

MOVIES

'Phantom Menace' provides entertaining visual feast

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



KEVIN MAZUR

By HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER
hgallagher@ec.homedomain.net

The second coming is at hand. The long wait is over. "Star Wars" is back. George Lucas' epic saga is the most anticipated movie event of the year. Fans have been standing in lines, waiting overnight in parking lots, offering money to those 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.

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

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

Those movies were rollicking good entertainment full of dazzling special effects, appealing characters, derring-do, silly jokes and, yes, underneath, a mythic story suggesting some biblical importance in Luke Skywalker's growth into manhood and his showdown with Darth Vader, the despoiler 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 evil Darth Vader.

"Phantom Menace" tells 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 falls flat or becomes tiresome. And, most serious of all, there isn't a character to match the reckless Han Solo. It all seems a bit heavy.

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

In a galaxy far, far away, an evil senator in the giant Republic is working with the Trade Federation to threaten his own small planet, Naboo, ruled by young elected Queen Amidala (Natalie Portman). 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 Jedi knights, Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) and his apprentice, the young Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor), have come to negotiate a peace, as the Jedi are the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy.

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

Two familiar friends 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, antelope and lizard, Jar Jar Binks, who speaks in a

weird 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 lightsaber 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 humanoid and space ships are also interesting. Credit West and John Glenn graduate Doug Chiang, the film's concept designer, for many of these excellent special effects.

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

Neeson is impressive and seems to enjoy playing a Jedi. He is strong, soft voiced but determined. But he doesn't have the youth or snarl of Harrison Ford's Han Solo. Ewan McGregor is also stiff as Obi-Wan, as if anticipating Alec Guinness' performance too closely without allowing for some youthful energy.

he will be a key figure in the next two episodes, either he or Lucas will have to reconsider how this part is played.

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 popcorn munching, eye-popping, let's-go-to-a-movie entertainment, Lucas delivers again.

GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

National Amusements Showcase Cinemas Phantom Menace I-1.4 2150 N. Oakdale Rd. Between University & Walton Blvd 248-375-2660 Bargain Matinee Daily All Shows until 6 pm Continuous Show Daily Late Shows Wed-Thurs, Fri, Sat. NP DENOTES NO PASS NP A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (PG13) NP ELECTION (R) NP THE MATRIX (R) NP THE MURPHY (PG13) NP ENTERTAINMENT (PG13) NP LIFE (R) NEVER BEEN KISSED (PG13) THE OUT OF TOWNERS (PG13) THE MATRIX (R) DOUG'S 1ST MOVIE (G) SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE (R) ANALYZE THIS (R) CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES	Phantom Menace I-1.4 2150 N. Oakdale Rd. Between University & Walton Blvd 248-375-2660 Bargain Matinee Daily All Shows until 6 pm Continuous Show Daily Late Shows Wed-Thurs, Fri, Sat. NP DENOTES NO PASS NP A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (PG13) NP ELECTION (R) NP THE MATRIX (PG13) NP ENTERTAINMENT (PG13) NP LIFE (R) NEVER BEEN KISSED (PG13) THE OUT OF TOWNERS (PG13) THE MATRIX (R) DOUG'S 1ST MOVIE (G) SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE (R) ANALYZE THIS (R) CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES	Star Southfield 12 Mile between Telegraph and Northland 248-333-STAR 248-333-STAR No one under age 6 admitted for PG13 & R rated films after 6 pm FOR SHOWTIMES AND TO PURCHASE TICKETS BY PHONE CALL 248-333-2222 WWW.SOUTHFIELDCINEMA.COM NP THE MURPHY (PG13) NP A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (PG13) NP TEA WITH MUSSOLINI (PG) NP ELECTION (R) NP ENTERTAINMENT (PG13) NP LIFE (R) NP PUSHING TNN (R) NP NEVER BEEN KISSED (PG13) GO (R) THE MATRIX (R) ANALYZE THIS (R) CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES	United Artists Cinemas Township 14 Located Adjacent to Home Depot 1400 N. of the intersection of 14 1400 N. of the intersection of 14 248-968-5881 All Shows Seating High Back Reclining Chair Seats Two-Day Advance Ticketing A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (PG13) NP ELECTION (R) NP ENTERTAINMENT (PG13) NP PUSHING TNN (R) NP LIFE (R) NP NEVER BEEN KISSED (PG13) THE OUT OF TOWNERS (PG13) 10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU (PG13) THE MATRIX (R) ANALYZE THIS (R) SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE (R) CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES	Phantom Menace I-1.4 30400 Plymouth Rd. 313-261-3330 All shows 11 except show after 6 pm. All shows 11:50 7:00 every Tuesday Would you like to see free movie? Then see a FREE EVENT COULD IN AND FIND OUT HOW Box Office opens at 4:00 pm Monday - Friday only CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES	Main At Theatres III Main-11 Mile Plym Dale (248) 342-0180 COOKIES FORTUNE (R) A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (PG13) SLC PUNK (R) NO ONE UNDER 17 ADMITTED CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES Children Under 6 Not Admitted	Main At Theatres III 4135 W. Maple, West of Telegraph 248-835-9090 DISCOUNTED SHOWS! TEA WITH MUSSOLINI (PG) THE CASTLE (R) LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL (PG13) CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES	Oxford 3 Cinemas, L.L.C. Downtown Detroit Upper Rd. (424) (248) 628-7100 Fax (248) 628-1390 DETROIT'S LOWEST TICKET PRICES INCLUDING TWILIGHT PICKING 11:00-4:30 PM ENTERTAINMENT (PG13) LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL (PG13) STAR WARS 1 FREE 46 OZ. POPCORN WITH THIS AD. EXP. 5/18/99 ALL SHOWS AND TIMES SUBJECT TO CHANGE ON CALL THEATRE AT (248) 628-7100 VISIT WWW.3CINEMAS.COM CALL THEATRE FOR LISTINGS AND TIMES	MQR THEATRES Inside Oakland Mall 248-968-0706 \$1.00 Ford Tel. 11:50 313-561-7200 11:00-1:30 After 11:00 11:50 Ample Parking, Ticket Center Free 60L on Drinks & Popcorn Please Call Theatre For Showtimes THE KING AND I (G) THE OTHER SYSTER (PG13) CRUEL INTENTIONS (R) CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES	Waterford Cinema II 7501 Highland Rd. S.E. corner M-59 & Highland Lake RD. 24 Hour Movie Line (248) 666-7900 CALL 77 FILMS 5551 Seamless Seating and Digital Sound Mixes For the best Movie Experience in Oakland County \$3.25 (TWO) SHOWS ONLY NP THE BLACK MASK (R) NP A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (PG13) NP THE MURPHY (PG13) NP LIFE HANDS (R) NP ENTERTAINMENT (PG13) NP LIFE (R) NP NEVER BEEN KISSED (PG13) THE OUT OF TOWNERS (PG13) THE MATRIX (R) DOUG'S 1ST MOVIE (G) STAR WARS EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES	United Artists West River 2 Black Veils of Middlebrook 248-788-4572 BLACK MASK (R) NP TRIPPIN (R) NP THE MURPHY (PG13) NP ENTERTAINMENT (PG13) NP LIFE (R) NEVER BEEN KISSED (PG13) THE MATRIX (R) NP ANALYZE THIS (R) Admission to STAR WARS EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE on sale now! CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES	Star Rochester Hills 200 Barclay Circle 833-2260 No one under age 6 admitted for PG13 & R rated films after 6 pm NP A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (PG13) NP TEA WITH MUSSOLINI (PG) NP THE MURPHY (PG13) NP ELECTION (R) NP COOKIES FORTUNE (PG13) ENTERTAINMENT (PG13) THE MATRIX (R) NEVER BEEN KISSED (PG13) CALL FOR COMPLETE LISTINGS AND TIMES	One Venue Warren & Wayne Rds 313-423-7700 Bargain Matinee Daily All Shows until 6 pm Continuous Show Daily Late Shows Wed-Thurs, Fri, Sat. NP BLACK MASK (R) NP TRIPPIN (R) NP ANALYZE THIS (R) NEVER BEEN KISSED (PG13) NP THE MURPHY (R)
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Drama: Elsa (Cher, left) and Georgie (Lily Tomlin) join the English ladies known as "Scorpioni" who live 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 WYCONIK
STAFF WRITER
kwynonik@ec.homedomain.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.

Tea 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 Hitler.

Lady Hester is part of a group of British expatriates, which film director Franco 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.

English novelist and playwright John Mortimer researched the ladies of Florence, and the "tea" with Mussolini 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 the world.

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

Generous to a fault, Elsa adores Lady Hester, 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.

When tensions begin to heat up in Florence, Lady Hester decides to go to Rome, because

"Mussolini has no idea of what'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 Geminiano 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 them.

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

"Tea With Mussolini" has its share of war scenes, none of them good.

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