

DVD REVIEWS

44 Minutes

20th Century Fox

Based on an actual event, *44 Minutes* is an above average made for television movie that tells the story of a botched bank robbery in 1997 which resulted in one of the longest and most intense shootouts in L.A.P.D. history. Even more remarkably the whole thing was shown live on television so millions of Americans were able to watch the action, minute by bloody minute.

While the movie might not be of the Hollywood blockbuster standard, it does have higher production values than most of the films that are made for television. It also has a decent cast with three recognisable actors taking the leading roles. Most convincing of the trio is Michael Madsen (from *Reservoir Dogs* & *Kill Bill*) who plays a veteran detective who realises that the two robbers are the same ones who have behind a series of other violent robberies. Ron Livingston (from *Office Space* and *Sex & The City*) has an intriguing part as a SWAT team leader, but he really isn't given enough to work with and his part is a lot more inconsequential than the DVD's cover might have you believe. Mario Van Peebles is the last of the bigger names, and his is the most generic part that elicits sympathy instead of portraying a three-dimensional character.

It uses a mix of interviews with the people involved (although the interviews are actually with the actors playing the people involved) and action sequences to tell the story, making it feel kind of like a documentary. But instead of making for a more convincing movie, it made me want to see an actual documentary instead. I wanted to hear what the real people had to say, and even see some of the original footage (although there is a short taste just before the closing credits).

Clocking in at a brisk 90 minutes, *44 Minutes* isn't really long enough to get boring, and with the shootout taking up much of the movie, it makes for a tense hour and a half. The gun battle is reminiscent of *Heat*, and uses a little too much slow motion sequences for my liking, but it doesn't detract too much from the action. The most incredible thing is that despite the hundreds of rounds of ammunition that were fired, no police officers or members of the public were killed - testament to bravery of all those involved.

Extras: None



MOVIE - 3 stars

X2: X-Men United

20th Century Fox

Thanks to *Spider-Man*, the standards for comic book movies have gone way up. Audiences are no longer going to put up with the likes of *Daredevil*, and so a lot was hinging on the second installment in the *X-Men* franchise. And thankfully it more than lives up to those expectations, making it one of last summer's most enjoyable popcorn movies.

X2: X-Men United is much better than its predecessor in so many ways. First of all, the story is a lot more interesting, plus it avoids the pitfalls of spending too much time setting the scene or introducing the characters. Instead, it starts off with the greatest action sequences of any movie last summer - Nightcrawler's attack on the President within the White House. It really does have to be seen to be believed, and it set the tone for the rest of the movie.

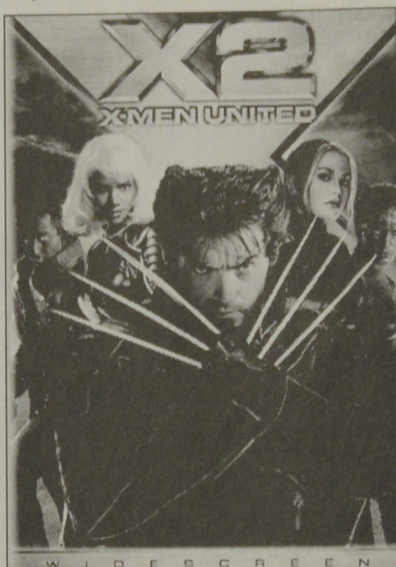
The plot involves an anti-mutant movement which starts after the aforementioned attack, and the effect is that Professor Xavier's school is shut while the mutant population is vilified. Of course, this is a thinly veiled metaphor for McCarthyism and almost any other kind of prejudice, with a few twists and turns along the way, including the allying of the X-Men and Magneto.

In addition to being a very entertaining movie, it also helps to set the scene for the next film in the series by bringing in a few new characters (including the tormented Pyro who sides with the bad guys) and develops the existing X-Men nicely. Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) continues to brood and Rogue (Anna Paquin) begins to come to terms with her powers. Some characters are given a lot more time onscreen, such as Storm (Halle Berry), while others are left languishing without a whole lot to do (especially Cyclops). Still, that can only be expected with such a large cast and even with a wealth of subplots, there just isn't enough time to give every X-Men their turn in the spotlight.

