

DVDs this week



Save the Last Dance (Paramount; \$29.99)

Movies are so heavily hyped now that it's almost impossible to discover a film on your own. That makes a genuine sleeper — a title that quietly slips into theaters and builds an audience through word of mouth — almost an endangered species. (Advertisers would have you believe differently, but when a movie is promoted as "the sleeper of the year" even before it's opened, you know something is out of whack.) But last year produced the indie flick *Croupier* and now we've got this very different smash hit. Akin to *Dirty Dancing*, *Save the Last Dance* certainly didn't arrive unheralded: there was a hit soundtrack and MTV beat the drums for weeks. But no one expected this modest drama about a high school girl who finds romance and a reawakened passion for ballet to gross \$90 million at the box office. Thank director Thomas Carter, who has directed some of the finest hour-long dramas on TV and will hopefully use this movie to make much better films down the road. And thank actress Julia Stiles, who gave *Save the Last Dance* a sexy, sincere lead performance of considerable charm. Actually, Stiles should be thanking the movie, because just like Patrick Swayze and Clive Owen before her, this sleeper has made her a star.

Sweet Smell of Success (MGM; \$19.98)



Tony Curtis

Okay, you can't get good tickets to Broadway's *The Producers* until 2007 (when the leads will be Jim Belushi and Ben Stiller). You can't rent the video of the original film starring Zero Mostel because it's always checked out. You can't even buy the movie on DVD because it isn't available yet. So why not get a jump on next season's "smash-Broadway-musical-based-on-a-classic-film" and buy *Sweet Smell of Success*? This brilliantly acerbic drama stars Tony Curtis as Sidney Falco, a toadying pr flack who has to

curry favor with the frighteningly powerful J.J. Hunsecker, a Walter Winchell-type gossip columnist played by Burt Lancaster. Like *All About Eve* and *Casablanca*, it's one of the most quoted movies of all time, thanks to a nasty little screenplay by Clifford Odets and Ernest Lehman. And like the movies of Stanley Kubrick, this gem proves how cynicism in the movies stands the test of time much better than sincerity or tragedy.

Proof of Life and The Pledge (Warner Bros.; \$24.98 each)

Proof of Life is the hostage drama starring Meg Ryan and Russell Crowe. Director Taylor Hackford blamed their off-screen romance for its relatively poor box office; I'll stick to the auteur theory. *The Pledge* is far more satisfying. The third film by director Sean Penn, it's yet another admittedly stolid drama about unhappy people trapped in unhappy situations. In this one, Jack Nicholson plays a retired detective who is obsessed with snaring a serial killer of little kids. *The Pledge* is also another example of why Penn prefers directing — he's good at it.

The Apartment (MGM; \$19.98)

Billy Wilder and Jack Lemmon were one of the cinema's greatest teams and surely this sad little comedy is their best triumph. (It won five Oscars, including Best Picture.) Lemmon plays an office schmuck who lets other, more powerful employees use his apartment as an afternoon love nest. What an unsavory topic for a comedy, but the put-upon Lemmon makes his pimp-like role seem sympathetic — especially when he realizes ice-cold boss Fred MacMurray is going to be trysting with the elevator girl Lemmon has been pining for. Will he give up his dreams of Shirley MacLaine? Any decision will cost him, as a suicide attempt and other depressing plot twists make clear. Somehow, it's all extremely funny.

Marty (MGM; \$19.98)

Finally, let's end with a sleeper from another era. Ernest Borgnine stars in this quietly piercing drama about a 34-year-old Bronx butcher who falls in love with a lonely schoolteacher. According to the book "Inside Oscar" by Mason Wiley & Damien Bona, rumor had it that producer Burt Lancaster turned the TV film by Paddy Chayevsky into a feature just so he could use it as a tax write-off. Then audiences went nuts for *Marty* during test screenings. They kept the movie in art houses for months and months to give this blue-collar drama an air of class. The result? It was the first American film to win the top prize at Cannes and one of the first low-budget indie films to snare the Oscar for Best Picture. Borgnine also won an Oscar as Best Actor.

— Michael Giltz