

STAR WARS

Here it is. There's no need to be patient any more. George Lucas has finally decided to join the rest of us in the 21st Century and release his original 'Star Wars' trilogy on DVD - and I'm sure it won't come as a major surprise to any of you that it's been worth the wait.

It's hard to imagine there might still be anyone out there who's unfamiliar with the basic storyline behind this first movie in the series but, just in case, here's a brief run-down. R2D2 and C3PO are two robots - one a midget, one a bit camp - who escape from The Death Star, a Russell Grant-sized war ship helmed by intergalactic sod Darth Vader (David Prowse, with vocal assistance from James Earl Jones). They end up on a remote desert planet, where adventure-seeking 70's-haired scamp Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) takes them under his

wing. Upon hearing from them that Vader has kidnapped space-toff Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher), Luke teams up with the insufferably wise Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness) and smirking wookiee-loving mercenary Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and sets off on the rescue mission of all rescue missions. Huzzah!!

Along the way they go for a paddle in a vat of inter-planetary waste, dress up as Darth's henchman, and even get into a pub brawl in the makey-uppy city of Mos Eisley. According to old Obi Wan, it's "a wretched hive of scum and villainy" - so think Dundee only with better-looking residents and a lower crime rate.

Part Samurai legend, part swashbuckler and part Buck Rogers, Lucas' brainchild is a rip-roaring amalgam of practically every

brand of adventure story you can think of. It's fantastically-paced to move practically seamlessly from one awe-inspiring cosmic setting to the next, and the plot underpinning it all makes up for a teensy lack of depth with some gripping set-pieces. Meanwhile, John Williams' heart-pounding score must go down as one of the most instantly-recognisable in celluloid history.

Of course, it's not perfect: the characters are a tad under-developed, some of the dialogue is only so-so, and the CGI that was needlessly tagged-on back in 1997 sticks out like a sore thumb. But, faults or not, it's largely down to this movie that big-budget action blockbusters have since become the staple diet of mainstream cinema-goers the world over. It's a ground-breaker, and it's a good 'un.



The Empire Strikes Back

In the all-time list of sequels that are better than their predecessors, 'The Empire Strikes Back' would have to be pretty darn close to the summit. It's a wondrous piece of cinema, much darker in tone than 'Star Wars', meatier in plot, and stronger in character. It's arguably the most refined, thought-provoking and perhaps even grown-up of the series. It's the cream of the crop, the icing on the cake, the pick of the litter. If the whole trilogy was an episode of 'The Bill', 'The Empire Strikes Back' would be Burnside. In a tube of Smarties, it's the orange ones. It's... it's... well, you get the idea.

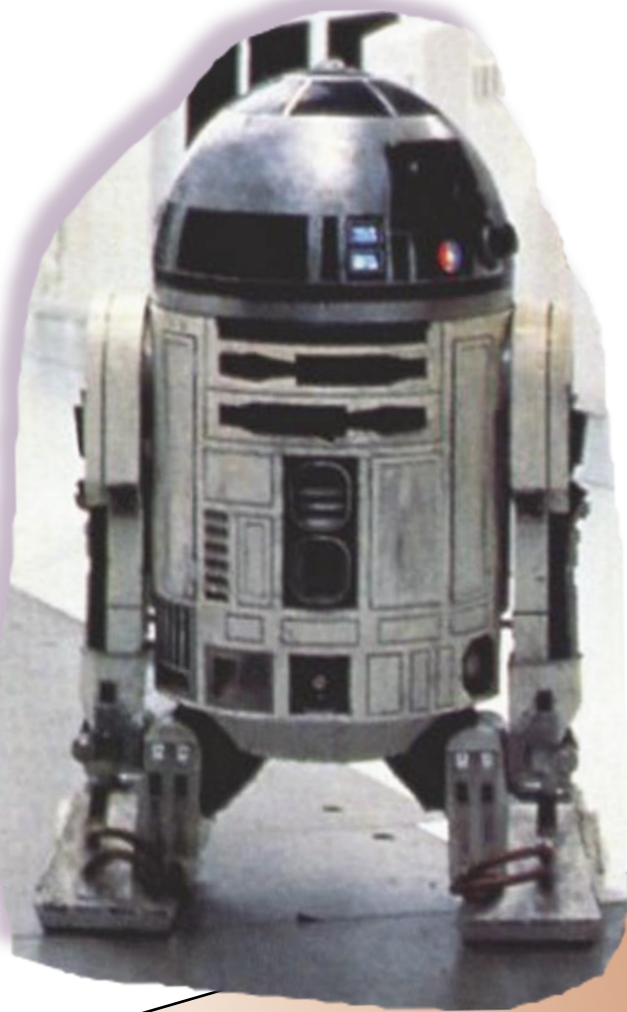
When we rejoin our heroes, they've become fully paid-up members of the Cockney Rebel alliance (the Cockney part might not be entirely true). On their hideout planet of Hoth, Luke (Mark Hamill) is having a spot of bother with a giant ice monster, Han and Leia (Harrison Ford and Carrie Fisher) are continuing to make us all feel a little bit sick with their endless will-they-or-won't-they flirtation shenanigans, and Chewbacca appears to be putting his HND in welding to good use. In other words, everyone's being kept busy.

Before long, of course, it's time for some plot to kick-in, and that nasty piece of work Darth Vader is back to his old ways. He's still on the "Luke" out (arf!) for young Skywalker, and pretty soon the rebels are forced into saving their skins by doing a runner. So, while Han, Leia, Chewy and C3PO embark on an intergalactic game of cat-and-mouse,

Luke goes into hiding on the swamp planet of Dagobah and kicks-off his Jedi training under the watchful eye of über-muppet Yoda.

