

All-star cast fails to save first 'Star Wars' prequel

By VINCENT CIVITILLO

A long time ago, in what seems like a galaxy far, far away, audiences were dazzled and entranced by George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga. However, this was indeed a long time ago in a time before remastered special editions and disappointing prequels.

Today it would seem that Lucas is almost intent on destroying his legacy. After re-releasing his original masterpieces with tampered special effects and deleted scenes, he wrote and directed the stale 1999 summer blockbuster *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*.

The film, the first part of a prequel trilogy which takes place decades before the events of *Star Wars: A New Hope*, tells the tale of the galaxy in the years before the Galactic Empire and follows a young Anakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd of *Jingle All the Way*) on his journey to becoming the dark lord of evil. Along the way familiar characters, such as Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor), C-3PO, R2-D2 and Yoda, are joined by new friends Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson), Queen Amidala (Natalie Portman) and Mace Windu (Samuel L. Jackson).

Unfortunately for fans of the series the rusty director, who had not directed a film since the original *Star Wars* in 1977, brought nothing, but a film loaded with dazzling special effects and useless star power.

The movie, which boasts a nine-year-old protagonist in Anakin and a wacky slapstick sidekick in the computer-generated Jar Jar Binks, is geared entirely towards children. Freshly introduced antagonist Darth Maul (*X-Men's* Ray Park) carries no real motive for his actions, other than his affinity for the dark side of the force, and the acting of many of the characters seems stale and unenthused, a result no-doubt of continual shooting in front of blue screens as opposed to real environments.

In addition, the story falls weak at times; feeling primarily like a chapter only intended to introduce characters and attempts to win over audiences solely with an awe-inspiring special effects show that makes the film seem like a two and a half hour commercial for Lucasfilm's special effects team.

The Phantom Menace's greatest strength though is its score. Returning to the

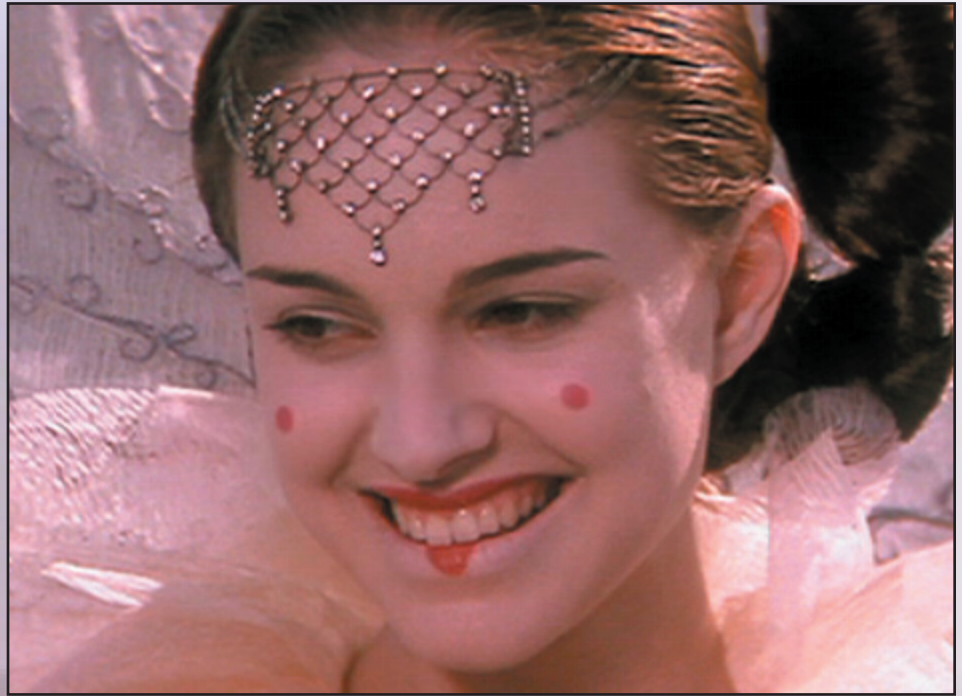


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Natalie Portman stars as Queen Amidala in the 'galactic' disappointment *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*. However, while the film itself is weak and childish, fans will find that the DVD has been built to reference quality standards.

conductor's chair is John Williams who presents a perfect soundtrack that tells the story of a passive queen forced into the swallow of war, a boy whose destiny is shrouded in mystery and a looming evil, awaiting its time to strike.

The strongest of Williams' tracks is the "Duel of the Fates," a battle anthem used in the film's climax lightsaber duel. The song combines the beauty of the London Symphony Orchestra with the power of the London Voices and New London Children's Choir to create what will undoubtedly be the prequel trilogy's most memorable piece.

For the DVD release of *The Phantom Menace*, the prequel is presented in its original 2.35:1 anamorphic widescreen ratio and features a Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround EX and a Dolby Digital 2.0 Surround audio mix.

The video is crisp and pristine, despite being transferred from the theatrical, rather than digital, print and the audio will give any home theater a workout, even without a DTS track on board. However, the two disc set's real drawing power is in the department of extra features.

The true gem of the supplements is an audio commentary featuring Lucas, producer Rick McCallum, co-editor and

sound designer Ben Burtt, visual effects supervisors Scott Squires, John Knoll and Dennis Muren and animation supervisor Rob Coleman. Although it is noticeable that the track was not recorded with all the men together at once, it still runs smooth and is an entertaining, while insightful, listen. A nice touch are subtitles that come up on the screen during the film to identify the speaker each time, as it may get confusing to differentiate the many voices.

Located on the second disc are seven new deleted scenes completed exclusively for this release, an informative hour-long documentary covering all aspects of the making of the film, various other making-of featurettes, the "Duel of the Fates" music video, production photo galleries, theatrical trailers and TV-spots and an additional featurette on the making of the *Star Wars: Starfighter* video game.

Although the DVD for the first episode of the *Star Wars* saga is built to perfection, there is little sense in purchasing this disappointment of a film unless you are a true fan of the series looking to complete the collection. Therefore, those looking to somehow buy into the *Episode I* marketing ploy would be better off purchasing the well-composed soundtrack by John Williams instead. ☺