

# ENTERTAINMENT



## Star Bores:

### Love Affair With 'Star Wars' Needs Counseling

By SEAN SMITH

First loves are usually remembered fondly and all others who come after pale in comparison. That's how I feel about the new installment of "Star Wars."

Back in 1978, when the first "Star Wars" appeared on movie screens, I was 9 years old. I remember standing in long lines five times just to see this film, and each time as the curtain went up and John Williams' score pumped through the speakers, I erupted in spontaneous cheers of delight.

From that point on I was immersed in and in love with the beautiful mythic world George Lucas created. I was reassured when good trumped evil and took solace in the fact that the rebellion destroyed the fascist authority of Darth Vader. I was so in love with the first "Star Wars" that you couldn't drag me away from it until the last credit rolled and the last note of the score was struck. My bedroom was festooned with "Star Wars" paraphernalia posters donned the walls, light sabers were tucked neatly away in my toy box, and action figures, X-Wing fighters and Tie Fighters were always standing at the ready.

When "The Empire Strikes Back" was released, I was equally enamored, but some of the polish had worn thin. By "Return of the Jedi" my love affair was coming to a close; damn those maniacal Ewoks who were the '80s equivalent of Jar Jar Binks. In 1999, I eagerly awaited my forlorn and lost love, but like old lovers who try to rekindle the flames of young love I was sorely disappointed, especially with the trite story, the super annoying Jar Jar Binks and the overuse of digital effects.

But like a scorned partner I won't give up. "Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones," although better than "Phantom Menace" was, and it pains me to say this, awful. Leaving the theater I felt cheated, even ripped off. My immediate feeling was, "Wow that's nearly three hours of my life I won't get back." This film suffers from a bad script, horrible acting and an impressive but overwhelming reliance on digital effects.

The story picks up 10 years after the end of the last installment. The Republic is facing an attack from a rogue senatorial faction who have hired a bounty hunter to assassinate former queen and now Senator Padmé Amidala. Natalie Portman returns as Amidala and her performance plays as if she reading directly from the script. Lifeless dialogue, awful one-liners and the strategic removal of her clothing throughout the movie leave her character a flat, dull piece of eye candy whom I kept hoping would be assassinated, putting her and the audience out of their misery (knowing that the future mother of Luke and Leia couldn't be disposed of added to my disappointment).

Unfortunately Amidala has a bodyguard, the teenage Padwon (Jedi in training) Anakin Skywalker who is ordered to protect his charge from the evils of the world. Hayden Christensen as the 18 year old Anakin gives a performance only Madam Tussauds would be proud of. His annoying dialogue is only a little better than his doe-eyed, James Dean wannabe pout. Christensen might actually know

how to act but even the best actors can't deliver lines like, "I don't like sand. It's coarse, rough and irritating and it gets everywhere Not like you (to Amidala) so smooth and soft" with any confidence. Are we supposed to take this stuff seriously?

During even the most touching moments of the film, I found myself choking back laughter. When Anakin's mom Shmi (remember her, the one they left in slavery on Tatooine. Apparently the Jedi council or Queen Amidala couldn't afford to free Ani's mom) dies in his arms in the most pathetic death scene ever put on film, a scene that makes high school productions of "Romeo and Juliet" look well acted, I nearly burst out in hysterical laughter. Again, these horribly overacted scenes are less the actors' fault and largely the fault of writer/director Lucas, who like the clone warriors in this film seems to be on auto pilot.

After long stretches of bad acting and horrible dialogue the special effects and action scenes are a welcome respite. In fact many of the action sequences, especially the climactic battle at the end of the film, are visually stunning. But they too become old fast. Shot digitally rather than on traditional film the CG effects move seamlessly, but they are still distracting; there is something not real about them. In the original "Star Wars" the models and sets had a depth that made them feel real. In "Attack of the Clones," many scenes play like a well-produced video game (can you say marketing and licensing genius?); they're flat and too blurred to be real.

There is hope however. Ewan McGregor's Obi-Wan Kenobi is the shining bright spot in this film. In "Phantom Menace," McGregor seemed a bit intimidated by taking over the role of the venerable Obi-Wan from Alec Guinness. In "Attack of the Clones" McGregor is more relaxed and seems to be enjoying his tenure as the Master Jedi. Unfortunately, Lucas doesn't allow McGregor the freedom he needs to have fun with the character and reins him in with stifling one-liners. Even his best line, "Anakin, you'll be the death of me" is delivered more for portent than playfulness.

Finally, you know you're in for a long movie when one of the best performance is given by a digital character. Yoda, not a muppet this time, but a fully fleshed out digital character, steals the movie in his climactic "Crouching Tiger" meets Bruce Lee fight scene with Christopher Lee's character (another scene stealer), the evil Count Dooku.

