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# A (zap) fantasy (pow) galaxy

By Shella Benson

*Star Wars*, a nearly perfect film, takes the old-fashioned word "childlike" and sets out to conquer space with it. It's a superb achievement, an elegant meshing of imagination, romance, nostalgia and the best movie magic ever. I can't imagine anyone hard-hearted enough not to respond to it.

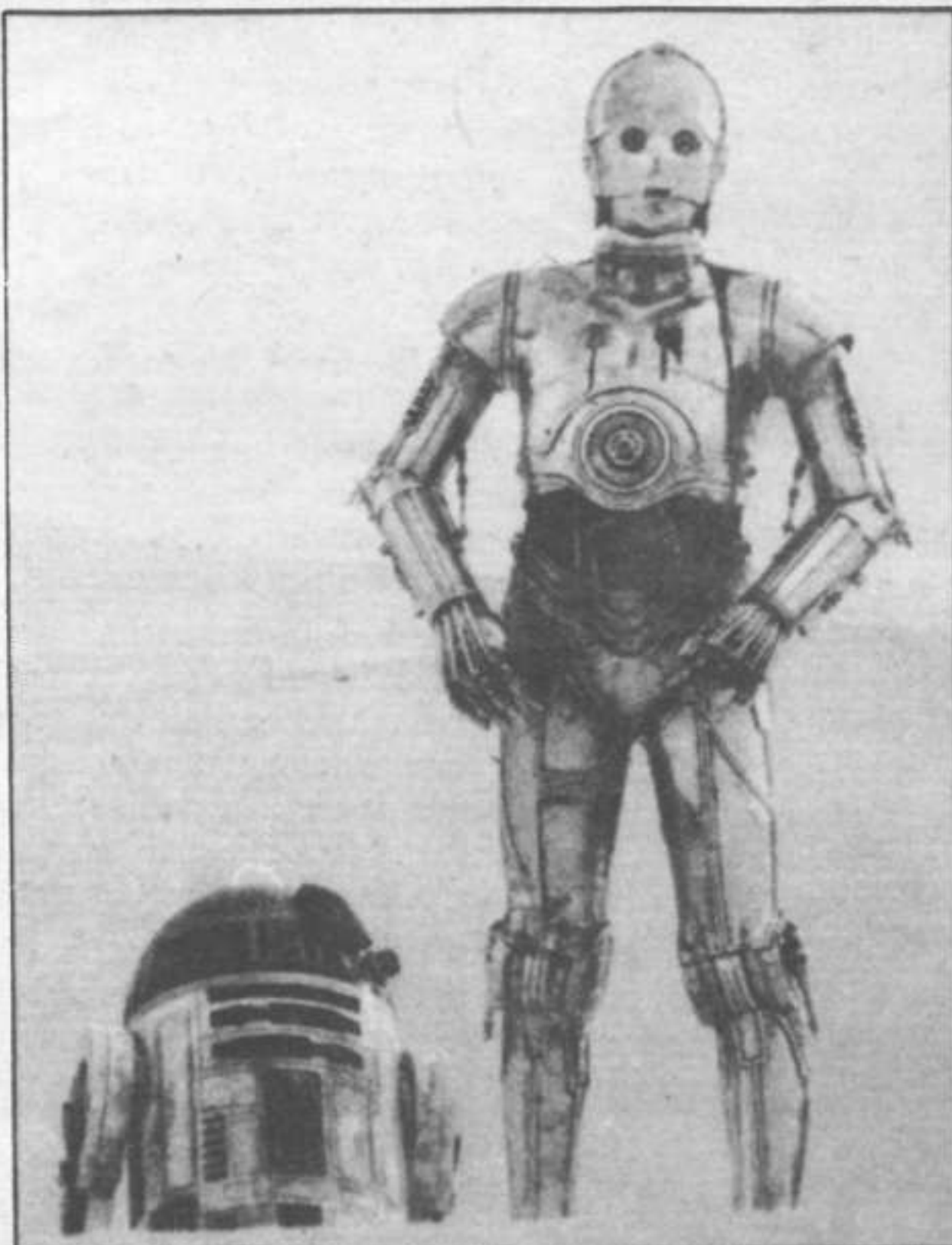
George Lucas's galaxy has a lot more in common with Howard Pyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Rube Goldberg than it does with Isaac Asimov or *2001*. "It's not based on science, which bogs you down," Lucas is quoted as saying sternly. "I wanted to tell a fantasy story."

And so, with an unfettered imagination, almost four year's time and 8 or so million dollars of Twentieth Century Fox's money, the 32-year-old director of *American Graffiti* leapt foresquare into space.

Because King Features wanted too much for the rights to *Flash Gordon*, Lucas set out to write his own adventure-romance. What he's proved cinematically is that a comic-strip maven from Modesto could outstrip his own god, Alex Raymond (*Flash Gordon's* creator).

