Lucas returns with second prequel and this time, it’s war

By VINCENT CIVITILLO

In 1977 George Lucas created a special effects milestone with Star Wars, and made it a point to do the same with all the forthcoming films in the series, eventually even sacrificing story for eye-candy in the 1999 prequel The Phantom Menace.

However, despite achieving yet another special effects benchmark in 2002 with his latest film Episode II: Attack of the Clones, the first film in history shot entirely digitally, Lucas learned from past mistakes and combined the powerful effects of Clones with an intriguing story worthy of the Star Wars label.

Set ten years after the events of The Phantom Menace, Episode II begins with the galaxy in a state of brewing civil war. When it is discovered that the life of Senator Amidala (Natalie Portman) is in danger, the Jedi Council dispatches Jedi knight Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor of Moulin Rouge) and his apprentice, Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christensen), to protect her. However, when a forbidden love begins to evolve between Kenobi’s student and the former queen, Skywalker finds himself taking his first steps toward the dark side.

Coming off little momentum from the first prequel, writer/director Lucas managed to score with Clones by deviating from his usual winning formula that proved stale the last time around. For example, the typical space battle climax has been replaced by a fierce, all-out Jedi vs. droid-army battle royal that eventually requires the hand-to-hand involvement of even Jedi Master Yoda himself.

Also moving away from the norm is the heavy emphasis on the love story between Skywalker and Amidala. Even in The Empire Strikes Back, where a romance existed between the space-pirate Han Solo and Princess Leia, it was treated as only a secondary plot to the central storyline. In Clones though, the love affair is evident right from the beginning and grows only stronger as the film is devoted to their affection.

By doing this, Lucas ensures something for everyone as the developing clone war provides an action-packed conflict and the romance serves to three-dimensionalize the story, giving it substance for older audiences looking for more than just another fencing movie.

One area Lucas thankfully did not tamper with though was the score. Returning for the fifth time was composer John Williams whose original classical composition flawlessly sets the mood of the film and relays its many deep emotions without a word of dialogue necessary from the actors.

The latest prequel lagged, however, in the constant changes in scenery. From the darkness of space to the city-planet of Coruscant, to the familiar desert planet Tatooine, back to Naboo where much of Episode I took place and even to a few new worlds such as Kamino, an ocean-based planet plagued by massive hurricanes, and Geonosis, a rocky, mountainous planet. Overall, the consistent background changes make it difficult for one to establish a stable sense of involvement in the film and make it seem less realistic.

In addition, the nighttime version of Coruscant, filled with floating neon lights, is, with its many varying color schemes, annoying on the eyes and looks like a futuristic version of Las Vegas; a setting which seems conspicuously out of place in a Star Wars film.

For the DVD release, Episode II is presented in both its original 2.35:1 anamorphic widescreen ratio, transferred straight from the digital print by THX for optimal video quality, and a separately available fullscreen disc.

Keeping consistency with the Episode I disc, the audio on Clones is available in a hard-hitting Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround EX mix, as well as a Dolby 2.0 Surround one, and does not feature a DTS track.

However, in place of the digital track is an audio commentary by Lucas with producer Rick McCallum, editor and sound designer Ben Burtt, visual effects supervisors Pablo Helman, John Knoll and Ben Snow, and animation supervisor Rob Coleman. Although it is a nice inclusion, the continued emphasis on the visual effects can get boring for the average listener.

Also in line with the Episode I release is the second disc, loaded with supplemental features. Like before, all of the trailers and TV spots are available, including a promo for the “R2-D2: Beneath the Dome” mockumentary. However, the disc also features eight deleted scenes, the music video for the “Across the Stars” love theme, numerous documentaries highlighting the making of the film and its digital characters, behind the scenes featurettes, web-links, visual effects breakdowns and a gallery of still photos.

With Attack of the Clones, Lucas has finally found his way back to the filmmaking he showed the world he was capable of decades ago. Now, with an exceptional DVD release with hours of extra features on board, anyone who has enjoyed the other installments in the series will find this to be a set not to miss.