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SOHO ARTS



Star Wars

New Hollywood He-Men

Rob Baker

I. IN SEARCH OF THE MIRACULOUS

Things were looking glum. There weren't any heroes anymore, even in Hollywood. Back in the early Fifties in the Great Midwest, we could pick and choose on a Saturday afternoon: Kit Carson, Lash La Rue, Rex Allen — to say nothing of the sidekicks like Smiley Burnette, Gabby Hayes, Andy Devine, the Sons of the Pioneers. And with each double-feature, there was usually a serial, taking us out of the sagebrush and into the jungle or up to the stars. Television, in its infancy, likewise jumped on the bandwagon, with Flash Gordon, Captain Video, Bomba and Ramar of the Jungle.

Adventure bred adventure — searching for secret caves in the country, exploring a newly installed sewer system in the city. Coalitions and alliances, clubs and conspiracies. Spy missions on the aliens next door or down the block, sneaking up on a hermit who lived alone in the woods with 15 dogs, breaking and entering the local haunted house, reading old letters in the family attic for proof of your own legitimacy. Or just sitting on the roof at night, looking up at the stars, being awed by them but not overwhelmed. You could go there someday: It was not impossible. Night. A cool breeze. Peace. And all the space in the world.

The world got littler fast when you got smarter, got bigger, began to travel. Goodbye Lash La Rue, hello *Gunsmoke*. Even westerns got adult, serious, "real." There was not much fun anymore. You still chopped down your own Christmas tree each year in Harry Higgins' woods, but each year it was a little smaller.

The clubs you made were gone. You played in other people's groups now, if you played at all. You could still

walk in the woods alone, but there wasn't much time for stuff like that with chores and homework and deciding what you were going to be. Your dogs began to get hit by cars. They take half of the farm to build a new lake for the town so everyone can drink cleaner/more water. Most of the rest of it goes when they build the Interstate, so more people can go faster between Indianapolis and Louisville. You almost don't keep dogs at all after that.

You move to town, to school, to college. To the city. To New York. You live in two rooms, then three, then one. You run away, come back. Janis Joplin dies, then Kennedy, then Jim Morrison and Martin Luther King. In no particular order. You cry in one room with no stars.

There are no heroes anymore.

And along came *Star Wars*.

II. RETURN TO FOREVER

And along came *Star Wars*. The most brilliantly silly movie ever made. Absolutely first-rate, absolutely first-grade. Uncorrupted by sophistication, sophistry of any kind. Technically catapulted into the Age of Aquarius, it lies thematically back in the wondrous age of innocence. Not nostalgia, not camp, but the real stuff that dreams are made of.

It is a shock, a thrill, to find you're not too old to dream.

III. MAY THE FORCE GO WITH YOU

Star Wars is King Arthur set loose in the cosmos. It is legend, myth, magic freed, reborn in the guise of sci-fi technicalese. The war of the title is the one war in the universe, and in the microcosm of each self: The Force is within us, without us, everywhere. Whether we call it God or fate or energy or power, it's the very breath of life, existence itself. We either use it or we don't, and we

either use it for good or, as the voodoo lady says, *pour mal*.

In *Star Wars*, Alec Guinness is Obi-Wan Kenobi, last of the Jedi Knights, who like Arthur and Lancelot, like Merlin, like the Templars in France and the Searchers for the Grail, used the Force for good, for protection, for maintaining peace, balance, harmony. Darth Vader, the faceless black knight of the film, once a Jedi himself, represents why the Force is protected, why its secret is kept hidden by occultists today as by every secret society and Force religion in history: Because the Force is capable of perversion; it can be used for evil as well as good; it can be used for war, for selfish power, for selfish wealth, for black magic of all kinds on all levels.

Star Wars is operative in New York today. Headless chickens in Central Park. Oric Bovar jumping out of his bedroom window. TM and est and the Karmapa. *Santeria* and *condomble*. Obi-Wan Kenobi and Darth Vader ride the subways daily.

