

Reviews of recent and upcoming DVD releases

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

"Air Guitar Nation" (NR, 2005, Docurama)

Were you perhaps unaware that the world of competitive air guitaring not only exists, but in fact thrives on a global scale? Don't worry, you're not alone _ which is why Finland's Air Guitar World Championship had never fielded a representative from the country that made the guitar famous in the first place. Things finally changed in 2003, and "Air Guitar Nation's" cameras were rolling as American air virtuosos dueled for a chance to show the world they belonged. A rivalry emerges, some bad blood trickles out, a guy rocks out with a Hello Kitty backpack for a shirt, and "Nation" follows in the steps of "Spellbound" and "Wordplay" by documenting yet another hobby that mankind has transformed into a thrillingly legitimate sport. Many a skeptic will watch, and there's no guarantee "Nation" will make believers out of its viewers. But it has a heck of a good time trying, and the energy it exudes is contagious in an entirely wonderful way.

Extras: Behind-the-scenes footage, bonus performances, updates on the air guitarists, deleted scenes.

"Heroes: Season 1" (NR, 2006, NBC/Universal)

It's rather staggering that it's taken this long for a show like "Heroes" to hit the airwaves. Done right, the concept _ ordinary people with banal existences developing powers ranging from mind-reading to invincibility to dimension-bending _ is tailor-made for television. Happily, "Heroes" does more than simply get it right. Rather than employ the various powers as some means of fighting weekly crimes and reaching neat conclusions, the show instead takes the serial route, giving the heroes time to discover their powers, shoehorn it into their normal existences, and face a pending disaster that two of them have already witnessed in very different ways. The storytelling is top-notch, the different characters allow for vastly different moods within any given episode, and the show takes full advantage of its premise when it comes to taking the hard way out and leaving the viewer hanging around for just one more episode.

Contents: 23 episodes (12 with commentary), plus the unaired, extended pilot (with commentary), five behind-the-scenes features, deleted scenes and a Mind Reader game.

"Year of the Dog" (PG-13, 2007, Paramount Vantage)

Exteriorly speaking, "Year of the Dog" exudes cuteness. The font on the DVD case is playful, as is the mostly cartoony artwork. The pictures on the back imply that "Dog" is a fun date movie, and the description uses the words "quirky" and "charming." But if all you know about "Dog" is what you learned from appearances, prepare to be blindsided. It's impossible to describe the plot without spoiling a major turn of events that happens almost immediately, and even touching on the film's themes is enough to rob it of its intended impact. Or not. It's not entirely clear whether "Dog" is earnestly making a point about animals or intentionally beating us over the head for dark comedic purposes. When a film

hits you from behind like this, it's awfully hard to get a good look at its intentions. Molly Shannon, John C. Reilly, Regina King and Peter Sarsgaard star.

Extras: Director/Shannon commentary, four behind-the-scenes features, deleted scenes, bloopers.

"Ugly Betty: The Complete First Season" (NR, 2006, Buena Vista)

With "The Devil Wears Prada" in our rearview mirrors and both "Lipstick Jungle" and "Cashmere Mafia" slated to debut this fall, we're on the eve of perilous saturation when it comes to comedic/dramatic portrayals of high-fashion professionals backstabbing their way to the top. Thank goodness, then, for Betty Suarez (America Ferrera), who fits into this world like a fork in a toaster but somehow manages to survive anyway. "Ugly Betty" lives and breathes on the energy of its terrific lead character, her family (Tony Plana, Ana Ortiz, Mark Indelicato) and her Queens neighborhood. That's not always a good thing, because "Betty" isn't always designed that way: When it tries to make us sympathize for Betty's high-fashion peers (Eric Mabius, Vanessa Williams, Becki Newton, Alan Dale), it often can't. But the not-so-sympathetic stuff still serves its storytelling purpose, thanks to a great overriding arc that slowly unravels as the season rolls on. And even when that grows tiresome, it's merely a matter of time before Betty rolls in to steal another scene.

Contents: 23 episodes (four with commentary), plus three behind-the-scenes features, deleted scenes and bloopers.

