DVD Select: Daniel Craig is the best Bond since Sean

by Robert J. Hawkins

I think the debate is fairly well settled: Daniel Craig is probably the finest James Bond to emerge since Sean Connery hung up his license to kill. With time and a few more episodes beyond "Casino Royale" (Sony, 3 1/2 stars) and Craig may well eclipse Connery in the hearts and minds of Bond fans.

Craig has two major assets working in his favor. For one, he has a rugged reserve and uneven features that oozes masculinity without being precious (yes, you, Roger Moore and Pierce Brosnan). Secondly, Craig just looks better and better with each cut, scrape, bruise and poisoning that he endures.

The guy can take a hit and even though it brings him to his knees, there's something inside that makes him keep getting back up for more. That, my friends, is worthy of a double-0 membership card.

'CASINO ROYALE' - Give Daniel Craig a little time he may well eclipse Sean Connery in the hearts and minds of Bond fans. CNS Photo.

And finally, I kind of like that Craig's Bond hints at working-class roots. Maybe he had to fight his way through public school, tough neighborhoods and brutal British military service before learning how to carry a tuxedo on his back with style, quiet confidence and animal wariness.

Of course, anyone who saw "Layer Cake" knew that Craig had a lock on the job.

"Casino Royale" takes Bond all the way back to the start, before our boy gets his 007 designation.

Oddly enough, though, Judi Dench remains as the iron maiden M who rules the MI6 section of the British Secret Service with a no-nonsense and almost Shakespearian theatricality. No matter. We love her.

And by the way, who was the stiff in bed with M when her phone rings in the middle of the night? The mere thought that M would have a conjugal relationship outside of the office is a staggering leap forward. OK, the fact that the guy never stirs tells me he's either 1) dead, 2) been through the late night phone calls aplenty or 3) Prince Charles. Ohhh, cool plot point to develop in future episodes.

The story is classic Bond: Our man has to thwart the evil Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen), high-cheekboned and bad-haired banker to terrorists. Le Chiffre has a murderous cold streak and a scar over one eye that tends to leak when he gets excited. Gotta love the complexity.

Le Chiffre - a mathematical wiz - plans to raise some serious cash in a high stakes poker game at Casino Royale in Montenegro. No slouch himself, 007 is sent in to outplay the man and hopefully crush his organization. Bond's bagman (carrying Her Majesty's cash) turns out to be a woman, chastely named Vesper Lynd (Eva Green). Naturally their relationship migrates swiftly from testy to tempestuous to torrid.

And here's where I think the worrying over Bond has been misplaced. It is not Bond we need worry about. It is the Bond women. If Green is the prototype for the future, we're sunk. When I think of Bond women the image is of strong, curvy, sensuous - well, Honor Blackman, Diana Rigg, Claudine Auger, Britt Ekland, to name a few.

Eva Green is a frail, thin bird that must be rescued more times than necessary. Fortunately, she suffers the fate of almost all Bond women. But the next one? Come on, folks, think long and hard before you pick.

There are no real beefs with the new Bond. The action scenes are gut-tightening and the stunts are dazzling without being overboard. In the opening chase, Bond pursues Sebastien Foucan, a real-life expert in free running and parkour (the art of navigating your environment in smooth fluid motion, seemingly defying gravity). Foucan vaults walls, dives through small openings, zigzags down elevator shafts with amazing grace and speed. An incredible display of athleticism and aestheticism. A really nice touch.

The "Casino Royale" DVD contains several features - one on Craig's transformation to Bond, another on the stunts and a third on past Bond women.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"The Holiday" (Sony, 3 stars) In this surprisingly (for me, anyway) sweet and thoughtful romantic comedy, two women with soured relationships swap houses for the Christmas holiday and unexpectedly find romance where they least expected it. Kate Winslet is Iris, a British journalist who can't get Jasper (Rufus Sewell) out of her system. Cameron Diaz is Amanda, a successful Hollywood producer whose breakup with Ethan (Edward Burns) is only the latest in a long string of failed unions. Finding each other on a house-swapping Web site, Iris and Amanda trade abodes. In Los Angeles, Amanda meets an aging Hollywood film writer (Eli Wallach) and a goofy film score composer (Jack Black in a refreshingly understated performance). Meanwhile, Amanda revels in the isolation of Iris' country house, briefly. When Iris' ridiculously

good-looking brother Graham (Jude Law) shows up at the door, Amanda's man-free vacation plans are out the window. Winslet's wounded soul is positively endearing and Diaz shows some seasoned comic timing as a Beverly Hills princess in the land of low roofs and primitive plumbing. Writer-director Nancy Meyers has created a well-paced story that touches the sentimental side of any viewer.