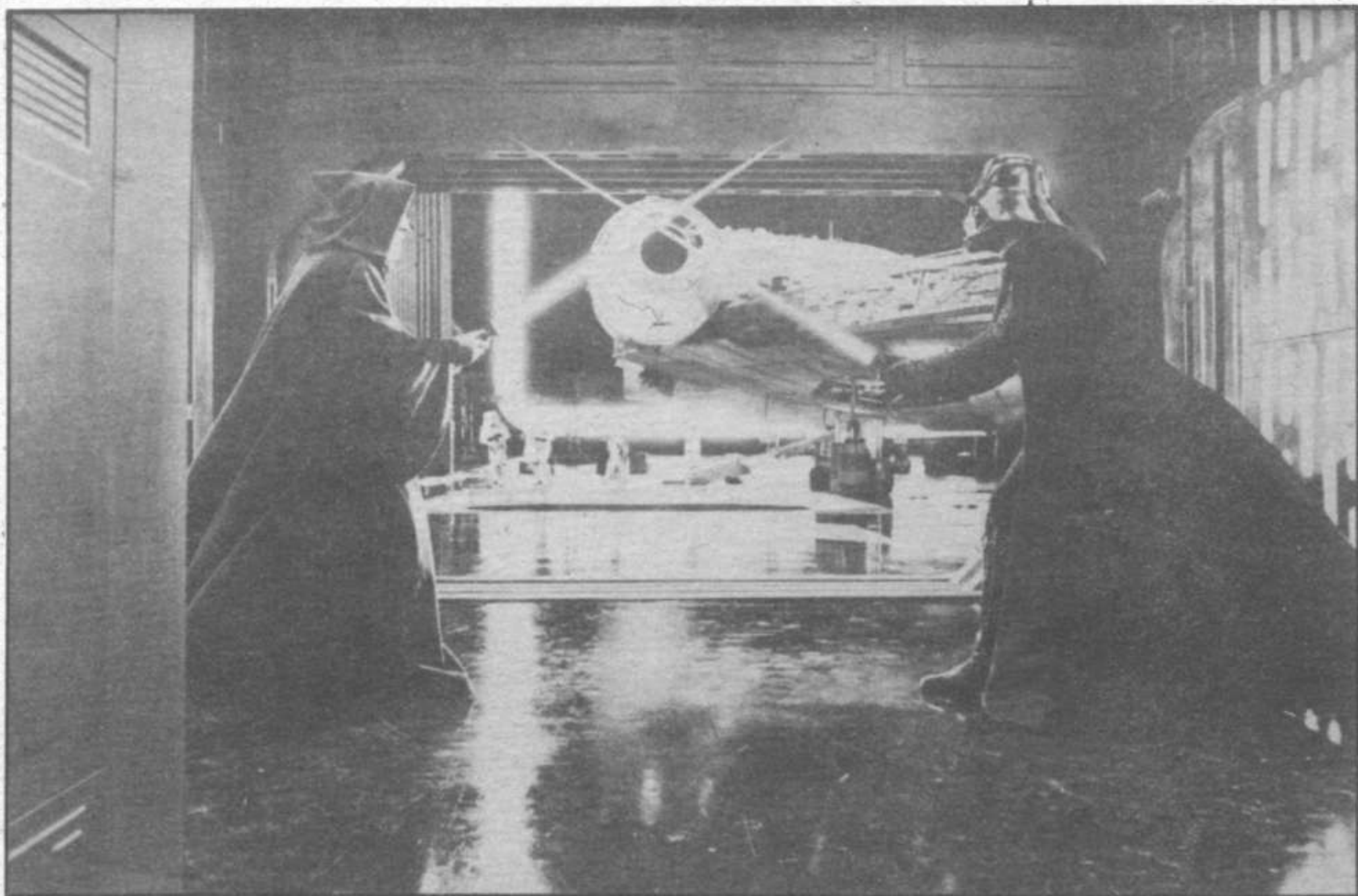
Either you believe it or you don't.

IV. BELIEVERS

Either you believe or you don't.

Scene: Mass "press" screening of *Star Wars*, Loew's Astor Place Cinema, Monday, May 25, 1977. Packed house. A good French dinner in your belly, you fight it for ten minutes, at least until cute Luke Starwalker appears. Everybody else has been machines or faceless spacesuits up to that point, anyway, except the Fair Princess (who's a bit of a 'droid, too, in her own way), but Luke is everyone's dream of the boy-hero, the Jedi in the making. You, too, can grow up to learn the Force, can still get back to the rooftop and the stars, before the universe began to shrink.

