrennial Olympic games, and thanks to TV, many professional athletes are now allowed to compete in what was once an 'amateur' event. Indeed, thanks to TV, there aren't even major documentary films any more about the Olympic Games. Instead, there are home video highlight programs.

We reviewed one Panasonic Nagano 1998 Olympic Winter Games program in Sep 98. The programs are drawn from CBS broadcasts of the Games and feature an hour or more of highlights and profiles, with extensive text supplements on all the events and other specific additional features. The picture quality is consistently good, with bright, vivid colors and a very sharp focus, and the stereo sound is probably better than it was in broadcast. The audio usually features the original broadcast narration, with additional explanatory comments. The programs are not time encoded or captioned, and because of their alternate angle features, some standard DVD manipulations, such as Scan or Still, may be suppressed.

The 64 minute 1998 Olympic Winter Games Hockey Highlights is divided evenly between Men's and Women's Hockey. In case you don't remember, the US Women's team ruled, while the Men's didn't even place. You get less of some games than you would on the sports segment of a local news broadcast, but the medal games are given a little more time and, by the end, you do have a decent sense of how at least a few of the major players handled themselves on the ice. The Women's segment focuses entirely on the competitions involving the US team, while the Men's segment follows both the US and Canadian teams, as well as the Gold medal round that neither was involved in. One last thought: You know those 600 lb. people who occasionally show up on the news, getting lifted out of their apartments and stuff? How come some professional hockey team has never hired one as a goalie?

One sport that has proven ideal for TV attention spans is figure skating. The sequences last only a few minutes and are fraught with a raw emotion that separates them from recitals or other non-competitive skating displays. 1998 Olympic Winter Games Figure Skating Competition Highlights (SLPDV0001, \$25) is a thrilling program, with many spellbinding emotional climaxes and incredible dancing. The 80 minute program (with about 17 additional minutes of alternate angle footage that is free of commentary) gives pretty much equal time to the Women's Free Skating, Men's Free Skating and Pairs competition, with a briefer overview of the controversially judged Ice Dancing competition. One of the narrators, Scott Hamilton, speaks with a puppy dog excitement about routines, and it is easy to get wrapped up in his enthusiasm, particularly when Tara Lipinski, skating after Michelle Kwan, bests Kwan's near-perfect score, and when French skater Phillippe Candelero does everything the other skaters have done, but in costume and as a 'character' (with sound effects, too), it is the ultimate blending of sport and entertainment. And in addition to all that skating, the music sounds terrific.

An 80 minute overview of many of the events, very little on 1998 Olympic Winter Games Overall Highlights (SLPDV0004, \$25) lasts long enough to make much of an impression. The competitions go by so quickly there's no competition within them. You do get plenty of the opening and closing ceremonies and a sampling of luge, ski jumping, downhill racing, speed skating, and snowboarding, as well as the figure skating and hockey competitions again, but it basically just makes you wish you could see a lot more of each event, which, we suppose, is its purpose.

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The miniseries format has proven to offer some advantages over theatrical films, thanks to the scope provided by the extended running times. Two compelling musical programs originally broadcast as long-form dramas on television have been issued on DVD, The Temptations from Artisan Entertainment (99032, \$20) and The Rat Pack from HBO Home Video (91551, \$25).

Contrary to a time notation on the jacket cover that suggests abridgement, The Temptations runs a full 173 minutes. The colors look solid and bright, and fleshtones are nicely detailed. The stereo surround sound is great. You need a miniseries length to cover the history of the pop group, which managed to sustain its popularity, albeit with some ups and downs, through several periods of musical fads, gaining and losing members along the way. Although they appeared to be in total unison on the stage, the group had many conflicts among themselves, success breeding the character flaws that are deftly suggested by the second meaning of the show's title. The film explores the development of the group's music and harmonies, and the their experiences in the glamorous world of musical stardom. Inevitably it skims past some developments and changes, and the lows seem slower than the highs, but it is an entertaining program with terrific music that enables a viewer to understand the dynamics of an important phase in American music. There is also the thrill, in the early scenes, of imagining how all those famous Detroit musical stars interacted and tripped over one another before they became famous. The program is adequately closed captioned and is accompanied by a Temptations discography, a large cast profile section and some production notes.

The title, The Rat Pack, also has a dual meaning, and it is a bit misleading—which may have been why the show was under appreciated by the critics—because it is primarily about Frank Sinatra's relationship with John F. Kennedy and not about the making of Robin and the Seven Hoods and that sort of thing. The 120 minute film does a superb job at sketching rich, believable behind-the-scenes portraits of a half dozen very famous personalities, and it adeptly explores many political realities of the early Sixties. The performances are very good, particularly Joe Mantegna as Dean Martin, Don Cheadle as Sammy Davis, Jr. (as an example of the film's unexpected strengths, there is a dream sequence in which Davis performs I've Got You Under My Skin in front of protesting Nazis) and Ray Liotta as Sinatra, and the film is quite entertaining (covering just a couple years, it is more focussed than the three decades-long tale The Temptations tells). Not only does it explore Sinatra's popularity and artistry, but it delves rather deeply into the underside of American politics.

Intense colors are quite blurry and the image is grainy in places. Hues are reasonably strong, but the focus is soft at times. The stereo surround sound is okay. The show is also available in Spanish, and can be supported by English, French or Spanish subtitles ("Il est trois heures moins le quart, Il n'y a plus personne ici, A part toi et moi. Alors prépare-les, Joe, J'ai un petite histoire, Que je pense, tu devrais connaître. On boit, mon ami, A la fin d'un bref épisode, Sers-en up pour ma chérie, Et un autre pour la route."). There is a cast & crew profile section and a 4 minute featurette.

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Not the feature film from the late Sixties but a Universal made-for-TV movie from 1981, The Munsters' Revenge, a GoodTimes Home Video release (0581025, \$20), stars Fred Gwynne, Al Lewis and Yvonne DeCarlo, with Sid Caesar as the 'villain,' who creates wax museum robot look-alikes of the heroes to commit robberies. The 96 minute movie has the bland, watchable efficiency that hallmark factory TV productions, though the robots also make a pleasing homage to other Universal horror characters.

The picture looks fine. The cinematography is dull but the transfer is adequate. Darker sequences are a bit soft and there is a mild grain here and there, but the colors are generally well defined. The monophonic sound is okay and the film can be supported by English, French or Spanish subtitles.

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Christopher Coppola, nephew of Francis Ford (who has lent his name as executive producer) and brother of Nicolas Cage, has written and directed a wonderful updating of Hopalong Cassidy, The Gunfighter. The Sterling Home Entertainment release (7175, \$25) is apparently so petrified of associating with the classic TV (and 'B' movie) cowboy that they only call him 'Cassidy' on the jacket cover, and don't

name him at all in the trailer. Coppola, however, shows no such reserve. The film has modern violence and realistic emotional relationships, but the hero, played by Chris Lybert, still looks like he's so clean dirt falls off him without washing, and he has an intuitive relationship with his horse that is far more intimate than the connections he makes with the heroine. And boy, can he shoot—he knocks the buttons off the bad guy's vest. The story—cattle rustlers kidnap the heroine to set a trap for the hero—is sufficiently interesting to hold one's attention for the 95 minute running time, although there is a rather pointless prolog and epilog, featuring Martin Sheen and Robert Carradine, apparently to boost the show's marquee appeal.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. Some darker sequences are a bit grainy, with murky colors, and fleshtones are bland, but the image is workable, particularly in the daylight sequences. The stereo surround sound kind of goes overboard at times (fistfights sound like dueling jackhammers), but it is lively, delivering in energy what it loses in finesse. The program is not captioned and is accompanied by a cast-and-director profile.

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An episode from the most successful film series to be adapted from a television show, Star Trek VI The Undiscovered Country, has been released by Paramount Home Video as a Widescreen Collection title (323017, \$30). One of the best offerings in the series, the film plays out like a well-made TV episode, with an entertaining mix of action and character. This is the one in which it appears that the heroes are responsible for assassinating a peace envoy from their enemies, the Klingons.

The color transfer is identical to the LD release (Aug 92) and is letterboxed, with an aspect ratio of about 1.95:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. Hues look accurate, with a nice gloss, and the image is much sharper than the LD, with purer blacks. The stereo surround sound is super and is equal in quality to the LD, but the DVD has a Dolby Digital track, and the sound on it is even better, with more separation detail, sharper definitions and a stronger, more varied bass. The 113 minute program, said to contain material not featured in the theatrical release, though it is identical to the LD, is also available in French and is adequately closed captioned. There is a standard theatrical trailer and a very nice teaser, narrated by Christopher Plummer, that shows a montage of images from the TV show and the previous films. And can somebody tell us why, with all this fancy, futuristic technology, the pilots of the Enterprise don't have force field seat belts to stop them from getting thrown on the floor at the slightest bump?

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The popular film spin-off of a popular children's cartoon—something that is harder to pull off than it looks—The Rugrats Movie, has been released by Paramount Home Video (333997, \$30). Told largely from a child's point of view, but with enough grown-up humor slipped into the mix to keep adults attentive (an important reason, perhaps, as to why the film did so well—can you imagine how good a decently produced Simpsons movie could do?), the 81 minute feature is a smart blend of realistic antics and exaggerated cartoon action. Thankfully, screen time for the character, Angelica, the Miss Piggy of Nickelodeon, is kept to a minimum.

The single-sided dual-layer DVD presents a letterboxed version on one layer and a full screen version on another. The letterboxing has an aspect ratio of about 1.77:1 and no 16:9 enhancement, masking a lot of picture information off the top and bottom and adding just a little to the sides. Because it comes from a TV show, or because the framing just looks better, we preferred the full screen image. The color transfer is fine. The animation falls into a sort of halfway point between a well-made television cartoon and a fancy animated feature film, but the colors are rich and the focus is sharp. The stereo surround sound and Dolby Digital sound are great fun. There are many simple but energetic separation effects, and the audio has a lot of energy. There is also a French language track, English closed captioning, a trailer and a 4 minute Catdog promotional short.

## DTS blahs

A couple months ago we ranted about the inability of DVD producers to create user-friendly menus on DVD, and one of the worst offenders is the Universal DTS DVDs. Each one opens with a choice between the DTS track and a standard, two-channel stereo track, but it is impossible to figure out which

one you have selected, since the one that gets 'highlighted' just shifts colors, so you have a fifty-fifty chance of figuring out if you've highlighted your choice correctly. Now, since Universal DTS DVDs have no other special features—not even subtitling—the only reason a consumer would buy one would be for the DTS encoding, right? Well get this. If you just choose the default choice on the audio menu option, you go to the standard track and not the DTS track. Since there is no toggling and we haven't been able to figure out how to get back to that menu again, we have to stop our player, turn it off (or else it conveniently defaults back to the same audio choice we were using), turn it on again and then try to figure out, once more, which audio option is highlighted. If our finger jiggles and we're not paying attention, we have to start all over again. And if we haven't watched one in a couple weeks, we have to go through the whole rigmarole again, because we forget what is what.

Is it worth the effort? We aren't so sure, so far. Every DVD DTS track we've examined has been either equal to or no more than marginally better than the Dolby Digital track on the standard DVD release, and every track has been significantly inferior to its LD DTS counterpart.

The DTS track on Apollo 13 (20461, \$35) is a touch louder than the Dolby Digital track on the standard release (Apr 98), but there are no significant embellishments and it is difficult to tell the two apart. The DTS LD (Jul 97), on the other hand, has more pronounced dimensionality and more energy. The frame transfer rate on the standard release of the 140 minute 1995 feature swings wildly between the high range and the mid-to-low range, and while the transfer rate on the DTS DVD doesn't go quite as high, it stays more consistently in the upper range.

The DTS track on Dragonheart (20463, \$35) is indistinguishable from the Dolby Digital track on the standard release (May 98), while the DTS LD (Jul 97) has more separation detail and stronger, better-defined tones. The frame transfer rate on the standard release of the 103 minute 1996 feature swings wildly between the high and midrange, while the transfer rate on the DTS release holds more consistently in the upper end.

The DTS track on 12 Monkeys (20462, \$35) is a bit more energetic than the Dolby Digital track on the standard release (May 98), but most of the time we couldn't tell the difference between the two, while the DTS LD (Jul 97) not only has even more energy, but stronger definitions and clearer separation effects. The frame transfer rate on the standard release of the 130 minute 1995 feature stays consistently in the midrange, while the transfer rate on the DTS release stays consistently in the mid-upper range.

Wouldn't you know it. The film that has the least to gain from an improved audio track, the 1996 Eddie Murphy comedy, The Nutty Professor (20459, \$35), is the one that shows the most improvement over the standard DVD (Feb 98) Dolby Digital track. The sound on the DTS DVD has more ambiance, and tones on the standard DVD sound flat in comparison. The sound on the DTS LD (Jul 97) is even more detailed and energetic, but the DVD is a step in the right direction. The frame transfer rate on the 96 minute program appears to be identical to the previous release.

All four programs are letterboxed with the same aspect ratios and, transfer rates aside, have the same picture transfers as the standard releases.

