

Standout Sequences Salvage "Clones": "Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones"

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 21 May 2002 18:00

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STAR WARS, EPISODE II - ATTACK OF THE CLONES

Can two or three marvelous scenes make a movie? The question arises after seeing *Star Wars, Episode II - Attack of the Clones*, the fifth installment in George Lucas' sci-fi series, and the first to make me seriously ruminate on whether or not I actually liked it. (For the record, I found the first film very enjoyable, thought *The Empire Strikes Back* was a work of near-genius, and found both *Return of the Jedi* and *The Phantom Menace* plodding and dull.) My initial reaction upon leaving the theatre, though, was one of unfettered happiness; replaying the kineticism of the movie's big set pieces, I smiled during the whole drive home, immediately called my best friend, a devout *Star Wars* fanatic, to tell him he'd love it, and continued, for the rest of the day, to extol the film's surprising merits to friends and co-workers.

However, when I sat down the next day to compose detailed notes for this review, I found myself recalling, at best, four scenes that I really admired, and about two dozen elements of *Attack of the Clones*

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that truly bothered me. Had Mr. Lucas, by positioning his knockout sequences at the very beginning of the film and the very end, hoodwinked me into *thinking*

I had enjoyed the whole experience? And if so, did it matter?

What's inarguable, I think, is that *Attack of the Clones* is vastly superior to 1999's *The Phantom Menace*

(When *Menace*

star Liam Neeson notoriously said that his experience working on the film made him consider quitting film acting I empathized, because witnessing said spectacle made me consider quitting film

reviewing

.) Gone is that tow-headed little yutz who played young Anakin; Jar Jar Binks's screen time is mercifully limited (though his every appearance still draws uncomfortable silence – or worse – from audiences); Ewan McGregor, as Obi-Wan Kenobi, looks to be having a bit more fun this time around; and the plotting, while still mostly incomprehensible, is easier to follow. Plus, the film features touches that even casual viewers of Lucas's mythology will grin at, such as the brief appearances of Luke's and Leia's aunt and uncle from the first

Star Wars

, the origin of the Stormtroopers, and some intriguing background info on what makes *Empire*

's Boba Fett tick. (The performance of the young actor playing mini-Boba, though, is painfully reminiscent of Jake Lloyd's work in

Menace

, and a reminder that whatever his strengths, George Lucas should never be allowed to direct children.)

In addition to these pleasures, of course, *Attack of the Clones* has that astonishing opening and closing to its credit. About fifteen minutes into the picture, Obi-Wan and Anakin (now played by Hayden Christensen) pursue an assassin through the skies of a city the size of a planet, and it might be the wittiest chase scene ever conceived for a sci-fi blockbuster. With our heroes hurtling past airborne traffic and among passers-by of all alien species, it's a completely thrilling, gloriously unrealistic, highly comic set-piece, one that continually tops itself just when you think it might run out of steam. (It's an Indiana Jones number in space.) You have to hang on until the film's end to find a sequence equally exhilarating, but it's just about worth the wait: Imprisoned in a coliseum, Obi-Wan, Anakin, and the former Queen Amidala (Natalie Portman) do battle with a mind-boggling number of droids, clones, and fanged, yowling beasts ready to turn them into hors d'oeuvres, and the sheer, joyous overkill of it all makes it the best scene in the movie. Or it *would*

be, if it weren't immediately followed by a scene that's already legendary, in which infinitely wise, feeble, elfin Yoda decides to get in on the action, engaging in a light-saber duel with an

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evil Jedi warrior (Christopher Lee) who has
sincerely

underestimated him. While I have long rallied against the omnipresence of CGI effects, and had absolutely no interest in seeing an endearing Muppet redrawn with computerized technology, I will forever cherish the image of 79-year-old Lee doing battle with this lightning-fast gnome. (I'd hate to be in an audience that

didn't

applaud when Yoda, light saber in hand, gives Lee that I'm-gonna-kick-your-sorry-ass look.)

These sequences are the most unapologetically enjoyable I've seen in all of 2002 thus far, so why does *Attack of the Clones* wind up only borderline good? Well, the film's other ninety-plus minutes certainly don't help matters. Defenders of *Clones*, and the four

Star Wars

films that preceded it, will no doubt say that elements like good acting and dialogue aren't of critical importance in this particular franchise; no doubt that's true, but when the installments are as talky as

Menace

and

Clones

are, shouldn't they be? Every time Christensen and Portman converse – and, this being the installment in which their characters' love is revealed, that happens a lot – the audience shifts in their seats and heads out to the lobby for popcorn. Their romantic drivel will either bore you to tears or cause you to laugh out loud; though both have proven themselves as likable, naturalistic performers in other films, suddenly Hayden Christensen and Natalie Portman seem like the worst actors on earth. (Similarly, you'd never know how amazing Samuel L. Jackson can be based on his undernourished role here; it's heartbreaking that scores of kids now know him only as "the black Jedi.") This would-be romantic duo doesn't really have worse material than the film's other actors – the script, by Lucas and Jonathan Hales, is plot-heavy and void of style – but their robotic delivery makes you more aware of its inanity. (Christensen doesn't pull off his character's anger, either; Anakin comes off as a petulant whiner who got his Tonka trucks stolen.) The film's mostly-crummy performances even extend to the droids. The "beloved" C3P0 and R2D2 return, and you're forced to ask yourself: Were they

always

this annoying?

And though he's undeniably a man of vision and a genius with effects – the spirit of technology embodied – there's a lot of evidence in *Clones* that George Lucas simply can't direct anymore, or at the very least, can't direct a non-action sequence. Beyond his poor work with performers, Lucas' style is moribund in material that begs for poetry; late in the film, Anakin suffers an injury that dovetails with *Empire's* most haunting

image, and the moment is so poorly staged that not only do you feel no goosebumps

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whatsoever, you're not even sure of what exactly happened. The fine moments in *Attack of the Clones*

are

so

fine that it would be churlish to suggest avoiding the film; it's fast-food season at the cineplex, and

Clones

sometimes delivers all the enjoyment you could hope for. Don't be surprised, though, if that enjoyment, like any fast-food experience, proves to be fleeting.