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Darth Vader and Ben Kenobi battle with light sabers

In the Wake of the Wars

R.M. Whyte

Gary Kurtz, 37, producer of *Star Wars* (seated in his room at the Hotel Drake) looks like a pleasant, slightly overwhelmed California surfer. "I never thought people would like the film *this* much," said Kurtz. He was even more appalled when I suggested that *Star Wars* may be the most effective piece of narrative ever written and designed for the Cinemascope screen. "That's your opinion. Not mine," said Kurtz.

Now that the film is lining them up around the block, Kurtz was in town this week checking out promo, prints and theaters. "The print currently at the Astor Plaza is about three points too dark. It's scratched. Also, the 70 millimeter prints trim the edges of the frame. The 35 mm prints are slightly more accurate."

Quickly, Kurtz runs through the litany of the special effects: the use of computers to set up shots, the "blue screen" method, the explosions, the swords that reflect light so violently they actually look like beams of light. Kurtz is especially fond of Jon Berg's stop-motion animated monster chessmen. "I also like the alien musicians in the cantina sequence," said Kurtz. "Rick Baker designed them. At first we considered alien-looking instruments. But it's better, it's goofier, to go with the regular jazz combo instruments. Some of the film has to be goofy. That explains the use of all that slang."

Does that also explain the obvious puns folks are finding in the character names — Princess Leia Organa (organic lay), Chewbacca (chews tobacco), Han Solo (say it fast, and you figure it out), Jawas (Yawahs — i.e., little Jewish merchants). Gary Kurtz thought a moment. Smiled an enigmatic surfer smile. "People see things in this movie."

What about the sex in the film? Like all good space operas *Star Wars* is built on the buddy system: the low comedy androids, See-Threepio and Artoo-Detoo; mercenary captain Han Solo and his fuzzy co-pilot, Chewbacca; even evil Darth Vader and good guy Ben (Obi-Wan) Kenobi once had a warm relationship. "It's there," says Kurtz. "I just don't like that word 'Buddies'."

"Yes, everybody says we took liberties with the realism of the special effects. The noise of space-ships in a vacuum, and a lot of other scientific inaccuracies. But this film isn't science fiction, really. It's Space Fantasy. I don't think anybody notices the scientific discrepancies — assuming they're enjoying the film."

"The mammoth beasts of burden of the Sandpeople were more than just elephants wearing rugs," said Kurtz. "It wasn't that easy. In order to wear their costumes properly, the elephants had to learn to hold their trunks in their mouths. Not many elephants can do that. They don't even want to do it."

"No. We're not expecting any lawsuits from the makers of *Dune*. We're not expecting any lawsuits at all. There are a thousand influences in *Star Wars*. Not just one or two."

"The machinery in the film looks so battered because it cost less. Things were made from, or cast from, almost all existing hardware. 2nd World War stuff. Tanks."

Gary Kurtz is also fond of the blip-an-bloop sounds made by little 'droid Artoo-Detoo. "Ben Burt catalogued a lot of sounds. Some computer-generated, some made by other machines. Burt put each sound in a category, say Neutral, Sad, Happy, Angry, Frightened. Then he took the word dialogue written for Artoo-Detoo and constructed sound equivalents for the words. Not syllable by syllable, but with the general feeling tone. That's why Artoo-Detoo's noises sound intelligent, purposeful. And yes," said Kurtz, "the goofy farting sounds made by Artoo-Detoo were intentional."

What about the racism vented on the androids? Gary Kurtz said, "It wasn't discussed. They're just servants. The fact that they have personality is what makes people think of them as human. They're not alive."

The aliens in the film are alive, however, and are also consistently treated as social and intellectual inferiors to the white humans. Are they surrogate ethnics — blacks? Gary Kurtz frowns a moment. "Yes, we may run into the race problem."

Why did Darth Vader's mechanical torture machine feature prominently only an hypodermic syringe? "Children recognize and fear needles," said Gary Kurtz.

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The grumbling around you begins to hush. All of the sudden you are in the Scott Theatre on a Saturday afternoon, circa 1951. The good guy is on the white horse. You break into applause.

All around you the applause swells. Cheers. Happy excitement. Belief.

It is not Indiana, 1951. It is New York City, 1977. And for the first time in a long time that is really not so bad.

New York is too jaded for the Jedi knights. I mean, not at a press screening, *my dear*. Those people on the list are almost as sophisticated as the hip weirdos who boo everything at the New York Film Festival — a little more low-brow perhaps, but very *au courant*. They're not going to buy it.