Here we glimpse some of the spark and humor from the first film, unless of course Lucas doesn't want us to laugh at Yoda's kung fu mastery. If that's the case than this scene is just further evidence of a downhill spiral.

Oh to be 10 years old again and inspired by mediocrity. If you're a "Star Wars" fan, this film is a must. The pacing is better, the inside jokes and references to the first film are done well and the backstory is somewhat interesting. It's entertaining, although only if you know the story. If you're not a fan, stay home and read a good book. This film can't stand on its own.

## MOVIE REVIEW: He Said/He Said

### From a Distance, Lucas' 'Attack of the Clones' Looks Pretty Good

By PETE BROOKS

In preparing this review, I ended up seeing "Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones" twice; once from the fifth row, and once from the back row. The difference between the two experiences is indicative of this film's strengths, as well as its flaws.

I made the mistake of seeing it the first time with my fellow critic Sean Smith (see column to left), from right down in front of the theater.

To his credit, Sean has more fun hating bad movies than most people have enjoying good ones. And sitting there in Sean's sphere of influence, I began to see the movie through his eyes.

Uh oh.

"Attack of the Clones" doesn't really hold up under such withering scrutiny.

In fact, everything that isn't created in the computer is kind of a shambles. Even talented actors like Samuel L. Jackson as Jedi master Mace Windu, and Natalie Portman — who can act, but doesn't here — get swallowed up in the perfunctory staging and filming of the live action elements.

And the writing is pitiful, even by sci-fi standards.

The parts of the dialogue I could hear over Sean's snorts and snickers were indeed lame to the point of being groan-inducing.

The romance between Hayden Christensen's Anakin and Portman's Padmé Amidala suffers the most from this, and is the main drag on the flick. As structurally important to the story as their fledgling romance is, it's a shame it's turned out as completely unconvincing as it has. Amidala goes from being creeped out by Anakin's advances to being deeply enamored with apparently nothing in between.

Oy.

To make matters worse, there was more sexual chemistry between cartoon time travelers Sherman and Mr. Peabody than there is between these two pretty kids.

Even "Star Wars" empressario George Lucas, however, couldn't direct bad performances out of his trio of British thespians. Ewan McGregor as kindly Jedi sage Obi-Wan Kenobi, Christopher Lee as evil Count Dooku and Ian McDiarmid as sneaky Senator Palpatine rise way above the material and direction.

God bless the Brits.

In the end, though ... I really didn't want to pan this movie. That's Sean's job.

I decided I had to give it another try. Lean over the plate and take one for the team, as it were.

The second time around, I arrived after the trailers had started and slipped into the

very last row of a crowded 9 a.m. screening.

Suddenly, it was whole different picture.

It turns out that although "Attack of the Clones" doesn't really hold up under close scrutiny, from a distance it dazzles.

It's like a badly written comic book, that happens to be drawn by the best cartoonist in the world.

I'd buy that book anyhow, just to drool over the awesome graphics.

George Lucas wrings every ounce of bang out of his buck in the digital sequences, which right there is 90 percent of the movie.

The planets and cityscapes alone are worth the price of a matinee admission. The level of detail is amazing, with each environment more fully realized than the one before.

The costumes are baroque with excess, the principal actors quite attractive (despite having McGregor dolled up like Tab Hunter from a '50s Biblical epic) and the pacing is MTV-quick.

Even most of the slow parts (Anakin and Amidala: bla bla bla bla... zzzzzzz) have enough effects razzle dazzle to keep one from heading for the concession stand — or the exit.

I even began to understand the story, after 25 years of being steeped in it:

It turns out the hapless Republic of this trilogy is the evil Empire of the first trilogy. In "Attack of the Clones," the Good Guys are selling out, and becoming the Bad Guys at the same time as Anakin is becoming Vader.

It is shamelessly fascinating to watch Jedi knights riding to the rescue with the cavalry ... of Imperial Stormtroopers, who are the Clones the full title of this movie refers to.

From the last row, it all began to become very clear. Lucas can't write dialogue or direct carbon-based lifeforms to save his life, but boy can he interpret myth!

(A warning to the politically correct out there, however: If the Jar Jar Binks character offended you in "Phantom Menace," you're really gonna hate him in this one. In spite of having hardly any screen time at all, he's dumber than ever, and his stupidity is the catalyst for catastrophic events sure to follow in Star Wars III.)

So if you haven't already, you ought to go see "...Clones" in the theater for the sheer gee-whiz of it all. Just make sure you sit in the back of the room — and far, far away from Sean.

