

DVD Select: Still on the trail of 'Zodiac'

by Robert_J_Hawkins

Given Hollywood's affection for neat and happy - or at least conclusive - endings, it is a wonder that "Zodiac" (Paramount, 3 stars) got made at all.

'ZODIAC' - Jake Gyllenhaal and Robert Downey Jr. star in the crime drama 'Zodiac.' CNS Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures. 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 The Zodiac killer enthralled San Francisco in the late 1960s and early '70s. Five people were brutally murdered, a sixth survived. The killer was never caught, despite taunting clues left behind and an obsessive pursuit by local cops and newspaper staffers.

Just the same, the movie, through some of the very real characters portrayed, fingers one suspect as the killer, Arthur Leigh Allen (played by John Carroll Lynch). In a morbidly bizarre twist, Allen suffered a fatal heart attack just before he was to be brought in for questioning.

While certain police and reporters were obsessed with finding the killer, they hardly seem to hold much over

the filmmakers. In the DVD special features, a portrait is drawn of a crew that takes attention to detail well beyond the norm.

Writer James Vanderbilt and producer Brad Fischer talk about taking nearly three years to research the events, even though they had the rights to the definitive account written by San Francisco Chronicle cartoonist Robert Graysmith (Jake Gyllenhaal). A lot of their interviews with police involved in the individual murder cases are included on the DVD set's second disc.

Locations were painstakingly re-created - trees were airlifted into place on a barren peninsula, a San Francisco intersection was re-created on a Los Angeles studio lot, the entire 1960s era newsroom of the Chronicle was rebuilt and outfitted with reconstructed newspapers from that time. The clothing of victims was re-created down to the last stitch from police photos.

At some point director David Fincher ("Seven," "Fight Club") joined the research team. And his obsession for detail seems to have made others seem like slackers. In the DVD extras, we watch Gyllenhaal toss a sketchbook down on his car seat 36 times until Fincher is satisfied. The re-created newspapers weren't just cover pages - every page was reconstructed in each paper. On a hood worn by the killer, Fincher ordered the eye slits be adjusted by a single line of thread - as if that somehow affected the outcome of the scene.

Obsessive? Certainly. Eccentric? Perhaps. But without a doubt, Fincher's approach to a difficult story works. You can almost forget that despite all the bustle, there is no definitive Zodiac killer, even today.

The first 45 minutes of the movie includes the killings, in uncomfortably accurate detail. From then on, though, it changes focus to the living souls whose lives were, in some cases, destroyed. In other cases, completely upended for years.

There is the cartoonist Graysmith, whose obsessions destroyed his family and home life. He divorced and for a long time was alienated from his children.

Others included detective David Toschi (Mark Ruffalo) who was the model for star characters in "Bullitt" and "Dirty Harry" and his partner William Armstrong (Anthony Edwards); and investigative reporter Paul Avery (Robert Downey Jr.).

This band of crime solvers collects data, makes connections, and chases one false lead after another. It is a study in pre-CSI sleuthing and the ultimate frustration at the true limits of detective work. And yet, the viewer can't turn away - even if you are well aware of the outcome.

It is as if Fincher created this movie not so much as an account of a real-life series of tragic events but more as a working investigative document that will lie there as Exhibit A until a savvier sleuth can finally conclude who dunnit.

Indeed costume designer Casey Storm says that many crew members "thought that the case would be solved in the course of filming."

Well, it ain't over yet.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"3:10 to Yuma" (Lionsgate, 3 stars) Never has catching a train been so suspenseful. In this remake of a 50-year-old classic (from an Elmore Leonard story), director James Mangold has done the unexpected: Made a film that is every bit the equal of the original. And better in technical terms. Russell Crowe plays the arrogant outlaw leader Ben Wade (Glenn Ford in the original), captured by the law and due to take the 3:10 to his appointment with justice. Christian Bale is Dan Evans, the simple farmer who is hired to make sure he makes the train. The role was played by Van Heflin in the original. Standing between Evans and Wade and the train

is a gang of vicious outlaws. For Evans though, the distance includes conquering cowardice, embracing his destiny and earning the respect of his son. The original 1957 film was recently released by Sony and holds up extremely well. The remake includes audio commentary from director Mangold; a making-of documentary; deleted scenes and a pair of features which look at the movies and cowboy mythology.

