

Gary Kurtz Zooms from 'Star Wars' to 'The Dark Crystal'

BY STEVEN GINSBERG

Remember that movie where Luke Skywalker battles the forces of evil? Has lots of toys named after it now? The biggest movie moneymaker of all time? *Star Wars*? (Oh yeah). Gary Kurtz produced that.

Remember the sequel three years later? Where Luke Skywalker battles the forces of evil? Also made lots of money? The fourth biggest movie ever? *The Empire Strikes Back*? (That's right). Gary Kurtz produced that.

And remember four years before *Star Wars* there was that film about California high school kids cruising cars down the boulevard? Aside from Ron Howard it starred two unknowns named Cindy Williams and Richard Dreyfuss. Also had undiscovered actors named Suzanne Sommers, Mackenzie Phillips and Paul LeMat in smaller roles? *American Graffiti*? (How could we forget?) Gary Kurtz co-produced that too.

But sitting in a small Los Angeles coffee shop on a recent Friday morning Kurtz, 41, hardly fits the stereotype of the tough-sounding Hollywood producer. He is shy but friendly. He talks slowly and pre-



cisely, carefully explaining his opinions like a concerned college professor rather than a slick hypester. He is serious about his work but appears equally interested in the quality of his life (he relocated to England five years ago and lives in the countryside with his wife and children). He even orders oatmeal for breakfast.

His latest is an adventure-fantasy, co-produced with Muppets creator Jim Henson, called *The Dark Crystal*, a film that has no human actors, only an elaborate world of foam rubber creatures.

"The *Star Wars* pictures were wonderful but each one took three years out of my life," Kurtz reflects. "It's nice to have new people come in and work on them (the next *Star Wars* saga, *Revenge of the Jedi*, will be at theaters next June). But I have a lot of my own projects I want to work on, and I simply don't have time to do both."

It was while working on *The Empire Strikes Back* five years ago that Kurtz first became involved with *The Dark Crystal*. He had contacted Henson and his associate Frank Oz for advice on how best to create the film's mini-hero, Yoda, when Henson explained an idea he had for a picture that would go one

step further than the Muppets or *Star Wars*. The world of the "dark crystal" would be a mythical place where plants and trees talk, mountains and rocks move and water "murmurs music." Placed in this setting would be the perennial young lad battling (what else?) the forces of evil. But like everything in the film he would be the creation of a team of conceptual artists and film technicians. No live actors would be used.

Of course, when *The Dark Crystal* is released to theaters this Christmas there will also be a variety of books and product tie-ins to acquaint audiences with the difficulties of the filmmaking process and the visual world the film creates. Look for *The Dark Crystal* figures at your local toy store, a \$25 coffee table art book with the work of conceptual designer Brian Froud, plus museum exhibits in New York, Los Angeles, and London. There will even be a limited line of *The Dark Crystal* adult designer clothes (125 pieces in all) on sale at expensive specialty stores in New York, Texas, California and London.

Many people, particularly those in the film business, fail to see the potential value of a picture before it is made. In the early Seventies Kurtz and Lucas wanted the film executives at United Artists to produce *American Graffiti*, but the studio rejected the picture. It was finally made at Universal, where it became one of the most successful low-budget movies ever produced. Then Kurtz and Lucas wanted Universal to produce *Star Wars* but,

like United Artists, the studio issued another reject and lost the biggest moneymaker in the history of the business.

Did those experiences teach Kurtz anything? "Yes," he answers. "It taught me you have to make the films that you want to see. You can't second guess the studio or the audience. And if you don't find an audience for your film you can't get depressed about it. There will be another."

Easy for Kurtz to say, since producing films has made him more than a millionaire and given him clout in Hollywood. Still, it was not that long ago that he graduated from film school at the University of Southern California and worked on low budget movies as everything from sound editor, costumer, makeup man, and editor to cameraman, production manager and, sometimes, director. It was also during that time that he met Lucas, who was just completing his first feature, *THX 1138*, and the pair went to work on getting *American Graffiti* off the ground.

That's why, when lecturing at colleges, Kurtz says he makes a special point to advise fledgling film students to do as much work as they can on as many projects as they can in preparation for what's to come in "the real world." But that advice, he adds, is not always done in his most encouraging tone.

"When I talk to students I go out of my way to do one thing," he admits. "To be negative. If they're dedicated it won't matter what I say. They'll ignore me. And those are the ones who will get ahead."

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