

Kicking Up Cosmic Dust

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New York Times (1923-Current file); May 10, 2002;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2011)

pg. E1

Hayden Christensen and Natalie Portman in "Star Wars: Episode II."



FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

Kicking Up Cosmic Dust

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By A. O. SCOTT

AFTER sitting through "Star Wars: Episode II — Attack of the Clones," I'm tempted to quote an evergreen Public Enemy song: don't believe the hype. But really, belief is beside the point. The promotional machinery around the "Star Wars" franchise exists beyond fervor or skepticism; it is a fact of life. When the fifth installment in George Lucas's pop-Wagnerian cycle opens nationally on Thursday (after being shown at the first TriBeCa Film Festival on Sunday afternoon), the event will have all the spontaneity and surprise of an election day in the old Soviet Union.

Like weary Brezhnev-era Muscovites, the American moviegoing public will line up out of habit and compul-

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sion, ruefully hoping that this episode will at least be a little better than the last one, and perhaps inwardly suspecting that the whole elephantine system is rotten. Even the true believers camped out on the sidewalks with their toy light sabers (or the ones at the screening I attended who burst into applause at the appearance of the 20th Century Fox and Lucasfilm company logos) seem more dutiful than enthusiastic.

Already I can hear the equally habitual murmurs of protest: Oh, come on, lighten up! It's only a movie.

Well, for one thing, given the scale and expense (reportedly \$140 million) of the enterprise, not to mention its ability to command the money and attention of audiences around the world, there's nothing "only" about

it. And for another, while "Attack of the Clones" is many things — a two-hour-and-12-minute action-figure commercial, a demo reel heralding the latest advances in digital filmmaking, a chance for gifted actors to be handsomely paid for delivering the worst line readings of their careers — it is not really much of a movie at all, if by movie you mean a work of visual storytelling about the dramatic actions of a group of interesting characters.

Twenty-five years ago the first "Star Wars" picture, which we are now supposed to call "Episode IV — A New Hope," offered a revelatory combination of whimsy and grandeur. The big, archetypal themes were there and would emerge into sharper relief through the next two films, but they were leavened by a cheeky sense of fun grounded in Mr. Lucas's love of old serials and B-movies: The solemn drama of Luke Skywalker's Oedipal struggle

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STAR WARS

Episode II — Attack of the Clones

Directed by George Lucas; written by Mr. Lucas and Jonathan Hales; director of photography, David Tattersall; edited by Ben Burtt; music by John Williams; production designer, Gavin Boquet; produced by Rick McCallum; released by 20th Century Fox. On Sunday at 3:30 p.m. at Stuyvesant High School, 345 Chambers Street, TriBeCa, and the TriBeCa Performing Arts Center, 189 Chambers Street, as part of the concluding day of the TriBeCa Film Festival. Opening nationwide and in many foreign countries on Thursday. Running time: 132 minutes. This film is rated PG.

WITH: Hayden Christensen (Anakin Skywalker), Natalie Portman (Padmé Amidala), Ewan McGregor (Obi-Wan Kenobi), Samuel L. Jackson (Mace Windu), Ian McDiarmid (Palpatine), Christopher Lee (Count Dooku), Jimmy Smits (Senator Bail Organa), Temuera Morrison (Jango Fett), Kenny Baker (R2-D2), Anthony Daniels (C-3PO), Frank Oz (voice of Yoda) and Ahmed Best (voice of Jar Jar Binks).

Fett, the vengeful bounty hunter from the first three films.

But where are the clones? Send in the clones! Patience, young Jedi. They're already here, on a distant, storm-tossed planet, waiting for

their big climactic battle scene. First, however, you must attend to the political turmoil that threatens the stability of the republic. Separatists in far-flung solar systems, apparently in cahoots with the dark side, are causing all kinds of trouble, and the beleaguered Jedi and the fractious senate are ill equipped to contain it. This leads to some earnest palaver among the sinister chancellor Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid) and the Jedi elders, who include Samuel L. Jackson, Jimmy Smits, Ewan McGregor and Yoda, as well as assorted masked and computer-animated space knights and politicians.

Mr. McGregor, revisiting the role of Obi-Wan Kenobi and looking ever less likely to age into Sir Alec Guinness, must also undertake some intergalactic police work, trying to find those responsible for an attempt on the life of Senator Padmé Amidala (Natalie Portman), who has become a legislator after her tenure as the elected (and apparently term-limited) queen of Naboo. (Jar Jar Binks, the notorious duck-billed racial caricature from "The Phantom Menace," has also returned, accent and all. Now you may call him Senator

Binks. Whether this makes the character less offensive or more is something to ponder.)

Obi-Wan's apprentice, Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christensen), is assigned to be Padmé's bodyguard. He promptly falls in love with her, which occasions some of the most embarrassing romantic avowals in recent screen history. The gifted Anakin also manifests some of the traits that will eventually pull him over to the dark side: arrogance, a hot temper and contempt for democratic institutions. It is clear by now that the purpose of the saga is to do for Anakin/Darth Vader what Robert A. Caro has been doing for Lyndon B. Johnson, but Mr. Lucas lacks Mr. Caro's feel for human psychology and his insight into the workings of politics.

The story of a young, ambitious knight's corruption, set against a backdrop of incipient civil war, has enormous potential, but Mr. Lucas (who wrote the script with Jonathan Hales) is, at best, a haphazard storyteller. He also has lost either the will or the ability to connect with actors, and his crowded, noisy cosmos is psychologically and emotionally bar-

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Saber-rattling in space: "Star Wars: Episode II — Attack of the Clones,"

ren. Mr. Christensen and Ms. Portman are timid and stiff, and uncertain of their diction. They alternate between the august tones of high-school Shakespeareans and the suburban soap-opera naturalism of "Dawson's Creek." Only Mr. Jackson, Frank Oz (the voice of Yoda) and, later, the formidable Christopher Lee seem comfortable in their performances, perhaps because they know better than to take the proceedings too seriously.

Now is perhaps the time to say that the special effects — the scaly critters and planetary landscapes, the swordplay and the spaceship chases — demonstrate impressive polish and visual integrity. But now is also the time to say: so what? Yes, the battle scenes and the monster rallies are superior to anything in "The Mummy," "The Mummy Returns" or "The Scorpion King," but that lowbrow franchise at least has the good sense to acknowledge its silliness. "Attack of the Clones," in contrast, like "The Phantom Menace," lumbers along in the confining armor of bogus wisdom.

There are two moments, one early and one late, in which the sentimentous hokey is cast off and some of the old "Star Wars" spirit peeks out. The first is an aerial chase through traf-

fic-clogged skies, in which the great cinematic challenge of conveying flight is breathtakingly surmounted. The other is a light-saber duel between the evil Count Dooku (Mr. Lee) and Yoda. Watching the elfin, leaping Yoda mix it up with the tall, graceful British bad guy momentarily dispels the ponderous tedium that has come before, but it is too little, too late.

Given Mr. Lee's long career in horror films, the contest also recalls one of those debates that erupt among third graders about the relative prowess of fictional characters. ("No way could Batman beat up Superman. He doesn't even really have powers." "Yuh-uh, 'cause what if Batman had some Kryptonite?" "Yeah, but neither one of them could beat the Incredible Hulk.") Could Yoda beat up Dracula? Good question. But the more relevant one is whether Anakin Skywalker can beat Spider-Man. The answer, young Jedi, is in your hands.

"Star Wars: Episode II — Attack of the Clones" is rated PG (Parental guidance suggested). It has many violent scenes, none of them terribly upsetting or, for that matter, interesting.