

Reviews

STAR WARS TRILOGY

By Cyril Pearl 9/8/2004

HIT: The documentary *Empire of Dreams* is packed with production clips, behind-the-scenes bits and interviews with 40 cast and crew members from the original trilogy.

MISS: When will fans get to see the original versions of the films?

The most anticipated DVD release of the year arrives fully loaded and ready to rock the retail and e-tail market through the winter. Restored and remastered by Lowry Digital Images (which also handled last year's *Indiana Jones* DVD box), the *Star Wars* films--*Star Wars* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983)--look better than they probably ever did in theaters during their original run. The films contained here are essentially the Special Editions that made the theatrical rounds back in 1997, which has already proven to be a sore spot for fans who clamor for the original features. It also should be noted that these versions have been further tweaked by the seemingly-never-satisfied creator George Lucas: His digitally dexterous hands have substantially altered a key scene between the Emperor and Darth Vader in *Empire* and the ending of *Jedi*, which now includes a shot of the spirit of young Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christenson). Tampering notwithstanding, the picture quality is nothing short of breathtaking, with the kind of sharp definition and sheen that one associates with the trilogy. (Check out *Empire's* battle scene on the ice planet Hoth or the skirmish on Jabba the Hutt's sand barge in *Jedi*.) Leading the four-hours-plus of supplemental materials (not including the commentary tracks) is the 2½-hour documentary *Empire of Dreams: The Story of the Star Wars Trilogy*, produced and directed by Kevin Burns and Edith Becker. A chronological look at the genesis and creation of the *Star Wars* series and its mega-success around the world, the doc is wholly engrossing. Filled with production clips, making-of footage, behind-the-scenes bits (get a load of Kurt Russell auditioning for the role of Han Solo), artwork and interviews of some 40 cast and crew members from the trilogy, *Dreams* makes a pretty persuasive argument that Lucas is the most influential filmmaker of the past 30 years, which isn't an unrealistic proposition, as Lucas is the man behind the Industrial Light & Magic effects house, the Pixar computer and non-linear digital editing. The wall-to-wall commentaries--one on each film--are well-edited, fast-moving concoctions. Featured commentators include Lucas, sound designer Ben Burtt, ILM's Dennis Muren, actress Carrie Fisher and, on *Empire*, director Irwin Kershner. Recorded separately, all are identified at the top of the screen before they speak, which keeps things clear. Like *Dreams*, the commentaries are comprehensive, bouncing back and forth between production tales, effects descriptions, finances and thespian bafflement (Fisher is quite funny when she describes how she and some of her fellow actors had no idea what their dialog meant). A trio of featurettes by Leva FilmWorks do a fine job of tackling particular aspects of the *Star Wars* mythos, including the development of the series' characters and the origins of the lightsaber. The third is the inevitable collection of filmmaker testimonials about the trilogy's influence. It demands to be taken seriously as it includes bits from Steven Spielberg, Peter



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Jackson, James Cameron and Ridley Scott. Trailers, stills, an Xbox game demo, DVD-ROM content: There's a lot for fans to savor, but none as delicious as the preview of next summer's *Star Wars: Episode III*--the part the faithful most want to discuss.

Lucasfilm/Fox, four discs, color, 390 min. plus supplements, Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround EX, widescreen or fullscreen, Street: Sept. 21, \$69.98; First Run: W, 1977, 1980, 1983, combined approximately \$800 mil.

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