### **Wertmüller classics**

Although it runs 120 minutes and not the 129 listed on the jacket cover, it still appears that the Fox Lorber Home Video release of Lina Wertmüller's Love and Anarchy (FLV5044, \$30) is Wertmüller's original cut and not the shortened 108 minute cut that was released theatrically in the U.S. We loved the shorter version, with its frantic energy (it was shuffled up a bit, also), but Wertmüller's original version is also highly satisfying. The story is simple—a would-be assassin, played by Giancarlo Giannini, visits his contact, a prostitute, played by Mariangela Melato, who has been weaseling government security secrets out of her clients. While he's at her brothel, however, he falls for another prostitute, played by Lina Polito, and begins to have second thoughts about his mission to murder Mussolini. The film revels in its depiction of the brothel and in Giannini's wild-eyed earthiness. The music is a glorious combination of old Italian pop and folk tunes and a Nino Rota background score (how we have wished, since the film first appeared in 1973, that somebody would release the soundtrack—and how happy we are now to have it, even if it is with the movie attached), and the cinematography, by Giuseppe Rotunno, is superbly executed. It's our favorite Wertmüller film—for that matter, it's one of the few of hers that we really like—because it doesn't get sidetracked by grotesque indulgences. Wertmüller's cut is somewhat calmer and more methodical than

the American cut, but the characters are clearly stated. There is still great humor in their actions and a compelling sadness in their fates.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.72:1 and no 16:9 enhancement, though it still looks a little tight on the sides. The film's opening and footage near the reel-change points are somewhat worn and battered, but other passages within the movie have moderately strong colors and looks reasonably sharp. Strong hues still blur, and we're sure a much better picture could be produced if the original source material could be obtained, but the presentation is workable and we're plain happy to finally have the film. The monophonic sound is okay—the music isn't too badly distorted—and the film is Italian with optional English subtitles.

Considered by some to be Wertmüller's masterpiece, Seven Beauties has also been issued by Fox Lorber (FLV5040, \$30). In all the audio commentaries we have heard, we've never once noted a director citing the film as an influence—as opposed to say, *Scarface*, which seems to have inspired everybody but Martha Coolidge—but the 1976 feature is audacious (why is it only the Italians make funny movies about the Holocaust?) and stimulating. Giannini stars again, as an Italian soldier who does what he must to survive in a concentration camp, while flashbacks depict how he ended up in the army, after murdering his sister's pimp.

The picture is letterboxed with an 1.7:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The picture is sharp and is free of noticeable wear. Colors are reasonably strong, fleshtones are workable and, on the whole, the presentation looks very good. The monophonic sound is also in reasonably good condition. The film is available in either Italian or English and can be supported by optional English subtitles.

### **Surfing the Webber**

The long-running hit musical, Cats, has derived much of its popularity from audience interaction, as the cast members, dressed in feline form, roam the auditorium between numbers, rubbing up against the knees of patrons and otherwise delighting the young at heart. The Andrew Lloyd Webber musical itself, however, is a little on the sleepy side, and the video recording, released on DVD by PolyGram Video (4400479952, \$30), which isolates singers and otherwise pares down a viewer's sensory inputs from the show, is even duller.

A couple numbers have been dropped, though the video still runs a full 120 minutes. At its best, the program captures much of the show's dancing, which combines athletic gymnastics with creative mime and costuming. The songs sound very fresh—more immediate than the cast albums (it's been recorded with a larger orchestra)—and the cast includes such heavyweights as Elaine Paige and the John Mills, so there is nothing rote about how they present themselves. The musical itself, derived from an entertaining cycle of poems by T.S. Eliot, has a limited narrative—no more than a linking device, really—to present the different cats (a train cat, an old cat, a sneaky cat, etc.) as individual numbers. With the focus that editing and image isolation brings to a video program, however, each number seems to go on for several reprises too many, inducing the viewer to catnap or, at the very least, start fiddling with a ball of yarn.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.81:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. Although the show's lighting is often meant to evoke night, with strong blue washes and other colored intensities, the image is very sharp and differences in shadings are clearly and accurately defined. The image is consistently crisp and appealing. The stereo surround sound has a nice dimensionality, and the Dolby Digital track is even better, with clearer separations and more detail. The 120 minute program is accompanied by a good, lengthy 'making of' featurette that looks back to the show's original London opening as well as the shooting of the video. Both the show and the featurette are adequately closed captioned.

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Take, in contrast, however, Norman Jewison's energized 1973 adaptation of Webber's Jesus Christ Superstar, a film that seems to get better and better with each passing year. Webber's music runs out of steam after the first half hour, but Jewison has staged the film so creatively that by then the viewer is totally wrapped up in the premise and more than willing to ride it through to the end. Shot in the Israeli desert (they use the same hole Sylvester Stallone drops down in *Rambo III*), the film depicts a street performance of the musical that gets interrupted by military maneuvers, but is seemingly even more

affected by the passions of the characters the cast members are representing. Because the musical deals with a subject that everybody has a heartfelt opinion upon, its approach may irritate some, but in addition to presenting a viable take on the story of Christ, the film genuinely captures the noblest aspects of the Sixties counter-culture, drawing a pointed and moving parallel between this nobility and the finer aspects of Christian values. With the help of Webber's music, Jewison uses every pre-MTV editing trick he can come up with, creating a zippy, energetic intensity that is solidified by the depth of the film's subject. People tend to put the Sixties down, particularly now since its representatives are running everything, but the film captures the ideal, evoking what was best about the era and what is best about humankind.

Universal has issued *Jesus Christ Superstar* in letterboxed format with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The letterboxing is essential for conveying the full power of Jewison's design. The color transfer looks terrific. Shot in the desert, the film is supposed to look dusty and a bit makeshift, but fleshtones are accurate, bright hues, when they do appear, look super, and the image is very crisp. The source material is speckled in places, but is free of significant wear, and darker sequences have a touch of natural grain.

The stereo sound is a bit more aged. The music still sounds terrific, but its aural limitations are readily apparent, and even dimensionality is tentative. Fortunately, the 107 minute film's format accommodates these drawbacks effectively. There is a four-track Dolby Digital channel as well as the standard stereo track. Definitions are a little better detailed, though the two are basically interchangeable. The film's dialog is entirely sung, and the DVD has a stereophonic French language track (!) in addition to its English tracks. There's no listing of whose voices are employed, but it sounds terrific and makes it worth watching the movie at least a dozen times more. There is also English and Spanish subtitling ("Jesucristo superestrella. ¿Crees que eres, Lo que dicen que eres?"), along with production notes, a cast-and-director profile section and a trailer. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are reasonably extensive, but do not identify the songs as precisely as we would prefer.

### **Crazy for Corman**

The home video/film' company of Hollywood legend, Roger Corman, New Horizons Home Video, has begun issuing films produced by Corman and usually directed by others under the Roger Corman Classics banner. Each is accompanied by a brief but interesting interview with Corman conducted by Leonard Maltin concerning the film at hand, and LD fans will recall the interviews appearing on New Horizon LDs as well. There are also trailers for several New Horizons films and cast profiles. So far, all of the films are presented in full screen format and none are captioned.

One of the most erotic sequences ever made for motion pictures is the love scene between Angie Dickinson and William Shatner in *Big Bad Mama* (NH00136, \$25). Not. Dickinson's a babe, and she has extensive nude scenes with both Shatner and with Tom Skerritt, but Shatner has hairy legs and doesn't know whether he should be licking her breasts or pleading with Scotty to beam him up. The film is a Bonnie & Clyde rip-off with a generally illogical plot, but sex and gore in the 1974 feature is plentiful and the cast is good for a few yucks.

The picture tends to be grainy and colors are a little flat, with dull fleshtones and minor evidence of wear in places. The monophonic sound is adequate. The film runs 83 minutes, and the interview with Corman is, as usual, very interesting ("I would say that somewhere in the neighborhood of 35-40% of our income from the whole United States came from drive-ins.").

A grey satire about a cross-country road race in a totalitarian U.S., in which the contestants score points for running people down, *Death Race 2000* (NH00144, \$25), stars David Carradine, but is today more recognized as one of Sylvester Stallone's first major films, in which he plays the principal villain. The 1975 film, directed by Paul Bartel, runs a spare 78 minutes and features a lot of repetitive long shots of cars running down empty roads. The humor is as exaggerated as the violence but, surprisingly, there are elements of a workable political drama mixed into the plot.

*Death Race 2000* was also released by Digital Multimedia Limited (DML00243, \$25). Friends insist that a version was put out by Front Row Entertainment as well, but we've never been able to confirm that. The colors on the New Horizons release are a touch brighter than the Digital Multimedia version, but the New Horizons presentation is substantially sharper. In general, the colors are a little drab and fleshtones are bland, with a touch of wear here and there, though the New Horizons version, at least, is

workable. The monophonic sound is actually brighter and more satisfying on the Digital Multimedia release (which isn't captioned), and is somewhat muted on the New Horizons version.

A key film in the career of Ron Howard, the 1975 "Eat My Dust" (NH00157, \$25), directed by Charles Griffith, was an enormously popular drive-in feature and allowed Howard to pressure Corman into making the follow up film his first directing gig. Howard portrays the son of a cop in a small town who steals a championship stock car and takes the local law enforcement officials, including his father, on a daylong joyride. Character motivation and other niceties are somewhat incoherent, but the performers are appealing and there is near-constant driving action, including a number of effective shots taken with the camera mounted on the hood of a speeding car.

The source material has a couple scratches and some other minor wear. Fleshtones are a bit bland, but other hues are bright. The monophonic sound is passable and the film runs 88 minutes.

### **From sick minds come sick movies**

A truly sick movie—but then, there are plenty of people around who adore truly sick movies—Dee Snider's Strangeland is about a psychotic who kidnaps teenaged girls and tortures them Hellraiser-style. Snider wrote the script, and it could have used some polishing. Many opportunities for excitement are wasted, and dramatic transitions are needlessly awkward. The basic concept, however, is solid. If you are expecting a frivolity by the Heavy Metal singer who used to look like a ungroomed poodle, you will be greatly mistaken, because this is a movie that revels in the 'Sloth' and 'Gluttony' sequences from Seven. The prosthetic effects ring the bell on the gross-out scale, particularly on the Artisan Entertainment DVD release (60498, \$30), which presents an 'unrated' cut of the film instead of the understandably tamer R-rated version released to theaters. The narrative follows a detective, played by Kevin Gage, who has to rescue his own daughter from the villain, played by Snider. The story has a basic Dirty Harry structure (the villain is caught by the hero, then released) and there is enough reality-based horror to thrill fans, but the film is also cheap and sloppy, coasting on its makes-A Man Called Horse-look-like-a-children's-party thrills. Snider admits he wants to start a franchise, but if he wishes it to endure, he should start trusting people who know film the way he knows the macabre.

The picture is letterboxed, with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The picture looks inexpensive. The transfer is okay, but the lighting is bland and the image compositions are dull. When the lighting is good, the image is solid and colors are smooth. Snider talked all his Heavy Metal pals into contributing to the musical score, so it is reasonably energetic. There is no five-channel track, but the standard stereo surround sound has smooth tones and a nice bass. Rear channel effects are adequate but not overly detailed. The 91 minute program is closed captioned and is accompanied by more than 15 minutes of music videos.

Snider also provides a commentary track. "We brought in a criminal psychiatrist who read the script and said I'd created a perfect schizophrenic sexual sadist. [He] wanted to know what books I'd read, and I hadn't [read any]. He didn't want to see me much after that." He doesn't go into too many filmmaking details but, as a practiced performer, he knows how to talk for an hour-and-a-half and keep the listener entertained.

### **Where's Parsifal**

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's superb film adaptation of Richard Wagner's Parsifal has been released by Corinth Films and Image Entertainment (ID4580CODVD, \$40). The 255 minute feature has been issued on two platters, the first running 181 minutes and holding Acts 1 and 2, and the second running 74 minutes with Act 3. We reviewed Image's LD release in Dec 89. The picture is presented in full screen format and appears to be very slightly windowboxed. Although it doesn't look like a new transfer, the image is improved, as contrasts on the LD appear washed out, hues look lighter and fleshtones are paler in comparison to the DVD. This is a low budget German feature with many creative visual effects, so the image quality has its limitations. It is somewhat soft looking and a bit worn, but colors are viable and the presentation seems quite nice, particularly when held up against the LD. The stereo surround sound is identical to the LD's playback. Although there are no distinctive separation effects, the music has a viable dimensionality. While it is not as vivid as a well-made audio recording, tones are well defined and it is adequate as a support for the film.

Syberberg has been known to make movies that run all day long, so for him, Parsifal was a quickie. His stimulating imagery, including puppets, cut-outs, miniatures, rear-projection and other special effects mixed with live actors moving about a very cramped and well-decorated set, makes an ideal venue for Wagner's somewhat unwieldy epic, energizing the opera's visual component so that the true power of its more methodical narrative and music can slip into a viewer's consciousness without resistance or fatigue.