Wrong.

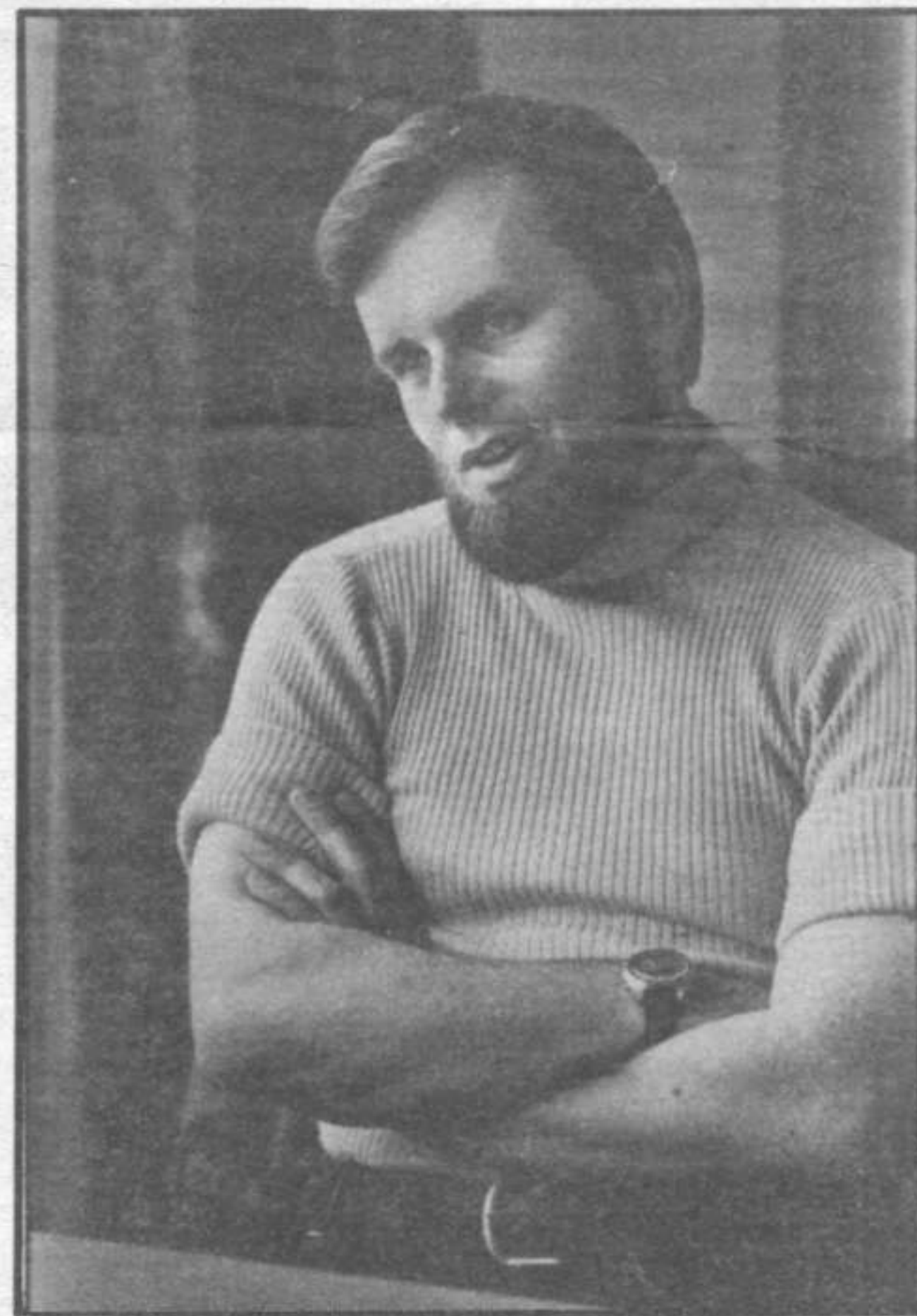
