

Reviews of recent and upcoming DVD releases

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**McClatchy-Tribune News Service
(MCT)**

"The Host: 2-Disc Collector's Edition" (R, 2006, Magnolia)

Sometimes, it's not about what you have so much as what you do with it. Witness "The Host," which is home to not one (chemical disturbance in water creates unstoppable monster), but two (monster carries a deadly virus) completely banal plot synopses. A little character goes a long way, and "The Host" is simply loaded with it, led by a ragtag and wholly likeable family that has no business antagonizing a trout, much less one of the most awesome monsters to emerge from celluloid waters in decades. The creature, cast and culture "The Host" create allow for tremendous versatility, and the film responds by bouncing from thrilling to scary to funny to sweet and back without breaking a sweat. It's the latest in an endlessly long line of monster and virus movies, but it's also two hours of pure, unchained entertainment that puts most of that line to shame. Fans of either genre best not miss it. In Korean with English subtitles, but an English dub is available as an option.

Extras: Director commentary and reflections, deleted scenes, 10 behind-the-scenes features, interviews, casting footage, bloopers, storyboards.

"Dexter: The First Season" (NR, 2006, Showtime)

How's this for a concept? A guy named Dexter (Michael C. Hall) helps the police by day as a forensics expert with an advanced knowledge in blood splatter. He has a girlfriend (Julie Benz), a good relationship with his sister (Jennifer Carpenter) and a rather delightful personality. Come nightfall, though, this same Dexter is Miami's most accomplished vigilante serial killer, trapping Miami's nastiest scum, disposing them, and completely getting away with it. It's a heck of a dichotomy, and it makes for one seriously interesting crime drama that's gruesome, funny and psychologically searing, with an equally damaged supporting cast to match. That said, a fair warning: "Dexter" exercises impressive restraint given its subject matter and the freedom being on Showtime allows, but anyone expecting a show about a serial killer-slash-forensics expert to be clean and easy on the eyes is living in dreamland. Still, if you can handle it and couldn't see it until now, this is the can't-miss show of last year.

Contents: 12 episodes (commentary on two), plus two episodes of the Showtime show "Brotherhood," a free "The Tudors" episode download, two behind-the-scenes features and DVD-ROM content.

"Yo-Yo Girl Cop" (NR, 2006, Magnolia)

A Web site is counting down the days, hours and minutes to an unknown event, and the only possible lead is a high school that allegedly is harboring an unknown number of terrorists bent on leveling their surroundings. Fortunately, a troubled but violently capable girl (Aya Matsuura), armed with a special yo-yo, has accepted a government deal to infiltrate the school and get to the bottom of things. Why a yo-yo, you might ask? Eh, who knows? Like a vast many things in "Yo-Yo Girl Cop," the weapon of choice doesn't exactly hold water on the sensibility scale. The good news is that

authenticity doesn't appear to be the film's intention any more than its strength. "YYGC" might be construed on some small level as a metaphor for any number of phenomena related to school shootings and suicide bombings, but it's much more fantasy _ and fun, action-packed fantasy at that _ than anything else. In Japanese with English subtitles, but an optional English dub is available.

Extras: Making-of feature, original Japanese trailer.

"The Ex: Unrated" (NR, 2007, TWC)

Like its name, "The Ex" is short. Even in unrated form, the film only clocks in at 84 minutes long. So it says something when, despite the short length, "The Ex" still feels a bit long. The concept is sound: Loser husband (Zach Braff) moves with frustrated wife (Amanda Peet) back to frustrated wife's hometown, only to get a job working under both her father (Charles Grodin) and her wheelchair-bound ex (Jason Bateman). Furthermore, the comedic potential of the aforementioned cast members _ with reinforcements from Donal Logue and Amy Poehler _ is immense. But while "The Ex" does have the occasional laugh-out-loud moment, most of the valuable time is wasted on elaborate plot turns that don't really go anywhere (or worse, lead to one of those dreaded "serious scene within a comedy" moments). Calling "The Ex" a bad movie is too harsh, because it's not altogether bad. Calling it a disappointment, though, isn't. (On a side note, nothing about this edition screams R, much less unrated, so don't let the packaging excite you.)

Extras: Deleted scenes, alternate endings, bloopers.

