

Reviews of recent and upcoming DVD releases

By Billy O'Keefe

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(MCT)**

"The Hoax" (R, 2006, Miramax)

Clifford Irving (Richard Gere) is, like most writers, a commercial failure. But that doesn't mean he doesn't tell a good story, especially when it results in a major publishing house funneling him gobs of money after he deceives a few honchos into thinking he's about to write Howard Hughes' exclusive autobiography. That "The Hoax" is based on a true story almost makes it a must-see movie by default: The idea that someone could be so arrogant as to pull a two-pronged fast one on one of the world's most powerful men and publishers, respectively, is fascinating in its own right. But "The Hoax" does one better by living up to its premise. Gere is fun to watch, and best buddy Dick Suskind (Alfred Molina) is a scene-robbing riot. The story takes some bizarre turns, and it manages to effectively alternate between humor and suspense without ever losing sight of either. Consequentially, rooting for and against the same con at the same time is both sensible and all kinds of fun. Hope Davis, Marcia Gay Harden and Stanley Tucci also star.

Extras: Two filmmaker commentary tracks, deleted scenes (with commentary), extended scene, two behind-the-scenes features.

"Michael Moore Hates America" (R, 2004, Allumination Filmworks)

The worst thing about "Michael Moore Hates America?" Try the title, which positions the film as some angry piece of far-right filmmaking that eats objectivity as a snack between two slices of freedom toast. Even filmmaker Michael Wilson, who chose the title, seems uncomfortable with his choice. He should be. What "MMHA" lacks in first impressions, it redeems behind its cover with a surprisingly heartfelt and balanced questioning of Moore's tactics and attitudes about a public he claims to serve. Wilson catches Moore in acts of self-contradiction, speaks with subjects who feel betrayed by the films in which they appear, and tries in vain to chase down Moore and provide him a chance to speak for himself (only to be publicly insulted for his efforts). All the while, he positions himself not as a conservative or a liberal, but as someone who simply doesn't like being lied to by anyone on either side. It's hard to argue with that perspective, especially when Wilson provides enough damning facts and footage to give it some credibility. But oh, that title. Because of it, the people who stand to benefit the most from this film will instead merely roll their eyes and never give it the time of day. Wilson surely didn't mean to preach to the choir, but that, unfortunately, is all his film has a chance of doing. No extras.

"Planet Terror: Extended and Unrated" (NR, 2007, Dimension)

For those unfamiliar with "Planet Terror," this is Robert Rodriguez's contribution to the "Grindhouse" double feature that has since been split back into two. For those who need further clarification, this is the movie where Rose McGowan replaces her severed right leg with that unbelievably awesome (and seemingly ammo-independent) machine gun. If you're looking for

something more than that in the way of story, don't hold your breath. "Terror" throws everything from zombies to soldiers to car chases and scary machines your way, but it doesn't really concern itself with any kind of lucid plot. In fact, it's little more than a mess of images and ideas cobbled together in the name of kicking rear and taking names. That's part of the "Grindhouse" appeal, of course. And as messes go, "Terror" at least manages to be a fun one _ once. Once the novelty wears off, there's little reason to go back and see it again, which isn't something that so easily can be said of Tarantino's contribution to the twosome. Josh Brolin, Marley Shelton, Freddy Rodriguez and Naveen Andrews also star.

Extras: Director commentary, audience reaction track (brilliant!), 10-minute film school class, four behind-the-scenes features, trailer/poster gallery.