### **Zeffirelli's Traviata**

Franco Zeffirelli's smart 1982 adaptation of Giuseppe Verdi's La Traviata has been released by Universal (20326, \$25). Teresa Stratas, Placido Domingo and Cornell MacNeill star in the operatic rendering of Camille, to which Zeffirelli applies his usual opulence with great flair. With the luxury of pre-recording, Stratas' singing is outstanding. It may lack a bit of color, but her vocals slide up and down the scale with a solid and compelling intensity. Her demeanor is, on the other hand, suitably frail. Domingo's singing is also highly attractive, with an energetic efficiency that is well suited for his screen performance.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.8:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The letterboxing adds a little to the sides in comparison to the old MCA Home Video LD and masks more off the top and bottom. Sometimes the masking seems a little tight, but generally, the framing is workable. Because the narrative is told in flashback or something, the cinematography is deliberately hazy, and the haze is occasionally so dominating it draws a viewer's attention away from the images beneath it. Still, the picture is sharper than the LD and colors are more accurate. Fleshtones that are hopelessly yellowed on the LD look correct on the DVD.

The stereo surround sound has no directional effects, just a total bleed of the music and the vocals to the rear channel. The audio is reasonably clean and has an adequate dynamic range. The 115 minute film is in Italian and is supported by optional English subtitles that read like captions, identifying sounds as well as translating the lyrics. There are also optional French subtitles, a production essay, a cast-and-director profile section and a trailer that pretty much tries to hide the fact that the film is an opera. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are very good.

### **Hong Kong action**

A somewhat melodramatic Hong Kong gangster feature, Man Wanted, has been issued by Tai Seng Video Marketing as a Special Widescreen Presentation title (40054, \$30). Simon Yam portrays an undercover detective who becomes friends with a mobster, played by Yu Rong Guang. The cop turns him in, and it appears the mobster has been killed, but he eventually returns, looking for revenge. Christy Chung co-stars, as the hero's vulnerable spot. There are plenty of action sequences, but the dramatic conflicts seem a bit overplayed. The director, Benny Chan, does not have a strong sense of style or pace, and the 1995 film is little more taxing than the most dynamic Hong Kong crime features.

The 92 minute film is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. Colors are a little drab and the image is a bit soft, but it looks much nicer than the LD (Aug 97), which is a lot more yellow and a lot hazier. The music has a very slight dimensionality and, otherwise, all of the film's sounds are centered. The audio is a little weaker than the LD, with a subdued high end. The film has tracks in English, Mandarin and Cantonese, and can be supported by optional English subtitles. There are also trailers and filmographies.

### **Fun with Japanese gangsters**

Two wild Japanese crime thrillers directed by Seijun Suzuki have been issued by The Criterion Collection, Tokyo Drifter (TOK050, \$30) and Branded to Kill (BRA090, \$30). We reviewed the LD releases in Jun 98 and the DVDs are essentially identical, with slightly smoother pictures. On both, the monophonic sound is weaker than the sound on the LD, but there is a Dolby Digital mono track that is on par with the LD's track. Both films are in Japanese with optional English subtitles and both DVDs include different parts of an interview with Suzuki. Branded to Kill also has a neat montage of Japanese movie posters. On both, it should be noted that while the background and budgets of the films prevent them from looking pristine, the transfers are highly satisfying.

Tokyo Drifter, from 1966, is in color. The narrative has a common premise—the gangster trying to go straight—but it takes a couple viewings to sort out the plot and the characters. The film uses regular outdoor locations, but some indoor sequences have a stylized, Hollywood musical look to them, and, throughout the 83 minute film, the colors of costumes, objects and backgrounds contribute greatly to the entertainment. The picture is letterboxed, with an aspect ratio of about 2.1:1 and no 16:9 enhancement, and has a slightly squeezed look at times. The colors look great and the image sharp.

Branded to Kill, from 1967, is in black-and-white, and is about a hitman being chased by other hitmen. Again, the plot takes a couple viewings to make sense, but the action scenes are so creatively staged you won't mind the effort. The 91 minute feature is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.25:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. Contrasts are reasonably well detailed and the image is sharp, with minimal wear.

### **Byrne's Stories**

David Byrne's quirky look at life in a small Texas town, True Stories, has been released by Warner Home Video (11654, \$15). John Goodman is featured prominently in the ensemble piece, which gets off to a great start but sort of runs out of steam about halfway through. The 1986 film is kind of a musical—Byrne was the leader of The Talking Heads—and the song interludes sustain its momentum, but there is no narrative really (some characters, such as Goodman's, are seen following through on plans, but that is about the only forward movement the plot has), just ironic observations on the economics and culture of the town and the idiosyncrasies of its inhabitants. Byrne, who directed, also appears in the film, as a sort of host and tour guide. All the really original ideas seem to be jammed into the first part of the movie, so that the second half becomes more repetitious and less insightful, but it is a different kind of entertainment, and its uniqueness is one of its primary strengths.

The picture has been slightly cropped, as is evidenced by the letterboxing in the end credit sequence. Since much of the movie feels like a music video, the cropping really doesn't upset things, but it is still a shame that viewers can't choose between a full screen and a letterboxed presentation. The color transfer looks great. Hues are deep and bright, and fleshtones look fine. The image is sharp, and damage to the source material is minimal. The stereo surround sound has an occasional dimensionality, but separation effects are limited. The 89 minute program is closed captioned with substantial paraphrasing. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are very good.

### **More Eastwoods**

The most recent LD release of Clint Eastwood's The Outlaw Josey Wales (Mar 99) offered almost no visual improvements over the former letterboxed LD releases, but the new Warner Home Video DVD (12588, \$25) is much improved. Colors are by design subdued, to evoke a kind of western atmosphere, but hues are much better defined on the DVD and are brighter, with more appealing fleshtones. The one real addition to the previous LD release, a Dolby Digital track, even sounds a touch brighter on the DVD, though the DVD's standard track is much weaker than the LD's standard track. The Dolby Digital mix provides a little more separation detail and better defined tones than the LD's standard track, although the standard track has a lot of thrust and maybe even a nicer bass. The picture on the DVD is in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The picture on the LD is windowboxed, so it may appear that there is more picture information on the sides of the image on some monitors.

There is a French track in mono, optional English and French subtitles, a cast & crew profile section, production notes that are fairly informative until they get to the point where they ought to be talking about Phil Kaufman being dropped from the film but at which point they stop, instead, and a theatrical trailer. The 1976 136 minute film is one of Eastwood's best westerns, about a farmer who must come to terms with life after his family is massacred.

A less enjoyable Eastwood effort, The Gauntlet, has also been released by Warner (11083, \$25). In this one, Eastwood is a slow-witted cop who has to transport a mob witness from Vegas to Phoenix with assassins lurking at every turn. The 1977 film is an adequate exercise, but it is somewhat farfetched and Eastwood's character is not all that appealing—to the point, in fact, where his personality is incongruous with the film's smooth jazz musical score.

The 111 minute film is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer is identical to the letterboxed LD (Sep 95), and although the image on the DVD is sharper, there is still some grain in the darker areas of the screen. The colors look fine, with accurate fleshtones, though it is possible that more intensity could be squeezed out of them. The stereo sound is a bit weaker than the LD's stereo, but only the DVD has a Dolby Digital track, which has slightly clearer definitions than the LD's standard track. The program also has a French mono track and can be supported by English or French subtitles. There is a cast & crew profile section and a trailer.

### **Really pink Panthers**

MGM Home Entertainment has released four Blake Edwards Peter Sellers 'Inspector Clouseau' detective comedies with gorgeous new picture transfers. All four are presented in letterboxed format on one side and in cropped format on the other side, though the cropping obscures gags and adds nothing to the entertainment. All four are accompanied by theatrical trailers and have optional English or French subtitles

The original feature, The Pink Panther (907041, \$25), looks fabulous. Whites that look yellowed on the letterboxed LD (Apr 91) are sparkling pure on the DVD. Fleshtones are accurate and other hues are crisp and precise. In addition to being a very funny film, the 1963 movie is also a showcase of early Sixties fashion and style, and with the film's vivid imagery, it is like you can reach out and touch the past. The letterboxing has an aspect ratio of about 2.3:1 and no 16:9 enhancement, trimming a bit off the sides in comparison to the LD. Although the monophonic sound is aged and somewhat muted, it is stronger and clearer than the sound on the LD.

The 115 minute film has a different pace than today's comedies, or even the later Clouseau films, and some viewers may get a little antsy with parts of it. On the other hand, the picture looks so nice that you may well savor every scene no matter how drawn out it becomes. David Niven, Robert Wagner, Capucine and Claudia Cardinale co-star. Niven is a jewel thief that Sellers' detective is trying to catch. As we pointed out in our LD review, however, our favorite moment could easily be excised from the film without hurting it in the slightest—an entire musical number, exquisitely choreographed for camp and sung in Italian, that occurs at the film's midpoint. Is there a movie executive alive who would ever let such a scene remain today?

The picture on the letterboxed LD release of A Shot in the Dark (Apr 91) has much more picture information on the sides of the image than the letterboxed picture on the DVD (907501, \$25), but the LD's image is squeezed (!), while the DVD's image is not. The letterboxing has an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer is identical to the LD, with accurate fleshtones and fresh hues, but the picture is sharper. The monophonic sound is fine, and the 102 minute program also has a French soundtrack. George Sanders and Elke Sommer co-star in the 1964 film, a murder mystery. It was A Shot in the Dark, and not The Pink Panther, that set the tone for the series.

Can't remember the difference between Revenge of the Pink Panther (907502, \$25) and The Pink Panther Strikes Again (907503, \$25)? Don't worry, we can't either. Revenge, from 1978, is the one with Dyan Cannon and Robert Webber, in which the French mafia attempt to assassinate the poor inspector. The hero's funniest disguises include a fisherman with an inflatable parrot on his shoulder, and Toulouse-Lautrec. In the sillier Strikes Again, from 1976, Herbert Lom's character kidnaps a scientist and forces him to build a 'doomsday' ray gun, while, once again, assassins attempt to dispatch the hero. Funniest disguises include a hunchback with an inflatable hump and a myopic Swiss dentist. Lesley-Anne Down is featured.

The picture on Revenge is very soft, almost fuzzy looking. Although the LD (Dec 91) looked fairly good, whites are again purer on the DVD and other hues are slightly less greenish. Fleshtones seem equal in quality, but wood tones are stronger on the DVD. And, despite the soft image, the picture still looks sharper and smoother than the LD. The letterboxing has an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback, trimming a little off the sides in comparison to the LD's letterboxing. The monophonic sound on the LD is a little fresher, but the sound on the DVD is adequate. The 99 minute feature also has a French soundtrack.

The color transfer on *Strikes Again* is identical to the colors on the LD (Jan 93), but the image is sharper and cleaner. Fleshtones look accurate and other hues are bright. The letterboxing has an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and no 16:9 enhancement, and adds a smidgen to the sides in comparison to the letterboxing on the LD. The monophonic sound is identical to the LD and is okay. The 103 minute feature also has a French soundtrack.

### **Double Star**

You can play either the 68 minute Special Edition cut or the 83 minute standard cut on the VCI Entertainment & Roan Group Magic Lantern Entertainment release of Dark Star (8205, \$30). The 1974 feature was originally produced as a film school movie by Dan O'Bannon and John Carpenter. When a distributor picked it up for release, they filmed some extraneous material to bring the running time up to a normal parameter. The Special Edition is the original 68 minute student film. When Image Entertainment released the Special Edition on LD (May 92), they included the removed footage at the end, after the film was over, but on the Magic Lantern DVD the footage on the standard version is re-integrated, creating two distinct options for playback. The Special Edition version is indeed the more entertaining of the two, though there are plenty of fans who prefer having the longer version simply because it is longer. The comical science-fiction feature is about the hapless crew of a deteriorating spacecraft.

The picture quality is a bit improved over the LD, though the two have basically the same transfer. Blacks are purer and the image is sharper on the DVD. This was a student film, so the cinematography is not slick and the production values are not glossy. Bright colors tend to blur, fleshtones are pale, contrasts are washy and other hues are very light. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to find a presentation stronger than the version released on DVD, and fans should be happy with the job Magic Lantern has done. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and no 16:9 enhancement.

The film's audio track has been remastered for Dolby Digital sound, but we found the overindulgent separations rather annoying and preferred to run the audio through our monitor's speakers, in which case it works quite well, providing an adequate dynamic range and clear dialog track. There is no captioning. A trailer, profiles and very thorough filmographies for O'Bannon and Carpenter have also been included.

### **Disasters**

The colors on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment THX release of Irwin Allen's 1972 upside-down cruise ship thriller directed by Ronald Neame, The Poseidon Adventure (4110422, \$30), are identical to the colors on the LD (Aug 97), but the picture is substantially crisper and as good as the LD looked, the DVD is much better. The sound, however, poses a different set of value judgements. It is monophonic, while the LD was stereo, and yet, despite the mono, the audio has a fresher ambiance, a stronger bass and is more satisfying, particularly since even the most rudimentary amplifier-stereoizations provide as much separation effects and dimensionality as the LD's stereo track. Others, however, may disagree. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The 117 minute film is also available in French, can be supported by English or Spanish subtitles, and is accompanied by a trailer and a cast profile section.

We must admit on this viewing we began to admire Gene Hackman's performance more than we have in the past. Although he's saddled with the same simplistic kind of characterization that all the other cast members are saddled with, he doesn't bog down in the clichés the way the others do, and it is his energy and sharpness that pulls you through the film.

