

# In the Beginning, the Future

By JANET MASLIN

*New York Times* (1923-Current file); May 19, 1999;

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

pg. E1

FILM REVIEW

## *In the Beginning, the Future*

**STAR WARS: THE PHANTOM MENACE**

Things look dicey for the new "Star Wars" crew when their undersea craft is threatened by a large aquatic critter. But then an even mightier beast appears, and it swallows up the first. "There's always a bigger fish," observes the Jedi sage Qui-Gon Jinn, speaking for more than marine life on the planet Naboo, where the sequence takes place. That description also sums up the earthly atmosphere into which George Lucas's pathologically anticipated "Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace" arrives today.

Mr. Lucas's new opus is only a movie. This revelation has touched off shock waves in a cultural climate (much stranger than Naboo's) where anything short of the biggest, splashiest and most moneymaking qualifies as a galling flop. And the reception of "The Phantom Menace" has not been helped by spoilsport tie-ins that make it (according to an item in *The Hollywood Reporter*) "the first film that will make money even if nobody buys a ticket to see it." Nobody, not even camp followers ready to turn this souped-up "Star Wars" into the second coming of the Grateful Dead, wants to be sick and tired of a film before it hits the screen.

But stripped of hype and breathless expectations, Mr. Lucas's first installment offers a happy surprise:

it's up to snuff. It sustains the gee-whiz spirit of the series and offers a swashbuckling extragalactic getaway, creating illusions that are even more plausible than the kitchen-raiding raptors of "Jurassic Park." While the human stars here are reduced to playing action figures, they are upstaged by amazing backdrops and hordes of crazily lifelike space beings as the Lewis Carroll in Mr. Lucas is given free rein. The "Star Wars" franchise was funnier and scrappier when it was new. But it simply wasn't capable of this.

There are film series that grow palpably desperate for inspiration as they age, but "Star Wars" isn't one of them. If the real Force at work is Mr. Lucas's boyish belief in the sci-fi universe he has created, then it hasn't dimmed. It's not hard to believe that the story of "The Phantom Menace," a genesis for the trio of films we already know, was always on a back burner somewhere. Or that the hundreds of design and computer-graphics artists who have brought Mr. Lucas's imaginings to life here really believe this epic fable and think you should, too. In the beginning, according to "The Phantom Menace," there were noble Jedi ("the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy") and a whole lot

*Continued on Page 5*

Forces of good and evil in "The Phantom Menace," another "Star Wars" movie defending old-fashioned heroism: Yoda, a puppet character, far left, who has the voice of Frank Oz; Natalie Portman as Queen Amidala of the planet Naboo, and Jake Lloyd as little Anakin Skywalker, who grows up to be Darth Vader.



Blocked due to copyright.  
See full page image or  
microfilm.

# In the Beginning, the Future: 'Star Wars' as a Swashbuckling Genesis Story

Continued From First Arts Page

of trouble-shooting to be done. Though Mr. Lucas's screenplay carries far more baggage in the form of interplanetary turf wars and highly ceremonial political wrangling, the basics will suffice. What matters is that the series' sense of good and evil is still quaintly naive, just as its notion of heroism remains rooted in movie traditions much less nihilistic than today's. The big battles are crisply staged and sadism-free.

## Appealing To the Inner Child

It goes without saying that those scenes also work hard to have kiddie appeal. "You mean *I* get to come with you in your starship?" exclaims pint-sized Anakin Skywalker, the prepubescent who will grow up to be Darth Vader and who is the new film's most pandering creation. Played in conventionally cute style by towheaded Jake Lloyd and outfitted as a junior Luke Skywalker, Anakin seems to be here mostly to try out the film's many toys. Only in the bland conception of Anakin is "The Phantom Menace" really undermined by its own innate boyishness. There's no hint of the future in him, though the audience knows this is one high-pitched voice that's really going to change.

In a notable change of pace, the earnest Swedish actress Pernilla August ("The Best Intentions") goes from playing Ingmar Bergman's mother to Darth's, as a "Star Wars" madonna nobly raising her boy on the desert planet Tatooine. Unlike much of what is seen in "The Phantom Menace," Tatooine is familiar from the first films, but it has been brightened to suit the new film's visual brio. The rogues' gallery on Tatooine is also new and improved, led by the blue, winged Watto, the

alien most skilled at upstaging the film's humans.

