

Reviews of recent and upcoming DVD releases

By Billy O'Keefe

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(MCT)**

"Flock of Dodos" (NR, 2006, Docurama)

Is there such a thing as a humorous film about the evolution-intelligent design debate? Well, there is now. "Flock of Dodos" comes courtesy of evolutionary biologist-slash-filmmaker Randy Olson, and if his title doesn't lay bare his stance on the issue, he happily volunteers it himself. But rather than make yet another case for evolution and preach to his choir, Olson instead talks to anyone who will talk back _ doctors, authors, professors, school board members, regular folks, even his mom. What he discovers, more than anything, is that the debate is far more civil and far more reasoned than the talking-head media would have us believe. People, as it turns out, are nice _ even when, say, Olson wears his "Evolutionist" hat at a pro-intelligent design family's dinner table. "Dodos" doesn't make light of the debate's gravity, nor does it ignore the impassioned arguments constantly bubbling underneath. It does all the things a good debate film should do, but it adds a two-way perspective that, sadly, is more endangered than even the poor dodo. That alone makes it a must-see film for those who have both an interest in the debate and an open mind.

Extras: A 60-minute "Ten Questions" film, panel discussion, outtakes, additional animation sequences, behind-the-scenes feature, "Shared Visions" skit, filmmaker bio.

"Death Proof: Extended and Unrated" (NR, 2007, Dimension)

The idea behind the "Grindhouse" double feature was inspired, but it's little surprise audiences didn't wish to sit en masse through two films at once. So people took a pass and waited for the inevitable and much more palatable "Grindhouse" twin-bill DVD set ... which isn't happening, because Dimension decided instead to sell the films separately under their less-known individual names. Whose great idea was that? In any event, "Death Proof" is Quentin Tarantino's contribution to the twosome, and his name need not even be on the bill for that piece of knowledge to shine right though. Don't enjoy the way Tarantino's characters like to get talkative in the middle of many of his films? You'll probably hate "Proof," which essentially is 113 minutes of meandering, absorbing conversation punctuated by two completely awesome action sequences. But Tarantino has been on a collision course with this film for years, and the "Grindhouse" umbrella allows him to unabatedly play with his influences without having to stop for explanation or tie it into any sort of audience-friendly convention. For that reason alone, the experiment is a creative, if not commercial, success _ and hopefully not the end of the road.

Extras: Six behind-the-scenes features.

"Snow Cake"(NR, 2006, IFC FirstTake)

Against his better judgment and arguably by accident, Alex Hughes (Alan Rickman) has offered a lift to a female hitchhiker (Emily Hampshire) who's on her way to visit her mom (Sigourney Weaver) in small-town Wawa, Ontario. "Snow Cake" is a much different movie by the time that trip ends, but we've merely reached the tip of the iceberg by that point. If the preceding plot description seems vague, it's not

by accident. The less you know about the handful of early surprises that change "Cake's" direction, the better chance those surprises have of disarming you and completely warping your expectations for the hour-plus that still remains. Fortunately, surprise isn't "Cake's" only commodity: A handful of great characters and a cast equipped to take them on see to that. If your familiarity with Rickman's career starts and ends with Severus Snape, his turn here is bound to open your eyes. That goes double for Weaver, regardless of whatever acquaintance you've made with her. Carrie-Anne Moss also stars.

Extra: Deleted scenes.

"Closing Escrow" (PG, 2007, Magnolia)

Three couples are in the hunt for a new house, and three rather unique real estate salespeople are ready to make their respective dreams come true. That's the premise of a really boring reality show, but it's also the premise of "Closing Escrow," a mockumentary that not only isn't boring, but is actually pretty funny. "Escrow" plays out like your typical Christopher Guest film: Mundane stuff happens, characters say funny things during interviews, repeat. But "Escrow" also voyages to frontiers Guest would dare not explore, touching on such family-unfriendly topics as racism, violence and the threat powers of dead rabbits. That allows it to be something Guest's films won't be while still successfully cribbing the sense of humor that makes them so good. Most of "Escrow's" cast is comprised of talented unknowns, but "Reno 911!" fans most certainly will recognize two of their own _ Cedric Yarbrough and Wendi McLendon-Covey _ in big roles. If you like that show's approach to comedy, "Escrow" should suit you just fine.

Extras: Two behind-the-scenes features, deleted scenes.

"Upright Citizens Brigade: The Complete First Season" (NR, 1998, Comedy Central)

"Upright Citizens Brigade: The Complete Second Season" (NR, 1998, Comedy Central)

A handful of you might be scratching your heads at this one. Didn't the first season of "Upright Citizens Brigade" already appear on DVD? Why, yes it did. But that was four years ago, and even Amazon doesn't stock it anymore. Fans who have the old set can skip right past this release, which is the same content inside a slightly redesigned package, and go right to season two. But for those unfamiliar, Comedy Central's thirst for new business presents a second chance to make acquaintance with a sketch comedy show that more closely resembles a high-concept sitcom than a collection of sketches. Each episode finds the Upright Citizens Brigade (Amy Poehler, Matt Besser, Ian Roberts and Matt Walsh) attempting to disrupt the status quo in the face of a similarly deranged public (played by the same people) that isn't exactly normal in the first place, and the plotlines often end up in places no conventional sitcom could realistically go. Sometimes it's laugh-out-loud funny; far less often but occasionally, it's borderline painful. But even at its worst, "UCB" never is dull.

"First Season" contents: 10 episodes, plus commentary, the pilot (with commentary), original live performances, deleted scene.

"Second Season" contents: 10 episodes, plus commentary (including live commentary at the UCB Theater), audience Q&A, original live performances, deleted scenes.

"Brothers and Sisters: The Complete First Season" (NR, 2006, Buena Vista)

As promised by the title, there are brothers and sisters in "Brothers and Sisters." But there also are

parents, kids, an uncle, a mistress, a company, an embezzlement and some other folks who may or may not join the family someday, and they all collide in what shakes out as a pretty heavy first couple of episodes. Repackage these first two episodes as a movie, and it'd be too obnoxiously heavy-handed and angst-ridden to qualify as recommendable entertainment. Fortunately, "B&S" has a little more time to spread itself out, and once all the introductions are made, that's what it does. Eventually, "B&S" emerges as a well-written, topical and occasionally funny family drama, and the huge cast that initially burdens the show gradually morphs into its best asset. Calista Flockhart, Sally Field, Rachel Griffiths, Ron Rifkin and Dave Annable, among many others, star.

Contents: 24 episodes (one unaired), plus commentary, three behind-the-scenes features, bloopers, deleted scenes.

"The Condemned" (R, 2007, Lions Gate)

In hopes of becoming the next big Internet reality sensation, a sleazy producer (Robert Mammone) has assembled a game of last-man standing featuring a bunch of dangerous criminals ("Stone Cold" Steve Austin, Vinnie Jones and eight more) on a deserted island. All but one will die, and the one left standing will be freed from prison. It's a great idea, and if "The Condemned" had given it the over-the-top, tongue-in-cheek treatment, it might have been a great movie as well. Instead, the film chooses to wax philosophical about the morals of the product at hand, and too much of "The Condemned" consists of a bunch of idiotic producers and crew members suddenly realizing that killing nine people has moral implications. Seeing as we already knew that, there's no reason for us to care. Sadly, the action on the island provides no respite: The criminals are so dull, you wonder what made the producers suddenly care about them so much. And with this being WWE Films production and an Austin star vehicle, is there any doubt who's going to win the thing in the end?

Extras: Austin/director commentary, second director commentary, five behind-the-scenes features, appearance and other footage, storyboards.

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