Allen's all-star follow-up about a fire in the world's tallest building, The Towering Inferno, has also been released by Fox as a THX title (4110429, \$30). In this case, the picture is almost identical to the LD (Dec 95), which is to say that it has fresh, solid colors and a crisp image, even in the problematic fire and smoke sequences. The stereo surround sound is of equal strength to the LD's stereo and is even a bit cleaner, and there is a Dolby Digital track with an enhanced dimensionality, though the sound mix on the 1974 feature is not elaborate. The 165 minute program can be supported by English or Spanish subtitles ("Es un incendio. Todos los incendios son graves."), and is accompanied by a trailer and a cast profile section. Steve McQueen and Paul Newman star.

## Living well

The film got bad reviews and put downs all over the place, and there is absolutely nothing original about it, but Tony Scott's Revenge has such a languid atmosphere, succulent imagery and grand star appeal that we find most of it to be totally captivating. So Sun Belt that it's actually South of the Border, Kevin Costner stars as a former jet pilot who visits the estate of a Mexican gangster, played by Anthony Quinn, and soon enough starts dabbling with the gangster's main squeeze, played by Madeleine Stowe. Obviously, one cannot equate being a jet pilot with being a rocket scientist.

The film's final act is flaccid. Based upon a Jim Harrison story, the logic of the conclusion is valid, and it is satisfying that the filmmakers do not succumb to the cliché of a bloodbath, but the rhythm and the mood of the film collapses, and up to that point the movie was living off its rhythm and its mood. Still, most of the 1989 feature is highly inviting escapism, particularly when DVD playback can deliver Scott's images and sounds with such vivid intensity.

The Columbia TriStar Home Video release (50219, \$30) is presented in letterboxed format on one side, with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback, and in cropped format on the other side. The letterboxed image is more appealing. Colors are wonderfully exact and immediate, and the picture has a striking freshness. The stereo surround sound is also super, with lots of good sub-woofer effects and plenty of dimensional touches. The 123 minute program is also available in Spanish and French, and comes with English, French or Spanish subtitles. A trailer is also included.

## O'Toole

As he has done on several occasions, Peter O'Toole enlivens what would otherwise be a rather pointless endeavor, Creator, a Trimark Home Video release (7038D, \$25). Ivan Passer directed the 1985 feature, in which O'Toole portrays a scientist unable to overcome the death of his wife. Vincent Spano and Mariel Hemingway co-star. A mixture of romance and mild comedy, there isn't much to the story, but O'Toole is so energized that whenever he appears in a scene it doesn't matter what the movie is about so long as he is talking or moving.

After a letterboxed credit sequence, the picture is presented in full screen and is slightly cropped, though the framing never feels tight. Fleshtones are a little light, but hues generally look fresh, speckling is minimal and the image is sharp. The monophonic sound is okay and the 107 minute program can be supported by English, French or Spanish subtitles. There is a cast profile section and a trailer.

## Delightful Trap

The LD has lots of special features (see page 12), but the Walt Disney Home Video DVD release of The Parent Trap (15888, \$30) delivers just the popular remake and nothing else. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The image is sharp and colors are exact. The stereo surround sound is a little duller than the Dolby Digital sound, but the Dolby Digital track has a nice dimensional atmosphere. The 128 minute program also has a French language track and can be supported by English subtitles. A trailer, containing scenes not included in the film, is also featured.

We watched the entire movie thinking that the young actresses playing the twins within the film were twins themselves, not realizing that it was just one clever actress, Lindsay Lohan, and a lot of special effects. Dennis Quaid, doing an impeccable Harrison Ford turn, and Natasha Richardson star as the parents, who divorced, each taking a twin shortly after their children's birth. The twins meet a decade later and plot to bring their parents back together. The film is outstanding, with one spine-tingling discovery after another, and plenty of jovial humor in between. It is a shame, really, that it was sold as a children's film, because it is an excellent romantic comedy for grownups, and deserved many more Oscars than it received.

## Errant knights

A funny Pythonesque comedy about inept Fourteenth Century knights who are taken to another planet in a spaceship and defeat a group of even stupider aliens, The High Crusade, has been released as a Widescreen Edition by Raven Releasing and Pioneer (DVD0310, \$20). Rick Overton stars with John

Rhys-Davies in the 1997 feature, which was produced by Roland Emmerich (his name is misspelled on the jacket credits) and has some fairly decent special effects. Some of the comedy is desperate, and many viewers will think the film is dopey as all get out, but it has a vaudeville-like charm to it. There are some inspired gags (an elevator in the alien ship has alien elevator music) and amusing verbal by-play ("Je t'adore." "Okay." The character turns and shuts the door.). The picture is letterboxed, with an aspect ratio of about 2.5:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The color transfer is strong, even during scenes bathed in yellow candlelight, and the image is sharp. Separation effects are moderate, but the stereo surround sound has a strong atmospheric dimensionality. There is no captioning.

### **Con job**

Brian Brown is a con artist who attempts to scam a defunct seaside town with a phony treasure scheme, but ends up falling in love and helping the town's economy in spite of himself in Sweet Talker, an Artisan Entertainment Pioneer release (DVD68918, \$25). The story is so predictable you wonder when Brown is going to break into 'Seventy-Six Doubloons,' but the South Australia location is appealing, and the 1990 film is pleasantly humorous. Karen Allen co-stars. It also helps that the picture and sound are in good shape. The image looks super, with bright, vivid colors and crisp details. The stereo surround sound is also strong and although the mix is not elaborate, tones are well defined. The 91 minute program is not captioned. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are modest.

At least they're nicer than the Helmacrons

A somewhat misguided science-fiction fairy tale about miniature spaceships that help a group of tenants hold onto their condemned apartment building, \*batteries not included, has been released by Universal (20520, \$25). The film has lots of special effects and plenty of good will, but the characters are predictable and the narrative has no special magic. Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy star.

The 1987 film is presented in letterboxed format, with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. Colors are bright and fleshtones look okay, but the image is a bit soft and the deepest hues are a little fuzzy. There is a Dolby Digital track, which has more separations and a somewhat wider dimensionality than the standard track, though the mix isn't as aggressive as it would be if the film were produced today. The 107 minute program is also available in French in standard stereo and can be supported by English or Spanish subtitles. There is a production essay that talks about the location but says very little about the special effects, a short cast-and-director profile section and a trailer.

### **Cops**

A well made but depressing cop film, Madigan, has been released by Universal (20525, \$25). Don Siegel directed the 1968 feature, in which Richard Widmark portrays a homicide detective whose home life is being destroyed by his job, while Henry Fonda is a police commissioner fretting over upper echelon corruption in his department. The film is good, but it doesn't end happily. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. The movie was shot on location and the film's colors have a drab realism, but the image is smooth, hues are well defined and the picture is sharper than the similar-looking LD (Apr 96). The monophonic sound has age-related limitations but sounds okay. The 101 minute program can be presented in French and can be supported by English or Spanish subtitles. There is a very good production essay that talks straight about the film's two separate dramas and the problems Siegel had with his producer, Frank Rosenberg. There is also a good-sized cast-and-director profile section and a trailer with some brief nudity.

### **Newman and Woodward**

The 1969 car race movie with Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward and Robert Wagner, Winning, has been issued by Universal (20526, \$25). The presentation is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and no 16:9 enhancement. We reviewed an LD release in Jun 93. The image on the DVD is sharper, but there are still a few murky segments here and there, and colors on the LD are slightly richer, with better fleshtones. Overall, the picture looks nice, but a little bland. There is a stereo surround soundtrack that kicks in a little dimensionality here and there and is on par with the LD. The 123 minute

film can be supported by English, French or Spanish subtitles and is accompanied by a pretty good production essay, a short cast-and-director profile section and a fairly dishonest trailer. Newman and Woodward portray a couple whose marriage is disrupted by the pressures of the race circuit. It's a star vehicle and works for a while, but the narrative is rather thin and unappealing.

### **Mummy and daddy**

A moderately entertaining tale of possession and greed, Bram Stoker's The Mummy, has been released by Simitar (7432, \$20). Louis Gossett, Jr. is top billed, but he just has a brief, showy part. Eric Lutes and Amy Locane star, attempting to determine why an important archeologist, the father of Locane's character, has fallen into a coma. The story is somewhat nonsensical, but the film manages to sustain a reasonably elegant atmosphere, while murders or other supernatural events occur with a dependable regularity. The picture is reasonably glossy and colors are smooth. The stereo surround sound is basic but dimensional, and there is a Dolby Digital track, though the two sound fairly similar with the Dolby Digital adding, at the most, slightly sharper separation effects. The 100 minute DVD is not captioned.

### **Spud studs**

A film that lives up to its acronym, Kill and Kill Again, has been released by Digital Versatile Disc, Ltd. (DVD104, \$20). The giggle-inducing martial arts feature, shot in South Africa, stars James Ryan, who is hired by the daughter of a scientist to retrieve her kidnapped father. "My father has been working for several years on a project to extract fuel from potatoes," she explains, "One year's crop could provide enough gasoline to drive every car in the world, to the moon." "You mean to tell me the good doctor was kidnapped because of potatoes," Ryan asks, placing his hands on his hips. "During his research, my father accidentally discovered there was a by-product," she replies, picking at a flower, "An incredible new mind-control drug that enables whoever administers it to bend people to his will." The bad guy, who plans to take over the world by putting the drug in the water supply (hey, wait a minute, won't that make everyone beholden to plumbers?), has the phoniest beard we've ever seen that isn't supposed to be a phony beard, so rather than covering in terror, there is a tendency to laugh uproariously at his every close-up. The fight scenes are pathetic. Ryan may be versed in the art of hand-to-hand combat, but the extras they have him taking on know absolutely nothing and just sort of wave their arms a bit before falling over. There's more, but we don't want to spoil all the fun.

The cinematography is either poorly composed or cropped, or both, and the colors are worn-looking, with yellowed fleshtones. The stereo surround sound is best held to a modest volume and the 100 minute program is not captioned.

### **Raw emotions**

A movie that plays like a bad X-Files episode, Impulse, has been released by Anchor Bay Entertainment (DV10608, \$25). Meg Tilly stars as a dancer who returns to her hometown when her mother attempts suicide, only to find that the whole place is going crazy. Must be something in the water, or the milk, more precisely. It isn't just that the premise is hokey, the film has a poor dramatic structure, so that what surprises there are get telescoped too far in advance, and the ending is pretty much a cop out. Tim Matheson and Hume Cronyn co-star. The 1984 film is presented in full screen format. Colors are a little light and fleshtones are bland. Contrary to a notation on the jacket cover, the sound is monophonic, and the mix is of limited interest. The 93 minute feature is not captioned.

### **Blurry City**

Not even the stunt casting of Deborah Harry is enough to rescue the lame Union City, a Fox Lorber Home Video release (FLV5047, \$30). The 1981 feature is set mostly in an apartment building and concerns the lives of several tenants. There is a murder, some infidelity and a lot of aimless talking, but the film is an amalgam of half-formed ideas masquerading as art.

We reviewed an Image Entertainment LD release in Dec 88. The picture is blurrier and colors are lighter on the LD, but the picture on the DVD is no picnic. Although hues are deeper on the DVD, the image is also darker, and you can usually make out more details in the shadows on the LD. Whites on the

LD are pure, while whites on the DVD look greenish. Other colors are also imperfect, and a bit flat. The transfer rate is decent, but the source material is so murky that artifacting, particularly tiling and the disconnection of objects, is often evident. The picture is presented in full screen format and the framing looks okay. The monophonic sound has a limited range and some background noise, though the music is not significantly distorted. The 87 minute program is not time encoded or captioned, and is accompanied by a good still photo section (the photos have captions) and some filmographies.

### **Animation collections**

Taking full advantage of the DVD format and its ability to hold more than four hours of movies on a single side, Image Entertainment has issued several collections of classic animation works. Many of the works are dated and would be less valuable to a consumer in a smaller collection, but the size of the anthologies allows one to obtain a substantial part of an artist's work at a reasonable price, enabling the individual pieces to contribute like themes in a symphony to a larger whole.

Probably the most exciting of the new releases is Art and Jazz in Animation (ID4709LYDVD, \$40), a single-sided dual-layer 245 minute collection of the films of John and Faith Hubley. The collection is so large that their own 71 minute compilation movie, *The Cosmic Eye*, takes up only a small part of the complete program. The pieces are not dated, but most were produced in the Fifties and Sixties. The animation is soft to begin with, and the picture often looks aged, with somewhat subdued colors. The monophonic sound is dated but workable, with a slightly brighter Dolby Digital mono track. Some of the cartoons have dialog, which is not captioned. Most of the films are scored by jazz musicians, such as Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Carter and Quincy Jones, and pursuant of the DVD's title, the collection does provide a satisfying (and substantial) sampling of late Fifties jazz. Two of the cartoons, *Dig* and *The Tender Game*, appeared previously on LD (Dec 87) through Disney, and the LD image and sound presentations are identical in quality to the DVD.

A theme also develops within the collection that is present but less obvious in shorter anthologies, of the interest the Hubleys had in physics and earth sciences. The cartoons teach viewers about geology, ecology, and relativity, as well as about the development of civilization. Even the 6 minute *Urbanissimo*, which is as close to frivolous as the pieces get, about a man having a conflict with a large, mobile city, has the inherent design of an educational toy.