"Forget About It" (Allumination Filmworks, not reviewed) I keep looking at the cast - Burt Reynolds, Raquel Welch, Charles Durning and Robert Loggia - and I think this must be something from the vaults, say, the "Smokey and the Bandit" era. But no. Reynolds and his pals have made a comedy about three old guys in a trailer park outside of Phoenix who find a pile of mob money and a boatload of trouble. And I'm thinking, "Oh, my, god. All that's missing is Phyllis Diller." But then I see, Phyllis Diller is listed in the supporting cast, along with Richard Grieco.

"Boogeyman 2" (Sony, not reviewed) So this girl (Danielle Savre) has a lifelong phobia about boogeymen - so she checks herself into a mental institution. And, like, you and I know - where do boogeymen prefer to hang out, when given a choice? Right. Mental institutions. It is like a fact in the horror movie bible. This is what she gets for not reading and having starred in a "Bring It On" sequel. Tobin "Saw" Bell is still doing what he knows best.

"Death Sentence" (Fox, 2 stars) Speaking of "Saw," director James Wan now tackles the violent vigilante/revenge genre. Kevin Bacon is a quiet family guy who sees his oldest son murdered by gangland punks. Impatient with the justice system (say, this is a Fox media presentation) he extracts his own revenge on the kid brother of the gang leader. Certainly it doesn't end there. It never does. Much blood is spilled, and if that is your thing - there's no point in telling you to get a life - you'll go gooey over the 15-minute finale.

"Dragon Wars (D-War)" (Sony, 1 star) Your first clue is when a studio can't decide which title to use, so it uses both. Based on Korean legend in which two dragons - good and evil - arise every 500 years and battle for control of Earth. All that is asked is the simple sacrifice of a female to the good dragon to give it the power it needs to win. But, nooo. Her knight-protector has to fall in love with her and so they jump off a cliff together. Fast forward 500 years to modern day Los Angeles and the dragons are stirring. The lovers are reincarnated as really good looking Los Angelinos (Jason Behr and Amanda Brooks). As reincarnation/dragon fighting movies go, this one really tanks. Young kids and really dumb adults will enjoy all the CGI battle stuff. Nose breathers will be annoyed at the low acting skills, turgid dialogue and dragon-sized plot holes.

Also rans: John Malkovich portrays the unstable but talented artist in the critically assailed "Klimt"; an adorably klutzy Jessica Alba and oft-undressed Dane Cook aren't enough to salvage the nearly joke-free romantic comedy "Good Luck Chuck"; spawn turns evil upon the birth of a little sister in "Joshua"; big-city girl inherits her late-sister's Amish kids in "Saving Sarah Cain"; Nathan Fillion returns from near-death to find he possesses inexplicable supernatural insight in the sequel "White Noise 2: The Light"; and astronauts must jumpstart the sun's solar power in the Danny Boyle-directed "Sunshine."

IT CAME FROM TV

In "The Riches" (Fox, season 1), the Malloy family is like any other upper-middleclass clan living the American Dream inside a pristine gated community - except that up until now, they have made their way by grifting and scamming the pants off unsuspecting marks. Eddie Izzard and Minnie Driver play the Malloy's, parents of three kids who sometimes reluctantly support their schemes.

Once around the dial: Season One of "The Naked Brothers Band" from Nickelodeon; themed episodes from the Animal Planet series "Growing Up Arctic"; MTV's "Rob & Big" season 3; Season 2 of "Two and a Half Men." Also, season two, volume one of the classic "Gunsmoke."

FROM THE VAULTS

Warner Brothers is cleaning out the shelves in the old vault this week with a handful of DVD debuts from prominent directors. In "Personal Best" (1982) Robert Towne directs Mariel Hemingway and Patrice Donnelly as a pair of Olympian track stars and lesbian lovers who turn into rivals. Lee Grant debuted as director of "Tell Me a Riddle" (1980), a tale of rekindling love. Alan Arkin was nominated for an Oscar as John Singer in "The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter" (1968), directed by Robert Ellis Miller. In the Daryl Duke-directed "Payday" (1972) Rip Torn is a semi-successful and unscrupulous country singer (who sings songs written by Shel Silverstein). From a Terrence McNally script, Richard Lester directs the screwball comedy "The Ritz" (1976) about a wanted man hiding out in a gay bathhouse.

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