Not enough time? Hard to believe considering the movie is more than two hours long but it doesn't feel overly long. There are plenty of excellent action sequences to keep things moving along, and both fans of the comic and more casual observers should enjoy this archetypal summer blockbuster.

There are enough extras that they get a whole disc to themselves, and despite the sheer volume, they are a little on the disappointing side. The commentary tracks (two of them) are pretty average - they have interesting moments, but not the kind of thing to listen to more than once. More promising are the documentaries which explain the history of the *X-Men* comic book and how it became a movie, and one that has the run of the mill behind the scenes stuff. And therein lies the problem - a lot of this is just your average DVD extras with nothing particularly innovative. There's a bit more substance in the various Nightcrawler-related extras (including a wonderful Multi-Angle Scene Study of the opening scene), but the deleted scenes must be there just to take up space because they really don't add anything.

Extras: 2 Commentary Tracks, Theatrical Trailers, The Second Uncanny Issue of X-Men: Making X2 Documentary, 11 Featurettes, Nightcrawler Attack Interactive Multi-Angle Scene Study, 11 Deleted/Extended Scenes, Still Galleries.



MOVIE - 4 stars
EXTRAS - 3.5 stars

Nil By Mouth

Columbia TriStar

Gary Oldman might be better known for the various psychotic bad guys he has played over the years, but back in 1997 he made his directorial debut in a movie which he also wrote. *Nil By Mouth* is a kitchen sink drama of the type made by Mike Leigh and Ken Loach, and it is an unflinching look at a working class family in South London on the brink.

Ray (played by Ray Winstone) is an alcoholic, with a laundry list of problems that include a drug use, a terrible temper and violent tendencies. His lifestyle is beginning to put a great deal of stress on his pregnant wife Valerie (Kathy Burke), and when her brother Billy steals money from them, he attacks him and eventually turns on his wife too. Let's put it this way - one of the DVD chapters is entitled "Miscarriage."

Nil By Mouth is not an easy film to watch. With almost constant bad language and some realistically violent scenes, it is harrowing in its honesty. The two lead performances are truly remarkable, with Winstone managing to be both terrifying, yet still eliciting sympathy too. Even more astonishing is Kathy Burke, someone who is well-known in the UK for her various comedic roles on television. She is a revelation here in a difficult role - she won the "Best Actress" award at the Cannes Film Festival for this movie, and it is easy to understand why. She is the most vulnerable character in the movie, but still she stays with the man who beats her because she loves him. And he beats her because he loves her.

Some of the film's earlier moments feel wasted by spending too much time on Valerie's brother Billy. After Ray's brutal attack, Billy drifts in and out of the film without any direction and only seems to serve as a distraction from the main story rather than a viable subplot. But it is hard to fault a film as powerful and moving as this. Oldman dedicates the film to his own father, and has commented that there is an autobiographical element to the movie although it is hard to know where fact ends and fiction begins.

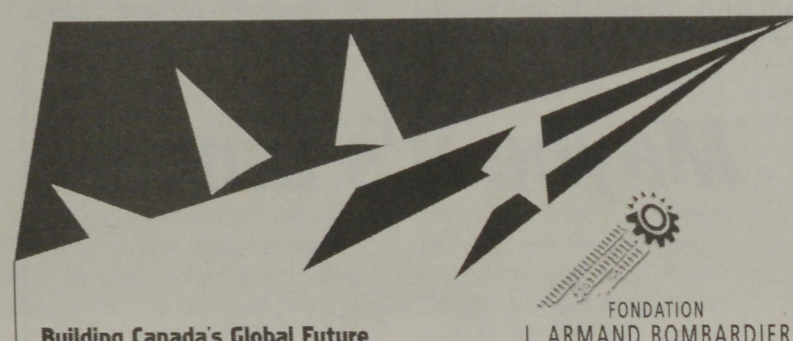
It would have been nice to hear Oldman's take on the film with a commentary track, but the DVD features no extras apart from a few movie trailers. Still, this isn't the kind of film that needs a special edition to get it's point across.

This is a brutal, unflinching film that never shies away from showing the cycle of violence that some families find themselves in, and it attempts to try and offer some kind of explanation and context for the lead character's actions. Yet there is a great deal of ambiguity in *Nil By Mouth* that leaves too much of the film unexplained and it feels like nothing has really changed by the end of it all. But then again, that's the reality in so many of these cases, so maybe Oldman knew exactly what he was doing after all.