*Cosmic Eye* includes clips from many Hubley cartoons, blended and framed by a conversation between several beings who are observing Earth, and depicting a variety of myths. Some of the cartoons also appear in their entirety in the collection, but others do not, so that the inclusion of the feature gives the whole anthology a stronger sense of completeness, at least in its presentation of the Hubleys' art. Other cartoons featured are the excellent 53 minute *Of Stars and Men*, which gives what is still a fairly decent summary of the nature of time and matter; the equally superb 25 minute *Dig*, about a young boy and a rock who learn about the Earth's geological history first hand; *The Hole*, which runs 15 minutes and is about two construction workers discussing the fate of the world; *The Hat*, which runs 18 minutes and is about two soldiers on opposite sides of a dotted-line border; the colorful *Voyage to the Next*, which seems to have been inspired by pre-Columbian art and myth while also looking at overpopulation and pollution; *The Tender Game*, a stick figure romance set to *Tenderly* that runs 6 minutes; *Eggs*, which runs 10 minutes and has two mythic figures, Death and an Earth Mother of some sort, exploring civilization and urban blight while sitting on bridges and riding around in a car; *Harlem Wednesday*, which runs 10 minutes and is a meditation on the paintings of Gregorio Prestopino, with no animation; *The Adventures of \**, which runs 10 minutes and is about the path from childhood through adulthood using cubist backgrounds and designs; and *Of Men and Demons*, which runs 10 minutes and depicts a group of evil beings attempting to upset a tranquil rural life with pollution and over-crowding.

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A 130 minute collection representing two video cassette releases, The Complete Uncensored Private SNAFU: Cartoons from World War II, has been issued by Image in association with Bosco Video (ID5533BKDVD, \$25). The black-and-white cartoons are severely windowboxed, often trimming picture information off all four sides of the image, but the source material is in fairly good condition, with sharp, clear lines and solid contrasts. There is some scattered wear, but it seems minor. The monophonic sound

is fine and the program is not captioned. The director of each cartoon (many were by Chuck Jones, Friz Freleng, Bob Clampett, etc.) has been identified with a superimposed credit. The cartoons were produced in 1943, 1944 and 1945. The collection is said to include every SNAFU cartoon that was created, including one that was never released to the Armed Services, and the DVD's comprehensiveness is an attractive asset.

Although there are understandably caricatured depictions of the Germans and the Japanese, the cartoons were intended not so much as propaganda, but as instructional entertainment, demonstrating how not to camouflage, look for booby traps, let slip secrets and that sort of thing. There is some enjoyable nudity and lots of bawdy gags, and they can still boost morale, even though the war has long since ended.

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A two-hour compilation of silent Felix the Cat cartoons, another combination of two hour-long video cassette collections, Presenting Felix the Cat, also comes from Bosco and Image (ID5532BKDVD, \$25). The opening cartoon, Paramount Magazine (Felix's debut), comes from 1919, but the remaining cartoons, Felix Saves the Day, Felix in the Swim, Felix Turns the Tide, Felix Lends a Hand, Felix Minds the Kid, Felix in the Bone Age, Felix the Ghost Breaker, Felix Wins Out, Felix Revolts, Felix Gets Broadcasted, Felix in Hollywood, Felix in Fairyland, Felix out of Luck, Felix Goes A-Hunting and Felix Finds 'Em Fickle, come from 1922, 1923 and 1924.

The black-and-white cartoons become progressively more sophisticated, but even the most complicated ones are not too far way from what somebody could accomplish drawing on the sheets of a scratch pad and then flipping the corner. Like SNAFU, the source material is heavily windowboxed, though less seems to be trimmed from the edges. Some of the cartoons are worn and contrasts are weak, but even then, the basic ink drawings are clear enough to make out what is going on. One cartoon is tinted, which is not all that appealing, and there is a stereophonic organ score that is best kept at a subdued volume.

The best cartoon is probably Felix Revolts, in which the town Felix is living in attempts to ban cats, until he makes arrangements with the town's mice. Also intriguing is Felix Saves the Day, about a very bloody war between cat and mice. What we found most interesting about the collection, however, was the development of cartoon gags—which ones went on to be used again and again and which fell by the wayside. There is a gag in Felix Minds the Kid that seems quite imaginative and kind of a breakthrough in the way cartoons can be utilized. The child Felix is watching loosens a balloon in his mouth, gets blown up himself, and floats out the window. It seems like a standard gag now, but back in 1922 it really took some innovative thinking to conceptualize.

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The Blackhawk Films Collection Image release, Cartoons That Time Forgot: From the Van Beuren Studio (ID4681DSDVD, \$30), is a replication of the two-platter LD release (Aug 94), a compilation of two video cassette programs running 156 minutes in total. The picture quality on the cartoons, some of which are in black-and-white and some of which are in color, is identical to the LD. For the most part, the cartoons are in very good condition. Some are quite colorful—although others are a little faded—while the source material on most of the black-and-white shorts is clean. The monophonic sound is weak, but the Dolby Digital mono track is stronger. There is no captioning.

The cartoons come from the late Thirties and early Forties, and a few contain negative stereotypes. A number of them are adapted from comic strips, such as The Little King and Toonerville Trolley, and there are even a couple color Felix shorts. There are several interesting attempts at creating an original character, Molly Moo-Cow, who has colorful cartoon-type adventures without sacrificing her essential cowness. Other shorts include Wot a Night (a good haunted house short), It's a Greek Life (a Centaur cobbler tries on Mercury's shoes), Cupid Gets His Man (a cupid Mountie), Candy Town (a trip to a moon made of something other than green cheese), and In a Cartoon Studio (a humorous look at making cartoons). On the whole, the cartoons are standard, but entertaining efforts with imaginative artwork and a pleasing humor.

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There is nothing comparable to the cycle of Superman shorts created by Max & Dave Fleischer for Paramount in the early Forties. The cartoons depict grownups instead of animals or children, and they represent possibilities in imaginative entertainment that have barely been tapped to this day. Image has issued a replication of its LD release, The Superman Cartoons of Max & Dave Fleischer (ID4388BRDVD, \$35), presenting the 147 minute program on a single-sided dual-layer platter. Included are all 17 cartoons produced by the Fleischers, plus the Private SNAFU short, SNAFUperman. The picture quality seems significantly stronger than the LD (Jul 90). Although the minor speckles and scratches are still in the same places, hues are more solid and lines are crisper, making the colors appear more accurate. The monophonic sound also seems stronger and clearer. There is no captioning.

A subset of the cartoons has also been released by WinStar Home Entertainment, Max Fleischer's Superman (WHE73010, \$20). The picture transfers are softer than Image's LD and nowhere near as nice as Image's DVD, but the WinStar release does have one advantage—the soundtracks have been remastered in stereo, which is great fun, particularly on the Dolby Digital track, which has well-defined rear channel effects and a terrific boom of a bass. There is no captioning. Nine cartoons are featured in the 100 minute collection, the original short, The Mechanical Monsters, Electronic Earthquake, Billion Dollar Limited, Arctic Giant, The Bulleteers, Magnetic Telescope, Volcano and Terror on the Midway, plus a bonus Fleischer featurette, Play Safe, which appeared on Walt Disney Home Video's Fabulous Fleischer Folio LD (May 85), again with stronger, sharper colors. The DVD presentation looks very faded and yellowed.

### **Lindbergh**

An excellent hour-long biography of Charles Lindbergh, Lindbergh The Shocking, Turbulent Life of America's Lone Eagle, has been issued by Shanachie (950, \$25). The 1990 PBS American Experience episode provides a succinct overview of Lindbergh's life and its many complexities. There are interviews (his elderly wife still gets choked up discussing the kidnapping), archival clips (including recordings of anti-Semitic speeches he made before World War II) and photos from all segments of his life. The picture quality is fine. Background music is stereophonic and the audio is clear. The program is not captioned.

### **Animated books**

The Sony Wonder Doors of Wonder series takes well known children's picture books and turns them into short animated features, though in order to do so, the stories are padded and songs have been added.

The first release, The Rainbow Fish (LVD49944, \$25), features two stories by Marcus Pfister, the title story and Dazzle the Dinosaur. In book form, both use special shiny material in parts of the illustrations, and it would have been really cool if the animators had hand-placed such material on the cartoon cels, but dream on, right? They do their best to make the shiny spots shiny, though, and they have used the material in the jacket art. Rainbow Fish is about a stuck-up fish who doesn't have any friends because he's so vain. We hate the book, but kids like it because of the shiny stuff and the underwater illustrations, and they will probably respond to the 15 minute cartoon in the same way.

The Dinosaur story is a 15 minute retread of any number of Land before Time videos, but kids eat those up, too. The picture quality looks fine, though the animation is fairly basic, beyond the evocation of the artwork. The stereo surround sound has a strong dimensional presence though specific directional effects are limited. We actually tend to use the DVD as a test for hooking up surround speakers, just because the rear channels come on like gangbusters at the start without losing an inherent pleasantness. There is no captioning.

Mama, Do You Love Me? (LVD49507, \$25) runs 30 minutes and is set in an Alaskan Inuit village, where a young girl gets into a little bit of trouble—but not too much—when her puppy runs off and she has to chase it. The part from the book, in which the girl's mother compares the depth of her love to various animal activities, appears in the middle of the story. The animation is simplified in comparison to the book's stylized illustrations, and is more basic, conceptually, than the animation in Rainbow Fish. The color quality is passable. The sound is not quite as aggressively dimensional as Rainbow Fish, and the program tends to function like a standard, cheap cartoon, despite its exceptional source. There is also a

sing-along segment for the show's one song, a multiple choice 'game' that includes live footage of arctic fauna and culture, and a profile of the story's author, Barbara M. Joose. There are optional English subtitles.

### **Joni**

Joni Mitchell gives a concert in what looks like the furniture section of a department store on Joni Mitchell Painting with Words and Music, an Eagle Rock Entertainment PLC Image Entertainment release (ID5515-ERDVD, \$25). Apparently, it was meant to make the studio audience feel comfortable, and if the environment didn't relax them, then Mitchell's music certainly does. There is a wonderful dimensionality to her recording, especially on the DVD's Dolby Digital track, and tones are smooth and strong. The analog track has a more generalized mix, but it is still pleasing.

Mitchell sings numbers from many points in her career on the 98 minute program, and she also pauses quite a bit to tell stories about her life. Keyed by the luscious immediacy of the recording, her singing sounds lively and unfettered. The stage illumination is darkish, giving a haze to everything not in the key light, but the picture looks fine. There is no captioning, but there is a discography and filmography for Mitchell.

### **Aretha**

The lackluster Aretha Franklin—Live at Park West has been released by Castle Music Pictures and Image Entertainment (ID5502CADVD, \$20). Franklin builds up a sweat, but she pretty much stays in one position on the stage, holding the microphone with one hand and motioning with the other as she sings. The recording of her vocals lacks a strong presence, and there is little personality in her renditions. In general, her studio recordings are more engaging.

Franklin is well lit, so while those behind her look a little fuzzy at times, she remains sharply focussed. Fleshtones are accurate. In addition to the weak vocals, the music does not have much dimensionality. There is no captioning. We reviewed an LD in Apr 95.

### **Mariah**

Mariah Carey performs in many outfits and venues across the globe on Mariah Carey Around the World, a Columbia Music Video release (CVD50184, \$25). She is so bloody good looking it often seems like an offhand bonus that she happens to sing quite well, too. The arenas she lands are a little big to do her voice justice, but she hits most of her notes and puts on a simple but energetic stage show.

The 45 minute concert program also contains lengthy backstage interviews between some of the songs. The DVD has four music videos, as well, Butterfly, Breakdown, The Roof and My All, which are accessed separately, along with a profile and discography. The standard stereo surround sound is rather dull, but the Dolby Digital track is very good, with clear separations, a strong bass and well-defined tones. The concert can be supported by optional English, French or Spanish subtitles.

### **And all that jazz**

An excellent biographical documentary, Charles Mingus Triumph of the Underdog, has been issued by Shanachie (6315, \$25). Using interviews and performance clips, the 78 minute 1997 program makes a strong case for ranking Mingus among the preeminent Twentieth Century American composers. It traces his development as a musician while also covering the stormy ups and downs of his personal life. Although the emphasis is on reporting, there is a decent amount of music in the documentary as well, and the filmmakers are never in a hurry to rush or interrupt a concert sequence. The archive material is in varied condition, but the picture quality is decent and the stereo sound is good. The program is not captioned.

### **The pagan influence**

A Canadian film about Celtic music in Ireland, Scotland and on Cape Breton Island in Canada, Celtic Tides, has been released by Putumayo World Music (PUTU1417, \$22). It isn't a very well made documentary. Even general viewers will cringe at some of the non-scholarly statements ("[Celts are

remembered as] fierce, naked warriors with long blond hair who displayed the severed heads of their enemies over their doorways.”) included within the narration, and the focus jumps from subject to subject without much sense of organization. Unlike Mingus, the music never lasts long enough to let the viewer savor it. But the only real problem these drawbacks create is that the documentary requires more than a single viewing to absorb the information it wants to impart.

