

Reviews of recent and upcoming DVD releases

By Billy O'Keefe

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(MCT)**

"Murder Party" (NR, 2007, Magnet)

The Question: Can a group of art students effectively kill a person in the name of art? The answer: Probably not. Fortunately, a bumbling idiot in a hilariously awful Halloween costume has stumbled upon an "invitation" to their fake Halloween party, and the odds could not possibly be any more in their favor unless he was already dead. For those keeping score, here's what "Murder Party" offers that so many other horror films do not: one victim who is impossible not to like, seven antagonists who are more fun to watch than most movies' protagonists, a dog who's smarter than all eight of those people combined, a host of funny moments that are intended to be funny, and a good story that simply goes crazy rather than lose steam. For good measure, "Party" also includes its share of gore and painful ways to die. Really, it does it all. And among the never-ending wave of horror DVDs that have relentlessly been crashing on shelves since mid-August, this is one of the few that emerges as a must-see.

Extras: Filmmakers commentary, making-of feature, knight costume how-to (you'll understand after you see the movie), bloopers, outtakes, pumpkin bread recipe (again, you'll understand), installation video (ditto).

"Meet the Robinsons" (G, 2007, Disney)

It would be futile to explain the plot of "Meet the Robinsons" in a way that both makes acceptable sense and fits in this small space. Let's just say it involves an ingenious young orphan, a time machine, a wacky family, a really cool house, a villain with an axe to grind, some musically gifted frogs and quite a lot more. Like most computer-animated films, "Robinsons" has a lot going on in a short space of time, and there's a specific moment _ oddly enough, when we meet the Robinsons _ where it looks like the whole thing is heading off the rails into random wackyland. Fortunately, things settle down almost as quickly as they lose control, and all those crazy pieces fall into place to form into a pretty sweet story that doesn't forget to be funny. "Robinsons" isn't exactly immune to predictability, but anyone who's bothered by that is taking it too seriously. A handful of great characters _ not to mention a whole lot of eye candy _ come through whenever the story can't.

Extras: Director (and special guest) commentary, deleted scenes (with introductions), making-of feature, DVD game, inventions feature, music videos.

"Alive Day Memories: Home From Iraq" (NR, 2007, HBO)

While "Home of the Brave" unsuccessfully uses the big-budget approach to illustrate the difficulties soldiers face when returning home from Iraq, "Alive Day Memories: Home From Iraq" gets it right by going straight to the source. In "Memories," 10 soldiers sit down and open up about their experiences. Some have lost limbs, others have suffered permanent brain damage, and one in particular illustrates the trauma that haunts an enormous number of veterans who look superficially unscathed. Each has a very personal story to tell, and while "Memories" illustrates some of the accounts with footage of insurgent

attacks, it need not even bother. It's only too bad the program isn't longer than it is. The 59-minute runtime makes sense for a TV special, which "Memories" originally was, but there clearly was more said than we saw. It's unfortunate HBO didn't include some of that as bonus material, because "Memories" definitely leaves you wanting more. James Gandolfini, who executive produced, also serves as interviewer.

No extras.

"Fido" (R, 2006, Lions Gate)

Just when you thought every good zombie movie idea had been taken, along comes "Fido," which imagines a world where zombies have been defeated in a war and reprogrammed, through fancy collar technology, into the equivalent of pets and servants. Is the technology foolproof? Do you even need to ask? The fantastic premise, along with a setting that's straight out of "Leave it to Beaver," give rise to a billion and one possibilities, and to "Fido's" credit, it takes supreme advantage of the opportunity while infusing subtle but undeniable bits of modern-day social commentary into the mix. (Case in point: Carrie-Anne Moss, who plays both a 1950s-era mom and a 1990s-era mom in the span of a sentence.) Rarely will "Fido" go somewhere you don't expect it to: It knows what its gimmick is, and it proceeds to milk that gimmick eight ways from Sunday until the credits roll. Beyond a few brief slow patches, the approach works quite nicely, and it's proof that you can tell the same joke repeatedly as long as you tell it well. Billy Connolly shines as Fido, while K'Sun Ray stars as (who else?) young Timmy.

Extras: Cast/crew commentary, deleted scenes (with commentary), composer commentary, DVD-ROM "Zombie Me" game, making-of feature, production galleries.