Lucas created Luke (Lucas?) Skywalker (Mark Hamill), a young, idealistic pilot turned farm boy, living on an arid planet, Tatooine, who becomes drawn into the rebellion against the Galactic Empire. This totalitarian force, headed by Grand Moff Tarkin (Peter Cushing) and the towering black knight, Darth Vader (David Prowse), commands a huge satellite battle station, the Death Star, capable of blowing up an entire planet. Luke's first interest is in rescuing a young princess, Leia Organa (Carrie Fisher), member of the galaxy's Senate, who was kidnapped when she obtained the plans to the Death Star.

On Luke's team are Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness), last of the gallant Jedi Knights (guardians of peace and justice before the rise of the Empire); a dashing mercenary pilot, Han Solo (Harrison Ford); and three of the most engaging non-humans since *The Wizard of Oz*: Chewbacca, a 100-year-old hairy Wookiee who has Paul Newman eyes in a quasi-monkey face (he co-pilots Solo's plane); See-Threepio (C3PO), a gleaming gold robot with an English ac-



See-Threepio and Artoo Detoo

cent; and his side-kick, tiny Artoo-Detoo (R2-D2), who speaks in computer burps and blatts, Harpo Marx whistles, and is utterly irresistible.

Lucas's world is delightful. Because it has movies as well as Marvel comics in its family tree, part of the fun for adults is matching wits with Lucas's pack-rat memory. For starters, try Arthur Treacher as See-Threepio and Lou Costello as Artoo-Detoo; then picking through the detritus you'll find Uncle Henry and Aunt Em, Errol Flynn, Buster Crabbe, Toshiro Mifune and Tatsuya Nakadai, Woody Allen (in *Sleeper* drag), the Cowardly Lion, the Tin Woodman, all the Saturday serials and every World War II aerial dogfight on film.

Then too, Lucas's future is somehow old-shoe, not sci-fi scary. Luke Skywalker may speed about his desert planet in a hovercraft, but it's a dusty, dinged-up ship with no more glamor than the family station wagon. Lucas says he wanted the look of "a used future, for true credibility." (An interesting change from Lucas's earlier *THX-1138*, a germ-free vision which pared away every extraneous detail including the actors' hair.)

Han Solo (Harrison Ford), Ben Kenobi (Alec Guinness), Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) and Chewbacca, the Wookiee



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Once in a while the film gets stuck in its bubble gum plot; it's almost *too* densely plotted, as though Lucas couldn't bear to throw away even one tiny planetary inhabitant. It's a little hard, at times, to keep them all straight, but I suspect on a second, third or fifth viewing (which will probably be the *least* kids will allow), these details will sort themselves out. There are the Jawas, meter-high, hooded creatures with tiny flashlight eyes and a foul smell, who survive by collecting scrap on their desert planet. There are the dangerous Tusken Raiders, vicious desert bandits masked against Tatooine's twin suns by mummy-like bandages. They ride Bampas: enormous yak-mastadon animals with curled horns. And there is a bar-full of the funniest stellar-inhabitants ever conceived including a five-piece swing band of grand, grasshopper-headed monsters, all attending closely to their instruments.

If the effects overshadow the actors, it's hardly surprising. As he did in *American Graffiti*, Lucas has again worked with mostly unknown actors to keep his comic-strip personae uncluttered by other associations. The great exception is the beautiful performance by Alec Guinness as Obi-Wan Kenobi — part Merlin, part Alan Watts. It's a pure, strong, touching characterization with magic elements of knighthood: the passing of the sword from one generation to the next. (And *what* a sword, a deadly laser beam.) Size had a lot to do with other casting: Darth Vader is 6'7"; the Wookie, Chewbacca, is 7'2"; and Artoo-Detoo is manned by Kenny Baker, 3'8".

But even with double fistfuls of outrageous characters, with Tunisian and Guatemalan locations which make splendid alien planets, *Star Wars* is primarily a picture of action. One thing Lucas learned well from his passion for serials was that action, not mush or philosophy, makes the movie. As the film's climactic battle begins — 20 minutes of such audacious effects that audiences explode spontaneously into applause — you know, from every fighter-pilot picture of World War II, *exactly* what is going to happen, and somehow it only makes it better. What you're not prepared for is how it looks, for a space fighter-pilot stunting down between Louise Nevelson canyons of space machinery.

Even the costuming details are witty: Princess Leia with her Ozma hairdo; the rebel fighter pilots with decals like race-car drivers on their helmets; the villains in Marshall Zhukov tunics and a distinctly totalitarian look to them. The rebel leaders sport bush jackets, beards and Kennedy space center accents, while Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi wear variations of aikido jackets.

When credit is given, it must start with Lucas himself. Not (yet) able to delegate well, every tiny detail came under his scrutiny, from the look of space machinery to the ad campaign. His production designer was John Barry (*The Little Prince*, *Clockwork Orange*); John Williams did the music (which, for once, is *worth* a special movie music album); John Dykstra supervised the special photographic effects; and Gilbert Taylor, one of Polanski's and Hitchcock's favorite directors of photography (*Frenzy*, *Repulsion*, *Macbeth*, *Dr. Strangelove*), was the cinematographer. There are 174 people named in the technical credits. What I would love to see is every one of them on that stage next April at the Academy Awards, making the most joyous and well-deserved traffic jam in movie history.

