

Star Wars: A Vader Is Born

Anakin's back. He's all grown up and ready for love. There are only a few problems. Everyone wants his girlfriend dead. He can't find his mother. His teacher thinks he's not much of a student. It's bad news for the Jedi.

Review by Brad King.



LITTLE ANAKIN SKYWALKER is all grown up, but the Jedi apprentice can't seem to buy a break, and that means bad news for everyone around him.

His teacher doesn't think he's much of a student. Somebody keeps trying to kill the girl he loves. His mother, well, she's half a galaxy away, facing some horrible danger that causes Anakin to have recurring nightmares.

That's a lot for any 19-year-old to take.

Yet, that is what the man who would be Darth Vader faces in *Attack of the Clones*, opening Thursday. *Clones*, the much-anticipated fifth installment of George Lucas' *Star Wars* series, will be a welcome respite for fans who loathed *The Phantom Menace* for its saccharine story line.

Lucas and his screenwriting partner, Jonathan Hales, weave an intricate story in which every action, even a simple kiss, has dire consequences. Like water spinning down the drain, the characters are caught in an inevitable pull.

The story picks up 10 years after *Menace*, reuniting Skywalker (Hayden Christensen) and his mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) with Padmé Amidala (Natalie

Portman).

Amidala, her reign as Queen of Naboo over, now represents the planet in the Galactic Senate. She has become a staunch adversary of those who want to create a standing army of clones to protect the Republic from the Trade Federation and a group of star systems threatening to cede from the union.

Amidala's stance has led to repeated attempts on her life. The Jedi council, at Supreme Chancellor Palpatine's (Ian McDiarmid) order, sends Skywalker to protect Amidala, while Kenobi is sent to the outer reaches of the galaxy to hunt for her attempted assassin.

Where *Phantom* served mainly as a setup for the fifth and sixth films, *Clones* begins to paint the picture of Anakin as a confused young man with forces -- both good and evil -- controlling his actions.

Kenobi, the ever-present master teacher, is an overwhelming force on Skywalker, pushing him away from his emotions and toward the rigid training of a Jedi. The two have a strong relationship, but the harsh criticism leads Anakin to believe his mentor is holding him back.

The rift between the Jedi and Anakin grows as he tries to win Padmé's love. While on Naboo, the young couple grow closer, leading to an inevitable clash between duty and emotion.

While Kenobi tracks Jango Fett (Temuera Morrison), the Senator's suspected assassin, Amidala becomes an unwitting Lady Macbeth. She stays by her young lover's side, pushing him to become a strong man and helping him battle the inner demons that threaten to destroy him.

Only Palpatine offers a soft hand to Skywalker, which will eventually become a wedge between him and the Jedi.

Anakin's fall from grace is central to the *Star Wars* world. Like any young man, he is torn between the duties of being a Jedi and pursuing the woman he loves. The conflicting emotions cause him to make snap judgments that consistently lead to him into danger.

His slow turn goes unnoticed because his actions, independent of each other, make sense when they happen. As with all evil, the true magnitude of his actions can't be appreciated until the one critical moment when a series of bad decisions suddenly connects together to form his character. In *Clones*, Anakin seems merely the rebellious youth, fighting with his teacher, falling in love with the girl next door and searching for family.

We know better.

Clones is at its best when it reveals the complicated relationships that tie the main characters from the first trilogy with those in the original. Lucas and Hales answer questions about the history of the stormtroopers, how Uncle Owen (Joel Edgerton) and Aunt Beru (Bonnie Piesse) will come to raise Luke Skywalker, and what made that nasty Boba Fett (Daniel Logan) so intent on whacking Jedi.

There are a few overly cute moments in the film. After a particularly harrowing chase, Kenobi offhandedly says, "You'll be the death of me" to Anakin, referring to the kid's driving. There is also a scene where Yoda trains several Jedi kids with helmets and hovering laser balls reminiscent of Kenobi training a young Luke Skywalker in *A New Hope*.

Of course, that sugary moment fades when it becomes apparent Lord Vader will soon be hunting down those kids with legions of stormtroopers.

The computer-generated characters and backgrounds work well. The speeder chase that opens the movie is visually stunning, although the stunts may be a little too much. Of course, these are the Jedi, so anything is possible.

The battle scenes with Mace Windu (Samuel L. Jackson) leading a small group of Jedi against a robot army in an ancient coliseum have an amazing feel, although it's difficult to believe the protectors of the peace don't put up a better fight. Windu, however, gets to show off his considerable skill with his purple lightsaber.

Still, not every animated scene works. Kenobi's meeting with Dexter Jettster (Ronald Falk), a cook who happens to have a critical piece of information, doesn't work. You can almost see McGregor hugging an extra while animation director Rob Coleman worked on a computer to size up the graphics.

But Coleman and his team did justice to one of the most beloved characters, turning Yoda into a fully functional computer animation. The old Jedi Master, long a puppet on the end of Frank Oz's hand, has been unhinged much like Jar Jar Binks (Ahmed Best), who makes a brief -- and damaging -- cameo. The animation stays true to Yoda's movements, as he hobbles around with a cane, but allows the little green guy to become a part of the action.

The new animation allows Lucas the opportunity to unleash the master on the enemies of the republic, which leads to the movie's most memorable scene: a Jedi clash between Yoda and his former student turned evildoer, Count Dooku (Christopher Lee).

Maybe the biggest challenge for *Clones* is the competition at the box office, where challenger Spider-Man raked in \$114 million its first weekend. However, the much-maligned *Phantom Menace* managed to pull in over \$430 million, so it's probably best not to bet against Lucas and the Jedi.

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