

Is There A New Hope In “Star Wars: Episode 7?”

Over the past year (and particularly the past four months) the build up and hype for the return of the Star Wars universe has been nothing short of overwhelming.

Was the wait and the hype worth it?

Well, as of January 2, I have seen it six times and will be seeing it at least another two to three times.

The Force Awakens is a roller coaster tour de force and a wonderful throwback to the original Star Wars trilogy in tone and bravura. And there is darkness which harkens at times back to the prequels. (Personally, I find the prequels to be almost Machiavellian or Wagnerian in scope. But that’s a debate for another time!)

Is The Force Awakens a perfect film? No.

Is it the best Star Wars film? No.

Is it the worst? Good god, no! Attack of the Clones still lies at the bottom for me.

This one lies in parallel with Return of the Jedi – and in fact reminds me of Jedi, which was a kind of recycled version of A New Hope. I keep hearing the comparisons to Episode 4 and for me, the multiple story-lines converging during the last act resemble Jedi so much more. As does the humor of the picture.

There is a lot to praise in The Force Awakens. The script, which is credited to Lawrence Kasdan, JJ Abrams and Michael Arndt, is filled with some witty one liners and moves at a brisk clip. The smartest thing Disney and Abrams did here was the hiring of Kasdan, whose smart storytelling hand is ever-present throughout the film.

New comers Daisy Ridley and John Boyega are superb and deliver solid performances. I am particularly happy to see Ms. Ridley on the path to becoming a kick ass Jedi – I’ve been waiting a long time to have a female Jedi whose story we get to follow.

Oscar Issac has a charismatic, swashbuckling feel as Resistance fighter pilot Poe Dameron and I hope we see much more of him in future films.

Adam Driver as Kylo Ren is also highly engaging. This an actor who I wish had been cast as Anakin in the prequels. Insecure, unsure, tortured and highly volatile, Driver delivers a highly engaging performance, filled with distinct and creepy choices. Looking forward to seeing how he develops.

My favorite character, however, is BB-8, the new droid. A practical effect, I was floored by the emotions conveyed by the character and was instantly charmed by this new droid. He’s just adorable and I must confess I was so happy to have found the remote control version of him under the Christmas tree.

And of course, the highlights of the picture are seeing all our old friends: Luke, Han, Leia, Chewie, C-3PO and R2-D2 - and Admiral Ackbar and Neim Numb! Particularly Harrison Ford and Peter Mayhew, who quickly steal the film and have a fantastic, applause generating entrance. Ford is at his best here, cocky, sensitive, charming, wisecracking – everything we desire from Solo.

I did feel that Carrie Fisher is underused and that Abrams and the writers didn’t quite know what to do with her. But she’s a welcome presence to have back on screen and Han’s departure scene with Leia is very touching.

The rest of the cast is solid and quite fun, although Abrams litters the film with a few unnecessary cameos which don't always ring true (like Greg Grunberg who unfortunately survives the final battle).

Where the film falters a bit is with the First Order and their ultimate goal. They never feel completely threatening in the way the Empire did in the original trilogy or its rise in the prequels. While they exhibit Nazi-like assemblages (the allusions to Triumph of the Will are not subtle) I never found the stakes high enough. And a logistical question for me is where was the New Republic in slapping them down.

While the Starkiller planet is fun (also a nice nod to Lucas' first-draft script), some logic problems do exist and this is the one major retread which I wish had been better thought out. Enough with the Death Stars, guys.

The character of Supreme Leader Snoke (motion captured and voiced by the great Andy Serkis) is never truly sinister. He seems more like some discarded character from a Lord of the Rings picture. After Ian McDiarmid's turn as Palpatine in the Star Wars saga, Disney is going to need to demand better, more ominous baddies. This is probably the picture's biggest failing particularly as there's absolutely no tension on screen – although theories abound about Snoke actually being Darth Plagueis. Not sure but I would have rather had him be a clone of Palpatine with McDiarmid reprising the role.

My last "gripe" with the picture is that it's sad to think that after the happy ending of Return of the Jedi, Luke, Han and Leia are miserable and torn apart. But that's what creates drama: conflict. I almost feel like this film is related to the second act of Into the Woods!

As for JJ Abrams, I must say this is by far the most accomplished film he has directed. I usually find his work filled with an A.D.D.-like frenzy which I just cannot connect with. Too over-edited, lame shenanigans, bad storytelling. The Star Trek films for me are unwatchable and devoid of real character arcs. Not here. For the first time Abrams' camera is often stationary, the editing cut at a more moderate tempo, actual shots filled with some engaging composition. He clearly has absorbed the Star Wars world and for the most part understood what made it visually tick, including the documentary style camera zooms which appear in Empire and the prequels.

