

The Jedi return

Excitement out of this world in last of superstar thrillology

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Moviemaker George Lucas has fired up his "Star Wars" money-making machinery again, this time with "Return of the Jedi," which completes his deep-galaxy trilogy, more properly identified as a thrillology.

Never mind about box-office lightning striking twice in the same place as displayed with the startling success of 1977's "Star Wars" and 1980's "The Empire Strikes Back."

Lucas, for a third time, surely will attract those same golden bolts — and probably even bigger crowds — with his rip-roaring "Jedi."

This latest triumph not only settles all the questions and crises generated in the first two outer-space winners but also brims with something for everyone, from riveting action sequences to broad comedy to light romance to an array of marvelous machines, not to mention monsters and creatures that come out of both the woods and the woodwork.

"Jedi" — though dominated by its parade of hardware and startling creations ranging from a vile, drooling lump called Jabba the Hutt to an army of "fur balls" (as Han Solo dubs them) that look like a cuddly cross between a terrier and a teddy bear — deftly avoids being a mere creature feature.

Lucas launches his carnival of movie magic with a battle sequence that lasts 35 minutes and seems a fraction of that time. Other rousing interludes of conflict, both aerial and on the ground, follow, always punctuated by breath-catching intervals in which another of the riddles in the series is solved.

What's up there on the screen is an all-stops-out eye-



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popper, pulse-pounder, breath-robber, rib-tickler and crowd-pleaser. The Force is with us again, in full force and in razzle-dazzle style.

If there are any complaints, they'll be heard from purist "Star Wars" cultists, who just may feel Lucas has gone a bit overboard with his stress on juvenile cutesie-creatures, some suggesting a Walt Disney influence, others "The Wizard of Oz." And while the moviemaker has a lot of human problems to tidy up, the cinematic scales are tilted by far in favor of the picture's hardware and creature creations.

All of the familiar cast members are back, quickly assembled in a single place by Lucas, whose story immediately goes into high gear. Villainous Jabba the Hutt still has Han Solo doing duty as a wall decoration, hanging there encased in a slab of carbonite.

Luke Skywalker, an almost-Jedi knight, has come up with a scheme to free his sidekick. In a twinkling, everyone's face to face (ugh!) with the Hutt . . . Skywalker, Princess Leia, C-3PO, R2-D2, Chewbacca and — lurking around the sidelines — Lando Calrissian.

Skywalker challenges the slobbering Hutt to free Solo. The monster, even more obese than Orson

Please see Diehl / 10B

Jedi: Get set for world of action

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Welles, refuses. If he had intoned "we will free no galactic warrior before his time," it would not have been a surprise.

Whoosh! And we're immediately engulfed by that 35-minute struggle, the first of a succession of such frays during the 133-minute space spectacle.

Surprises and revelations are the mainstay of other interludes, and their fun and impact won't be dulled by needless tattling here. Let's just say that Luke finds out a lot about his family tree, Princess Leia proves she's both feminine and a fighter, Darth Vader has some choices to make that are heavier than his breathing, and that it all comes down to a finale that should send crowds home eager to spread the word, doubtless favorable.

Few are unaware that "Jedi" actually is Chapter 6 of Lucas' announced nine-part narrative, with "Star Wars" Chapter 4 and "Empire" Chapter 5. Lucas has said that when and if he continues the project, he'll go back to Chapter 1. So this is probably the last time we'll see the "Star Wars" roster as presently constituted.

Once again, the special effects are ultra-special. The Death Star, previously demolished, is being rebuilt, the evil Emperor (Ian McDiarmid) insisting it be finished in time for his scheme to crush once and for all the Rebel forces. Aware of this, Skywalker and Solo map an attack to catch the Emperor with his attack shield down.

But Luke has other weighty things on his mind. Is Darth Vader (as hinted earlier) really his father? If so, can he redeem his errant parent? The Emperor connives to thwart any such scheme and even counts on luring Luke to the Dark Side of the Force.

Mark Hamill as the tormented Skywalker has the most demanding human part in the tale and is the most prominently displayed. He scores some genuinely affecting moments. Harrison Ford as Solo gets off a very few one-liners and dashes around, but his role is muted. Carrie Fisher, looking more and more like her father, singer Eddie Fisher, displays a lot of pluck and a lot of her bod in a surprisingly abbreviated costume when held captive by the Hutt.

But the others — Anthony Daniels as C-3PO, Frank Oz manipulating the 900-year-old Yoda, Kenny Baker as R2-D2, Peter Mayhew as Chewbacca, Alec Guinness as Ben (Obi-Wan) Kenobi and Billy Dee Williams as Calrissian — are given only bursts and spurts of attention and/or lines.

Stealing the show (and surely stealing hearts as well) are those "fur balls," the Ewoks, both lovable and laughable — and mighty handy in a fight. As funny as they are fuzzy, they scamper around a forest where a goodly share of the action takes place, swinging a la Tarzan through the branches to their treetop dwellings. (Guess what new bit of

merchandise is about to invade toy counters!)

To create his swarm of Ewoks, Lucas put out the largest call for midgets since "The Wizard of Oz." They'll have audiences "ooohing" and "aaahing" at their appearance and antics.

Lucas not only goes more emphatically for outlandish creatures in "Jedi," but he shrewdly caps most of his hard-hitting action sequences with at least one laugh and often several. These sight gags are effective tension-breakers, a welcome ingredient in the pell-mell picture.

The trilogy to date has been a money magnet. "Star Wars" — which cost \$10 million — has a global gross of \$524 million, while "Empire" — with a budget of \$25 million — has rung up \$365 million on the same turf. "Jedi" is the longest, most lavish of the epic cycle, carrying a price tag of \$32.5 million. Lucas bankrolled this one himself — and it's a built-in winner.

Nevertheless, director Richard Marquand and producer-scripter Lucas indulge themselves at times. Several of the battles run entirely too long (coming dangerously close to bruising the picture's delicate rhythm). And the ending is dismayingly hokey.

However, their special effects (\$8 million worth), makeup and other moviemaking wizardry all are little short of awesome.

What's more, in this era of much-abused permissiveness, they deliver their goods without

resorting to a single crudity. The PG rating is the consequence of the intensity of the screenplay's battle action, nothing else.

So it's hail and doubtless farewell for this particular cluster of "Star Wars" stars, who have completed their segments of the Lucas space fantasy. If industry expectations for "Jedi" are on the mark, Hamill, Ford, Fisher & Co. will still be saying their "goodbye" on screens across the nation when snow flies once again.

"Return of the Jedi." Starring Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher, Billy Dee Williams, Anthony Daniels, Peter Mayhew, Ian McDiarmid, David Prowse, James Earl Jones, Alec Guinness, Frank Oz, Kenny Baker. Rated PG for violence. At Har-Mar, Signal Hills 4, The Movies At Maplewood II, Skyway, Ridge Square, Southtown, Brookdale East. □