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DVD is the vehicle for Wholphin mag

By Joshua Klein
Special to the Tribune

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In the liner notes to the first issue of Wholphin (the new quarterly magazine "of unseen things," published on DVD, and produced by Dave Eggers' magazine, McSweeney's), editor Brent Huff writes loftily of the disc's biggest scoop, a seen-by-few short documentary shot by Spike Jonze for Al Gore's presidential campaign.

"If nothing else," writes Huff, "it might have at least calmed a few jumpy liberals into reconsidering their protest vote," adding that "it may seem like a sweet, simple study of a loving American family, but in our opinion, Jonze's short film could have changed the world."

"It is kind of sad," says Huff from Wholphin's San Francisco headquarters. "By 'jumpy liberals' I was referring largely to myself. I just didn't see any soul in that man. He's not a performer, and such a large part of being a politician comes down to being a performer. In this crucial election, right before the election, here's this documentary, made by a very respected director, which shows [Gore] may still very much govern by committee when he's discussing movies, but he's not a robot."

Another tantalizing political firecracker included on the first Wholphin is an excerpt from "Soldier's Pay," a documentary by "Three Kings" director David O. Russell about Iraq war veterans, and Huff expresses an interest in pursuing other controversial works. Yet Wholphin is by no means a strictly political enterprise. Rather, it's intended as a clever and eccentric clearinghouse for any number of short films.

"We're hooking up with a guy named Mark Osborne, who directed an Oscar-nominated short film called 'More,'" says Huff of plans for future installments. "Errol Morris is interested in getting us some stuff that no one else has seen."

Future issues may include films from the writers of "The Daily Show." And then there are works based on pieces that originally ran in McSweeney's magazine. "We have a lot of adaptations we're working on. We're talking to bunch of people like Nick Hornby, Michael Chabon and Jim Shepard, who have amazing short stories that would make amazing short movies, and there are amazing directors that want to work on them."

Huff cites "The Big Empty," a particularly well-made adaptation of a story by Alison Smith, as an example of how the reputation of McSweeney's helps attract talent, and how that talent views Wholphin as a way around the usual Hollywood roadblocks.

"Those guys didn't make that film because they thought they were going to get into Sundance, or because they thought it would get them a job directing Nike commercials," he says. "It wasn't any sort of calling card. They called in every favor they could in the world to get that made, and they got people from [George Clooney's and Steven Soderbergh's production company] Section Eight involved, and actors like Selma Blair. Everyone thought this was a good story that should be made into a film."

"That is something that can happen again and again," Huff continues. "People want to be involved with good writing. I think this is why people are willing to give their pieces to us. There's some trust that the only criteria is that it be good. I'm not trying to strike a balance. I'm just trying to choose good things. Anything foreign, anything documentary--it's very unlikely that any of it will otherwise be seen. And I feel like some of the menu items, the offbeat stuff, were just inherently beautiful and striking pieces. Did you see the hovercraft?"

Ah, yes, the hovercraft. Among the more entertaining aspects of Wholphin are the creative menus, which if you wait long enough, morph into their own strange, surprising works, ranging from an entrancing shot

of a hovercraft making a dramatic beach landing to a man singing "Stairway to Heaven" backward.

"The guy runs around Europe making a lot of money doing performances of that," Huff says.

Which all raises an interesting question: With its esoteric documentaries and short films based on short stories published by a hip, popular magazine, where should Wholphin--whose first issue is included with current issues of McSweeney's and The Believer--be sold? Bookstores? Video stores?

"That's something that we've been talking about," Huff says. "We've had a lot of interest from bookstores, who at first weren't sure what to do with DVDs. That is an interesting dilemma. Where do you put it? `Special interest?' `W?' I mean, there's no real `short films and guy singing "Stairway to Heaven" backwards' section in your local DVD shop, is there?"

For more information, visit www.wholphindvd.com.

Best of the week

"Metropolitan" (Criterion, 1990, 1:39; PG-13, \$39.95) and "Young Mr. Lincoln" (Criterion, 1939, 1:40, NR, \$39.95): "Metropolitan" and "Young Mr. Lincoln" couldn't be more different, but these two disparate Criterion editions do capture a pair of important firsts. "Metropolitan" introduced the indie film world to writer/director Whit Stillman, while "Young Mr. Lincoln" marked the first time director John Ford worked with star Henry Fonda, here cast as the titular president in his formative years. The latter is also noteworthy for including an MP3 download of the film's radio dramatization, portending the further conflation of high-tech media.

"Reel Paradise" (Wellspring, 2005, 1:50; R, \$24.98): "Reel Paradise," an excellent doc about the love of film as well as a clash of cultures, follows feted indie film producer John Pierson and his family when they move to Fiji and host a free movie night at their tiny town's run-down theater. The movie's an engaging hoot, bolstered here by the postscript commentary offered by director Steve James (of "Hoop Dreams" fame) and Pierson's wife, Janet. Also included is the episode of Pierson's TV show "Split Screen" that inspired the film, "The Fiji Stooges," about the discovery of what the host deems the world's most remote movie theater.

"Ryan's Daughter" (Warner Bros., 1970, 3:26; R, \$26.98): The last of David Lean's widescreen epics, "Ryan's Daughter" gets a spectacular DVD transfer that more than makes amends for the film's unfairly unsung reputation. The overlaid Laurent Bouzereau, best known as the man behind all of Steven Spielberg's by-the-books DVD special editions, here produces just the right amount of supplementary material, no small feat considering much of the cast and crew have long since passed.

Dud of the week

"Saw II" (Lions Gate, 2005, 1:32; R, \$29.98): Even the special features hint at a future "unrated" cut of the horror hit "Saw II," and there's no reason to believe a new edition promising just that isn't already being planned.

It's been a pleasure writing the column, but all good things must come to an end. Send section questions to ctcmovies.com. And please feel free to drop me a line at chitribdvd@gmail.com.

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