'STAR WARS II'

Sequel's even better

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Vader's raiders again are on the prowl . . .

Star Wars supposedly saw the end of the Dark Side of the Force — but Lord Darth Vader has miraculously survived. And now *The Empire Strikes Back* in a rousing sequel to the 1977 George Lucas gold mine.

Once more, producer-scripter Lucas has given moviegoers a Forceful space adventure, one that's every bit as good as the original and, in some ways, is even better (though the spirit and appeal of *Star Wars* may never again be touched).

It hardly seems possible that it's been three years since that familiar, dominating musical theme first was heard. Now, in vibrant Dolby Sound, it trumpets forth again at the Har-Mar Theater, where *Empire Strikes Back* is being presented in the movie house's newly installed 70mm process.

For two action-crammed hours, the screen unfolds the latest adventures of Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Princess Leia, C-3PO and R2-D2 in those never-dull days "a long time ago in a galaxy far away." This time, the stress is on stress itself: There's nary a moment one of the principals isn't in dire danger . . . and the 124 minutes have only a few lulls and never a lag.

As the majestic music immediately grabs and molds the audience mood, the familiar receding scroll peels off into space, pocked by zillions of stars. This time it reads:

"Episode V — The Empire Strikes Back. It is a dark time for the Rebellion. Although the Death Star has been destroyed, Imperial forces have driven the Rebel forces from their hidden base and pursued them across the galaxy.

"Evading the dreaded Imperial Star Fleet, a group of Freedom Fighters led by Luke Skywalker has established a new secret base on the remote ice world of Hoth. The evil Lord Darth Vader, obsessed with finding young Skywalker, has dispatched thousands of remote probes into the reaches of space."

Immediately, the movie begins to unfold its high-tension tale — and it's a ton of fun. In the very first moments, Lucas springs the first of his new creations, at once startling and delighting us and establishing a level of excellence never compromised during the entire production. Mark Hamill as Skywalker is riding across the snowy landscape of Hoth astride an incredible creature called a Tauntaun, which looks very much like a kangaroo with ram's horns.

It's only the beginning. Yet to come are probe droids that come tip-toeing across the frozen countryside like towering spiders . . . Imperial tanks that are massive mechanical mastodons . . . a daring flight through an asteroid field

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that'll have you ducking . . . a landing in the interior of (well, you'll not have the surprises dulled here) . . . a Jedi master named Yoda who preaches and teaches mind over matter to Skywalker, . . . lightsword duels (one over a yawning pit) and, of course, rocket ships and space flights in abundance. It's a dazzling cinematic circus, and Lucas is the firm-handed, overgenerous ringmaster.

The original cast is back, even Alec Guinness — though he was killed in *Star Wars*. Guinness, who was recovering from an eye operation and who wasn't sure he'd be available for *ESB*, was able to show up for work just as shooting was nearly completed. He appears for only a few seconds in scenes in holographic form or as an off-screen voice.

Harrison Ford as Han Solo, Carrie Fisher as Princess Leia, David Prowse as Darth Vader (with the still unbilled James Earl Jones supplying his menacing metallic voice), Anthony Daniels as the "golden neurotic" robot — C-3PO, midget Kenny Baker (3 feet, 2 inches) as the bleeping R2-D2, and towering Peter Mayhew (7 feet, 2 inches) as the towering (8 feet) Chewbacca all are back with fresh fun and action.

Lucas has wisely taken note of his host of imitators . . . *Buck Rogers, The Black Hole, Star Trek*, etc. Those views of mammoth space vehicles and dazzling spacescapes, so awesome in 1977, have become by now rather commonplace. So Lucas turns his nimble imagination in other directions. Typical of his startling new creations are those walking tanks, sort of mobile ironclad Trojan horses, and the Yoda character, a Muppetlike creature brought to convincing life by Muppet master Frank Oz, whose talents also create Miss Piggy elsewhere.

Though audiences now are familiar with such items as Vader's enormous command ship and the lightswords, Director Irvin Kershner uses them in such effective ways that the old impact again is felt. *ESB* carries a PG rating, a near mystery in itself and perhaps due to the intensity of the screenplay. It's a movie that's gripping and with a high level of constant peril. When I came out of *Star Wars*, I was dazzled and exhilarated (as the Roseville 4 Theater gang still recalls). Emerging from *Empire*, I was thoroughly entertained, dazzled . . . but frazzled.

Darth Vader (David Prowse) confronts Lando Calrissian (Billy Dee Williams) and Boba Fett (Jeremy Bulloch).

Star Wars cost $10.5 million to make . . . has grossed more than $400 million . . . has actual earnings of $176 million. *The Empire Strikes Back* (according to new figures just made available to this writer) had a final budget figure of $25 million. There is no reason why it shouldn't be the same box-office blockbuster as its predecessor.

Though the main thrust in *ESB* is on action atop thrills atop suspense, Kershner squeezes in moments of fun and even romance: Princess Leia tells the rough-and-tumble Solo she loves him — and they kiss. While the film's tone is that of melodrama, the director (who agonized over keeping the screen mood "just right") deftly balances his ingredients. As the story progresses and the characters scatter to elude Vader, the camera has to hop back and forth from one set of players to another. But so firmly are locales and identities established that there is no confusion.

A newcomer to the roster is Billy Dee Williams as a "scoundrel pal" of Ford's, Lando Calrissian. Williams fits right into the flow (and comes off so effectively that Lucas has just rewarded the actor with the same bonus he's given his other cast principals, a full percentage point of the movie's surefire profits).

Production on *ESB* began March 5, 1979, near a glacier in Norway, which doubled for the ice planet Hoth. The rest of the picture was shot at the EMI Studios near London. The story opens on Hoth but then fragments, part of the action (involving the centuries-old Yoda and Skywalker) unfolding on the swampy jungle planet of Dagobah.

Composer John Williams has created another masterful score, his music — performed by The London Symphony — keeping a razor's edge on the screen's mood and particularly underlining the action sequences. The Panavision camera work, the DeLuxe Color and the Dolby multitrack sound combine to create lofty production values also repeated in the movie's matte, miniature and other mechanical work.

The characters this time out are more credible, less comic-strip creations. And one of the story's greatest surprises involves two of those familiar personages, a relationship no one should tattle to another. But (because the scene is so fleeting) do keep a sharp eye out — and you'll see Lord Darth Vader without his helmet on, his "head" revealed as a mass of pink-and-yellow-colored brain.

Though dialogue is deliberately kept lean, there are some bright, light lines to crack the tension. C-3PO's chattering gets on Solo's nerves, and he barks: "Shut him up or shut him down!" Solo also good-naturedly calls Chewbacca "fuzz ball." And Leia gets her shots in, too, dubbing the romantically elusive Solo "laser brain."

The Empire Strikes Back is great fun on an awesome scale, a loud and lively and lusty entertainment bonanza. Its ending is a non-ending, an unashamed setup for the next sequel. Lucas in a few months starts work on that followup *Star Wars* adventure, *Revenge Of The Jedi*, and I — for one — can hardly wait. □