

## Dawn of a New Era:

## Reflecting on **STAR WARS** THE FORCE AWAKENS

by Glen Ryan Tadych

Returning from *Public News'* 3-month hiatus and diving into 2016 cinema, I already have enough to discuss until summer. However, it's impossible for me to jump into any 2016 film commentary without touching on 2015's closing smash, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

One of last year's most anticipated films, *The Force Awakens* opened Dec. 18 with a record-breaking domestic gross of \$119 million, surpassing *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 2*'s (2011) \$91 million, according to Box Office Mojo. It set the record for highest domestic opening weekend at \$529 million, and ultimately surpassed *Avatar* (2009) as highest grossing domestic film at \$928.8 million.

Nearly three months since its release, *The Force Awakens* stands as the third-highest grossing film of all time worldwide at \$2.052 billion—the third film in history to surpass \$2 billion, and the second to do so in its original run.

Now, obviously these are just numbers. A movie could make \$1 trillion and I wouldn't care if it were complete garbage. But it's certainly inaccurate to say *The Force Awakens* was anything but a success, and believe me, The Walt Disney

Company knows it. With all the upcoming changes in their theme parks to fit new Star Wars-themed attractions, as well as five more films (at least) slated for release through 2020, Disney is taking the Star Wars cow for everything it can.

As a fan, I have mixed feelings about all this new Star Wars hype. While I was alive for the 1997 Special Edition re-releases and Prequel Trilogy era, I can't say I recall Star Wars hype and fandom resembling anything like what it is right now. That being said, a 10-year break between film releases, combined with a (somewhat)

dwindling hype due to a lack of fresh live-action material, did seem to make this newfound hype come out of nowhere.

My greatest fear is Disney will drown any and all Star Wars interest with all this milking. It's the kind of effect something has when it just inevitably runs its course, which eventually leads to reboots and things of that nature. The fact we're getting spinoff films is already something I'm not too thrilled about, because I personally feel Star Wars doesn't need spinoffs. To me, that's when you get to the point where you're going, "OK, how far can we actually go with this?"

I won't lie though. *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*—due for release on Dec. 15—has definitely sparked my interest. I can't say I'm all that gung-ho about Han Solo and Boba Fett spinoff films, but a film telling the story of the rebel spies who stole the Death Star plans prior to the events in *Star Wars* (1977) sounds like it could be interesting to watch.

All of this was up in the air though without knowing how *The Force Awakens* would perform, and now that we're in March, it's safe to say Star Wars is back and here to stay. This, of course, brings up inevitable question: As a diehard Star Wars fan, what did I think of the film?

To put it simply, I loved it. I saw *The Force Awakens* four times over the course of a month, and with each viewing, my opinion didn't change one bit. I knew I would have to see it at least twice because anyone who is a hardcore fan of something knows there will always be that adrenaline rush we all get with the initial viewing. It normally takes a repeat viewing to see things on more of an objective keel and walk away with a better understanding of what you watched.

Before I go on, I'll just put it out there that everything is fair game regarding spoilers at this point. *The Force Awakens* has been out for quite some time now, and honestly, if you haven't taken the time to see it in a theater—which any real Star Wars fan would in my opinion—you don't care.

The story of *The Force Awakens* deals with the search for Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill), who's been missing

for years following the failed attempt at establishing a new Jedi Order. As he's furiously hunted by his sadistic and conflicted nephew Kylo Ren (Adam Driver)—a former padawan of Luke's, born to Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and Leia Organa (Carrie Fisher) as Ben Solo—a rogue stormtrooper named Finn (John Boyega) and scavenger named Rey (Daisy Ridley) work with Han and Chewbacca (Peter Mayhew) to find Luke first.

*The Force Awakens* very much evoked the spirit of the Original Trilogy, paying various nostalgic respects while exploring new characters and ideas. That is my overall assessment, but in terms of the film's broader audience, it's one side of said coin. The other side of said coin, and probably *The Force Awakens*' most common criticism, is that it was "too much like" Star Wars. Many viewers said it was a "carbon copy" or "remake" of *A New Hope* (the original film's eventual subtitle which I refuse to use in general conversation).