"Friday Night Lights: The First Season" (NR, 2006, NBC/Universal)

How badly does NBC want "Friday Night Lights" to become a hit? Here's a clue: The network is offering a money-back guarantee for anyone who buys the first season DVD set and is unsatisfied. While that sounds like the kind of idea that will put an executive out of work, the studio does have a point about the show, which follows the maddening trials and tribulations of a high-profile Texas high school football team. "Lights" isn't exactly the most unpredictable show on television, often treading on cliché and telegraphing its not-so-shocking twists sometimes episodes in advance. But while that's a deal-killer for a lot of shows, this one avoids disaster by filling those well-worn roads with a relentless current of energy and some pretty watchable characters. The shaky-cam approach is a bit overused, but the fast, uncompromising pace _ along with some great on-field action _ make for a show that's absorbing in spite of its obvious flaws.

Contents: 22 episodes, plus a making-of feature and deleted scenes.

"Blades of Glory" (PG-13, 2007, Dreamworks)

In much the same way "Talladega Nights" was Will Ferrell in a stock car, "Blades of Glory" is Will Ferrell in ice skates. Beyond the vastly different surroundings, the two movies have more in common than a couple of singles who met on eHarmony.com. The overlying plots are strangely similar, and you can guess, with deadly accuracy, how "Glory" is going to end by the 15th minute. Of course, if you're familiar with the works of Will Ferrell, none of this should come as a surprise to you. Like "Nights" and so many films before it, "Glory" seems concerned only with taking a vessel _ in this case, competitive figure skating _ and filling it with so many inane characters (Will Arnet, Amy Poehler, Jon Heder, Craig T. Nelson, Jenna Fischer, William Fichtner) that the jokes almost write themselves. As such, it mostly coasts by on the talent of its cast, content with being consistently funny, if never legendarily hilarious.

Hey, it works. And even though you absolutely know how it ends, the final showdown still manages to exude excitement in a palpable, entirely unexplainable way.

Extras: Deleted/alternate scenes, six behind-the-scenes features, bloopers, music video, "Moviefone Unscripted" episode, promo shorts, photo galleries.

"Kickin' It Old Skool" (PG-13, 2007, Fox)

After spending more than half his life in a coma by way of a breakdancing accident, Justin Schumacher (Jamie Kennedy) has finally awoken _ a 12-year-old from the '80s living as a twentysomething in 2006. Funny, right? Actually, for a brief while, it is. Kennedy's movie career is becoming increasingly one-dimensional, but he manages some funny bits while playing the fish out of water. Before long, though, "Kickin' It Old Skool" goes where you were afraid it was headed all along _ a boring barrage of the same old fat/ethnic jokes, bodily function gags and record-scratch sound effects. Some faces from the time capsule (David Hasselhoff, Emmanuel Lewis) emerge for cameos, but these don't amount to much. All the while, "Skool" marches down the path of predictability, capped by an ending you saw coming after the first scene. Some of the film's breakdancing sequences are pretty good, but you can see better stuff _ sans bad story and lame jokes _ on YouTube for free.

Extra: Deleted scenes.

"A New Wave" (R, 2007 ThinkFilm)

Wannabe artist Desmond (Andrew Keegan) works, unwillingly, in a bank. His friend Gideon (John Krasinski), a wannabe Tarantino, wants to rob the bank. Desmond agrees, but Gideon insists that the robbery must go according to his plan, which resembles the script of a bad Tarantino copycat film. And that's the premise of "A New Wave," except that it's not. While the overlying plot would seem to have enough comic potential in its own right, "Wave" chooses instead to zig, zag, serpentine and run around like a headless chicken as it bounces between a cornucopia of side plots that swallow the main storyline alive. Even that might be OK if the side plots were funny enough to entertain, but "Wave" isn't even sure it wants to be a comedy half the time. The resulting, horribly confused mess neuters whatever interest one might have in the characters, and it's hard to care once we finally get to the culmination of all those plans. Perhaps that's a blessing, because "Wave" botches this sequence as well.

Extras: Deleted scenes, outtakes, music video.

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