

# One man's creative S-F fantasy

**Star Wars (u)**  
 Dominion/Leicester  
 Square  
 (from December 26)

**The Deep (a)**  
 Odeon, Leicester Sq

**Goodbye Emmanuelle (x)**  
 Columbia

**Shirin's Wedding**  
 The Other Cinema

If anyone could ever really explain, even *post facto*, what makes a wild, runaway box-office success like *Star Wars*, the film business would be a very different game and our lives would not be littered with spin-offs and sequels and counterfeits and daughters-of-Emmanuelle.

Two factors, though, have clearly played a part in the *Star Wars* miracle. One is that this is a film not made by a committee of accountants trying to devise a chemical formula out of the incalculables of box-office attractions, but a single person's creative fantasy, which by grace of luck and a moment of bravery at 20th Century-Fox, he has been able to realize. George Lucas, the writer-director, belongs to the group and generation (thirty-ish) of Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg.

Lucas says that even before *American Graffiti* (1973) he had the idea of doing a space fiction movie on the classic, elemental lines of *Flash Gordon*. Since the rights to *Flash Gordon* were tied up, he was obliged to research the whole archaeology of science fiction and come up with his own story.

The story—and this is a second major factor in the *Star Wars* phenomenon—synthesizes a whole body of the most potent myths on which we have all been reared. Lucas's uncomplicated, essential characters—heroes, villains, beautiful princess and venerable seer—with their odd dialogue, at once formal, stilted, and comically colloquial, are the very stuff of strip cartoon. But there are much broader references. The golden robot, the hooded midges in the desert, the great, fearsome, whimpering simian who is navigator of the spacecraft, are none other than reincarnations of the Tin Man, the Munchkins and the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz*. When the prim gold robot is in company with his miniature partner, Artoo Detoo, with its expressive range of electronic chirps and grumbles, they are transformed, again, to Stan and Ollie (and John Williams's witty score even sneaks in a phrase of "The Dance of the Cuckoos" to underline the point).

The old seer (Alec Guinness) is Merlin; and it is he who hands over to Luke Skywalker (note the link of Luke/Lucas) the Excalibur which his dead father had left behind... but then the story evokes the lore of the West, with Luke's return to the smouldering homestead which determines his course of action; and the lone gunfighter (called significantly, Solo) who makes the traditional transformation from



Ben Kenobi (Alec Guinness) does battle with Darth Vader (David Prowse)

reluctant mercenary to committed champion of the streets, the gun-battles on the museum, the climactic dog-fights in the galactic sky dredge up lost memories of a lifetime of movie-house experience. John Williams's score meanwhile runs the gamut from biblical epic to *Lawrence of Arabia*, and finally brings us home to Ruritania, as the Musketeers stride side by side through the parted ranks in the courtroom where their restored Princess is enthroned.

The storm-troopers in the space ship, the masked warriors (wearing the Samurai armour that gave us nightmares after childhood visits to the museum), the climactic dog-fights in the galactic sky dredge up lost memories of a lifetime of movie-house experience. John Williams's score meanwhile runs the gamut from biblical epic to *Lawrence of Arabia*, and finally brings us home to Ruritania, as the Musketeers stride side by side through the parted ranks in the courtroom where their restored Princess is enthroned.

It is an anthology not so much of actual scenes as of almost subconsciously recalled sensations and sentiments of the film-goer's memory. May be it is this more than anything that inspires such fierce loyalty in audiences. People who have already seen the film get snappishly defensive if you have the temerity to say things like "It's very silly, of course"; and retort "But it's such fun".

And, indeed, it is. *Star Wars* unashamedly restores all those qualities which film-makers and audiences have almost forgotten in their chase after illusory sophistication—brightly defined characters; a story that hurtles along at such a pace that it leaves no time for questions; a world of fantasy so confidently portrayed (in *Star Wars* special effects achieve new heights of technical expertise) that there is no thought of disbelief; a genuine escapism that obliges you to make no connexions at all with real worlds.

