

DVD Select: Evil cyber crooks just can't hack it against John McClane

by Robert_J_Hawkins

When it comes to knocking heads, killing bad guys and jumping from speeding vehicles, supercop John McClane (Bruce Willis) is in his element. Maybe it is a tactile thing - the need to feel (and inflict) pain.

'LIVE FREE OR DIE HARD' - Bruce Willis finds himself up against cyber crooks bent on destroying the Internet in the action movie 'Live Free or Die Hard.' CNS Photo courtesy of Frank Masi. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin In the latest McClane sequel, "Live Free or Die Hard" (Fox Home Entertainment, 3 1/2 stars), he is in a completely foreign element: the Internet.

Well, technically not "in" the Internet. The most complicated technology in McClane's hands would be a cell phone and a service revolver. The Internet is in the hands of evil genius Thomas Gabriel (a delightfully heartless Timothy Olyphant) and his chillingly efficient sidekick Mai Lihn (Maggie Q). Gabriel has recruited a crew of amoral hackers to steal entry codes into key national infrastructure - power grids, transportation and communication systems, public safety and enforcement agencies.

Their intent is to create widespread chaos while they drain every bank account in the nation of funds. (Plot hole No. 1: If you are the only person in the country with money, wouldn't you be conspicuous? And where would you park all those funds that wouldn't be noticeable?)

McClane spends a good deal of his time keeping alive one of the hackers, Matthew Farrell (a nicely dweebish Justin Long). Gabriel's hired guns are out to kill him.

Farrell and McClane develop a terrific on-screen relationship - brains and brawn. Farrell's hacking skills are a means to McClane's end - which is, get to the bad guys and kill them before too much of his own blood is lost and too many of his bones are broken. McClane's single-minded pursuit grows even more focused after they kidnap his estranged daughter Lucy (Mary Elizabeth Winstead), who, it turns out, has quite a bit of John McClane's trademark bullheadedness in her.

The chases, the fights, the crashes are all spectacular - launching a cop car into a lead-spewing helicopter, a military jet taking out a tractor-trailer and a half-mile of overhead freeway, McClane's fight to the finish with Mai Lihn. These are why we watch "Die Hard" movies, and this one totally gets that.

This is not a film you want to think about too hard or watch too closely - the goofs list on imdb.com is one of the longest I've ever seen. And the plot holes are huge. This movie goes best with a dark beer and popcorn and lots of friends to share the laughs.

Screening notes: On the DVD, Fox is offering a digital copy of the film that you can copy to your laptop. The DVD comes in three configurations - single DVD wide screen (unrated) or full screen (rated) and an unrated double-disc version. I watched the unrated version, which I highly recommend, although I'm at a loss to explain why it is unrated and not a fairly mild R. The other is PG-13.

The double-disc version also has a "Conversation with Bruce Willis and Kevin Smith" - the latter plays a mythical hacker named Warlock - and a lengthy making-of feature.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Rescue Dawn" (MGM, 2 1/2 stars) Based loosely - very loosely, it seems - on the real-life escape from a prison camp during the Vietnam War by Navy pilot Dieter Dengler (Christian Bale). Werner Herzog has directed a film dripping with authenticity and harrowing moments. What apparently he didn't get right is the portrayal of Gene DeBruin (Jeremy Davies), according to the late DeBruin's family, which has set up a Web site, www.rescuedawnthetruth.com, to air its discontent. Their argument is if you are promoting a film as based on historical fact, stay close to the facts. (Are you listening, Ron Howard?)

If you want harrowing truth inspired by fiction, this week sees the release of the 1991 documentary "Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse." It is the story of the film that almost killed writer-director-producer Francis Ford Coppola, among others. An amazing story about the making of an amazing fictional movie, "Apocalypse Now."

"Hairspray" (New Line, 3 stars) This musical update of the classic John Waters film and the recent Broadway musical about a star-struck teenager trying to get a shot on the local Baltimore TV dance show was a summertime, \$100 million box-office hit. Who wouldn't pay that kind of money to see John Travolta in hefty drag? Alan Shankman directed and choreographed a superb cast, including Travolta, Michelle Pfeiffer, Queen Latifah, Christopher Walken, Amanda Bynes, Zac Efron, Brittany Snow, James Marsden, Elijah Kelley, Allison Janney and newcomer Nikki Blonsky.

"Santa Clause 3: The Escape Clause" (Buena Vista, 2 1/2 stars) So, what's a little shameless seasonal pandering and treacly storytelling among family? As the third film in the "Clause" franchise, Tim Allen (as Santa and marketing wiz Scott Calvin) may have gone to the Pole once too often for discerning moviegoers, but for kids and their frazzled parents, this is a nice holiday bon-bon. This time Santa has to juggle difficult in-laws (Ann-Margret and Alan Arkin) as well as the sinister machinations of Jack Frost (maniacal Martin Short). And get all the stuff out for Christmas. (Note the late Peter Boyle as Father Time.)

