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Warner Home Video

Glenda Farrell with Tom Kennedy, left, and Barton MacLane in "Torchy Blane in Chinatown" (1939).

By DAVE KEHR
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The Torchy Blane Collection

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Shout! Factory and New Horizons Pictures
Youth in revolt: P. J. Soles, center, with the Ramones in "Rock 'N' Roll High School" (1979), the first of Roger Corman's cult classics to be released in Blu-ray.

"B movie" is now a term routinely applied to essentially any low-budget, vaguely disreputable genre film. But it used to mean something quite specific. During [the Great Depression](#) exhibitors began offering double features in the hope of luring back their diminished audience. The program would consist of an A picture, with stars, conspicuous production values and a running time of 80 minutes or more, and a B picture, with minor stars or none at all, produced on standing sets and often using scripts and stock footage recycled from older films, with a length that hovered around an hour or so.

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Produced by separate units within the studios, B movies were offered to theaters at a flat rental rate rather than a percentage of the gross, as was customary with A pictures, and few newspapers bothered to review them. But because no one was paying attention, B movies could sometimes offer a freedom that the more closely supervised A productions could not — an opportunity exploited by producers like Val Lewton, with his famous series of horror films for RKO, or directors like [Budd Boetticher](#) and [Anthony Mann](#), who used the fast pace and hurried shooting schedules of the B's to hone their own efficient, expressive styles.

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But even artistically unambitious B's could possess the charm of speed and sassiness — qualities very much on display in “The Torchy Blane Collection,” a boxed set from Warner Home Video's burn-on-demand Archive Collection ([warnerarchive.com](#)) that unites all nine films in one of the most consistently engaging B series of the 1930s.

Glenda Farrell and Barton MacLane may have been supporting players in Warners' A pictures, but the magic mirror of B movies turned them into headliners. An aggressive, wisecracking blonde with an unfortunately hard set to her mouth that usually forced her to take a back seat to the softer, more sympathetic [Joan Blondell](#), Farrell came into her own as Torchy, a hard-charging reporter for a major metropolitan newspaper called The Star; MacLane, who specialized in dumb beat cops and prison guards who could always be bested by Bogart or Cagney, got to step up to romantic lead status as Lt. Steve McBride, the police detective who was Torchy's perennial fiancé and frustrated rival. Somehow Torchy always managed to find the killer before he did, with plenty of time to phone her scoop in to the rewrite desk.

Bristling with sexual and professional tension, it's a setup that could still work today for a [Jennifer Aniston](#) picture (and probably has), though Torchy's methods would probably not make it past a contemporary standards editor. “[Torchy Runs for Mayor](#)” (1939) finds her planting a microphone in the office of a corrupt politician and gleefully reporting his private conversations in the “[Extra! Extra!](#)” edition. The series takes the dynamics of the central relationship and embeds them in the procedural details of a whodunit plot, a formula that could be infinitely reproduced. (The 1939 “[Torchy Blane in Chinatown](#)” reuses a story that had been filmed twice before.)

A fascinating aspect of B series like “Torchy Blane” is how they allow us to see different creative personnel handling basically the same material. Even on this level of hurry-up filmmaking, the director's touch is crucial. The first four “[Torchy](#)” films — “[Smart Blonde](#),” “[Fly Away Baby](#),” and “[The Adventurous Blonde](#)” (all from 1937) and “[Blondes at Work](#)” (1938) — were staged by Frank McDonald, a career B director who brought rhythm, spirit and a great sense of fun to his work. “[Fly Away Baby](#)” in particular does a remarkable job of conjuring a rollicking, around-the-world flight from some worn newsreel footage and remnants of back-lot exotica. When the series

passes to the somber William Clemens ([“Torchy Blane in Panama,”](#) 1938) and the indifferent William Beaudine ([“Torchy Gets Her Man”](#) and [“Torchy Blane in Chinatown”](#)), the helium seems to leak from the balloon.

In two of the films, Farrell and MacLane are replaced by other actors, though the characters remain the same: “Torchy Blane in Panama” offers a younger, more conventionally attractive couple, Lola Lane and Paul Kelly, and loses something in gruffness and credibility; in the final film, Noel Smith’s 1939 “Torchy Blane ...Playing With Dynamite,” MacLane has been replaced by the dialect comic Allen Jenkins, and Torchy is now a snub-nosed bombshell played by a peroxided [Jane Wyman](#). The results are discomfiting to say the least, but there is a pleasing sense of closure in Wyman’s casting: she had received her first screen credit on a feature for playing a hat-check girl in the initial “Torchy” film, “Smart Blonde,” and here, only two years later, she had risen to a leading role, on a career path that would take her to an Oscar ([“Johnny Belinda”](#) from 1948) and two great films by [Douglas Sirk](#) ([“Magnificent Obsession”](#) and [“All That Heaven Allows”](#)). Along the way she married another graduate of Warner’s B unit, [Ronald Reagan](#) — whose “Brass Bancroft” series might someday make a nice set of its own. (*Warner Archive Collection, \$39.95, not rated*)

Rock 'N' Roll High School

By the mid-1950s television had killed the B movie (and appropriated many of its best directors), but its spirit lived on in other forms — notably in the teen-oriented exploitation films that studios like Columbia and American International Pictures were producing for the burgeoning drive-in market. “Rock 'N' Roll High School,” released by [Roger Corman](#)’s New World Pictures in 1979, came at the very end of that tradition and looks back, with nostalgia spiked by irony, to '50s films like [“Rock Around the Clock”](#) and “High School Confidential!” Instead of Bill Haley and the Comets, we get the proto-punk group [the Ramones](#), but otherwise the youth-in-revolt plotting is intact.