Not least, *Star Wars*, for all its own technological accomplishment, heartens the strong current sentiment of mistrust of technology, which has found its most notable expression in the proliferation of films of the occult. In this future world, the technological marvels (already showing signs of wear; the heroes' spacecraft

is getting pretty crocky) exist alongside the dreadful mutants and zombies, preserving all the worst of human qualities, who appear in one of the film's most marvellous fantasy scenes, set in a galactic waterfront barroom.

In the outcome victory goes not to technology, but to the mystical and religious. Alec Guinness represents the old, suppressed religion, "The Force", and having warned the renegade Darth Vader that he will be much more powerful dead than alive, returns in spirit to guide Luke Skywalker with the advice that he will triumph not by *thinking*, but by *feeling*. It's a reflection worth considering in the historical view; and it certainly explains something of the triumph of *Star Wars*.

There seems even less chance of explaining the success of another American box-office winner, *The Deep*, unless it is the expectation raised by the original literary property, the novel with which Peter Benchley followed *Jaws*. It is one of those films in which at least you have to admire the effort. Much of the action takes place under water, and a book-about-the-film (*Inside the Deep* by Peter Guber) relates at length how writer, director (Peter Yates) and stars (Robert Shaw, Jacqueline Bisset, Nick Nolte) spent months beneath the ocean around the Virgin Islands.

There is a lot of plot, which involves the discovery of two sunken treasure hoards—one of seventeenth-century gold and the other of twentieth-century morphine—in the same spot. It is all ingeniously conducted to a finale of remarkable complexity.

Underwater it is good-looking (with some very appealing and impeccably trained fish) and fun. Ashore it is like a beached whale with everyone sitting around, poring over old documents and explaining things to one another in tedious detail.

In the past 12 months no fewer than eight Emmanuelles have been launched on London. (They have been Black,

Yellow, Young, Black and White; gone to Tokyo and to America; and been teamed in Emmanuelle and Françoise.) Properly speaking you should be able to identify the Real Thing (that is, the authentic word of the novelist Emmanuelle Arsan) by the consonants: two m's and one n is the genuine article; one m and one n or two n's is counterfeit. Unfortunately not everyone plays fair.

*Goodbye Emmanuelle* seems authentic in as far as it has Sylvia Kristel in the title role. The promise of the title is not to be trusted though: Emmanuelle still looks far too perky as she follows her new lover off to Paris. Even more than its predecessors, this fantasy of the lives of hedonist expatriates in the sunny Seychelles, indulging every permutation of sexual activity, is erotic wishdream for arrested adolescence. Allowing for a few nude scenes and talk of orgasms, it all seems peculiarly innocent.

There now seems little hope of saving *The Other Cinema*. On Tuesday the governors of the British Film Institute told them that it was not possible to find money of the order—£25,000—they need; and their public appeal has not brought fast enough results.

Not the least misfortune of this hair's-breadth failure of the cinema, which will probably close in early January, is that it may strengthen the claim of the landlords, National Car Parks, to change the use of the site, which has been a place of entertainment since 1772. Originally the New Rooms in Tottenham Street, from 1905 to 1969 the Scala Theatre occupied the site.

*The Other Cinema's* final presentation is Helga Sanders's *Shirin's Wedding*, the story of a Turkish girl who becomes a *gastarbeiter* in Germany in order to follow her faithless fiancé. A mordant commentary on the abuse of migrant workers is somewhat vitiated by the *jaux-naif* artifice of the plot and main performance.

David Robinson



Sir Alec Guinness as Ben Kenobi

## Star talk about Star Wars

John Higgins

Britain has been waiting a long time to see *Star Wars*. It eventually opens at the Dominion and Leicester Square cinemas on December 27 after a trail of news stories listing the records that it has broken in America. A Christmas film? Yes, in a way, because fairy stories in which good triumphs over evil go down well at Christmas.

*Star Wars* does not deal in shades. The good are terribly good and the bad quite horrid. Of the white men by far the whitest is Ben Kenobi, the last of the Jedi Knights, who has been pushed into exile as the forces of darkness have taken over the galaxies way out yonder. The role was offered to Sir Alec Guinness in Hollywood on the last day of filming *Murder By Death*.

