

Some Surprises in That Galaxy Far Away

By A. O. SCOTT

CANNES, France, May 15 — With “Episode III — Revenge of the Sith,” the “Star Wars” cycle at last comes to an end — or rather to a middle, since the second trilogy, of which this is the final installment, comes before the first in faraway-galaxy history even though it comes later in the history of American popular culture. Like many others whose idea of movies was formed by (and to some extent against) the galactically later, terrestrially earlier “Star Wars” trilogy, I was disappointed by “The Phantom Menace” and “Attack of the Clones.” So I approached the recent press screening of “Episode III” in New York warily, and perhaps a little wearily, though to balance my own trepidation I brought along two fans whose enthusiasm in 2005 easily matched my own in 1977, when I was a little older than they are now and when “Star Wars” — oh, all right, “Episode IV — A New Hope” — landed in my hometown.

I was anticipating, at least, a measure of relief: finally, this extravagant, ambitious enterprise, a dominant fact of our collective cultural life for nearly 30 years, would be over. But I was hoping, a little anxiously, for more. Would George Lucas at last restore some of the old grandeur and excitement to his up-to-the-minute Industrial Light and Magic? Would my grown-up longing for a return to the wide-eyed enthusiasm of my own moviegoing boyhood — and my undiminished hunger for entertainment with sweep and power as well as noise and dazzle — be satisfied by “Revenge of



The Jedi master Yoda, voiced by Frank Oz, makes a return appearance in the new film.

the Sith”?

The answer is yeth.

This is by far the best film in the more recent trilogy, and also the best of the four episodes Mr. Lucas has directed. That’s right (and my inner 11-year-old shudders as I type this): it’s better than “Star Wars.”

“Revenge of the Sith,” which had its premiere here yesterday at the Cannes International Film Festival, ranks with “The Empire Strikes Back” (directed by Irvin Kershner in 1980) as the richest and most challenging movie in the cycle. It comes closer than any of the other episodes to realizing Mr. Lucas’s frequently reiterated dream of bringing the combination of vigorous spectacle and mythic resonance he found in the films of Akira Kurosawa into American commercial cinema.

Star Wars: Episode III — Revenge of the Sith

Opens on Thursday nationwide.

To be sure, some of the shortcomings of “Phantom Menace” (1999) and “Attack of the Clones” (2002) are still in evidence, and Mr. Lucas’s indifference to two fairly important aspects of moviemaking — acting and writing — is remarkable. Hayden Christensen plays Anakin Skywalker’s descent into evil as a series of petulant bad moods. Natalie Portman, as Senator (formerly Queen) Padmé Amidala, to whom Anakin is secretly married, does not have the range to reconcile the complicated and conflicting demands of love and political leadership. Even the more assured performers — Samuel L. Jackson as the Jedi master Mace Windu, Ewan McGregor as Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jimmy Smits as Senator Bail Organa (note the surname) — are constrained by their obligation to speechify. Mr. Lucas, who wrote the script (reportedly with the uncredited assistance of Tom Stoppard), is not one to imply a theme if he can stuff it into a character’s mouth. Ian McDiarmid, as Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, who transforms from a rancid political hack into a ruthless totalitarian before our eyes, gives the most powerful performance; Yoda, the spry green Jedi master voiced by Frank Oz, some of his finest work in this film does. (R2-D2 is also in fine form).

Anyway, nobody ever went to a “Star Wars”

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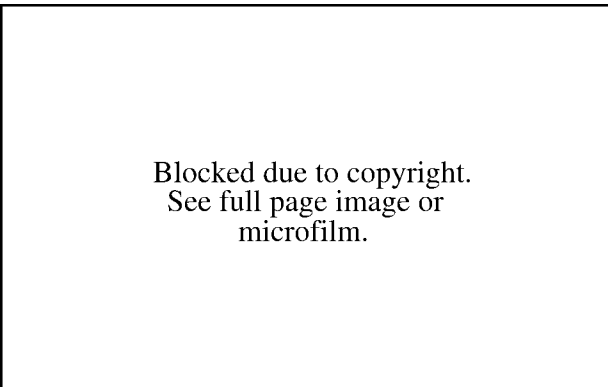
Desert Island Fantasy With a Tent and a Cause

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ture event staged in Nevada, in one of the country's most remote places. (Governors Island is only 800 yards from the tip of Manhattan.)

Civil War re-enactment was the guiding idea in large part because Ms. Smith grew up in Manassas, Va., and has always been fascinated by the obsessive dedication to authenticity of Civil War re-enactors. But many of the 40 or so tents, shacks and teepees scattered across a field near an old fort where the event took place ignored the theme altogether. One looked like a ship, and out front sat a man in a striped prison uniform playing a guitar and singing the blues song "Caldonia." In another, a large trampoline served as the floor, and a third looked like a Day-Glo maypole.

Others did toy with the military idea, mostly in a nonpolitical way. Gary Graham, a fashion designer, made ghostly military uniforms and enlisted his friends Charles Beyer and Brianna Espitalier to dress in



Using a Civil War re-enactment theme, artists made their statements.

them with gory makeup. A woman sat inside the tent with votive candles, reading "On Being Ill" by Virginia Woolf. While some of the tents and costumes seemed like leftovers from a school play, Mr. Graham's

were serious.

"Hair and makeup people came over on the first ferry this morning at 7:30 — we had a bugle call to get up," said Mr. Beyer, who, like many of the artists, slept in their tents on

Friday night.

Across the way, students from the Rhode Island School of Design, under the direction of Liz Collins, a professor, put up a tent filled with knitting machines, where they cranked out a huge abstract red-white-and-blue cotton banner during the afternoon. Julia Bryan-Wilson, another professor, said that earlier in the day, the knitters were approached by a man who had come to the island thinking there was going to be a real Civil War re-enactment. "He was just really confused," she said. "When I said that we were fighting for a sovereign nation of knitters, he didn't like that at all."

If he did not like that, then he probably hated the tent run by the artists Nicole Eisenman and A. L. Steiner. It included a bench where passersby were summoned to kneel, confess their sins through a megaphone and be whipped with a leather belt. "We're the negative energy vortex here," Ms. Eisenman said. "We give a home to everyone's yang. It has to go someplace, so it comes here."