

Film: Robots Return In 'Empire Strikes'

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New York Times (1923-Current file); May 21, 1980;

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

pg. C25

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'Star Wars' Sequel

IF George Lucas makes good on his promise to turn "Star Wars" into a parade of nine films and spend several years on the making of each of them, we may all be pretty long in the tooth before this story gets told. However, on the evidence of "The Empire Strikes Back," we won't be bored. "The Empire Strikes Back" is very much a sequel, which is to say that it expands on the first film but never outstrips it, and that it can't stand alone. But on its own terms, it's a success, because "Star Wars" was such an uncommonly hard act to follow. It's no small wonder that the first film has been followed at all.

"The Empire Strikes Back," which opens today at Loews Astor Plaza and other theaters, finds the "Star Wars" regulars retrenching for the long haul. Instead of trying to match the original film's momentum, the present effort concentrates on laying groundwork for a more extended story. So it offers hints and clues and riddles that may take eons to unravel, in exchange for the first film's happy-go-lucky humor. The jokes seem more closely geared to children this time, and there aren't nearly as many of them. Compared to its predecessor, the present film is just as polished and technically proficient, but seldom as lighthearted and seldom as much fun.

The plot, which asks more insistently to be taken seriously this time, first finds the three human principals and their two robots and one Wookiee on an ice planet, where the film's most spectacular battle scene takes place, very early in the story, because the new film takes little trouble to establish its own beginning, middle and end. This battle involves an attack by war machines that look like metal dinosaurs, and it is resolved when Luke Skywalker runs a

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, directed by Irvin Kershner; screenplay by Leigh Brackett and Lawrence Kasdan; story by George Lucas; director of photography, Peter Suschitzky; film editor, Paul Hirsch; music by John Williams; produced by Gary Kurtz; released by 20th Century-Fox, At Loews Astor Plaza, Orpheum and Murray Hill theaters. Running time: 118 minutes. This film is rated PG.

Luke Skywalker	.....	Mark Hamill
Han Solo	.....	Harrison Ford
Princess Leia	.....	Carrie Fisher
Lando Calrissian	.....	Billy Dee Williams
C-3PO	.....	Anthony Daniels
Yoda	.....	Frank Oz
Darth Vader	.....	David Prowse
Chewbacca	.....	Peter Mayhew
R2D2	.....	Kenny Baker
Ben (Obi-Wan) Kenobi	.....	Alec Guinness
Boba Fett	.....	Jeremy Bulloch
Lando's Aide	.....	John Hollis
Chief Ugnaught	.....	Jack Purvis
Snow Creature	.....	Des Webb
Voice of Emperor	.....	Clive Revill

tiny cord around the legs of one of these behemoths, causing it to trip.

Aside from featuring some of the new film's fanciest special effects, this sequence has a welcome touch of the old "Star Wars" impishness, which is strangely absent from "The Empire Strikes Back" too much of the time. The first film's offhanded gags have virtually been cast in bronze; the comic shabbiness of all the space gadgetry, for example, has been expanded from a casual giggle to a full-scale running gag. And the dialogue, fueled with a heightened spirit of adventure the first time around, is more wooden now. Luke Skywalker and a fellow warrior, talking on the eve of a battle: "Right now I feel like I could take on the whole Empire myself." "I know what you mean."

Irvin Kershner, who directed the present film, and Mr. Lucas, who produced it and was an adviser, have made the only sensible choice between the alternatives of imitating "Star Wars" or trying to outdistance it: they aim for a little of both. So some of the space-flight sequences or other special effects recall the first film, and others,



Anthony Daniels as C-3PO

like the visit with Yoda, are marked departures. Yoda is a two-foot gnome — he looks like the kind of tiny figure one might find in a novelty shop, with an inscription reading "Have a Lousy Day" — and his pointy, mobile ears are one of the movie's great marvels. Just as clever, and just as noticeably different from the first film's highlights, are a race through an asteroid shower and a mysterious cavern that licks its chops as our heroes zoom away.

Much of the dialogue concerns Luke Skywalker and his sacred mission, the full shape of which will not be made

clear until a future episode. But Luke, as played by Mark Hamill, can be a ponderous fellow, and this time Harrison Ford's Han Solo steals the show. Mr. Ford slips easily into the film's comic-book conversational style, and he also brings a real air of tragedy to Han's fate, which is another thing we won't exactly know about until next time.

So he goes to what may or may not be his doom with a grand show of nobility, flinging his head back and staring bravely ahead. For this alone he seems to deserve Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher), with whom he has a flirtation fraught with pre-adolescent sarcasm. ("Kiss you? I'd sooner kiss a Wookiee!" "That can be arranged.") Princess Leia, bright-eyed and snappish as ever, is seen fixing equipment and driving the spaceship from time to time, as if someone were concerned with offering positive role models for children in the audience.

Accordingly, it's too bad that the character played by Billy Dee Williams, the story's only black principal (with the possible exception of Darth Vader, whose voice is supplied most effectively by James Earl Jones), is exaggeratedly unctuous, untrustworthy and loaded with jive.

"The Empire Strikes Back" is often grainier and grimmer looking than its predecessor. It's also considerably more violent, what with one shot of a space-creature's intestines and a couple of bloodless amputations that no one seems to mind. Luke Skywalker, for instance, loses his hand in one sequence, and gets a new hand soon after, without even complaining about his injury. Perhaps small children in the audience will find this hard to understand. I know I did.

"The Empire Strikes Back" is rated PG ("Parental Guidance Suggested"). It contains a few violent episodes, as mentioned above.