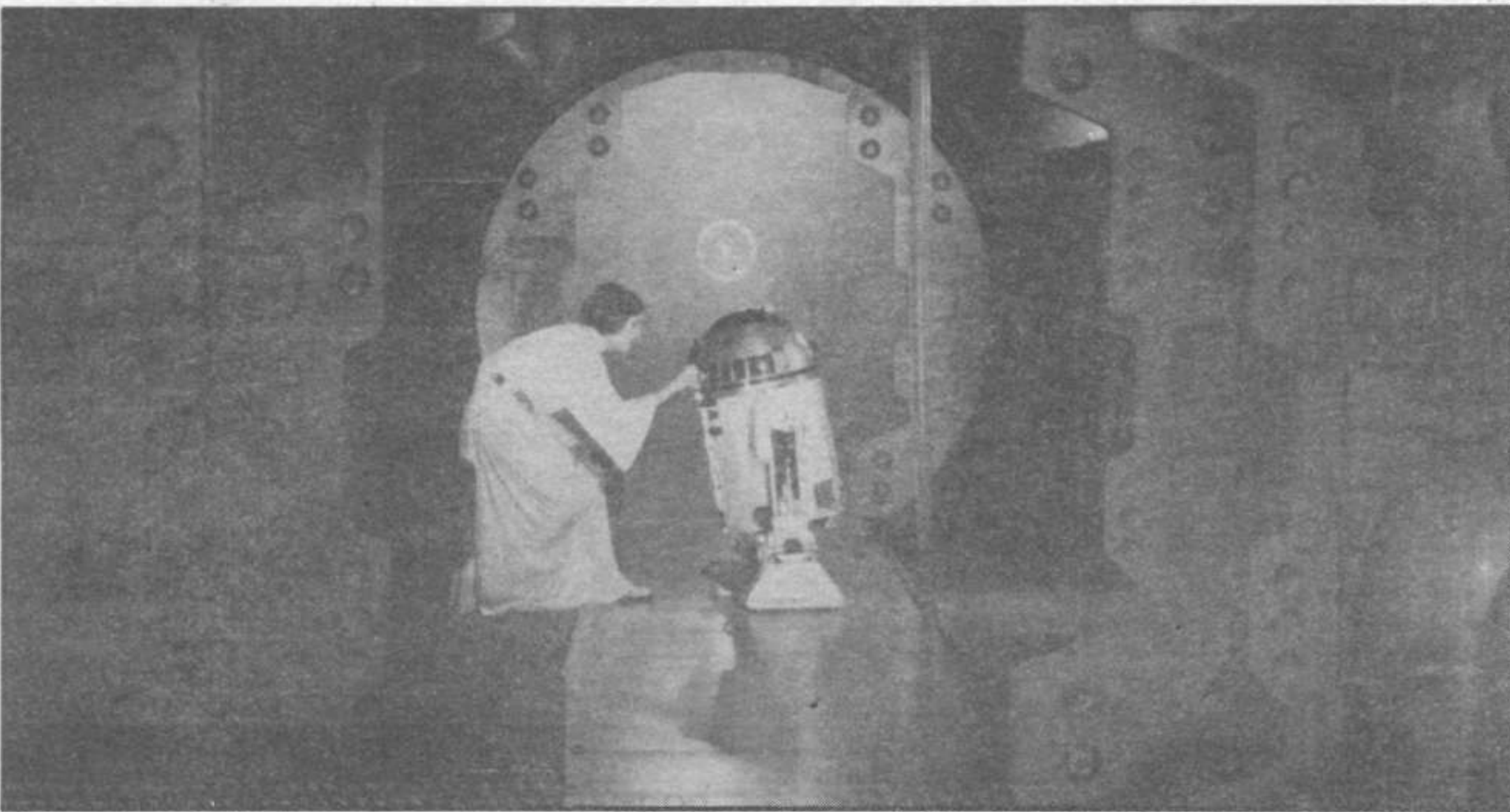
Belief.