"Shortbus" (ThinkFilm, 2 stars) This is "Explicit Sex in the City" from writer-director John Cameron Mitchell ("Hedwick and the Angry Inch"). Various couples, heterosexual and gay, sort out their relationship and sexual issues as they converge on the underground club called Shortbus. The sex is real but so is the emotional journey that these people embark upon.

"Sublime" (Warner, 2 1/2 stars) This graphic horror film comes direct to DVD as part of the studio's "Raw Feed" project. Tom Cavanagh stars in what director Tony Krantz describes as "More than just a horror film or psychological thriller." He continues, "I saw this as an opportunity to make a sociopolitical allegory and commentary on principally white upper middle-class fear in our culture." Krantz mines that fear in a very bizarre hospital to which Cavanagh's character is admitted for a very simple procedure but wakes up in a sanity-challenging form of hell.

"Favela Rising" (Genius Products, 2 1/2 stars) A powerful documentary on the rise of the Afro-reggae movement as a catalyst for social change in the slums of Rio de Janeiro largely through the influence of a former drug trafficker Anderson Sa who became a social revolutionary and rallied the favela (slum) community against teenage drug mobs and corrupt police.

IT CAME FROM TV

"John Paul II" (Vivendi Visual Entertainment/Ignatius Press) This uplifting made-for-TV biopic of the life of the late head of the Roman Catholic Church presents a ready resume for those who would elevate him to sainthood. One of several TV films on the subject, this one is bolstered by the casting of Cary Elwes as the young Karol Wojtyla and Jon Voight in his later years into his papal reign.

"Bosom Buddies" (Paramount/CBS, Season 1) Who would have thought that this 1980 sitcom in which Tom Hanks and Peter Scolari spend much of the time in drag would launch one of the finest film careers of the last 20 years? Although, Scolari made the better-looking woman.

"The I Love Lucy Hour Shows" (Paramount/CBS, Final seasons 7, 8 and 9, four DVD discs) Airing from 1957-60, these hour-long shows carried forward the original sitcom saga of Lucy, Desi and their friends the Mertzes.

More TV: "Without A Trace" (Warner, season two); "Run's House (Paramount/MTV, seasons one and two); "The Dukes of Hazzard: The Beginning" (Warner, direct-to-DVD film is a prequel to the TV series and feature film); "The Pretender 2001"/"Pretender: Island of the Haunted" (Fox, two made-for-TV films continue the original series).

FROM THE VAULTS

"The Ernest Hemingway Film Collection" (Fox) Hemingway didn't write for the movies, but the movies adored his stories. This collection contains movies based on five of his most celebrated stories: "Adventures of

a Young Man" (1962, based on the Nick Adams stories); "A Farewell To Arms" (1957, with Rock Hudson and Jennifer Jones); "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1952, with Gregory Peck, Susan Hayward and Ava Gardner); "The Sun Also Rises" (1957, with Tyrone Power, Ava Gardner, Mel Ferrer and Errol Flynn); and "Under My Skin" (1950, based on the short story "My Old Man," which stars John Garfield as a crooked racetrack denizen). Each DVD contains bonus extras including restoration comparisons, commentaries and making-of features.

"Ghost" (Paramount, 1990) Whoopi Goldberg got her supporting-actress Oscar for her role as a psychic but everybody turned to jelly when the ghost of Patrick Swayze helped Demi Moore shape clay on a potter's wheel. This "special collector's edition" contains improved image quality, new interviews with the cast, commentary by the writer and director and a handful of featurettes.

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

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