Decorated with incredible sets and marvellous effects, it's clearly apparent even post-digital remastering that George Lucas' budget for this one was substantially up on that used for 'Star Wars' three years previously. But just as impressive as any of the special FX is Yoda himself, a puppet created in Jim Henson's Creature Workshop and voiced by Frank Oz. He's realer and edgier than the CGI Yoda used in the new 'Star Wars' movies, and makes a far bigger impression on the film.

An interesting aside is that, by the time this one was made, 'Star Wars' had already become the most successful movie of all time. With that in mind, it's fair to assume the pressure on George Lucas not to let everyone down by producing a complete dud must have been immense - so to actually surpass the first film in terms of quality is an achievement not to be sneezed at. Unfortunately, it's also the sort of achievement Lucas' new trilogy - due to stumble to an end in 2005 with 'Revenge of the Sith' - could only dream of.



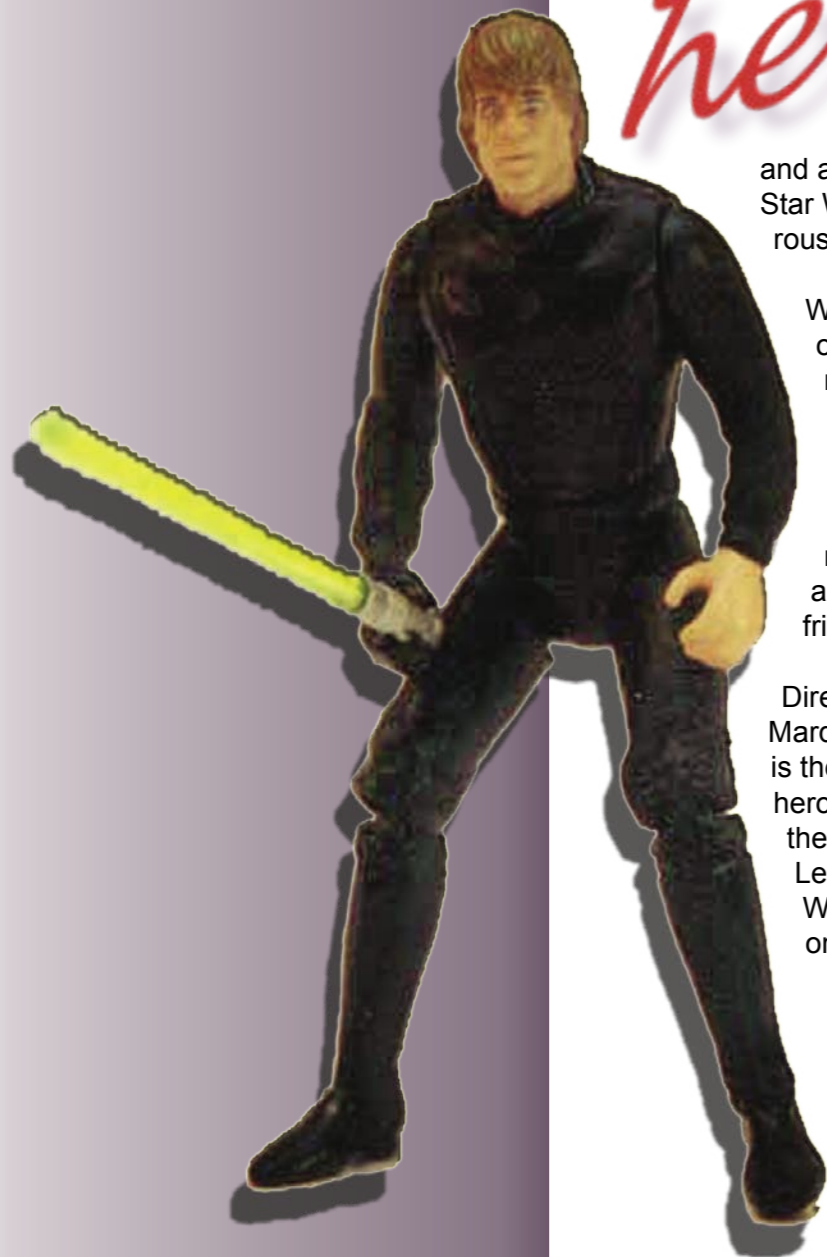
Return of the Jedi

hello

Whatever its shortcomings in the script and acting departments, the third instalment in the Star Wars saga comes loaded with epic battles, rousing themes and fantastic special effects

With the Empire rapidly nearing completion of a second Death Star, the race is on to mount another Rebel assault. This time Emperor Palpatine (McDiarmid) is overseeing the construction personally, providing an opportunity for the rebels to wipe out the Empire once and for all. But before that, Han needs to be rescued from Jabba the Hutt and Luke needs to keep a promise to 'an old friend'...

Directed by ex-BBC documentary maker Richard Marquand (who died in 1987) Return Of The Jedi is the weakest of the original 'middle' trilogy. The heroes' camaraderie is often embarrassing, and the chemistry between Han (Harrison Ford) and Leia (Carrie Fisher) is forced and unnatural. While much of this is down to the script (Lucas once again adding his dialogue skills to the



mix), Ford is also to blame, turning in a performance so wooden that it shows Mark 'Hammy' Hamill in a good light. Plus, the revelations about Luke and Leia's family ties cast an unsavoury incestuous cloud over the previous films (did Lucas really have this whole storyline planned from the outset?).

That said, the loose ends are all neatly tied up and Return Of The Jedi gives over its final hour to a thrilling, climactic showdown between good and evil. The Rebel assault on the Death Star, the battle on Endor to disable the deflector shield and Luke's confrontation with Vader and Emperor Palpatine are well paced and expertly intercut.

we're back