Included among the many interviews are The Chieftains, Clannad, Altan, The Rankin Family, Natalie MacMaster, Ashley MacIsaac, Old Blind Dogs, Mary Black, Seamus Egan, Dougie MacLean and Matt Malloy. Concert sequences are unevenly lit and the image is a little grainy, but colors are reasonably fresh and clear, and fleshtones look fine when the lighting allows. The stereo sound is okay and the program is not captioned. There is no time encoding.

### **Everybody's goin' to swing**

We could do the one-two and the three-four, but it took the longest time to figure out the five-six. No matter, Simitar has released an enjoyable program of instruction and more, Swing Craze (7577, \$15) and has released it in a bundle with a CD of swing music, Swing Craze & Next Generation Swing (7578, \$25). Swing Craze actually contains three programs, the title program, also identified as Get into the Swing of Things, which is a half hour overview of the revitalized swing craze and its roots, Club Swinging, also called Swing Craze Six Count Basic Swing, which is a 50 minute instructional of the basic steps and arm movements, and Advanced Swinging, a more complex 16 minute instructional of 'East Coast Swing.' The longer instructional has fresh colors and a solid picture. The other two are a little a bit grainy but acceptable. The stereo sound is not elaborate, but is functional, and the programs are not captioned.

The documentary is not well organized, but gives the viewer a decent taste of what all the excitement is about. The longer instructional is the best part of the collection. A methodical effort takes the viewer from putting one foot in front of the other to doing everything but those wild somersaults, and you can always use a repeat loop if you're having trouble getting something down. The longer instructional has one instructor who speaks and demonstrates with his partner, as several other pairs also demonstrate the moves. In the shorter instructional, it is just a single pair of instructors, but both speak.

The CD opens with a Louis Prima number and then goes on to 13 contemporary recordings of swing classics, which have blander orchestrations than the original recordings but better, smoother stereo.

### **More 'Singles'**

We reviewed one of the quick and cheap 'DVD Single' programs from Palm Pictures and Rykodisc in Mar 99, and we have since had a couple moments to look at two more. The better of the two is Mickey Hart (Planet Drum Indoscrub) (RDVD51059, \$8). The two music videos it contains, Indoscrub, which runs 5 minutes and Endless River, which runs 3 minutes, both have recognizable imagery. Indoscrub is a collection of time-lapse images depicting construction sites and other urban locales. Endless River features natural images of water, nature and the moon, though it is edited more energetically than the usual nature image clip. Both numbers emphasize percussion, but are highly appealing, and Indoscrub even has a vocal track.

The picture quality looks fine, and the sound is super. The audio is available in both Dolby Digital and DTS (which seems a bit crisper), and has a full dimensionality and strong tonal definitions. There is also a good 9 minute interview with Hart, in which he talks about his background and his music (the image on the interview, however, is somewhat jerky, like a computer video playback). There is no captioning.

The two cuts on Mocean Worker Detonator/Diagnosis (PPDVD70032, \$8) are set to abstract and semi-abstract imagery, and the music is, by design, more cluttered. Diagnosis, which runs 3 minutes, contains footage from the backstage of a concert, from a storm, from Red China and a couple other things, manipulated with colorful lights and drawings. Detonator, which runs 4 minutes, uses an extensively manipulated image of people commuting, a circuit board, crash dummies at work, and the musician, Adam Dorn, wandering around Wall Street. The music is fast paced and deliberately repetitious.

There is another 8 minute interview as well, with Dorn. The picture looks okay. The audio is in Dolby Digital only and has the same intensely dimensional playback as Indoscrub, though because of its style, the tones are not as elegant. There is no captioning.

## LD Reviews

### **A better Trap**

The superb remake of the Walt Disney romantic comedy classic, The Parent Trap, has been released by Walt Disney Home Video as an equally superb collector's edition Widescreen Laserdisc (10559AS, \$40). The film is accompanied by a commentary track featuring the director, Nancy Meyers, her husband, the producer, Charles Shyer, and cinematographer Dean Cundey. They talk about developing the material, working with the cast, the logistics of the shoot, the special effects, and their filmmaking strategies. It is a very informative talk that seems inspired by the quality of the film. The 128 minute feature is spread to three sides in CLV and is followed by a deleted scene in which the heroine meets the Queen of England (obviously it didn't belong in the movie, but it is cute), a lengthy look at the components that went into the seamless special effects shots, several fascinating screen tests for the young star, Lindsay Lohan, and a trailer, also featured on the DVD (see page 12), that contains footage not included in the film. The commentary also stretches across all these sequences. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. Except for the inherent crispness of the DVD, the image on the LD is identical, with bright, fresh colors and a complete stability during the totally invisible special effects. The stereo surround sound is good and the Dolby Digital track has a wider dimensionality and more detail. It is also brighter than the Dolby Digital track on the DVD. The film and all the supplements are effectively closed captioned.

### **Gore master**

A film director starts having hallucinations about all the splatter movies he's been making in Lucio Fulci's fictionally autobiographical Cat in the Brain (Un Gatto Nel Cervello, also known as Nightmare Concert), a Box Office Spectaculars LD release (BOS001, \$50). Fulci portrays himself in the gore-heavy feature, hypnotized by a genuinely psycho psychiatrist into believing it is he and not the psychiatrist committing serial splatter murders. While the premise seems like an excuse to present imaginative deaths that could not otherwise be integrated with a narrative, and while the plot verges on incoherence itself in scene after scene, it is a witty examination of Italian slaughter movies and the funny old men who make them.

The transfer is great. This being a low budget Italian production, the source material does not sparkle, but fleshtones are viable and other hues look reasonably fresh. Darker sequences are less stable and grainier, but the presentation is workable. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.57:1. The audio is presented in English on the digital track and in Italian on the analog track, although the 93 minute film's final two sequences were not part of the Italian release and therefore have no Italian dialog. Contrary to a jacket notation, the English track appears to be in mono. The disc is not captioned and was produced by Bob Murawski and Tom Rainone.

Included with the platter is a reproduction of an insert poster. After the film is ended, there is a very gory trailer, a nice montage of advertising materials and things like CD soundtrack jackets, and about 25 minutes of footage from a 1996 Fangoria convention in New York City attended by Fulci, who responds to questions from the audience. The sound is not the greatest for this sequence and both the queries and the answers are at times difficult to make out, but fans will surely relish the nature and extent of the footage.

### **The giant turtle makes his appearance, in letterbox**

An excellent presentation of the marvelously silly Japanese monster movie, Giant Monster Gamera, has been issued, with perhaps too literal a translation of its title, as a Limited Edition LD release by Synapse Films (SFL004, \$40) on a gold platter. We reviewed a cropped release from Image Entertainment in Dec 90. If you have any affection at all for the black-and-white 1965 feature, however, then you will probably find Synapse's presentation enchanting. The film is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.27:1 and is in Japanese (mostly—the American actors who have a few lines are hysterical). The image is set a little high on the screen to facilitate white English subtitles that appear beneath the picture. The film's widescreen framing often provides a compelling dynamic, particularly in the 'monster' long shots, that is completely missing from the standard cropped version. The image is pretty much free of

damage and looks super. Blacks are not rich, but otherwise the picture is finely detailed, with well-defined contrasts and a sharp focus. Hooray! Side two of the 79 minute feature (accompanied by two trailers) is in CAV, with two unsteady still frames out of every five, and playback at triple speed creates such a vivid image it looks as if the giant turtle will spin his rocket feet right into your living room. Although we kind of wish the dubbed track had been included on the analog channel—if for no other reason than we could then share the film with our children—the subtitling is excellent, covering not just the dialog but many of the mysterious signs and things that usually pass unnoticed. The monophonic sound has a limited range and a little background noise, but is functional.

### **Hammer adventure**

An intelligent and enjoyable Hammer adventure thriller, The Abominable Snowman, has been issued as part of The Hammer Collection on LD by The Roan Group (RGL9632, \$50). Based upon a British TV drama, the script writes itself into a corner at the end, but the 1957 film features a pair of terrific performances, by Peter Cushing and Forrest Tucker, some super location footage (in the Pyrenees), and tries, philosophically, to examine the good and bad in Mankind. There are also some fairly exciting sequences and some fairly creepy ones, too.

The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The source material is very clean, with hardly a speckle, and contrasts are nicely delineated. The image looks sharp and smooth. The monophonic sound is fine and the program is not captioned. The 91 minute feature is accompanied by an amusing theatrical trailer that tries to turn it into the monster movie it is not. A reproduction of a British pressbook is included with the platter, as an insert. The disc was produced by William Lustig.

On one of the analog channels, commentary from the director, Val Guest, is intercut with commentary by the writer, Nigel Kneale, prompted by Hammer historian Marcus Hearn. Both lament the conclusion, but allow as to how 'only a Spielberg' could have made it better. Guest talks about working with Cushing and Tucker, and explains why he doesn't like shooting in widescreen. Both share a number of memories from their days at Hammer. There is an interesting story about a practical joke one of them played on Alfred Hitchcock, a discussion about using only doubles for the location shots (though Tucker would always claim later that he actually climbed the mountain), and lots of details about the way Hammer made movies. It is very fortunate that both filmmakers are still around, and their involvement with the disc has made what was already a special little movie even more special.

### **Funny Mary**

The riotously funny romance, There's Something about Mary, has been released by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment as a Widescreen Edition (0670585, \$40). Cameron Diaz, Ben Stiller and Matt Dillon star in the blockbuster hit, about a man who tries to rekindle a relationship fifteen years after a disastrous prom date. The film is a smart mix of state-of-the-art, cringe-inducing physical comedy and old-fashioned love, making fun of everybody and everything without alienating anyone.

The film runs 119 minutes and is presented on a single platter, with the side break cutting into the middle of a scene, though the interruption is not overly disorienting. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. Fleshtones are not intense and the image is a little soft, but the presentation looks okay and colors are well defined. There is buffeting and other scratchiness on the dialog track in more than one outdoor sequence on both the standard stereo surround soundtrack and the Dolby Digital track. The film's sound mix is functional and nicely atmospheric, but differences between the standard track and the Dolby Digital track are limited. The film is adequately closed captioned.

### **A new Robe**

The jacket cover and catalog number on the CBS/Fox Video re-priced Special Wide Screen Edition LD release of The Robe (102280, \$40) are identical to the original release (Feb 90), but the platters have 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment labels and the transfer is brand new. The letterboxing has an aspect ratio of about 2.4:1 and shows more picture information on the sides of the image than the old release. The picture is much sharper and the most severe damage to the earlier presentation has been

eliminated. The color transfer is also improved, though the embellishments are less distinctive. Colors are a bit better defined and less inclined to over-saturation. Hues are not intense and some sequences still look rather washed out, but when the age and history of the film is taken into account, the presentation is highly pleasing. The stereo surround soundtrack is also brighter and better detailed, though it must be remembered that this isn't Titanic. The audio mix on the 1953 feature is mostly centered, with a few scattered separation effects and a mildly dimensional musical score. The 134 minute feature is spread to three sides in CLV and is accompanied by the same extras that accompanied the original release—newsreel footage of the film's premiere and trailers. There is no captioning, and the chapter encoding is limited. Richard Burton and Victor Mature star in the entertaining costume spectacle about the beginnings of Christianity.

### **Elegant cartoon**

It's a bizarre subject for a cartoon, but the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment Widescreen Edition LD release, Anastasia (0276485, \$30), is an admirable work. The animation is terribly derivative of Disney, but that is sort of like saying that silver is not as nice as gold. It was shot in Cinemascope and looks very classy, putting most of those Warner cartoon features to shame. The narrative skews to a slightly older audience than most animated films, but that just makes it easier for us grown ups to remain bewitched. It has a workable balance between fantasy and non-fantasy, and the animation allows for sweeping period shots of both St. Petersburg and Paris. The characters are attractive and the narrative, in which a young woman is conned into pretending to be a lost princess, is involving. Even the songs aren't bad. Part of the cartoon's appeal comes from the strength of the LD transfer. The letterboxed image is utterly captivating. It has an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and colors are crisply defined. The image is sharp and hues are vivid. The stereo surround sound is also terrific and the Dolby Digital sound is even better, with more forceful separation effects and a stronger bass. The 94 minute program is adequately closed captioned.

### **Doing a jig for DTS**

You know what scene really blew us away on the Pioneer Paramount DTS Widescreen Edition of Titanic (LV334812WSDTS, \$50)? It was the Irish dance sequence ('A Real Party' is what it's called in the chapter listing). We have a friend who insists to us that DTS is just louder and not really different from Dolby Digital. Who knows, that may be partially the case with DTS DVDs, but the differences between the best DTS LDs and their Dolby Digital counterparts have nothing to do at all with volume. There are simply more details to the sounds. The bass has more flavors, and the high tones are more distinct. In the dance sequence on the Dolby Digital track, the pounding of the beat, to a certain extent, drowns out the rest of the music, the sound effects and even the dialog. On the DTS track, it holds its place, the other sounds come through clearer, and despite all the extra noise you follow the dialog better because it, too, is sharper and better defined. What gave us goosebumps, though, was that the enhanced sound brought us closer to the scene's emotions, making the dancing more thrilling and the growing affection between the hero and the heroine more palpable. Needless to say, the film's most spectacular sequences, while perfectly thrilling on the Dolby Digital disc (Nov 98), are also more enthralling with the DTS playback. The 194 minute Oscar-winner is spread to four sides in CLV.