V: BUTTONS

The buttons are silver on a blue background. "May the Force Go With You." You take two. For days you're high. You tell people at Martha Graham, in bookstores, on the subway. You can't write a "review," even to tell people about the wonderful scene in an alien bar filled with the most wonderful grotesques since Carson McCullers. Or anything about the visual/visceral thrill of the actual experience of floating free inside the miniature/gigantic starworld, of escaping into hyperspace.

You don't talk or write about it. You see and feel it.

Back on the roof, you always knew that someday you could fly.

Gary Kurtz, producer of *Star Wars*

Princess Leia leaves a message for Ben Kenobi in Artoo-Detoo

Does Darth Vader wear a mask because in the sequel we will learn he is really Luke Skywalker's father! "That's an interesting idea. I think we decided he should wear a mask because he had been in a fight with Ben (Obi-Wan) Kenobi, and his face had been disfigured. That explanation got dropped from the script."

Carrie Fisher, who plays Princess Leia Organa, entered the room. After introductions, I explain to her that people have told me they felt at the end of the film that the Princess thinks Luke Skywalker is a nice kid, but that Han Solo is more her idea of a guy to go to bed with. What does she think?

Carrie Fisher, daughter of Debbie Reynolds and Eddie Fisher, and the toughest space princess that ever came down the pike, looked quickly at Gary Kurtz. After a moment Kurtz said gently, "That's open to many interpretations."

No Interpretation

What isn't open to interpretation is the marketing potentials of *Star Wars*. (Aside from the inevitable sequel.)

George Lucas' last film, *American Graffiti*, unleashed a wave of junk imitations and '50s nostalgia products that we have yet to see the end of.

Star Wars, which will probably circle the globe, may unleash the most massive attack of "entertainment" films we've ever seen.

The record albums of the sound track have hit the stores.

Marvel Comics has already issued 3 parts of a 6-part adaptation of *Star Wars*, scripted by Roy Thomas, drawn by young veteran Howard Chaykin.

"I hate comics," Chaykin told me. "I never keep them around the house. I sell all my original art. [The *Star Wars* pages are on sale at the Comic Art Gallery in Manhattan.] But *Star Wars* is different. I enjoyed drawing that. I think the design of the film was influenced a lot by the strip drawn by Carlos Gimenez, called *Dani Futuro*. That's published, I think, in the *Tin-Tin* series, in France. And the whole worn-out machinery, nitty-gritty people of the future in *Star Wars* seem to me derived from the novels of Samuel Delaney. But there's so many influences in the film, it's hard to say."

Chaykin said, "*Star Wars* is great Samuri-Western-King Arthur-Pure-Racial-Memory stuff. Simple symbols. White against black. Only mercenary Han Solo is allowed to wear black and white."

Chaykin said, "About last October they sent me 650 stills, copies of production sketches, slides, all the promo they had — and the screenplay. I broke the screenplay down into six parts, drew them, and sent them off to Roy Thomas in California. He then wrote the dialogue. My favorite issue is the final one. It's nothing but the dogfight sequence."

"The only thing that makes me unhappy is that I think Marvel should have issued *Star Wars* as a two-part magazine sized comic, in black and white, on good paper. The color comics look worse and worse."

Chaykin said, "In a world technologically improving everywhere, comics reproduction is getting progressively worse."

Del Rey Pleased

What isn't getting worse is the attitude of the folks over at Ballantine books, who brought out the novelization of *Star Wars*, Judy Del Rey, and husband Lester Del Rey, run Ballantine's Science Fiction imprint, "Del Rey Books."