"Angel-A" (Sony, 2 stars) A French fable from Luc Besson in charming black and white - or maybe it is the lush Parisian backdrop that is so charming. The story, not so charming. Jamel Debbouze (the market clerk in "Amelie") plays Andre, an earnest hustler who is deep in debt to mob types. While contemplating jumping from a bridge into the Seine, a leggy platinum blonde beats him to it. He rescues her and - shades of "It's a Wonderful Life" - she's an angel, named Angel-A (Rie Rasmussen). Her techniques would make Clarence blanch and turn George Bailey into a stammering idiot. There is curious chemistry between these two. Give the movie some time to unfold, don't rush to judgment. Things happen that change your perspective.

"Beat the Drum" (Genius Products, 3 stars) A young South African boy, Musa (Junior Singo), is orphaned after the AIDS epidemic kills his family and devastates his village. Taking the drum given to him by his father, Musa sets out alone for the big city of Johannesburg, where an uncle lives. His mission is to find work and buy his aging grandmother a cow, but he learns of the devastating nature of the AIDS/HIV epidemic and brings back to his village knowledge that is far more valuable. The David McBrayer-written and David Hickson-directed story is deftly told and young Junior Singo has earned strong accolades for his performance. "Beat the Drum" has made the festival circuit and aired on Showtime.

"RFK Must Die: The Assassination of Bobby Kennedy" (Dokument Films) Shane O'Sullivan's unsettling documentary, based on his three-year investigation and reports he made for "BBC Newsnight" and The Guardian newspaper, claims evidence that links the CIA to the 1968 assassination of the presidential candidate and that Sirhan Sirhan was not the lone gunman.

"The Ritchie Boys" (Docurama Films) A small group of German Jews who escaped the persecution of the Nazis returned to Europe in uniform as American soldiers during World War II. They were able to use their native language, intelligence and cultural knowledge to wage extremely effective psychological warfare against the enemy. They were trained for their unique form of battle at Camp Ritchie in Maryland - and thus the name. The documentary contains interviews with many of the surviving "Ritchie Boys."

While you wait for the eagerly anticipated theatrical debut of the fantasy-quest epic "The Golden Compass," Koch Vision introduces a nice backgrounder DVD on the author of the "His Dark Materials" trilogy, from which "Compass" is adapted: "Beyond the Golden Compass: The Magic of Philip Pullman." The video purports to unlock the secret codes and symbols that Pullman imbeds in his literature. It also includes an interview with Pullman and footage from the sets of "Compass," which will be the first of three films.

And the rest: Comic Katt Williams sets off for Hollywood to become a star, only to find that the role suited for him is suiting up for a penguin movie, in "Katt Williams: American Hustle" (Salient Media); outside of San Francisco is a town with more tombstones than living people and somebody made a musical about it, "Colma: The Musical"; animated feature about everyone's favorite cat, "Garfield Gets Real"; and finally, a documentary about the affection for a 50-year-old typeface, "Helvetica."

IT CAME FROM TV

Mega-set of the week: Season one of the original "Star Trek" series, remastered in high definition from the original film negative with new digital effects and 5.1 soundtrack. The dual-sided discs can be viewed in either traditional DVD or HD-DVD formats. Those watching in HD can click on icons to pull up minifeatures, videos and commentaries - including a virtual tour of the Starship Enterprise. Both versions include a treasure chest of bonus features. Additionally, the signature opening theme music has been re-recorded and William Shatner's 38-word opening monologue ("Space, the final frontier ...") has been digitally remastered. The 10-disc set comes in a futuristic plastic canister.

More and amore: First season, volume one, of the romantic comedy series "Love, American Style" contains 12 hour-long episodes on three discs. Each episode contained two to four vignettes exploring variations on the theme of love, each filled with celebrity guest stars. The series ran from 1969 to 1974. Also: third seasons of "Mission Impossible" and "Wild Wild West"; seventh season of "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation."

FROM THE VAULTS

"Hudson Hawk: Special Edition" (Sony, 1991) Bruce Willis plays cat burglar extraordinaire Eddie (Hudson Hawk) Hawkins - um, yeah, no relation - tasked with stealing three Leonardo Da Vinci masterpieces in order to save his pal Tommy Five-Tone (Danny Aiello). The two sing a lot of duets while going about their globe-trotting business, and the ever-alluring Andie MacDowell shows up as a Vatican art restoration specialist. Willis wrote the script.

"The Song Remains the Same" (Warner Home Video) arrives in a new edition and for the first time contains all 14 songs from the original 1973 Led Zeppelin concerts at Madison Square Garden. The DVD (in SD, HD DVD and Blu-ray formats) features newly remixed and remastered sound, and more than 40 minutes of bonus material, including never-before-released performance footage; a 1976 BBC interview with Robert Plant and Peter Grant; TV footage from the Drake Hotel robbery during the New York concert stand; and a Cameron Crowe radio show.

"It's A Wonderful Life" (Paramount) Yes, the first sign of the holiday season is the re-release of this Frank Capra classic - only this time it comes in both the original black and white and a newly colorized version in the same package. Two features are included, a making-of narrative and a remembrance by Capra's son, Frank Jr.

"Monty Python's Life of Brian: The Immaculate Edition" (Sony, 1979) The classic Monty Python Biblical satire includes a newly discovered recording of the first full-length read-through of the script; a new, hour-long documentary, "The Story of Brian"; five deleted scenes; newly illustrated radio spots promoting the theatrical release; and audio commentaries with Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle and Terry Jones, as well as John Cleese and Michael Palin.

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