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New DVD's

By DAVE KEHR

Whirlpool

The centerpiece in the three latest releases in Fox Home Entertainment's outstanding Fox Film Noir series is Otto Preminger's 1949 "[Whirlpool](#)," one of Preminger's finest achievements and a master class in how a great director can completely transform a rickety script.

Adapted by the screenwriters Ben Hecht and Andrew Solt from a forgotten novel by Guy Endore, "Whirlpool" is full of creaky plot devices, including self-hypnotism, amnesia and an absurdly complicated murder mystery. Ostensibly, it tells the story of a Los Angeles society woman, Ann Sutton (the beautiful, tortured [Gene Tierney](#)) who falls into the clutches of the crooked astrologer Korvo (José Ferrer) when he observes her shoplifting in a Wilshire Boulevard department store. Following the fashionable Freudianism of the time (of which Hecht was a major proponent), Ann's thievery is framed as an unconscious revolt against her perfect, loving husband, a prominent psychiatrist ([Richard Conte](#)).

Dr. Sutton may worship his wife, but at the same time he is suffocating her. Beginning with a series of rapid camera movements in the Wilshire store that link Tierney to the other merchandise on display, Preminger suggests that she has become just another object to her professionally sensitive husband, and that the seductive, dastardly Korvo actually comprehends her disappointments and desires better than anyone. Suspended between two kinds of love - distant idealization and intimate understanding - Tierney's character tears herself apart. With his restlessly moving camera, Preminger draws the emotional essence from the mechanical plotting, and a result is a dark and ambiguous exploration of an issue that would seldom again be raised in American films before the feminist surge of the 1970's.

Fox has done a marvelous job with the transfer of this gem, providing a razor-sharp image with appropriate grain and excellent contrast - terms that also apply to the two other releases in this batch, Henry Hathaway's newsreel-style spy thriller "[The House on 92nd Street](#)" (1945), and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's convoluted "[Somewhere in the Night](#)" (1946). Mankiewicz, one of Fox's greatest assets ("[All About Eve](#)"), is not quite at home with the material (amnesia again, with John Hodiak as a returning soldier who suspects he may have been a murderer in the previous life he no longer remembers). But the film snaps to life with a pair of the marvelous scoundrels in which Mankiewicz specialized: Fritz Kortner, a noted actor of the Weimar era, as a phony medium and Margo Woode as a brassy femme fatale. The discs are priced at \$14.98 each; none have been rated.

To Kill a Mockingbird

It has been only three years since Universal's last "collector's edition" of the enduring chestnut "[To Kill a Mockingbird](#)" (1962), but here it is again in a lavish double-disc set paired with "A Conversation With [Gregory Peck](#)," [Barbara Kopple's](#) feature-length interview with the film's Oscar-winning star. The transfer doesn't seem to have been updated - it's still quite dark and a little soft - and the other extras are familiar, including Charles Kiselyak's sensitive, respectful documentary on the film's background and making, "Fearful Symmetry" (1998) and the voice-over commentary recorded by the film's director, Robert Mulligan, and producer, Alan J. Pakula. But those who value this nostalgic evocation of tough-love parenthood and small-town values will find this set a worthy object of devotion. Universal Studios Home Entertainment is also issuing upgraded editions of two other library titles today - George Roy Hill's multiple Oscar winner, "[The Sting](#)" (1973) , in a new widescreen transfer, and [Michael Cimino's](#) "Deer Hunter" (1978), now with a surround soundtrack. The discs are \$26.98 each; "Mockingbird" was not rated, but "The Sting" is PG and "[The Deer Hunter](#)" is R.

Two by Maurice Tourneur

Just enough of the director Maurice Tourneur's early work survives to suggest that he played an important part in the early evolution of film. Where many pioneer filmmakers either came from technical backgrounds or the stage, the French-born Tourneur had been trained in drawing and design and worked as a book illustrator and, briefly, as an assistant to Rodin before entering movies in 1911. His work, not surprisingly, has a polished visual quality not apparent in his more rough-and-ready contemporaries. His compositions are carefully arranged in depth, and his lighting is fully dimensional and dramatic - not that far removed from the style the Germans would label Expressionism a few years later.

Kino on Video is releasing two Tourneur silents today. "[The Blue Bird](#)" (1918) is a ravishing adaptation of the Maurice Maeterlinck children's fantasy (the one that gave us "the blue bird of happiness"), presented in the stunning, fully tinted print preserved by the George Eastman House. "[Lorna Doone](#)" (1922) is an adaptation of the popular Victorian romance by R. D. Blackmore. Both are worth exploring, but Tourneur's talent is most spectacularly on display in the first, where, aided by the pioneer art director Ben Carré, Tourneur creates an Art Nouveau fantasyland that has reminded more than one commentator of MGM's "Wizard of Oz," though with an even odder cast of characters (including the Spirits of Milk and Sugar). At times, Tourneur seems to be consciously imitating the popular illustrators of his day, like N. C. Wyeth and Maxfield Parrish, with images that seem painted as much as photographed. The discs are \$29.95 each; neither has been rated.

The Miracle of Morgan's Creek

Gary Tooze, editor of the invaluable news and review site [dvdbeaver.com](#), has described Paramount Home Video's DVD release of "[The Miracle of Morgan's Creek](#)" as "easily the biggest no-brainer purchase of the year," and one can only concur. Here is one of the comic masterpieces of the American cinema - [Preston Sturges's](#) amiably blasphemous 1944 update of the Nativity story to a small town in postwar America - presented in a superb print for the highly reasonable list price of \$14.99. [Betty Hutton](#) is Trudy Kockenlocker, the local beauty who returns from a dimly remembered night on the town, with a soldier whose name may or may not have been Ignatz Ratzkywatzky, in an inconvenient (and at that time, highly censorable) family way. Eddie Bracken is the unassuming boyfriend who heroically steps forward to save her reputation, and ends up a national hero. So just buy it already. Not rated.