

## 'Star Wars: The Force Awakens' soars high

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You can feel the creative force at work in "Star Wars: The Force Awakens." And that's a mighty fine thing because the beloved film juggernaut has not exuded something this emotionally dynamic since, well, "Return of the Jedi" bowed back in 1983. However, in the fine hands of director J.J. Abrams, "The Force Awakens" soars wonderfully high thanks, in part, to its diverse cast, controlled confidence and resilient storytelling. (\*\*1/2 out of four)



David James, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures

In other words: Feel free to breathe a sigh of relief.

That is not say that the outing has its challenges. The film doesn't always flicker like the flames of the original three outings. Perhaps no new "Star Wars" ever will. It's 2015. With the relentless births of big-budget super hero franchises, at this point movie audiences may feel as if they have seen it all. Ironic, since "Star Wars" was among one the first blockbusters around. Yet Abrams, who played an integral part in the script, in fact, alongside Michael Arndt and "Star Wars" alum Lawrence Kasdan, managed to do one thing really well here: Return to basics.

Gone are the high-tech mishegas the franchise's father, George Lucas, spawned more than 13 years ago in Episodes I, II and III. (Not to mention some of the most abysmal acting. Sorry, Hayden Christensen—although we really dug you in 2001's "Life as a House," buddy.) In its place is the old-fashioned storytelling that made the original trilogy (Episodes IV, V and VI from 1977, 1981 and 1983) so inviting.

We've known for some time now that "The Force Awakens" (the seventh chapter in the series) picks up years after "Jedi," when Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) confronted the galactic enemies once and for all and brought peace, justice and broad smiles to the galaxy and his sis Princess Leia ([Carrie Fisher](#)) and Han Solo ([Harrison Ford](#)). But The Dark Side is still very much alive this time around. The realization of just how brutal war and annihilation can get festers inside troubled stormtrooper Finn (John Boyega). He quickly decides to make an exit, shed the white battle garb, and join forces with resistance pilot Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac). What's at stake: protecting the vital information pertaining to Luke Skywalker that has been housed in the droid BB-8. Maniacal Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) sends his posse of stormtroopers to retrieve that information and here's where things get rolling.

Boyega and Isaac—strong, solid and believable—each smack of a young Han Solo and will be interesting to see what unfolds in the next few theatrical endeavors. As for Driver (from HBO's "Girls"), once again, the man proves himself to be an effectively grounded actor, even when he's in a fit of rage. Some have called Kylo Ren a Baby Darth Vader and the moniker isn't that far out of line, however Driver knows how to not go over the top even when he's being directed to go over the top. He has a rare screen presence that captures our interest.

The film's heart belongs to Daisy Ridley (Rey, a resilient desert scavenger). The British actress hits all the marks here and gives us something and *someone* to truly root for. The character is equal parts vulnerable and persistent. (Think Leia back in the day, but with more spunk and a natural British accent.) When Rey crosses paths with an abandoned BB-8, later she and Boyega stumble upon Han Solo and Chewbacca—yes, it is good to see these two characters on screen again—and we suddenly find ourselves witnessing the birth of a refreshingly different kind of big-screen heroine. Cheers to that and cheers to Ridley. Unlike, say, Jennifer Lawrence ("The Hunger Games") or Kristen Stewart ("Twilight"), the actress exudes a natural grace for the role, as if it has been waiting for her to step into.

But where's our beloved characters Luke and Leia? Well, Fisher (Leia) enters the fold about halfway through this spectacle. Now a general combating the dark forces, she exudes a dignity and inner knowing we would have hoped for—the good news is that the on-screen chemistry between Fisher and Ford is still there. Together, the new team attempts to thwart the rebel forces despite having to confront something much more destructive and devastating than The Death Star we all feared in the original "Star Wars." Look for some father-son themes, too, which were such a significant part of Episodes IV, V, and VI, in this round.

All that and quiet and haunting ending point that speaks loudly of what's to come.

But one of the most interesting things about this entire ride may be what played out behind the scenes. Abrams has been a "Star Wars" mega fan for some time. He was 11 years old when he first sat through the original "Star Wars" and as a teenager, he quickly found his dream job—cleaning Steven Spielberg's student movies. Not a bad a gig. So it seems fitting—or perhaps a kind a delicious destiny—that Abrams is on board here. Few directors could have weaved together such a vibrant, fiery outing that not only pays homage to what George Lucas created back in the 1970s, but also adds layers of emotional depth in a new story that, ultimately, is a passionate and powerful fight to save humanity.

Something much of today's world can certainly relate to.



**Greg Archer**

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