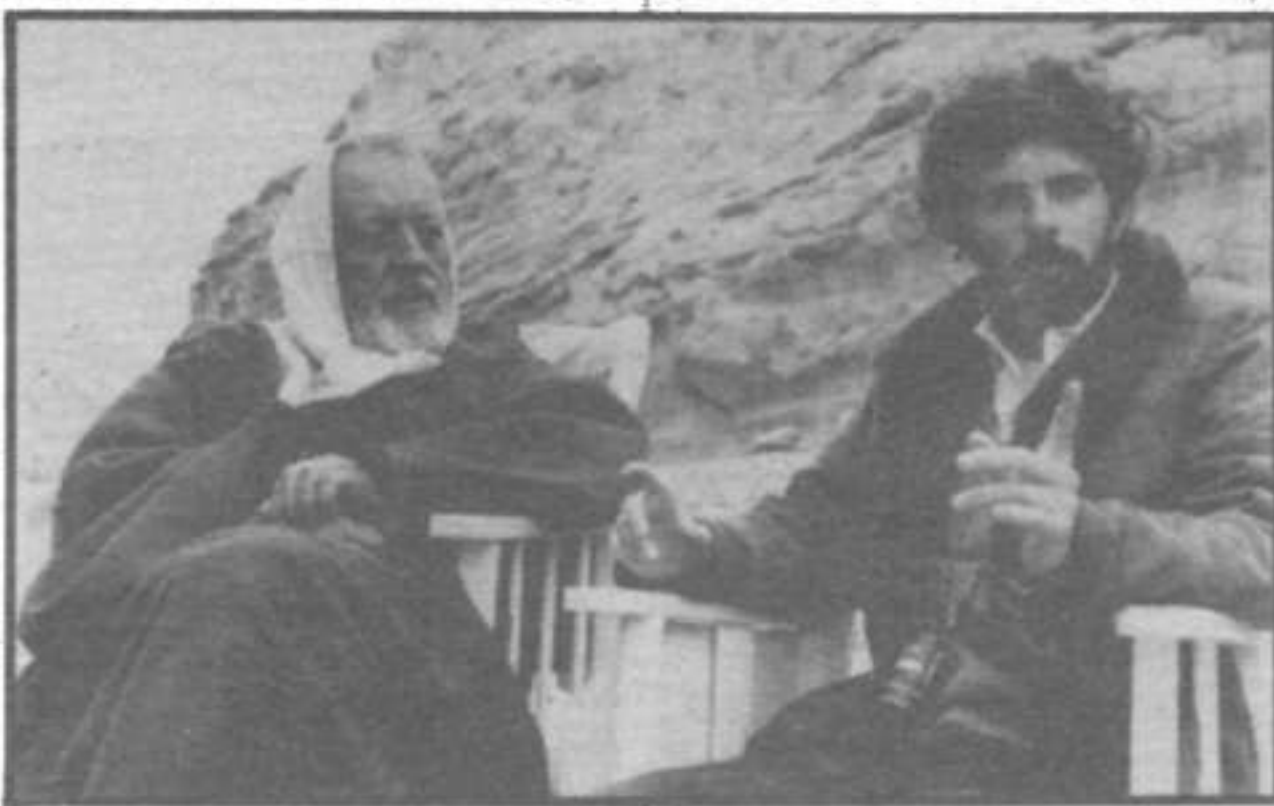
We phoned Judy Del Rey, who was busy attending the American Booksellers Association (ABA) convention in San Francisco. "I'm exhausted," she said. "But I love *Star Wars*. I kept telling people how great it would be. Nobody believed me. We had somebody at our booth today dressed up like Darth Vader, and everybody went crazy. George Lucas is marvelous. He's a new breed in Hollywood. He grew up with Science Fiction. He knows it. And now his generation can swing the money to make good science fiction movies, instead of the usual bad science fiction films of the past. Those films were kitsch, not schmaltz. Lucas knows how to make schmaltz!"

"Space Operas! That's the sort of stuff that made Science Fiction great. So much science fiction today is depressing. If people want to read something depressing, they should read *The New York Times*."

"But I don't think it's fair to say *Star Wars* discriminates against androids and aliens. Not really. It's fairy tale stuff. Fairy tales always discriminate."

"The minute we saw the completed *Star Wars* film last Monday, we went back to press with the novel. We're planning a *Star Wars* calendar, an Art Book, and, of course, continuations. Allen Dean Jones, who novelized the animated *Star Trek* series is working on a continuation of *Star Wars*. (No, I don't think the feature film version of *Star Trek* was cancelled because of *Star Wars*. They never got a good screenplay together. *Star Trek* seems to be going back into production as a TV series, and that's a good idea.)

"Yes, we're bringing out *The Making Of Star Wars*, by Charles Lippincott. Today, a waitress demanded my 'May The Force Be With You' button."



