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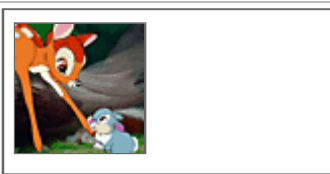
San Francisco Chronicle

## DVD REVIEWS

[Sue Adolphson](#), [Mick LaSalle](#), [Sam Hurwitt](#)

Sunday, March 20, 2005

### BAMBI



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There's only one word for the star of Walt Disney's animated film based on the best-selling Felix Salton story: adorable. And that goes for his cuddly pals, too -- the mischievous bunny Thumper and bashful skunk Flower. The story of a newborn fawn's first year, coming of age and survival of tragedy (caused by evil humans, of course) is familiar to many 63 years after its premiere. Those who saw "Bambi" as children may now see the film -- in its beautiful digital restoration -- in a new light. The attention to detail and realism -- the way a bird lands on a limb, how a stag stands majestically on a hill -- is awe-inspiring, and the humor is infectious (Owl's sex education speech on the power of being smitten -- or "twitterpated" -- is priceless). And the way music, more than the sparse dialogue, is used to describe the action is impressive, especially a cymbal-crashing symphony of a thunderstorm. Especially spectacular is this two-DVD set's array of extras. There are featurettes on the making of the film and its digital restoration, narrated by Patrick Stewart, who voices the forthcoming "Bambi and the Great Prince of the Forest"; an entertaining re-enactment of the film's storyboarding, created from Disney's original story notes; a stills gallery; a 1942 time capsule feature (new home? \$7,000); an animated short; plus games, deleted scenes, a "Disneypedia" of nature lessons about real fawns, bunnies, owls and skunks; and a virtual forest. Whew. -- Sue Adolphson

### BAMBI

1942

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**RATED G****WALT DISNEY HOME ENTERTAINMENT**

\$29.99 (TWO DISCS)

**IMPROMPTU**

Twenty-five-year-old movies are old, and therefore history, which means they're interesting, while new movies are new, and therefore relevant. "Impromptu" is 14 years old, and therefore in an awkward middle-age, in which it could easily be passed over. A second look shows that it shouldn't be. It takes place in France, circa 1840, in the artistic circle inhabited by the female novelist George Sand, known for her tumultuous romantic life, and Frederic Chopin, a delicate soul living with tuberculosis. Sand (Judy Davis) discovers Chopin (Hugh Grant) through his music and pursues him romantically, over the course of months. In the meantime, there are soirees and a notable two-week getaway at the home of an art-besotted noblewoman (played with unselfconscious wholeheartedness by Emma Thompson). James Lapine makes a series of tasteful, intelligent and witty decisions in the course of directing the film. The comic sense is deft. The sense of the characters is spot-on. There's a feeling for the beauty of the period - in the music, the sets, the gardens and carriages -- but this is no mummified Merchant-Ivory piece. It's a lovable frolic, with an undertone of longing. It represents the best showcase yet for Judy Davis, capitalizing on her sharpness, her neurotic charm and her emotional abandon. Grant is also quite good. For everything else it is, it's an appealing story of opposites attracting, with the artistically meticulous and ever-courteous Chopin finding his soul mate in the artistically freewheeling, outrageous Sand. -- Mick LaSalle

**IMPROMPTU**

1992

PG-13

**MGM HOME ENTERTAINMENT**

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Time was lavished on these episodes, which were essentially full-length TV movies -- eight them, first shown during the 1972-73 season. The character of Columbo, of course, has become a classic. The episodes, while not as exalted as they might exist in memory, are compulsively watchable. The formula for each show is identical: We see a successful (often famous) person committing a murder. Then we watch as Lt. Columbo (Peter Falk) unravels an almost-perfect crime and traps the killer. The formula presents two challenges: 1) Because we see the first half-hour from the murderer's viewpoint, the audience could easily root for murderer and not the lieutenant; and 2) Each script is at pains to come up with some brilliant means by which Columbo solves the crime. Each challenge proves an occasional stumbling block, especially the latter. Crimes are occasionally "solved" in ways that would never pass muster with a jury. It's also a bit absurd that Columbo always seems to know the identity of the murderer immediately. Yet what makes these episodes fascinating isn't cleverness, rooting interest or the likability of the central character. It's Columbo's mysteriousness. How much is he acting? How much is he only pretending to be a fool? When does he know what he knows? At times, Columbo almost seems paranormal, a mind reader feigning ignorance and toying with people, and a hint of sadism and amusement peeks out. Intentionally and brilliantly, Falk keeps a part of Columbo aloof from the viewer. -- Mick LaSalle

## **COLUMBO:**

### **THE COMPLETE**

### **SECOND SEASON**

1972-73

### **NOT RATED**

### **UNIVERSAL**

### **HOME VIDEO**

\$39.98

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## **THE AMERICAN ASTRONAUT**



If anyone was going to make a musical space Western, it's not all that surprising that it would be Cory McAbee, front man of the Bay

Area cult band the Billy Nayer Show (now moved to New York). Filmmaking has been a longtime sideline for McAbee and the band, starting with the 1990 animated short "Billy Nayer." The surprise is how polished this first feature is, with expressionistic use of shadow in black-and-white as reminiscent of Fritz Lang silents as of Flash Gordon serials. The soundtrack alternates deftly between stirring instrumentals and hilarious songs about babies in jars and women with glass private parts, and the surreal story goes from a cowboy musical number in a bar men's room to a meandering quest involving abducting the Boy Who Actually Saw a Woman's Breast (Gregory Russell Cook) from Jovian space miners while being pursued by a psychotic professor (Rocco Sisto) obsessed with apologizing to our hero (McAbee) so he can then kill him. Long viewable only when the band came to town with a print in hand ever since it premiered at Sundance in 2001, the film is at last available on DVD, with special features including test footage and live director's commentary alternating between the film and a jovial onstage Q&A session with writer-director McAbee. -- Sam Hurwitt

## THE AMERICAN ASTRONAUT

2001

**NOT RATED**

**FACETS VIDEO**

\$24.95

Page 32

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