Ever since we were old enough to drive we've been waiting for the Openwheel Image Entertainment IMAX DTS release, Super Speedway (ID4717OW, \$40). We thought the standard Dolby Digital version (Oct 98) rocked, but it's like the Surrey with the Fringe on Top compared to the DTS disc. May we recommend chapter 11? Where the Dolby Digital puts you in the driver's seat, the DTS track straps you in. The bass lasts longer and is more varied in its rumbles, the high end is clearer, the rear channels are even more equal in power to the front channels and there is more audio detail amid the roars on the DTS version. Like the standard LD, the 50 minute program appears on one side and a 47 minute 'making of' piece appears on the other side. If only the cars could get up and dance, it would make as good a demo disc as Titanic.

The New Line Home Video Image DTS release of Blade (ID5423LI, \$40) has room for the excellent Mark Isham commentary track and isolated score that the standard LD (Jan 99) couldn't fit in, along with the commentary track from producer/star Wesley Snipes and other crew members, which was

included on the first LD. The DVD (Jan 99) featured both tracks, as well. Also included with the 120 minute film on the three-sided presentation are 40 minutes of supplement materials carried over from the LD—a collection of deleted scenes and a look at how the special effects were created. The LD's Dolby Digital track packed a lot of punch—way more than the DVD's Dolby Digital—but the DTS track does even better, with sharper definitions and more separation detail, adding more entertainment to the film's thrills.

The same situation is present on the New Line Image DTS release of Rush Hour (ID5477LI, \$40). The commentary track by director Brett Ratner is included, as it was on the standard LD (Apr 99), along with an excellent isolated score and commentary track by composer Lalo Schifrin, which was on the DVD (Apr 99), but wouldn't fit on the LD. Ratner's film school movie, What Ever Happened to Mason Reese, a trailer (which opens the program) and a couple deleted scenes are also featured. The 98 minute film would be entertaining on a black-and-white TV and the sound mix is not even up to Blade standards, but the DTS track is slightly crisper and packs a bit more thrust than the Dolby Digital track. The differences are slight, but clear.

John Frankenheimer's Ronin has a terrific soundtrack, with loads of exquisite separation effects, and the MGM Home Entertainment DTS release (ML107602, \$40) gives each noise a sharper, purer delivery. The differences between the excellent Dolby Digital audio track on the standard release (Apr 99) are minor, but the enhanced crispness of the audio track makes the film more involving and more exciting. Frankenheimer's audio commentary is presented on both analog channels. The 121 minute film is spread to three sides, with the finale in CAV, and is accompanied by an alternate ending and a trailer.

The audio track on The Man in the Iron Mask, starring Leonardo Di Caprio, is not critical to the film's entertainment, and the improved audio on the MGM DTS release (ML107203, \$40) does not solve the film's dramatic problems, but the DTS track is wonderful. Separation details are much better defined than on the Dolby Digital track of the standard version (Mar 99) and the musical score has a stronger, more moving presence. It doesn't turn it into a different movie, but the soundtrack on the DTS version smooths things over a bit better and wraps the viewer more steadfastly in the entertainment. The 132 minute feature is spread to three sides with the finale in CAV. Director Randall Wallace's commentary appears on one analog channel and the film's soundtrack, in mono, appears on the other. There is also a trailer and a look at the production designs for the mask.

There is a much better detailed mid-range on the DTS track of Halloween H20, a Dimension Home Video DTS release (16070AS, \$50), than on the Dolby Digital track of the standard release (Feb 99). The film's audio mix adds to its thrills considerably and is highly enjoyable, so the enhanced detail and impact of the DTS track makes the movie even more exciting. The CLV program runs 86 minutes

Purists would suggest that Eric Clapton/Unplugged should only be heard in analog, but they would be missing out on the clear-spoken purity digital playback has to offer. We could detect no difference whatsoever, however, between the DTS track on the Warner Reprise Video Image DTS release (ID4747WO, \$40) and the Dolby Digital track on the DVD (Aug 97). The 70 minute MTV concert is presented in CLV, although side two runs less than a half hour.

All DTS discs have the same picture transfers, letterbox aspect ratios and closed captioning as their standard counterparts.

### **The new Giant**

The new Warner Home Video LD release of Giant (36135, \$50) has truer fleshtones and brighter, crisper colors than the most previous LD release (Jan 91), but the previous version wasn't bad and the new version is still a little soft, so the improvements are moderate. The presentation has been letterboxed, with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1, adding a little bit of picture information to the side of the screen and masking off some from the bottom in comparison to the older full screen version. We could detect no changes at all in the stereo surround soundtrack, which has a modest dimensionality. The film is closed captioned with some paraphrasing.

The 202 minute feature is spread to three sides and is accompanied by about a half hour of extras. There are two black-and-white TV documentaries hosted by Gig Young, one about shooting the film on location (in Marfa, Texas) and the other profiling Dimitri Tiomkin, and an excellent retrospective documentary talking about the various personalities involved with making the film. The documentaries are also captioned. Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean star in the 1956 generational tale of

Texas cattle ranchers and oil men.

### **The not so great escape**

Franklin J. Schaffner's uninteresting 1973 feature about escaping from Devil's Island, Papillon, has been released on LD by Warner Home Video (916, \$40) in letterboxed format with an aspect ratio of about 2.5:1. We are unable to compare the disc to previous releases, but the color transfer looks reasonably good. Some darker sequences are a little murky, but fleshtones are fairly well defined and, in the sun, the image is crisp. The frog man holding the raft steady in the film's ridiculous finale is clear.

Jerry Goldsmith's lyrical score sounds wonderful on the stereo surround soundtrack. The LD also has a Dolby Digital track, but we could detect no difference between the two. Other than the music, the separation effects are fairly elaborate for their day but still somewhat subdued compared to current efforts. The 150 minute feature is spread to three sides and is adequately closed captioned. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are good.

Accompanying the film is a 12 minute 'making of' featurette, which includes footage of the author upon whose life the film is based, Henri Charriere, visiting the set. There is also a trailer. Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman star in the predictable film that gets by on its exotic locations and star power (and musical score), but has little in the way of dramatic surprise or insight.

### **Improved Rescuers**

Walt Disney's 1977 vermin-as-heroes cartoon feature, The Rescuers, has been released as a Widescreen Laserdisc by Walt Disney Home Video (17105AS, \$30). The previous LD release (Nov 92) was cropped and the letterboxing on the new release, which has an aspect ratio of about 1.68:1 is very satisfying, adding picture information to the sides of the image and losing nothing from the top and bottom compared to the cropped release. The colors are essentially the same, but the picture is much sharper and hues are better detailed.

The monophonic soundtrack is sharper and clearer than the sound on the earlier disc, but the audio is also a little noisier. The 77 minute program is adequately closed captioned. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are passable.

### **Breaking Up is hard to watch**

Salma Hayek and Russell Crowe star in what is essentially a two-character film (there are inserts with man-on-the-street interviews and a few other excursions, but the end credit scroll is telling—it lists three characters), Breaking Up, a Warner Home Video release (15251, \$35). You have to really, really like Hayek, however (we doubt anybody can like Crowe that much) to enjoy the film, since it is as irritating as a former lover.

In real life, people argue over very specific things, but in the movie, the dialog is all generalities, which might be believable in snippets but becomes quite artificial well before the 90 minute exercise is concluded. They break up, they get back together and have great sex, they argue and break up again, over and over. If there are insights to the true nature of men and women in their words and actions, we missed it, but there are certainly plenty of clichés.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and the letterboxing works quite well with the basic two-shot frame, putting one character on one side of the image and the other on the other side. The colors are not intense and the image is a little soft, but the picture quality is workable. Fleshtones are somewhat bland. The stereo surround sound is not elaborately mixed but has no particular flaws. The program is adequately closed captioned. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are okay.

### **LD Roundup**

The three-hour Universal Pioneer Widescreen Edition release, Meet Joe Black (LD83377WS, \$40), is spread to four sides in CLV. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color transfer is pretty much identical to the DVD (see page 2) but the image is a little softer and not quite as you-are-there vivid. Still, it looks very nice. The stereo surround sound and the Dolby Digital sound are

okay, though even the Dolby Digital track on the DVD seems a touch sharper. The film is adequately closed captioned. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are fairly generalized.

The colors on the Walt Disney Home Video release of Mighty Joe Young (12746AS, \$30) are even lighter than the colors on the DVD (see page 3), and the image is a little more grainy. The presentation is workable, however, and the flaws do not create a great distraction. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The Dolby Digital sound on the LD is equal in quality to the Dolby Digital sound on the DVD and is one of the film's most entertaining components, but you might want to sample the standard stereo surround soundtrack, which has an even better bass, even if the other separations are not as detailed. The 114 minute program is adequately closed captioned.

The Adam Sandler comedy, The Waterboy, has been released by Touchstone Home Video as a Widescreen Laserdisc (15970AS, \$30) in letterboxed format with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The image is a bit less sharp than the DVD (see page 3), but the color intensity is the same and fleshtones look fine. The stereo surround sound may be a touch sharper, but it, too, is basically identical to the DVD's audio, as is the Dolby Digital track. The 90 minute program is adequately closed captioned. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are okay.

Warren Beatty's political satire, Bulworth, has been released as a Widescreen Edition by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment (0051185, \$40). The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color quality looks identical to the DVD (Apr 99), although the image is a little softer, making some of the darker sequences a little more murky. The Dolby Digital sound is identical to the DVD's Dolby Digital track, delivering a strong bass and a number entertaining separation effects. The 108 minute feature is accompanied by the film's awful, awful theatrical trailer and is adequately closed captioned. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are okay.

Ronny Yu's engagingly campy horror film, Bride of Chucky, has been released by Universal and Pioneer (LD83749WS, \$35). Unlike the DVD release (Apr 99), there are no special features. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The image is not as smooth as the DVD and colors are not as deep, but the presentation looks okay and hues are reasonably bright. The stereo surround sound is somewhat stronger than the sound on the standard stereo track on the DVD, and the Dolby Digital track is a bit sharper, though the differences are very minor. The 89 minute CLV feature is adequately closed captioned.

The appealing Drew Barrymore romance, Home Fries, has been released by Warner Home Video (15169, \$30) in letterboxed format with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. Like the DVD (see page 3), the picture is a bit dusty looking, but workable, though the image on the LD is softer. The stereo surround sound and Dolby Digital sound are okay, with a couple aggressive moments, and seem identical to the DVD. The 93 minute program is adequately closed captioned and is accompanied by the same well-designed trailer that was featured on the DVD.

The picture on the Paramount Pioneer release, The Rugrats Movie (LV333993WS, \$30) is identical to the letterboxed version on the DVD (see page 8), but the LD release does not have Dolby Digital encoding. The DVD's Dolby Digital track has more pronounced separation detail, and the film's sound mix contributes a good deal to the entertainment. The image is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.77:1. The 81 minute CLV program is adequately closed captioned. The chapter encoding is passable, and the film is accompanied by the same Catdog short that appeared on the DVD.

The picture on the Eagle Rock Entertainment PLC Image Entertainment release, Joni Mitchell Painting with Words and Music (ID5513ER, \$30), has the same kind of blurs around the edges that the DVD has (see page 14), and blacks are not as pure, creating a little more grain, but the Dolby Digital track is richer—the DVD's Dolby Digital sounds a little brittle in comparison—and it is the sound playback that is the essential attractiveness of the program. The standard stereo surround sound is also strong. The 98 minute program is not captioned.

Beware of the PolyGram Video Image release of Cats (ID4764PG, \$30). Not only is it slightly cropped, it is time compressed. The LD runs 115 minutes while the DVD (see page 9) runs 120, and we could never get the two to synch up for more than a moment. We said the DVD was a little slow, but this is ridiculous. The songs have no breath and the music is off pitch. They sound like cats on a hot tin roof. The picture is grainier than the DVD, and hues are a little dull. Because of the compression, neither the standard track nor the Dolby Digital track is as satisfying as the DVD's audio tracks. The image is slightly

letterboxed, though the letterboxing may not show up on some monitors and the image loses a bit from the sides while gaining nothing on the top or bottom in comparison to the more accurately letterboxed DVD. The program is adequately closed captioned.

### **Star Trek winds down**

The end of the sixth season and the beginning of the seventh and final season of Star Trek: The Next Generation, has been released on LD by Paramount Home Video, which will apparently be seeing the show through to the end, thank goodness. The sixth season concluded in the spring of 1993 and the seventh started in the fall of that same year. As with all the other seasons, Paramount has changed the jacket design for the seventh season, an aspect to their systematic release of the series that we have greatly appreciated. Except where otherwise noted, the picture quality on the episodes leaves something to be desired. Darker sequences are grainy or murky, and colors are often light even in well lit scenes. The stereo surround sound, on the other hand, is really great, with an intelligent mix and lots of pleasing dimensional ambience. The episodes are closed captioned with too much paraphrasing and, stubborn till the end, Paramount still refuses to chapter encode them.