On top of it all, Abrams gets terrific performances from his cast. I must applaud him for his sure-handed work and finally allowing his camera to stop moving here and there. I can't believe I'm writing this but I wish he were directing the remaining two films.

As for the technical credits, the film is top notch. Sound design by Ben Burtt and Gary Rydstrom is nothing short of miraculous as always. I very pleased to hear Burtt reigned in and not overpowering the score (which I'll get to in a moment). The production design and costume work is worthy of award accolades, particularly in the way it recaptures past memories with precision. As for the editing, Mary Jo Markey and Maryann Brandon keep things tightly paced without letting the audience miss anything important. Like Titanic, this picture just glides by leaving you wanting more.

And now we've come to the score. We've all been waiting to here what the Maestro, composer John Williams, has fashioned. The reports of the sessions beginning in June and lasting until November have been plastered everywhere. What kind of things were we going to hear? Will the score feel like Star Wars? Are the themes catchy?

For me, the score is nothing short of miraculous and a testament to why Mr. Williams is the greatest American composer this country has produced since Bernstein or Copland. He's 83 and shows no sign of resting on his laurels. The music is complex, thematically driven, impeccably orchestrated, passionate, sinister, heart-wrenching, beautiful. It's definitely written in his later period style (which began surfacing in the 90's): an intricate harmonic structure, the high xylophone/woodwind riffs during action sequences which make the music cut through sound design, detailed counterpoint and a sense of assuredness of a master craftsman operating in top form.

We walked out of the first showing with my head swimming with Rey's and Kylo Ren's theme – AND the new Resistance March, which harkens back to Williams work in the 70's with its quasi-Baroque flavor. I was reminded

of Black Sunday, The Eiger Sanction and the Meet the Press theme. It's an amazing tune which gives the Resistance robust brawn on screen.

Rey's theme is filled with such longing and heroism all the while displaying an inner strength and playfulness. And it shares a harmonic structure with the Force theme! When I was able to buy my soundtrack copy (after having to wait overnight until the morning of December 18th), the first track I listened to was the concert arrangement of Rey's theme. I just couldn't shake it from my brain!

I have now spotted seven new motives and themes running throughout this score. When Williams recalls his tunes from the past pictures, there's incredible resonance for the audience. The appearance of the burning homestead music (from episode 4) when Rey finally wields a lightsaber has made me burst into tears EVERY time I've seen the picture. As has the Force theme at the picture's end (recalling the binary sunset moment) as Rey holds out said lightsaber to someone. Another tear-bursting moment on each viewing.

The other point which must be mentioned is Williams' spotting sense which is unparalleled and always dramatically right. The best example is in the Torn Apart cue where a major upsetting moment occurs to a beloved character. Rather than adding a stinger to that moment (as many would do today, particularly another writer whose music is earsplitting), Williams instead brings the orchestra down to a *pianissimo* low brass and string tone, then lets the music build with our horror before releasing the tension on the most tender moment of the picture. I really can't find the words to express the perfection of this kind of scoring which is so lacking in 95 percent of the music churned out for films. I only get this kind of innate dramatic writing from Williams and his contemporaries – Silvestri, Horner, Goldsmith, Newton Howard. The way in which the cue heightens what we're seeing is literally Puccini-esque for lack of a better term.

It's also wonderful that the score was recorded here in Los Angeles by our wonderful studio musicians. I'm proud to have so many friends and colleagues contributing to the heart of this picture. They sound wonderful and I look forward to seeing how Maestro Williams will continue show Hollywood what an art film scoring can be and what a classically-trained, competent composer and musician is capable of achieving. Along with Hateful Eight, The Walk and Wolf Totem, this is my favorite score of the year and I'm crossing fingers it's given the Oscar in February. It more than deserves it.

At present, the film is poised to surpass Avatar as the highest grossing film of all time. It's worthy of it. I'm stunned at the debates on the merits of this picture I'm seeing on social media. It's not a perfect film and I think it's hard for anything to surpass Empire Strikes Back. But The Force Awakens made me feel like a child again and filled my heart with magic, terror, humor, sadness, nostalgia and hope. It's a joyous ride and I look forward to more. The Force is definitely strong with this one. For me it gets a 9.5 out of 10. And I can't wait to see it again!!