"The script came through the door and the moment I saw a sci-fi sticker on it I said to myself 'Oh crumbs, it's not for me'. But I started to read and I had to turn the page. It's rather like that..." Guinness points at a copy of John Le Carré's *The Honourable Schoolboy* lying on the table of his London drawing room. "It had vigour and I finished it at a sitting."

Was that normal? "No, not at all. But it's a jolly good sign. I don't apply any professional 'technique', if that's the word, when I read scripts. But if I'm held then I think there's a chance the public will be held too. Probably the last time I went through a film script so swiftly was when James Kennaway's *Tunes of Glory* came into my hands. And then there was *Kind Hearts and Coronets*..."

Guinness looks almost wistful and quickly makes the expression disappear.

"But that was far too long ago to talk about."

The script arrived from its author, George Lucas, who also directed the picture

"I hadn't met him previously, so I went off and saw his *American Graffiti*, which I found impressive. Soon after that we came together and he struck me as being a very considerable little person—by that I mean that he is small in stature. In many ways he is quite untypical of the film industry. When we started work on *Star Wars* it was all so calm, so gentlemanly. No fat cigars, no tough language. I remember someone on the set criticizing Lucas because of his lack of display and announcing that the film was going to be dull. So I took him aside and said 'Mark my words, this film is going to have distinction'."

"Like all the best directors Lucas had very little to say during the actual filming. He simply sensed when you were uncomfortable and just walked across and dropped a brief word in your ear. It was almost like being on stage: good actors don't like being told how to act and they become worried if they are made to feel merely part of someone else's work."

"Before we even started there was another gesture which was much more part of the theatre than the film business, which is scarcely noted for its modesty. Lucas brought the costumes across to London himself to see if I liked them and he came to all the fittings. Now

that is exceedingly rare. It was just like being at one's tailor. "Perhaps, just another quarter inch on the cuff". Guinness pulls down his own left cuff, which, being precisely right, has no need of another quarter inch.

"The day before *Star Wars* opened in America George Lucas telephoned me and said in his regular quiet, diffident way 'Do you know I think we got rather a success. The press quite like it.' In his total concentration, in his reliance on both his eye and his ear he reminded me of the young David Lean. I always had the feeling that, like Lean, deep down he was totally involved in the action. Of course there was none of the Lean star-quality, the hush when The Director Is On Set. But there is the sensation that life can only be a piece of celluloid. Lucas is completely wrapped up in the cinema, he is only happy talking film. Lean is a bit like that, too, but he is interested in horticulture, ornithology and listening to Beethoven's Seventh as well. My only worry with Lucas is that the cinema system will force him into a series of follow-ups to *Star Wars*. He should resist that."

The conversation switches from Hollywood to Shaftesbury Avenue, where Guinness is appearing in Alan Bennett's *The Old Country* under, as usual, Michael Codron's aegis. This link dates back to Simon Gray's first play *Wise Child*, which Guinness defended fiercely against all the attacks that were launched against it by the critics.

"I hadn't met Codron before

*Wise Child* came along. It was sent by my agent who commented that there was no chance of my wanting to do it. After five minutes' reading I was convinced that I should. Codron has literary taste and that is why I get on with him."

Apart from the Codron connexion Guinness gives the impression of liking to work on stage with the same people, a Guinness family. This brings a strong denial.

"Oh, I don't think there's a family at all. It's simply that at my advanced age when two people are under consideration for the same part I simply inquire who is the nicer person. There might be a shade more talent in the chippy one, but the nicer man is always better at conveying enjoyment to the audience. I always say: 'Let's have lovely people to work with.'"

"But actors are much calmer nowadays. When I began in theatre there were screaming rows, hysteria. I remember rehearsing my very first play, *Libel*, at the King's, Hammer-smith, and one of the cast speaking the line: 'You will kindly sit over there.' The reply came back: 'No, I will not. I'm going home. I've a bus to catch.' It could not happen now. The hysteria has passed to the directors. Once they were there to smooth the actors down and now it is the other way round. We have to do the calming. They come off some course or other and try to use you to prove theories someone else has fed them. Naturally, that's a generalization and there are many, many exceptions."

"No one ever saw George Lucas with ruffled feathers."