"A Mighty Heart" (R, 2007, Paramount)

"A Mighty Heart" recounts the story of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl's (Dan Futterman) 2002 kidnapping, and if you were paying attention to the news around then, you almost certainly already know what happens here. "Heart" appears to presume that you do: The saga of the kidnapping provides the backbone, but the film isn't placing the burden of storytelling on its eventual turns. Rather, the weight falls on the shoulders of a number of people who often were reduced to footnote status in the news but played immeasurably large roles beyond the surface. Chief among those characters: Daniel's wife, Mariane (Angelina Jolie). "Heart" pays immense tribute to Daniel as both a reporter and a person, but it's Jolie's portrayal of Mariane _ and the excellent supporting cast (Futterman, Archie Panjabi, Irfan Khan, Denis O'Hare and Will Patton, among others) surrounding her _ that both ignites the film and keeps it lit the whole way through. The character-first approach makes "Heart" a worthy and very respectful homage to all involved, as well as a must-see for anyone interested in discovering the stories behind this story.

Extras: Making-of feature, PSA, information about the Committee to Protect Journalists.

"Girl 27" (NR, 2007, Westlake/Red Envelope)

It would be impossible today, but in 1937, MGM tricked more than 100 underage chorus girls into attending a party for its sales staff. When one, Patricia Douglas, tried to escape, she was sexually assaulted and subsequently silenced by a legal stonewalling so effective, her ordeal remained covered up for 60 years. "Girl 27" is what happens when screenwriter and author (and now filmmaker) David Stenn accidentally stumbles upon the cover-up and follows the dominoes that fall from there. The investigation itself is a fascinating study of the combined power of corporate money and paid-for public servants. But "27" really enters some amazing territory when Stenn catches up with an elusive Douglas herself and attempts to get her talking. What's happened to her life since that night in 1937 _ and the trickle-down effect it's had on her family _ makes for a stunning illustration of the effects such a violation can have on a person. That goes as well for the power of words: Sometimes a single, simple phrase can alter someone's entire trajectory, and "27" aptly demonstrates how.

Extras: Stenn commentary, 1935 short film "Hollywood Extra Girl," photo gallery.

"Transformers: Two-Disc Special Edition" (PG-13, 2007, Dreamworks)

A live-action "Transformers" movie has been an inevitable no-brainer since the dawn of the CGI

era in filmmaking. It's downright staggering, then, that after so many years of possibilities and ruminations, this is what we get. For starters, the open 50 (yes, 50) minutes of "Transformers" have barely anything to do with Transformers. The film is crammed with paper-thin human characters whose plights couldn't be less gripping, and the plotline grows into a bloated mess about artifacts and a possible war against another superpower. Sadly, that's almost preferable to what happens when the bots take back the stage. Are you ready for Megatron to name-drop ebay or for Jazz to ask some of the humans "what's crackin'?" You'd better be, because even the coolest robots of the 20th century aren't immune from the awful dialogue that infects every Michael Bay film. The final scuffle in "Transformers" is pretty cool, and the film's CGI does look pretty cool when it isn't butchering the memory of certain character. But those small positives don't do nearly enough to wash away the bad taste left behind by a film that's boring, overlong and almost devoid of fan service for seemingly no good reason.

Extras: Director commentary, three making-of features.

"The Invisible" (PG-13, 2007, Hollywood Pictures)

"The Invisible" has a problem: Its best twist _ that its main character, Nick Powell (Justin Chatwin) is dead, even if he doesn't initially realize it _ isn't really a twist at all. The commercials and trailers gave it away, the DVD case gives it away, and pretty much every description of the film spills this bean. As such, we spend the first act of "The Invisible" waiting for the inevitable moment when (a) Nick dies and (b) Nick finally realizes he's a ghost and sets out to solve his own killing. When it happens, we can only sit there and wonder how much better the film would be if the marketing department had some means of keeping this a secret. Unfortunately, its hands were tied. Powell isn't a terribly interesting character, his killer (Margarita Levieva) fares little better, and the events surrounding his death aren't particularly engaging. Even the better-hidden second twist isn't terribly exciting _ perhaps because, by that time, "The Invisible" has revealed that it isn't terribly good. A ghost story without good characters or good thrills can experience no other fate.

Extras: Two filmmaker commentary tracks, deleted scenes, music videos.

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