

Reviews of recent and upcoming DVD releases

By Billy O'Keefe

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(MCT)

"Flight of the Conchords: The Complete First Season" (NR, 2007, HBO)

Where the Conchords go, a sea of raised eyebrows and cocked heads are likely to follow. That's because the tale of two New Zealand musicians (Jemaine Clement and Bret McKenzie), their manager (Rhys Darby), their stalker (Kristen Schaal) and their adventures in New York City is almost unquestionably the strangest new comedy of the year. Imagine a half hour of awkward dialogue _ in the vein of the British version of "The Office," but without the mockumentary approach _ interrupted by two or three instances of Jermaine and Bret spontaneously breaking out into song. That's how "Conchords" plays out, and it's perfectly reasonable to not even know whether you like the show or not after seeing an episode.

With time and acclimation, though, the genius of it all starts to rise to the top. "Conchords" never stops being weird, but the wall of brilliantly funny exchanges _ and the parody songs that miraculously manage to incite just as many laughs _ is harder to deny with each passing episode. Go in with an open mind, and you may come out with a new favorite show.

Contents: 12 episodes, no extras.

"Ocean's Thirteen" (PG-13, 2007, Warner Bros.)

After the bloated bore that was "Ocean's Twelve," the prospect of an even busier sequel to a sequel no one needed wasn't exactly mouthwatering. That left "Ocean's Thirteen" in a position to pleasantly surprise _ which, happily, is exactly what it does. Eschewing the endless train of Hollywood in-jokes that made its predecessor so disposable, "Thirteen" gets back to the business of heisting casinos, investing its energy in the kind of clever scheming that made "Ocean's Eleven" so much fun. Having to divide a two-plus-hour film among such a massive A-list cast (now including Al Pacino and Ellen Barkin) remains the franchise's biggest problem, but the division of labor feels much more even this time around. That means less of Clooney, Pitt and Damon than one might expect, but more of the great supporting characters (Don Cheadle, Bernie Mac, Scott Caan) who prove every bit as, if not more, valuable to keeping the entertainment flowing.

Extras: Deleted scenes, two behind-the-scenes features.

"Blame it on Fidel!" (NR, 2006, Koch Lorber)

The communist revolution in the early 1970s left sweeping, global repercussions in its wake. More acutely, though, it really screwed up a good thing for nine-year-old Anna (Nina Kervel-Bey), whose parents abandoned the comforts of modern living in order to fight on the front lines of what seemed like a good idea at the time. Given the subject matter, "Blame it on Fidel!" can't help but be (a) a period piece and (b) a film about politics. But filtering the period and politics through the timeless worldview of a nine-year-old changes

the landscape considerably, transforming just another film about the '70s into a brilliant little comedy about a kid who can't _ but valiantly attempts to _ understand why the world's needs are sometimes more important than her having to bunk with her snoring little brother (Benjamin Feuillet).

The ultimate message _ that nobody knows everything about everything _ is something anyone can get behind, and the kids' misadventures in current events education are as sneakily intelligent as they are funny.

In French with English subtitles.

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

"Stalking Santa" (NR, 2007, Excel Entertainment)

Some might classify Lloyd Darrow (Chris Clark) as unemployed. Lloyd, on the other hand, would prefer to call himself a scientist. And this Christmas season, with the support of his wife (Lisa Clark), kids and trusty intern/sidekick/doormat Clarence (Daryn Tufts), he stands determined to provide smoking-gun proof that Santa Claus exists. The deluge of mostly sub-par holiday DVDs already is in third gear, but "Stalking Santa" very possibly could (or at least deserves to) weather the storm of mediocrity and emerge as one of the few must-see releases of the season. Shot in mockumentary fashion, "Santa" takes stylistic cues from every bad expose you've ever seen about Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster and infuses them into a wonderfully funny story of one very pathetic man's pursuit of the impossible. In fact, by the time the novelty of the approach wears off, Lloyd has emerged as such a tragicomic figure that "Santa" actually improves as it progresses. The steady stream of hilarious dialogue doesn't hurt, either. William Shatner narrates, and it's hard to imagine a voice more suited for the job.

Extras: Santa artifacts feature, deleted scenes.

"Heavens Fall" (PG-13, 2006, Allumination Filmworks)

Narratively speaking, "Heavens Fall" is a paint-by-numbers telling of a true story _ in this case, a 1931 miscarriage of justice that sent nine black men to jail for crimes they never committed against two white women. Being faithful in this case is anything but a bad thing, of course, but it does make the film a hard sell. Hollywood has told variations of this story a number of times in a number of films, and not everybody has an appetite for one more. What ultimately saves "Fall" _ or at least gives it tangible value as something other than a "me too" film _ is the cast (Timothy Hutton, Anthony Mackie, Will Owens and several more) that brings the story to life. These are familiar roles with mostly predictable destinies, but the actors in their charge play them with enough vibrancy to give the material the emotion and import it deserves. That especially applies to Hutton, who demonstrates for the umpteenth time that not all actors are created anything close to equal.

Extra: Behind-the-scenes feature.

"Jerome Bixby's The Man From Earth" (NR, 2007, Anchor Bay)

Professor John Oldman (David Lee Smith) has a surprise for the handful of colleagues attending his farewell party: He's more than 14,000 years old, even if he doesn't look a day over 40, and he's witnessed countless world events his friends can only read in textbooks. Suddenly, a lame party in a cabin turns into an interrogation as his friends scramble to

figure out whether he's legit or legitimately crazy. And that's what "The Man From Earth" mostly is: a heated conversation inside a cabin, captured on video. While gifted with a great concept and some smart interplay, "Earth" can't help but lose its grip on our suspension of disbelief. The exchanges following John's reveal manage to engage for a while, but once John starts talking about the experiences he claims to have had, it basically turns into a campfire story. That's still enough to rattle the mostly unlikable friends who live in his reality. We, however, remain stuck on the outside, fully aware that "Earth" is a work of fiction and that Oldman's story is an inconsequential product of someone else's imagination. Once immersion is lost, intrigue isn't far behind.

Extras: Two commentary tracks, four behind-the-scenes features.

"Endgame: Blueprint for Global Enslavement" (NR, 2007, Disinformation Co.)

Hope you're sitting down, because filmmaker Alex "TerrorStorm" Jones has some bad news for you. Apparently, a secret group of elites known as the Bilderberg Group meets annually to flex its ultimate plan of merging all world governments into one, reducing the human population by 80 percent and enslaving whatever remains inside walled super-cities. Fortunately, hope need not be lost just yet, because while "Endgame" talks a big game, it never manages to provide any satisfactory link between public knowledge of the not-so-secret group and the wild claims about its intentions. Instead, Jones fills the bloated 140-minute piece with unsubstantiated and insultingly misleading claims about past and current events that often are contradicted by the material he himself flashes ever so quickly past the screen. (Thank goodness for pause buttons.)

Coupled with scenes in which Jones plays a revolutionary but looks instead like a kook with an axe to grind, "Endgame" ends up providing more unintentional entertainment value than anything else. That's probably the last thing Jones wanted, but by his own hand, it's all he deserves.

Extras: More footage, music performance.

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

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