The two-part episode contained in Star Trek: The Next Generation ( Episode 141 – Tapestry Episode 142 – Birthright (Part I) (LV40270241, \$35) and Star Trek: The Next Generation ( Episode 143 – Birthright (Part II) Episode 144 – Starship Mine (LV40270243, \$35) is really a part-and-a-half, since the first episode combines the story that is continued in the second episode, in which the Klingon hero discovers a colony of his race who have become non-violent, with an unrelated story, about the android character who suddenly begins having dreams. The construction is effective, providing the extra time the longer story needs to explore its themes without padding the action needlessly. The companion episode on the first disc, Tapestry, has a common premise—the captain is given the opportunity to see what his life would have been like if he had made different choices in his youth—but while the narrative may be a bit tiresome, it still stimulates a viewer's imagination and daydreams. Starship Mine is a dandy Die Hard tale, in which the captain is the only one left aboard the Enterprise during a dry dock procedure when terrorists come aboard to steal some dangerous materials. All in all, we wish there'd been more episodes like that.

The captain gets a girlfriend in Lessons on Star Trek: The Next Generation ( Episode 145 – Lessons Episode 146 – The Chase (LV40270245, \$35), but it is easy come easy go when he has to order her on a dangerous mission. The Chase is a terrific episode about the origins of life in the galaxy and why all the characters on Star Trek have the same basic body shape—and we bet you thought it was just Central Casting.

There are some good epistemological twists on Frame of Mind in Star Trek: The Next Generation ( Episode 147 – Frame of Mind Episode 148 – Suspicions (LV40270247, \$35). One of the heroes starts having hallucinations that he is in a mental hospital, and soon does not know if he simply thinks he is a starship officer or if he really is one. The premise has been done before, but the execution is engaging. The companion episode, Suspicions, has some nice plot twists, too, but it is founded on very bad science—scientists testing a sun probe for the first time use a manned instead of an unmanned spacecraft—and there are many other unlikelihoods in the actions of the characters. The picture quality on Suspicions is a little stronger than the others.

Jonathan Frakes gets to play two versions of himself on Second Chances in Star Trek: The Next Generation ( Episode 149 – Rightful Heir Episode 150 Second Chances (LV40270249, \$35). His character discovers that a second copy was produced in an accident eight years earlier and has been living in isolation since then, so they have a number of personality differences and don't like one another all that much. It is a fun episode and Frakes, who also got to stretch his acting muscles in Frame of Mind, gives a lively performance in both roles. In Rightful Heir, a figure in Klingon legends comes to life and the Klingon hero has to work out the political implications of the event. It used to be that any show with Klingons was terrific, but they're starting to turn into wusses. Because of the smoke and stuff the Klingons like to live in, the episode is particularly grainy.

The two-part episode that spanned the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh season is presented on Star Trek: The Next Generation ( Episode 151 – Timescape Episode 152 – Descent, Part I (LV40270251, \$35) and Star Trek: The Next Generation ( Episode 153 – Descent (Part II) Episode 154 – Liaisons (LV40270253, \$35). In this instance, it is Brent Spiner who gets to play a dual role, as the heroes

encounter some independent-thinking Borg. It is an enjoyable effort, though not the most exciting two-parter Star Trek has conceived.

Timescape has an interesting premise, in which a couple of the heroes are thrown into a different time parameter, allowing them to move around while everyone else is frozen. It is a stimulating effort, and have fun trying to see if the actors are breathing. Liaisons is a fairly standard episode, but adequate entertainment. In the main part of the story, the captain crashes on a planet, where he meets a young woman, the sole survivor from a previous crash, who starts showing him more affection than he cares for.

Another engaging two-part episode is featured on Star Trek: The Next Generation ( Episode 155 – Interface Episode 156 – Gambit, Part I (LV402760255, \$35) and Star Trek: The Next Generation ( Episode 157 – Gambit, Part II Episode 158 – Phantoms (LV402760257, \$35). Frakes' character is investigating the death of the captain—yeah, right—when he is abducted by a group of smugglers. He then has to pretend to be disgruntled with his command in order to gain their confidence. Richard Lynch guest stars.

LeVar Burton's character thinks he sees his dead mother in the gasses of a huge planet in Interface, and for a while everybody believes him. It is a serviceable episode, with vague mythological overtones that are, perhaps, not explored as thoroughly as they could have been. Surrealism runs rampant in Phantoms, an episode directed by Stewart, in which the android character has increasingly vivid and debilitating dreams. The explanation is well conceived and the episode is quite entertaining.

### **This Bud's for cheaters**

If there is one theme that runs through many Walt Disney comedies, it is that underdogs must cheat to win. That was the lesson in Air Bud (Feb 98), and that is the lesson in Air Bud: Golden Receiver, a Walt Disney Home Video Widescreen Laserdisc (15655AS, \$30). The film is very much a Disney formula comedy, with clownish bad guys (they want to kidnap the basketball-and-football-playing dog who belongs to the hero), an impossible premise (the dog gets to play on the boy's school football team, even though the animal is not a student), and simple emotional conflicts (the hero has to get used to his mother's new boyfriend). Within these parameters, it is effectively designed, and while its morality is dubious, the dog is cute. Watch for Dan Martin and Tim Conway playing sports announcers.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. Colors are bright, but often a little over-saturated, and the image is a bit soft. The stereo surround sound is not elaborately mixed, and the 90 minute CLV program is adequately closed captioned. The chapter encoding and jacket guide are workable.

### **Anywhere she wants**

Every man's dream and every man's nightmare, Attack of the 50-Foot Woman, has been released on LD by Warner Home Video (14008, \$35). A film that is as stupid as it is enjoyable, the special effects are awful, the acting is pathetic and the story is pretty dopey, but once you start watching it, you can't stop. Frustrated with her husband's infidelity, the heroine is speeding home one night when she bumps into a UFO, and a little while later, she's big and looking to get back at her philandering spouse. She may be transparent in some of the effect shots and completely off scale in others, but the idea supersedes the shortcomings. The actors are so self-conscious you hang on their every line reading and wonder what the cast, the crew and the people who invested money in the 1958 project could possibly have thought they were trying to accomplish—or did they know darn well they were making a classic?

We are unable to compare the LD to the previous CBS/Fox Video LD release (Sep 89), but from what we can recall the two are fairly similar in appearance. Well-lit scenes are reasonably sharp, with nicely defined contrasts, and darker scenes are grainier, softer and murkier. There is some scattered speckling, particularly around the reel-change points. The monophonic sound is adequate and the 65 minute feature is effectively closed captioned. Side two is in CAV, and she doesn't get big until the second half, anyway.

### **Busy bunnies on DVD**

The first 15 minutes of the 71 minute Playboy Image Entertainment release, Playboy: Farrah Fawcett: All of Me (ID4039PLDVD, \$30), is the best part, telling how the actress rose like a rocket to

stardom on the strength of her looks, becoming, in the late Seventies and early Eighties, the most significant female cultural icon of her day. Except in cases where the reverse was true, every woman wanted her hair and every man wanted her nipples. Then, somewhat daringly, the second segment of the program attempts to explore her fall. Using video footage from Playboy's modeling shoots with her, the actress is depicted being vulnerable and insecure, fretting over her appearance as if she wasn't drop-dead gorgeous even when her makeup is smeared and her hair is ratty. It could have been daring filmmaking, but they reach a point and they pull back, not really exploring her arguments with the magazine, or the nature of her emotional problems and how she overcame them. The program is still superior to the standard Playmate puff piece, and even the nude modeling sequences have a context that keeps them interesting but, if it had been produced independently of those involved, it might have been a significant exploration of fame and ennui. The picture quality is generally good, with a reasonably sharp image and rich colors.

One would think that Playboy was being lazy putting out Playboy: Strip (ID5391PLDVD, \$25), like a fisherman buying fish in the store, but the program includes spirited interviews with the strippers and the dance sequences (most appear staged) that take up the bulk of the program are less monotonous than other strip videos. The picture is a little soft and some sequences are deliberately hazy, but hues are bright. The program runs 50 minutes.

Although the premise of Playboy's Bedtime Stories, a Playboy Image release (ID5412PLDVD, \$25), is promising, the execution is not. Supposedly a reenactment of five classic erotic tales (with an annoying framing device about a couple reading to one another), the episodes are more concerned with the posing and nude modeling of the performers than with the pace or execution of the story. The picture is often blurry or hazy, but colors are usually fairly bright. The program runs 58 minutes.

Each of the seven erotic skits on Playboy's Girlfriends (ID5103PLDVD, \$25) are introduced with a brief dialog sequence, but are otherwise enacted to a blandly energetic musical score, as the models frolic with one another in various venues. The picture is often soft and fleshtones tend to look orangish. The program runs 61 minutes.

The theme of Playboy Wet & Wild: The Locker Room (ID5387PLDVD, \$25) is more vague than the title suggests, as the modeling sequences and erotic quasi-skits are linked only by the predisposition of the models to forsake apparel and embrace dampness. The picture is a bit soft and some sequences are a bit blurrier than others, but on the whole, the image is passable. The program runs 55 minutes.

All Playboy DVD programs have uninteresting but reasonably strong stereo soundtracks and none are closed captioned. All but Farrah Fawcett are accompanied by a still portrait section and other Playboy promotional features.

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Playboy: Farrah Fawcett: All of Me is also available on LD through Playboy and Image (ID4027PL, \$30). The picture quality is essentially identical to the DVD and the stereo sound is brighter. The program is even closed captioned, and side two is in CAV with a mixture of steady and unsteady still frames.

#### Adults Only DVDs

An enjoyable women's prison exercise, Bad Girls 2: Stripsearch, is available from Vivid Interactive (UPC#0073215556, \$35; the film's actual title is just Strip Search). The plot isn't coherent and doesn't end interestingly, but the vignettes are amusing and well staged, and the erotic sequences are energetic. The picture quality is also very good, with sharp, strong colors and decent fleshtones. The sound is okay and there's even an attempt to supply background noises for the prison. The 69 minute program stars Lené, Debi Diamond, Kaitlyn Ashley, Isis Nile and Bionca.

The picture also looks nice on Vivid's Exposure (UPC#0073215551, \$35). Fleshtones are rich, hues are bright and the image is sharp. The narrative is also very effective, a spin-off of Disclosure, about an advertising executive saddled with an evil female boss, and the erotic sequences are energetic. The sound is passable, though there is some buffeting in one sequence and extraneous background noise in another. The 70 minute program features Celeste, Jenna Jameson, Anna Malle and Rebecca Bardoux.

The latest installment in the lucrative Debbie Does Dallas series, Debbie Does Dallas '99, from Vivid (UPC#0073215571, \$35), is less inspired than Debbie Does Dallas Next Generation (Mar 98). The cheer-leaders have to earn a lot of money, so they bet on one team and wear out the other. Not the first

time that plot has been used in an erotic film, and not the last. The program also seems consciously designed to accommodate an R-rated version as well as the hardcore version, and the erotic sequences are rarely creative. The picture is grainy and colors are bland. The monophonic sound is okay. The 74 minute program features Lexus, Lovette, Raina and Stephanie Swift.

You gotta give points to whoever came up with the title, The Nice, The Naughty & The Bad, another Vivid release (UPC#0073215549, \$35). The narrative is also inspired, a viable adaptation of Captain's Paradise, about an advertising executive who has two wives, each ending up desiring the sort of life the other has. There are a couple other interesting subplots, as well, with a good twist at the end. Colors look drained and fleshtones are light. Some of the dialog is distorted and difficult to make out, and the stereo sound is generally bland. The 75 minute program stars Jeanna Fine, Chassey Lain and Jill Kelly.

There's the semblance of a story, humor, and a milk motif in Interview with a Milkman, from Vivid (UPC#0073215554, \$35). An elderly milkman reminisces about how much fun he used to have with his customers. The picture is grainy, but colors are passable and the monophonic sound is okay. The 76 minute program features Madelyn Knight, Laura Palmer, Kum Kummings and Sindee Coxx.

A vague narrative about ghosts helping a guy with his relationship, through his and his partner's dreams, Cloud 9, from Vivid (UPC# 0073215558, \$35), has little to offer. The erotic sequences are bland and colors are a bit light and hazy. The sound is passable. The 67 minute program stars Racquel Darrian ("Her first feature since June of 1994," hails the jacket cover), Felecia and Barbara Doll.

The narrative for Vivid's Trapped (UPC#0073215548, \$35) is nonsensical, something about a married couple coming home and finding strangers in their house having fun; then they hire a new maid. The erotic sequences are rarely creative and the picture is soft, with noticeable artifacting flaws. Colors are reasonably fresh. The sound is bland. Kobi Tai, Tasha, Julia Rage and Gina Rome are featured in the 70 minute productions.

An all-male program, The Hotel, has been issued by Vivid (UPC#0073215519, \$35). The 85 minute presentation has slightly faded colors and a soft but workable picture. The monophonic sound is adequate. The narrative is reasonably creative, about a mysterious hotel in the middle of the desert from which there is no escape.

All Vivid programs contain extensive hardcore promotional extras and all except The Hotel feature multiple angle sequences.