"Renaissance" (R, 2006, Miramax)

Like a young starlet at a red carpet interview, "Renaissance" is better at looking impressive than sounding impressive. The monochromatic, ultra-high-contrast, computer-animated visual style immediately grabs the eye, and there's little denying the high level of visual flair on display throughout the picture. Unfortunately, once the novelty inevitably wears off, all that's left behind is an all-too-familiar story of a corrupt corporation, a lone wolf cop, a love interest, some mad science and the cold, futuristic world in which they exist. The hokey, wannabe-noir dialogue merely exacerbates the story's problems. "Renaissance" still works as curiosity fulfillment, and any film that experiments with the medium is worthy of applause on at least some level. It's just too bad the style-to-substance ratio leans so heavily toward the former. A little balance would've done wonders. Daniel Craig, Romola Garai and Ian Holm, among others, lend their voices.

Extra: Making-of feature.

"I Pity the Fool: Season 1 (NR, 2006, Lions Gate)

Perhaps the most amusing thing about "I Pity the Fool" is the fact that the very first word uttered in the opening theme is "reality." That's amusing because, even by reality television's completely damaged perceptions of reality, this one rates awfully low. In "Fool," helpless car dealerships, dance troupes, families and more call on Mr. T to help them get their act together. Mr. T arrives, spits out a few cliches about trust/leadership/respect/insert your own word here, and generally acts like a parody of himself. Twenty minutes later, after a few very predictable and TV-friendly twists, all appears resolved. One can only conclude that these people (a) never needed Mr. T's help in the first place or (b) are so far beyond help that Mr. T's cocktail napkin advice actually looks good to them. Either way, the results are neither

enlightening nor particularly entertaining.

Contents: Six episodes, no extras.

"Pandemic" (NR, 2007, RHI Entertainment)

ABC went for the jugular when it aired an awful movie about a bird flu pandemic that may or may never happen. But that's child's play next to "Pandemic," which leapfrogs the avian flu and instead imagines the ramifications of an even worse virus. As it turns out, a really bad movie is what happens. "Pandemic" leaves no cliché unexploited, trotting out scheming politicians, mad dog reporters, selfish businessmen, surfer dudes, militia nuts, drug lords and other wholly unlikable characters whose deaths are somehow supposed to touch us. A barrage of useless, tired side plots push the run time past 170 minutes, and the film outdoes itself with a pat, rushed ending that effectively neuters whatever impression the preceding 165 minutes aimed to leave. Had "Pandemic" left any such impression in the first place, that would be most disappointing news. As it happens, it's merely the last in a long line of disappointments in what amounts to nothing short of an embarrassment for all involved. Tiffani Thiessen, Faye Dunaway, French Stewart, Vincent Spano and others star.

Extras: Cast interviews, behind-the-scenes feature.

Roundup of the Week: Latest Special Editions

_ "Hard Boiled: Two-Disc Ultimate Edition" (R, 1992, Dragon Dynasty): New transfer, Bey Logan commentary, interviews, behind-the-scenes feature, trailer gallery, location tour. Playstation 3 owners, take note: A Blu-ray edition of "Boiled" will come packaged with the special edition of the "Stranglehold" video game, which takes place following the events of the film.

_ "Bubba Ho-Tep: Limited Edition" (R, 2003, MGM): Bruce Campbell/director commentary, commentary by "The King," Joe R. Landale reading, deleted scenes (with commentary), four behind-the-scenes features, promo spots, photo gallery, music video, special Elvis jumpsuit packaging.

_ "Kung Fu Hustle: Axe-Kickin' Edition" (R, 2003, Sony Pictures): Deleted footage, three behind-the-scenes features, storyboards, interviews, outtakes, DVD-ROM game.

_ "Robocop: 20th Anniversary Collector's Edition" (NR, 1987, MGM): Extended and theatrical cuts, crew commentary, six behind-the-scenes features, storyboards (with commentary), deleted scenes, galleries, promo spots, tin case.

_ "Serenity: Collector's Edition" (PG-13, 2005, Universal): New commentary with Joss Whedon and cast, deleted/extended scenes (with commentary), outtakes, six behind-the-scenes features, "Sci-Fi Inside" episode, fancy packaging.

(Billy O'Keefe writes video game and DVD reviews for McClatchy-Tribune News Service.)

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