DVD Select: All together now, Beatles-based musical is superb, trippy

by Robert_J_Hawkins

I've been trying to articulate just how I feel about Julie Taymor's Beatles-based musical "Across the Universe" (Sony, 4 stars). My first feeling after watching the movie was: "If I'd known there would be a Julie Taymor, I would have pursued a career in movies just so I could one day work with her.

'ACROSS THE UNIVERSE' - Jim Sturgess, left, and Evan Rachel Wood lead a hip ensemble in the Beatles-based musical 'Across the Universe.' CNS Photo courtesy of Sony 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 But that's foolish. I'm too old to switch careers now.

So I've got to go with the title of a discussion thread for the movie on the Web site Internet Movie Database (imdb.com): "I would pay money to be an extra in a Taymor sequel."

That about sums it up.

Almost.

A few forum threads down the list is this one: "Possibility of 'Across the Universe 2,' says Taymor." (The director told E!'s Mark Malkin, "I only used, like, 33 (Beatles) songs. I think there's about 200, so there's so much more I can do and work with.")

So, yeah, I'm going to start saving my money.

Taymor is a director with an infinitely fabulous imagination who seems to naturally attract devoted and creative people. "Across the Universe" is just a mind-blowingly beautiful movie.

Never mind that I grew up with the Beatles and even recognized some of the papier-mache figures in the anti-war marches (or their distant uncles), "Universe" is a robustly entertaining movie with a powerful story inspired by one of the most fab periods in our cultural history: the 1960s.

Taymor stitched together 33 well-known Beatles tunes beneath the story of a Liverpool ship welder named Jude (unknown Jim Sturgess, a scruffy Paul McCartney look-alike) who travels to the United States to find the ex-GI father he never knew. Jude melds into a classic '60s "family" that includes college dropout Max (Joe Anderson), fiery blues-rocker Sadie (Dana Fuchs), Jimi Hendrix-like guitarist Jojo (Martin Luther) and runaway waif Prudence (T.V. Carpio).

Jude's heart, and ours, eventually tumbles for Max's younger sister, Lucy (Evan Rachel Wood).

New York City in the 1960s was a heady time of endless possibilities, passion and joyously impoverished communal living with the ever-present specter of the Vietnam War. Psychedelia and Army green, side by side.

They run into a counterculture Ken Kesey-like character named Dr. Robert (Bono) who takes them on his hippie bus for a magical mystery tour to the estate of his East Coast counterpart (Timothy Leary, no doubt). They end up at a trippy circus in a field as the guests of the maestro named, naturally, Mr. Kite (Eddie Izzard).

In the midst of all this, college dropout Max is drafted and sent off to Vietnam from which he comes back a bit of a mess. Yeah, there's a bit of the musical "Hair" in all this, too.

"Across the Universe" is more than a brightly played museum piece. The music, for one, may be Beatles songbook but the arraignments and voices are stunningly fresh. In most instances, music producer Elliot Goldenthal stripped the songs down to minimal essence before turning them over to the young cast, some of whom never sang before.

The result is fresh, alive - Beatles music as you've never heard it before.

Bono and Izzard are only two cameos to watch for. Salma Hayek, plays a nurse (well, six nurses) in the military hospital ward where Max recuperates. Joe Cocker, a venerable interpreter of Beatles songs, is seen singing in three cameos.

The DVD includes extended musical performances and deleted scenes as well as a handful of short features on the creation of the movie. The only thing I haven't done yet is turn on the commentary track by Taymor and Goldenthal (artistic and life partners). I'll be doing that momentarily.

ALSO THIS WEEK

We are getting so close to Valentine's Day you can almost feel it in the incredible number or romances being unleashed on the DVD audience, this week and next.

"2 Days in Paris" (Fox, 3 stars) A romantic comedy that actually challenges viewers to reflect? That sounds so French. But of course. It is directed by the French actress Julie Delpy. Wait, it was written by Delpy, too. And, yes, that is Delpy in the starring role as Marion, making a last stop in her hometown of Paris with boyfriend, Jack (Adam Goldberg), before they return to New York. I suppose if Woody Allen had written "Meet the Fockers" it would have come out something like this, only it would have been set in England because Woody's nuts about England right now. Between the laughs are thoughtful nuggets about clashes of culture, family, relationships and the fact that maybe we don't know each other as well as we thought. Marion and Jack aren't squishy loveable. They are at times a bit noxious, but quite human. And really about the only thing in common with Delpy's "Before Sunrise" and "Before Sunset' is the Parisian setting. DVD extras include some extended scenes and an interview with Delpy.

"The Jane Austen Book Club" (Sony, 2 stars) Five women with a wide range of emotional issues and one absurdly well-balanced and sensitive guy (Hugh Dancy) form a book club for the sole purpose of reading all of Jane Austen's books and hopefully to make sense of their own lives. Truth in Jane. Based on a novel by Karen Joy Fowler, the division of the story by novel is a bit forced but strong characters rule the day, especially Kathy Baker as the vivacious group instigator, Emily Blunt as the pretentious yet emotionally fragile teacher Prudie and Maria Bello as the independent Jocelyn. Add to that list Amy Brenneman as Sylvia who is sandbagged with a divorce by Jimmy Smits. Do you need to know Jane Austen's works to appreciate the movie? It might help on some level, but as a guy who has only seen Austen's work translated in films, I found it entertaining enough. The DVD contains some deleted scenes, commentary by cast and crew and several featurettes.