I find this criticism absurd, and this isn't coming from someone who was blind to all the similarities between *The Force Awakens* and *Star Wars*. The very night I screened the film I said, discussing it with my coworkers, there was a lot of the original film embedded in *The Force Awakens*. I, along with many others, see this as a benefit and one of the contributors to the film's success. A lot of the assholes out there will just say, "Well, yeah, because all of you sheep will pay to watch the same regurgitated garbage over and over again." I honestly can't even see how such words could come out of a Star Wars fan's mouth.

Some people were even saying *The Force Awakens* made the Prequel Trilogy look like the originals. No. Just no. Anyone who even thinks such a thing, in my opinion, forfeits the right to watch any Star Wars film ever again. And such people might say, "Fine, good riddance." To which all I'd say is, "Yeah, more for me, prick."

This is the world we live in, where nerds take this stuff so seriously, they can actually anger people and lose friends over it. I like to think I'm able to keep myself in check, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't passionate about these films for what they mean to me and my love

of cinema.

If I hated *The Force Awakens*, I wouldn't have sat through the damn thing four times. It was action-packed, adventurous, funny and emotional—everything a Star Wars film should be. Not to mention the film looked incredible. To start, the creative team did an outstanding job with choosing locations. The real-world settings and lack of green screen added to the film what the prequels lacked in authenticity. Like the original films, we feel immersed in these worlds again. And it's always astounding to see such settings in a film, getting to remember such environments on this planet still exist.

All of the film's visuals were top-notch. Everything from the ships to the battle sequences was executed in a way to where we don't just see the elements, but we can almost feel them, especially the lightsabers. The lighting effects they're able to achieve with the lightsabers now are so effective now, you're really able to get a sense of what these weapons would be like in reality. And the way they established a clear difference between Kylo Ren's and Luke's sabers in function and appearance was a new and unique way of expanding on the series' mythology.

My favorite part of the film is definitely the climactic duel between Rey and Kylo Ren in the forest. It was a match that wasn't exactly expected since no promotional material featured Rey wielding a lightsaber, and the moment in which she wields it for the first time was, for me, by far the most invigorating moment of the entire film.

It was like Neo realizing he was The One all over again. And like Neo to Mr. Smith (sort of), Rey kicked Kylo Ren's ass; something that was also unexpected, but to be fair, Kylo Ren had just been shot. This fight also seemed to bear more emotion than anything in the prequels, much like that of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), which was something else the prequels lacked. Just the intensity of it put you on the edge of your seat.

On a related note, the most talked about subject regarding *The Force Awakens* though is without doubt Ridley's character Rey. I give credit to the film's marketing

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team for keeping Rey's significance out of promotions because while I expected Rey to have some significance (given she's in the center of the damn poster), I never anticipated the story revolve almost solely around her. Rey really is the Luke of this new trilogy, that much is clear.

Now, of course, everything concerning her character is speculation at this point. Numerous theories have emerged as to who she really is and where she comes from. I for one am a proponent of the theory that she is Luke's daughter. To me, it's the one that makes the most sense, and despite how obvious that direction may seem, this film saga is about the Skywalker family, and that comes from Lucasfilm Ltd. CEO Kathleen Kennedy herself.

There are so many signs pointing to Rey as Luke's daughter (and no, I'm not going to go through them, as one can find that speculative mess anywhere on the web now), it would be stupid for the writers to not take the

story in this direction. Yes, it's obvious, but we don't need a damn twist in every single thing we watch nowadays. What in the hell is wrong with a narrative that's straightforward and doesn't try to pull the rug out from under you all the time?

We have a ways to go before *Episode VIII* hits theaters, and believe me, there will be much more to talk about as time passes. But for now, I feel I've said all I need to say regarding this film, given how much time has passed since its release. Plus, anything else I'd have to say isn't fresh and has been said virtually everywhere else already, and anyone who's seen it has their mind more than likely made up by now.

I'll close by simply saying *The Force Awakens* met all my expectations, and in some instances exceeded them. I loved it, I can't wait for more, and anyone who dismisses the film or finds me to be nothing more than a mindless sheep can shove it because I don't care.

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