'Phantom Menace' provides entertaining visual feast

Encounter: Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson, left) tells young Anakin Sky-walker (Jake Lloyd) and Jedi Apprentice Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) about a near deadly encounter as droid R2-D2 looks on.



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BY HUGH GALLAGHER STAFF WRITER brallagher@oc.homecomm.net

The second coming is at hand. The long wait is over. "Star Wars" is back.

"Star Wars' is back. George Lucas' opic saga is the most anticipated movie event of the year. Fans have been standing in lines, waiting overnight in parking lots, offering money to others to stand in line so they can be among the first to see "Episode I: The Phantom Menace."

What they'll see is a state-of-the-art visual and aural feast of the mind-boggling possibilities of digital film making.

digital film making.

Those seeking revelations here or rich spiritual insights are best advised to look elsewhere. Lues makes use of world myths and religious symbols in the way that poets and writers have done for centuries, but he adds little to our understanding of what those myths mean to our spiritual growth.

myths mean to our spiritual growth.

It's also not great drama, but it is a great time.

From the start Lucas' goal was to recreate the movie serials he enjoyed as a child. He thought, what if the makers of those serials had the money to match their imaginations? Lucas had the money.

imaginations? Lives a nat undersomery.

The first three films, numbers IV-VI in the the serial, were an international sensation. In the 20 years since the last film, generations of children have been introduced to the "Star Wars" phenomeno. It is a part of our identity.

Those movies were rellicking

phenomenon. It is a part of our identity.
Those movies were rollicking good entertainment full of dazzling special effects, appealing characters, derring-do, elily jokes and, yes, underneath, a mythic story suggesting some biblical importance in Luke Skywalkers growth into manhood and his showdown with Darth Vader, nemesis of the universe and his father.
Now, as Lucas always planned, we go back to discover how Anakin Skywalker, Jedi knight,

went over to the "dark side" to become the epitome of ovil Darth Vader.

"Phantom Menace" tolls a complicated political tale but in a way that would appeal to children, with a bright, adventurous child at the center of the action and a lot of silly, schoolyard humor mixed with the numerous high-tech battle scenes.

The story, for all its complexity, is thin. The humor often falls flat or becomes tiresome. And, most serious of all, there isn's a character to match the reckless Han Sole. It all seems a bit heavy.

But, admit it, you want to see this movie. And you will be grandly entertained.

In a galaxy far, for away, an

But, admit it, you want to see this movie. And you will be grandly entertained.

In a galaxy far, far away, an ovil senator in the giant Republic is working with the Trade Federation to threaten his own small planet, Naboo, ruled by young elected Queen Amidala (Natabie Pedrama). The Federation has set up a blockade and threatens an invasion of its droid warriors if the queen doesn't sign a trade agreement that would ruin her planet.

Two Jed knights, Qui-Gon Jin (Liam Neeson) and his approntice, the young Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor), have come to negotiate a peace, as the Jedis are the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy.

Of course, their efforts fail and they must rush the queen to the Rapublic's headquarters on the city planet of Coruscant to argue her case. On the way their ship takes fuel on the remote Tatooine. Here on this desert planet they encounter a remarkable and gifted 9-year-old boy alave, Anakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd), whom Qui-Gon is conviced is the One, the person destined to balance the Force.

Two familiar rifends are introduced, the brave little droid R2-D2 and Anakin's droid in progress, C-3PO, without his golden skin. But comic relief is provided by an odd creature, part rabbit, antelops and lizard, Jar Jar Binks, who speaks in a

woird almost Jamaican patois.
The computer generated character is given voice and action by Ahmed Best. He's initially funny but then gets to be irritating.
A race scene that sets up Anakin's freedom, several massed battle scenes and the lightsabor duels are all well staged. But even more impressive are the imaginative recreations of several distinct cultures. Each is convincing, from the Mediterranean-like Naboo to the steel and glass Coruscant to the Saharan Tatooine. And the many bizarre animals and humanoids and space ships are also interesting. Credit Westland John Glean graduate Doug Chiang, the film's concept designer, for many of these excellent special effects.

Another friend makes his flether

John Glenn granuare Long Cargang, the film's concept designer; for many of these excellent specifical effects.

Another friend makes his first" appearance, the wise little Jedl Master Yoda (voiced by Frank' Oz). It is Yoda who gives first warning that something isn't equito right with the amiable, energetic young Anakin.