Directed by Allan Arkush, “Rock 'N' Roll High School” is a fast, fun, sloppy picture, the motion picture equivalent of a garage band. P. J. Soles (who played a supporting baby sitter in [“Halloween”](#)) is the resident rock queen of repressive Vince Lombardi High, where the puritanical principal is the one-time Warhol superstar [Mary Woronov](#) and the classical music department is led by the writer-director [Paul Bartel](#) ([“Death Race 2000”](#)). A pure product of the film generation sensibility of the '70s, the picture moves through references to [Howard Hawks](#)’s [“Gentlemen Prefer Blondes”](#) and [Frank Tashlin](#)’s “Girl Can’t Help It” to climax with a defiant homage to [Michelangelo Antonioni](#)’s [“Zabriskie Point.”](#)

“Rock 'N' Roll High School” is the first in a series of “Roger Corman Cult Classics” to be released in Blu-ray by Shout! Factory, and while the film’s ingratiatingly low-tech look isn’t dramatically enhanced by the high-definition format, the disc does allow plenty of room for

new supplementary materials, including interviews with many of the surviving participants. (*Shout! Factory*, \$26.97, PG)

ALSO OUT THIS WEEK

LEAP YEAR A young professional ([Amy Adams](#)) travels to Ireland with the intention of proposing to her stuffy boyfriend ([Adam Scott](#)) but gets waylaid by a charming local bartender (Matthew Goode). Anand Tucker ("[Shopgirl](#)") directed. "What makes 'Leap Year' so singularly dispiriting is precisely that it is bad without distinction," A. O. Scott wrote in *The New York Times* in January. (*Universal, Blu-ray* \$36.98, *standard definition* \$29.98, PG)

M [Fritz Lang](#)'s landmark 1931 film — the chilling tale of a child murderer ([Peter Lorre](#)) pursued by both the Berlin underground and the police — looks virtually flawless in this new edition from Criterion. "As a strong cinematic work with, remarkably fine acting, it is extraordinarily effective," Mordaunt Hall wrote in *The Times* in 1933, but he found the film "shocking and morbid." (*Criterion Collection, Blu-ray and standard definition*, \$39.95, not rated)

NINE [Daniel Day-Lewis](#) leads an Oscar-heavy cast ([Marion Cotillard](#), [Penelope Cruz](#), [Sophia Loren](#), [Nicole Kidman](#), [Judi Dench](#)) in [Rob Marshall](#)'s adaptation of the 1982 Broadway musical. Mr. Scott wrote in *The Times* in December that the film "descends into vulgar chaos, less a homage to [Federico Fellini](#)'s '8 1/2' (its putative inspiration) than a travesty." (*Sony, Blu-ray* \$38.96, *standard definition* \$28.95, PG-13)

SAVING PRIVATE RYAN A Blu-ray upgrade for [Steven Spielberg](#)'s 1998 distillation of the World War II combat film, starring [Tom Hanks](#) as a captain who leads a mission behind German lines to rescue a captured private ([Matt Damon](#)). With [Tom Sizemore](#), [Edward Burns](#), [Barry Pepper](#), Adam Goldberg, [Vin Diesel](#), [Giovanni Ribisi](#) and [Jeremy Davies](#). Mr. Spielberg "restores passion and meaning to the genre with such whirlwind force that he seems to reimagine it entirely, dazzling with the breadth and intensity of that imagination," Janet Maslin wrote in *The Times* in 1998. "This film simply looks at war as if war had not been looked at before." (*Paramount*, \$35.99, R)

TETRO [Francis Ford Coppola](#) does it his way in this independently financed, black-and-white feature about a cruise-ship waiter (Alden Ehrenreich) who arrives in Buenos Aires to search for his older brother ([Vincent Gallo](#)), a putatively brilliant playwright on the run from family trauma. With [Klaus Maria Brandauer](#) and Carmen Maura. "Life meets art meets family meets film in 'Tetro,' sometimes powerfully, sometimes obscurely," Manohla Dargis wrote in *The Times* last June. (*Lionsgate, Blu-ray* \$39.99, *standard definition* \$27.98, not rated)

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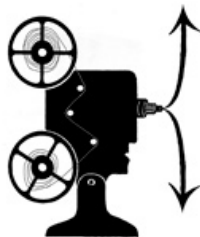


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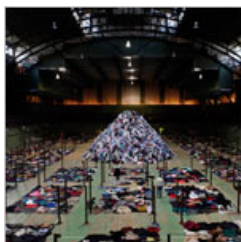
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