"Feast of Love" (MGM, 2 stars) In a small Oregon town coffee shop, love seems to get served with the daily special. Although not without some hefty measure of heartbreak mixed in. More romantic drama than comedy. Greg Kinnear is the romantic proprietor of the coffee shop who loses Selma Blair, then Radha Mitchell. Morgan Freeman and Jane Alexander are a couple dealing with the loss of a child. Toby Hemingway and Alexa Davalos are co-workers who struggle to find love and leave troubled pasts behind. Directed by Robert Benton ("Kramer vs. Kramer") so you know love don't come easy. DVD extras include audio commentary by Benton and several featurettes.

"Romance & Cigarettes" (Sony, 2 stars) Another musical this week. Directed and written by John Turturro and produced by the Coen brothers - OK, that should clue you in to the quirky side of this film. Even more so, the cast includes both Eddie Izzard and Christopher Walken. But it is James Gandolfini as a married guy who cheats then must choose who pulls this circus along. Cast also includes Susan Sarandon, Kate Winslet, Mandy Moore, Mary-Louise Parker, Steve Buscemi, Bobby Cannavale and Amy Sedaris. DVD extras include commentary and an introduction by Turturro, deleted scenes and a featurette "Making a Homemade Musical."

"Niagara Motel" (Allumination, 1 1/2 stars) A downbeaten cast of characters occupy rooms at the seedy little motel, overlooking the waterfalls. This is their lives. Be glad you aren't one of them. Stars Craig Ferguson, Anna Friel, Wendy Crewson, Kevin Pollak and Caroline Dhavernas (remember her in the short-lived TV show "Wonderfalls"?)

"Blind Dating" (Fox, 2 stars) For Danny (Chris Pine) the multitude of blind dates his brother sets him up on are really just that: blind. Well, Danny is blind. On his own he meets Leeza (Anjali Jay) and they begin to date. There is mutual attraction but Leeza is Indian and engaged to someone else.

The not-so-Valentines titles:

"The Brave One" (Warner Bros., 3 stars) Jodie Foster goes from radio host in love to vigilante when her fiance is murdered in New York.

"The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford" (Warner Bros., 3 stars) Along with "3:10 to Yuma," this film starring Brad Pitt as the outlaw-hero Jesse James did wonders for reviving the Western. Co-stars Casey Affleck (as that coward Robert Ford), Mary-Louise Parker and Sam Rockwell. Nominated for two Oscars: supporting actor (Affleck) and cinematography (Roger Deakins).

"Elizabeth: The Golden Age" (Universal, 3 stars) Cate Blanchett and Geoffrey Rush take another swing at playing the queen and her courtier, as they did in the 1998's "Elizabeth." Blanchett was the Queen, Rush was Sir Francis Walsingham. They return now and face the Spanish Armada. Elizabeth also faces her hot rush, Sir Walter Raleigh (Clive Owen). Blanchett is again up for a Oscar for leading actress for the role, one of two nominations.

IT CAME FROM TV

"Comic Relief: The Greatest ... and the Latest" (Shout! Factory) Pulls the best bits from 20 years of hosted fun, as in hosted by Billy Crystal, Whoopi Goldberg and Robin Williams. Proceeds go to rebuilding in New Orleans. More fun in Comedy Centrals' "Uncensored" with stand-up artists Lewis Black, Dane Cook, Jeff Dunham and more.

Also: More of "Route 66" comes roaring in with Season 1, Vol. 2; Season 3 of "Beauty and the Beast"; Season 3 of "Soul Food"; from PBS a documentary on the struggles of immigration and assimilation in "The Jewish Americans."

FROM THE VAULTS

"The Apartment" (MGM, 1960) The great Billy Wilder directed Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine in one of the best comedies ever, and the winner of five Oscars. Lemmon (Bud) lets company bigwigs use his apartment for trysts, in hopes of climbing the ladder. Fred MacMurray brings the lovely secretary Fran (Shirley MacLaine) to the apartment and through some mishaps, she's forced to stay there with Bud. They, naturally fall in love.

"You've Got Mail" (Warner, 1998) A so-so update of "The Shop Around the Corner," even with Meg Ryan

and Tom Hanks in the leads and Nora Ephron at the helm. Two new DVD featurettes, commentary by Ephron and an interview from HBO.

"The Director's Series: Jean-Luc Goddard" (Lionsgate) Four films from the revered French director Jean-Luc Godard - "Prenom Carmen," "Passion," "Detective" and "Helas Pour Moi."

"Tootsie" (Sony, 1983) Has Dustin Hoffman ever looked prettier? I think not. (with Bill Murray, Geena Davis and Jessica Lange. This is the 25th anniversary edition, directed by Sydney Pollock.

"Midnight Express" (Sony, 1978) Based on a true story of an American in a Turkish prison for possession (then smuggling) of hashish who must find a way to escape.

"Imitation of Life" (Universal, 1934 and 1959) Not one, but two versions of the dramatic tale of two widows and their daughters. The first stars Claudette Colbert, the second Lana Turner.

Â© Copley News Service

DVD Select: All together now, Beatles-based musical is superb, trippy by Robert_J_Hawkins