Extras: Theatrical Trailers



MOVIE - 4 stars
EXTRAS - 1 star



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Buffy The Vampire Slayer: The Fifth Season

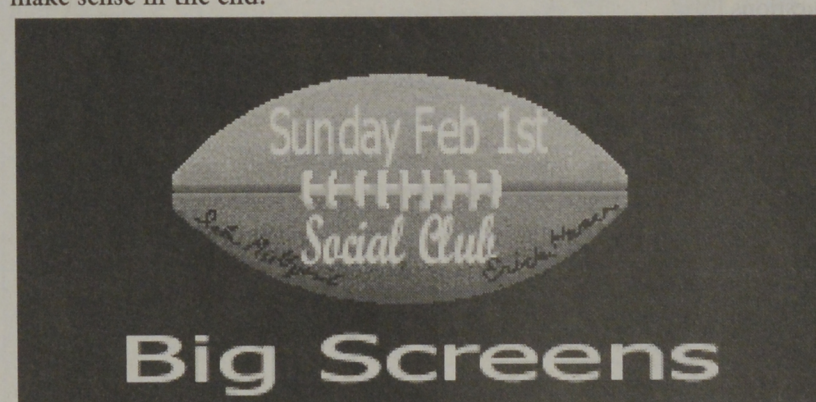
20th Century Fox

Considering the humble beginnings *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* had, it is hard to imagine how it managed to become the quintessential cult tv show with a huge fanbase. Yet writer Joss Whedon was successful in reinventing his character in a darkly comic television series that evolved into one of the best shows in recent memory.

While the fifth season is held in high regard by most fans, it also has one of the more controversial elements too - Dawn, Buffy's younger sister. Dawn is introduced as if she was always there, and that we're all fools for not knowing that - other characters make reference to events from their collective past and the writers even go out of their way to explain everything away. To be honest, she is no more annoying than any other 14 year old, and the way that the season arc progresses does justify her introduction and it does make sense in the end.



MOVIE - 4 stars
EXTRAS - 4 stars



The real strength of season five is the quality of the writing. After a few misfires in the fourth season, Whedon and the rest of the writing team are back at the top of their game. First of all, the big villain, fallen god Glory, is extremely entertaining and in a convincing foe. That becomes especially apparent during the final four episodes, climaxing with what could have quite easily have been the final *Buffy* episode ever, 'The Gift'. In fact, it might even have been better if things had come to a close after this season because it is a more satisfying conclusion than the one that we were provided with after season seven.

Yet the finest episode in the season is one of the most emotional *Buffy* episodes, 'The Body'. It deals with the death of Buffy's mother, but rather than any supernatural involvement, she dies of natural causes. The episode was filmed without any music, leaving all kinds of awkward silences and pauses, allowing the absolute heartbreak of the situation to come through. Sarah Michelle Geller is truly magnificent here - television doesn't get much better than this.

Plus there are other must-see episodes, and hardly any weak spots although 'Buffy Vs. Dracula' comes pretty close - it was fun, but a little too trivial to open a season. Still, interrupting the sombre tone of the season with some light relief isn't the end of the world (such as the introduction of the Buffy-bot and the two Xanders in 'The Replacement') and it helps to offset the serious moments. Quite simply, this is one of the best seasons of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*.

The six DVDs in the box hold all 22 episodes, plus there is enough space for a decent amount of extras too. The packaging is the same as the previous sets, and the extras follow a similar template too. There are commentary tracks for four episodes (including Whedon himself for 'The Body'), and scripts for four episodes too. The seven featurettes are of varying quality, with 'Buffy Abroad' (a look at *Buffy* internationally, including wacky dubbed clips) being near the bottom. 'The Story Of Season Five' is the most interesting because the writers explain their ideas for the season, including Dawn.

Fans will buy this no matter what, but even casual viewers could easily jump into season five because of the powerful self-contained storylines and the way that the writing fleshes out most of the cast of characters. Just be prepared to buy all the other box sets...

Extras: Writer Commentary Tracks for 4 Episodes, 4 Episode Scripts, 7 Featurettes, Series Outtakes, Still Gallery, Video Game Trailer, DVD-ROM Features.

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