

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Not all DVDs are created equal. The hunt for better image, sound, extras and language options can span the globe

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Think you own a lot of DVDs? Gary Tooze shares his Mississauga, Ont. home with 4,000 DVDs—a third of them international — and offers comparisons of about 1,000 on his website, www.DVDBeaver.com.

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Foreign affairs: Not all DVDs are created equal

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JEFF HEINRICH, The Gazette

Published: Saturday, December 09, 2006

A couple of years ago, Vincent Legendre got tired of watching DVDs in English.

He likes classic horror movies like Dracula and Night of the Living Dead, and wanted to hear them dubbed in French.

Trouble was, the versions sold on DVD in Canada were only in English, with French subtitles.

So Legendre went shopping abroad, online.

"You go on the Internet and you can find French-language dubs, no problem - you just have to order them from France," said Legendre, 31, a Beauport bookstore owner.

He's one of a growing number of film collectors who are looking outside North America for their DVD fix.

The advantages are many, aficionados say. They can find films that have gone out of print here, get better-quality transfers with better extras, find the language they like and get better prices.

The only impediment: the region-coding system designed by major studios and DVD-player manufacturers to make foreign DVDs unplayable here. But there's an easy way around that.

All it takes is a DVD player that can play all regions. Once quite costly, they're now available new for as little as \$30 at chains like Best Buy and La Source (Circuit City). Better yet, at no cost at all and in a matter of seconds, people can hack their own player to play DVDs regardless of their origin.

It's something the big studios and distributors frown on. Coupled with downloading and pirating, buying from foreign websites is cutting into their sales.

DVD and videocassette wholesalers posted \$1.8 billion in revenues in 2004-2005, no more than in 2003-2004, a Statistics Canada survey found last August. Meanwhile, online sales are on the rise. Another StatsCan study shows that in 2005, Canadians placed almost 50 million orders for goods and services online, totalling \$7.9 billion - and 13 per cent bought DVDs.

And with 87 per cent of Canadian families now owning DVD players, the potential for DVD sales from foreign markets is growing, too.

To stem the tide, North American DVD producers make a point to keep releasing world cinema titles here. Sony Pictures Classics and Miramax, as well as smaller, respected players like Criterion and First Run Features, all sell foreign films.

So do specialty distributors in Canada like Toronto's Mongrel Media and Montreal's Christal Films, which dubs U.S. hits like Crash into French.

But collectors can't wait. They're looking further afield than their local video store.

Ottawa magazine-store clerk Pat Pilon became a fan of Asian cinema after teaching English in South Korea for two years. By looking outside Canada for his favourite titles, Pilon has kept his passion alive.

Recently, he got his hands on a new Hong Kong fantasy horror flick that's unavailable here. It's called Gwai wik (Re-Cycle), by the Pang Brothers.

"It's great, it's amazing," said Pilon, 26, who reviews films for Rewind and Worldwide DVD Forums, two British websites.

"But of course if it's released in the U.S. at all, it'll take at least two or three years. And that's a long time to wait."

Foreign production companies are eager to feed the need.



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"There is interest in our titles from North America, thanks largely to Internet retailers who have made it relatively easy to obtain international DVDs," said Steve Lewis, DVD manager for Artificial Eye, a respected U.K. production company.

"DVD comparison and review sites have made buyers more discerning about the versions they buy," he said. "Enthusiasts often take the trouble to check which edition offers the optimum quality or the most comprehensive extra features. And they'll order that version, no matter which country it's released in."

When Montreal DVD distributor Rejean Page couldn't find a French-dub here of the hit TV series 24, he ordered it from Amazon in France. Same for Lost: "You can only get Season 1 in French - the rest was never done," said Page, a buyer for Videoglobe 1 Inc., in St. Laurent.

Aside from Warner Bros., no major U.S. studio takes the trouble and expense to dub TV series and movies into French in Quebec, Page said.

And even when made-in-Quebec dubs do exist -

like the French audio version of the original Star Trek TV series, recorded in Montreal in the 1970s - you can only get them on DVDs from France or Belgium.

Collectors enjoy the hunt, though, and tracking down films unavailable here is part of the fun.

Movies that have long been out-of-print are high on their wish lists. Filling the need are small upstarts like Second Run, in England, which has won rave reviews for its all-region transfers of eastern European titles like Konkurs, Milos Forman's first film; and Passenger, the Andrzej Munk classic.

Some films simply look better and have better extras in foreign versions, like the new special-edition release by Studio Canal and Optimum of Don't Look Now, the 1973 Anglo-Italian thriller set in Venice.

Other films are prized for not being censored. In the U.S., Stanley Kubrick's Eyes Wide Shut had its 65-second orgy scene digitally altered to qualify for an NC-17 rating. In the U.K. and France, the scene is left intact.

Some purists take issue with the audio on foreign DVDs: it can sound slightly sped up, with the pitch of voices higher and the music a bit up-tempo. That's because many DVDs made outside the Americas - in Europe, Hong Kong and elsewhere - are recorded in a video format called PAL, which plays four per cent faster. But most people don't notice the difference.

The bottom line?

Unlimited choice is a lot better than no choice, said Gary Tooze, founder of DVDBeaver, one of the best international DVD websites.

Tooze, 44, remembers what home viewing was like before the advent of DVDs. Growing up in Toronto, he'd lug a projector and spools of 35-millimetre prints home from the public library. It was the only way to see old favourites like The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.

In the 1980s, Tooze started buying laserdiscs, and in the 1990s he got into the first DVDs. The new media opened up a new world of foreign films to him, and he started a website and listserv for fellow enthusiasts. Five years ago, nagged by a friend, he finally bought an all-region DVD player, allowing him to review DVDs manufactured outside North America.

In the basement of his Mississauga, Ont. home, Tooze has more than 4,000 DVDs, and on his website he offers comparisons of about 1,000 of them. About one-third of the films are manufactured abroad.

Other sites like DVD Compare (in the U.K.), DVD Aficionado (in the U.S.) and DVD-Basen (in the Netherlands) also provide detailed comparisons. DVDBeaver's strength is screen captures. Tooze takes DVDs of the same film from different manufacturers, isolates specific frames from each one, and displays them side by side so viewers can see for themselves which is better.

The production differences are sometimes so pronounced, a foreign buy is a must. Who would have known, for example, that the U.S. Columbia-TriStar release of *The Scent of Green Papaya*, the French-Vietnamese classic of 1993, looks like mush compared with the same film transferred to DVD in France by Gaumont?

The reasons for quality differences are many: what state the print of the original film was in, whether it was restored before transfer to DVD, what digital bitrate the transfer was done at (the higher the better), whether the digital image was then cleaned up to remove dirt, stains and scratches, whether the film is displayed at the original aspect ratio or is cropped, and whether the original audio has been cleaned up by remastering. For foreign-language films, accurate subtitles are important, too.

Truly passionate film fans pay attention to all those things. And by going outside North America, "they're expanding their entertainment potential to the maximum," Tooze said.

"I'm going to have my DVDs for the rest of my life," he added. "So are most people. Their DVDs are going to last longer than the equipment they're watching them on."

All the more reason to buy the best, wherever the best may be.

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