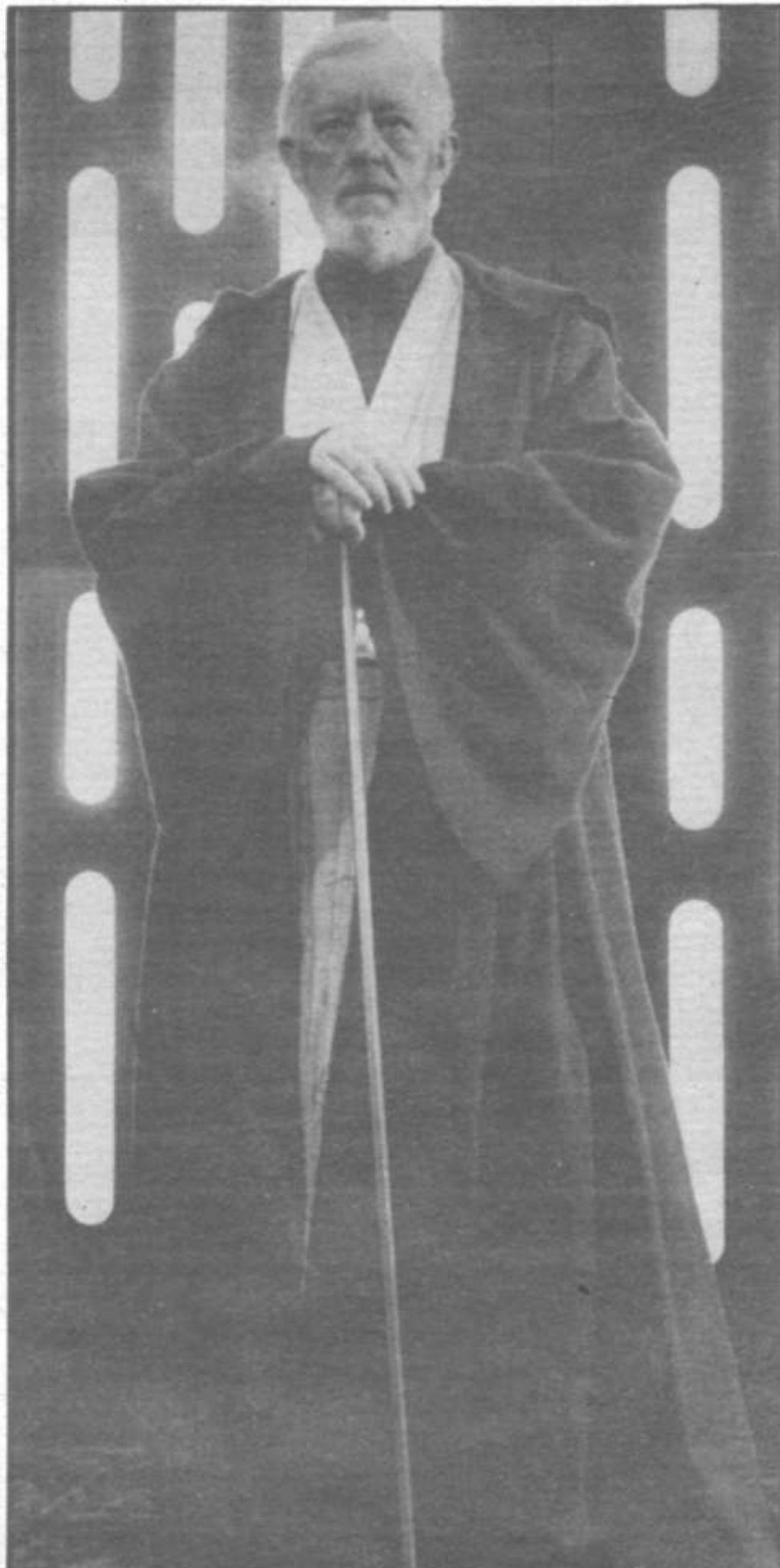
Guinness with Lucas



Stormtroopers



Firing at Princess Leia



Alec Guinness as Ben Kenobi

"*Star Wars* is wonderful. I'm exhausted."

Also in the planning stages is a hardbound version of the paperback novel, which is a major switch. Publisher is undisclosed.

Doing It Six Times

Martin Last, a proprietor at the famed Science Fiction Bookshop, said, "Hundreds of people have come in and asked us if we like the film of *Star Wars* as much as they do. Well, we love it! It's the most exciting thing in the field. People are reading more and more science fiction anyway. This will just boost everything. The business is up!"

Florence Steinberg, Managing Editor at *Arts Magazine* told us, "I never thought they could put those images on the screen. When they went into Hyperspace I almost passed out with pleasure. Seeing *Star Wars* was the nicest thing I've done in ages. Director George Lucas loves Science Fiction. He's a real fan. Bless him. Bless him."

The night I saw *Star Wars*, the East Side matron across the aisle from me stood up and declared loudly, "I don't care what Andrew Sarris says about this movie; I'm going to see it six times!"

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

At least for a while.



Howard Chaykin's illustrations for Marvel Comics Group's *Star Wars* comic book