The showpiece pod-racing sequence on Tatooine ("Ben-Hur" with jet engines) is a model of the film's cheerful ingenuity. The stadium is huge and filled with excitable creatures. Anakin's chief rival has flesh dreadlocks and a wicked grin. The course sends racer's hurtling through a video-game Monument Valley. Each racer is of a different species, just as the pods are differently designed and make different noises; look closely, and each has a tiny flag to match. Somebody has even bothered to come up with Tatooine ideograms that appear on the pods' in-

strument gauges. As if all that weren't enough, Jabba the Hutt makes a humorous cameo appearance from the stands.

Without excessive clutter, "The Phantom Menace" stays that busy in each of its exotic settings. The terrific design team led by Doug Chiang has effectively put global culture in a blender and come up with what is still the series' ace in the hole: a viewer-friendly fusion of the bizarre and the familiar. Just as the creature designs show off a playful knowledge of zoology, the space cities jumble and recycle earthly architecture with mischievous abandon. One of the real jaw-droppers, a spectacular

underwater bubble city, looks for all the world like an elaborate Art Nouveau lamp.

## New Creatures, Old Notions

The filmmakers could have been smarter about throwaway references when it came to the ethnic hallmarks of their creatures. Some of the most unsightly villains sound embarrassingly like dated stereotypes from the sinister Orient. And lop-eared, clownish Jar Jar Binks is made noxious by his obsequious Ca-

ribbean-sounding patois. Only when it comes to the new Darth Maul does the film have no toes to step on since his Dévil makeup and horned head speak for themselves. The martial arts expert Ray Park makes him a villain you'll love to hate.

The other actors are often sandbagged by the physical demands of their roles. As Qui-Gon Jinn, Liam Neeson carries himself gallantly and gamely converses with creatures ("Patience, my blue friend"), but he can't make it look easy. Ewan McGregor, a naturally dashing actor, is stymied by the flat and passive character of young Obi-Wan Kenobi, though his echoes of Sir Alec Guin-

## STAR WARS

### Episode I — The Phantom Menace

Written and directed by George Lucas; director of photography, David Tattersall; edited by Paul Martin Smith; music by John Williams; production designer, Gavin Bocquet; creatures effects by Nick Dudman; visual effects supervisors, Dennis Muren and John Knoll; visual effects art director, Doug Chiang; animation supervisor, Rob Coleman; produced by Rick McCallum; released by 20th Century Fox. Running time: 132 minutes. This film is rated PG-13.

WITH: Liam Neeson (Qui-Gon Jinn), Ewan McGregor (Obi-Wan Kenobi), Natalie Portman (Queen Amidala), Jake Lloyd (Anakin Skywalker), Ian McDiarmid (Senator Palpatine), Pernilla August (Shmi Skywalker), Ahmed Best (Jar Jar Binks), Frank Oz (voice of Yoda), Samuel L. Jackson (Mace Windu) and Ray Park (Darth Maul).

ness are uncanny at times. Natalie Portman, under the weight of gaudily breathtaking costumes, becomes a one-woman doll collection as Naboo's Queen Amidala. (Who can fail to love this story's character and place names?) But she and young Mr. Lloyd, as the future parents of Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia, are often wooden as can be.

Just as "Star Wars" became one of the most widely imitated pop phenomena of its time, "The Phantom Menace" looks like a template for a new generation of computer-generated science fiction. And unlike "The Matrix," another film liable to spawn imitations, it is sweetly, unfashionably benign. Whether dreaming up blow-dryer-headed soldiers who move in lifelike formation or a planet made entirely of skyscrapers, Mr. Lucas still champions wondrous visions over bleak ones and sustains his love of escapist fun. There's no better tour guide for a trip to other worlds. Bon voyage.

"Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It includes battle scenes that are as good-hearted as battle scenes can be.

Blocked due to copyright.  
See full page image or  
microfilm.

The Jedi master Qui-Gon Jinn, played by Liam Neeson, left, talks to the junk dealer Watto as young Anakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd) looks on.

Keith Hamshire/Lucasfilm