Neeson is impressive and seems to enjoy playing a Jedi! He is strong, soft voiced but deteromined. But he doesn't have the youth or snarl of Harrison Ford's Han Solo. Ewan McGregor is Makes and stiff as Obi-Wan, as if antief pating Alec Guinness' performance too closely without allowing for some youthful energo. The young leads are especially good. As all "Star Wars' fans know, the young queen and Anakin will become the parents of Luke and Princess Leia. Natalie Portman projects the right amount of forthright courage that her daughter will carry on. Jake Lloyd is not only a cute Anakin but a spirited and intelligent one as well.

"Star Wars' has never been great science fiction. But for popeor munching, eye-popping, let's-go-to-a-movice entertainment, Lucas delivers again.



Drama: Elsa (Cher, left) and Georgie (Lily Tomlin) join the English ladies known as "Scorpioni" who live in Florence tive in Florence on the eve of Italy's entry into World War II in "Tea With Mussolini."

'Tea With Mussolini' tells heartwarming, well-played tale

BY KEELY WYGONIK STAPP WRITER kwygonik@os.homecomm.net

"Tea With Mussolini" is a very nice movie and not what you'd expect from the title. Yes, there is a scene where Lady Hester (Maggie Smith) and her nephew Wilfred (Paul Chequer) really do have tea with Mussolini (Claudio Spadaro), but that's not what this movie is about

about.
"Tea with Musselini" is a

"Toa with Mussolini" is a heartwarming tale of friendship and coming-of-age that takes place in Florence just before and during World War II.

Mussolini is the premier who makes the trains run on time. He hasn't gone to war with England yet, or joined Hitter.

Lady Hester is part of a group of British expatriates, which film director France Zeffirelli calls the "Scorpioni." They dress as if they're in England and even have tea at 4 p.m.

The film is based on Zeffirelli's childhood in England. His intent was to tell a story that "would be a mixture of real and imagined events."

events."
English novelist and playwright John Mortimer researched the ladies of Florence, and the "tea" with Musselini was partly inspired by an event that actually did take place. Violet Trefusis, an English

intellectual who lived in villa outside Florence, met Mussolini. The film revolves around 7-year-old Luca Innocenti, born out of wedlock and orphaned by his mother. Unable to bear the thought of him growing up in an orphanage, Mary Wallace (Joan Plowright) who works for Luca's father, becomes his surrogate mother and tutor.

She introduces Luca to her family of friends who share responsibility for helping him become the British gentleman his reluctant father wants him to be. Arabella (Judi Dench) who has little talent but fashions herself to be an artist, teaches Luca about art. Wallace teaches him about theater.

The group also includes Georgie (Lily Tomlin), an American archeologist who prefers women to men, and Elsa (Cher), a former Ziegfield dancer, an American of Jowish descent who deals in modern art.

American of Jowish descent who deals in modern art.
Generous to a fault, Elsa adores Lady Hoster, who can't stand her, and the other women who become Luca's family.
Eccentric and independent, the women have adopted Florence as their own. They refuse to leave, even as the cloud of war hangs tentatively over Italy.

tentatively over Italy.
When tensions begin to heat
up in Florence, Lady Hester
decides to go to Rome, because

"Mussolini has no idea of whith's going on. He assures Lady Hester that you have nothing to fear. Whatever happens you will always be under my protection. You have my word."

Of course it's a lie, and the women are sent to San Gimignano in Tuscany, Luca is sent to Austria by his father to become the perfect German gentleman.

As the war unfolds, the women are held captive but not harmed. Luca, now 17, returns to help.

Luca, now 17, returns to help them.

There's suspense, romance, and jealously rears its ugly head. Elsa's life is in danger, and Luca's forced to make some very difficult decisions.

"Tae with Mussolini" has its share of war scenes, none of them gory.

They say you never know how strong a woman is until she gets into het water. The women in this movie — Cher, Dench, Plowright, Smith and Tomlin — certainly prove they're capable of making lemonade when life gives them lemons.

The only disappointment was the ending credits. Underneath each character is a National Lampoonish certoon of what

each character is a National Lampoonish cartoon of what happened to them. It kind of takes away from the drama and spectacle that is "Tea with Mus-solini."