"Mr. Brooks" (R, 2007, MGM)

Don't you wish your life was as jam-packed with activity as Earl Brooks' (Kevin Costner) is? Not only is he a wildly successful businessman and a celebrated philanthropist, but he also finds time in his busy schedule to kill seemingly random people and get away with his crimes. But being good at killing isn't the same as enjoying it, and that's the quintessential conflict in "Mr. Brooks." Had the film stayed a little truer to that conflict, we'd really have something here: Brooks is a very engaging character, and his path through the film is equal parts perverse, intellectual and silly (sometimes intentionally, sometimes not, but entertaining either way). Problem is, "Brooks" wastes a big chunk of time on a would-be foil (Demi Moore as Det. Tracy Atwood) whose boring personal issues turn her scenes into instant momentum-killers. Fortunately, the power of fast-forwarding, which eluded theatergoers, is now in your hands. With a little creative editing, a so-so two-hour movie becomes a pretty enjoyable 90-minute trip. William Hurt and Dane Cook (don't worry, he holds his own) also star.

Extras: Filmmakers commentary, deleted scenes, three behind-the-scenes features.

"Home of the Brave" (R, 2006, MGM)

What happens to soldiers who return home from Iraq, visibly wounded or not, has become an increasingly hot topic of conversation in the last couple of years. "Home of the Brave," then, deserves kudos for being the first big-budget attempt at dramatizing the issue. Unfortunately, beyond its intentions and the novelty of being first on the scene, that's really all the kudos it deserves. "Brave" certainly means well, and it's not without its moments, but the film paints the problem with such

excessively broad strokes that it eventually loses its grip on authenticity. The ironic result undermines rather than increases awareness of the issue at hand. With that mission failed _ and with an increasing wave of excellent documentaries succeeding where it can't _ "Brave" offers little other reason to keep watching. Samuel L. Jackson, Brian Presley, Jessica Biel and Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson star.

Extras: Filmmakers commentary, deleted scenes.

"Normal Adolescent Behavior: Havoc 2" (NR, 2007, New Line)

Wendy (Amber Tamblyn) and her small but mixed circle of friends avoid the hassle of dating and sleeping around by exclusively spending time (and sleeping) with each other. Sounds like a fun plan, but it's not an airtight one _ especially when Wendy falls for an outsider (Ashton Holmes) who thinks her friends are insane. In case you're wondering: Yes, that "Havoc 2" tag is as slapped-on as it looks in the title. Truth is, "Normal Adolescent Behavior" has little beyond that designation in common with the original "Havoc," which itself is known more for Anne Hathaway's nude scenes than for being a good movie. But New Line needs some kind of hook for this straight-to-video "sequel," which doesn't even have gratuitous nudity going for it. Meanwhile, Wendy's obnoxious, her friends are obnoxious, and even her mom is obnoxious. And the outsider? He actually makes those obnoxious friends look good. Only Wendy's little brother (Daryl Sabara) is worth a salt grain of interest. His reward? Not one, but two storylines that simply trail off into oblivion.

Extras: Making-of feature, character profiles.

Just the Extras: New Special Editions on DVD

_ "Saw III: Director's Cut" (NR, 2006, Lions Gate): Extended cut of film, three commentary tracks, three behind-the-scenes features, trivia game, music video, preview of "Saw IV" (don't look surprised).

_ "Hostel: Director's Cut" (NR, 2005, Sony Pictures): Extended cut of film (with optional new ending), four commentary tracks, deleted scenes, seven behind-the-scenes features, interview, TV special, photo galleries.

_ "Hollow Man: Director's Cut" (NR, 2000, Sony Pictures): Extended cut of film, "HBO Making-of" feature, 15 behind-the-scenes features, VFX comparisons.

_ "2001: A Space Odyssey: 2-Disc Special Edition" (NR, 1968, Warner Bros.): Crew commentary, behind-the-scenes documentary, three other behind-the-scenes features, Stanley Kubrick feature and interview, concept art.

_ "Eyes Wide Shut: Two-Disc Special Edition" (NR, 1999, Warner Bros.): Uncut and theatrical versions of film, scene-specific commentary, "Lost Kubrick" feature, live Kubrick footage, interviews, behind-the-scenes documentary.

_ "The Shining: 2-Disc Special Edition" (R, 1980, Warner Bros.): Crew commentary, making-of documentary (with commentary), three behind-the-scenes features.

_ "Hellraiser: 20th Anniversary Edition" (R, 1987, Anchor Bay): Cast/crew commentary, interviews, behind-the-scenes feature, promo spots, galleries, DVD-ROM screenplay.

_ "Cujo: 25th Anniversary Edition" (R, 1983, Lions Gate): Director commentary, three-part making-of feature.

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