

'Star Wars: The Force Awakens' is fun fan service

By LINDSEY BAHR
AP Film Writer

J.J. Abrams may not elevate the language of "Star Wars," but he sure is fluent in it. "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" is no more and no less than the movie that made us love it in the first place. In fact, it's basically the same thing. Isn't that what we all wanted anyway?

It's hard to talk rationally about "Star Wars." It is a deeply silly thing, with a genuine, undeniable hold on our culture. Chalk it up to nostalgia, collective arrested development or the ineffable. But for many, the magic of "Star Wars" is inseparable from the magic of the movies and, hey, that's no small thing.

These movies make us lose ourselves in the spectacle. They make us forget our best instincts. They make us love the advertising as much as the art. They make us kids again.

In this way, "The Force Awakens," the seventh movie in this improbable yet inevitable series, delivers.

It's a movie made by someone who loves "Star Wars" deeply. Someone who can see more clearly than even its creator what made it so special to so many people. Abrams has taken everything that we adore about that first film, delicately mixed up a few elements, and churned out a reverent homage that's a heck of a lot of fun to watch.

From the opening scroll to the sequel-setup ending, he manages to hit each beat of its 38-year-old predecessor.

Abrams has essentially passed the torch on to its new cast by making them amalgamations of the originals. You'll know it when you see it. Who cares if it's "Star Wars" Mad-Libs?

There's the resistance-affiliated droid, who ends up stranded on a desert planet carrying a secret message (BB-8). There's the nobody with the dead-end job and a Jedi obsession (Daisy Ridley's Rey), who has a life-changing encounter with said droid. There's the reckless kid uncertain of his allegiances (John Boyega's Finn). There's the cocky pilot (Oscar Isaac's Poe Dameron). There's the powerful, masked villain, too (Adam Driver's Kylo Ren).

The plot is as unwieldy and MacGuffin-filled as one might expect. It almost serves no purpose to go into the specifics at this point beyond the fact that the galaxy is in disarray, an evil army is growing (as is a resistance), and a series of coincidences help Rey collect a "Wizard of Oz"-worthy



Peter Mayhew as Chewbacca and Harrison Ford as Han Solo star in "Star Wars: The Force Awakens."

Film Frame/Lucasfilm via AP



Film Frame/Disney/Lucasfilm via AP

Daisy Ridley, right, as Rey, and BB-8 in a scene from the film, "Star Wars: The Force Awakens," directed by J.J. Abrams.

posse to help get BB-8 back to its rightful owners.

This time, it's all because of Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill). He's vanished. Those are the first words on the screen and the last we'll say about the big mystery.

The action is nearly non-stop, as is the humor, which kicks into gear when Han Solo (Harrison Ford) finally shows up. Ford is in his element — delightful, energetic, funny, brash and fully Han, bantering with Chewie and everyone with the same verve he showed nearly 40 years ago.

If only the same showcase was given to Carrie Fisher, who is woefully, inexcusably underused as Leia.

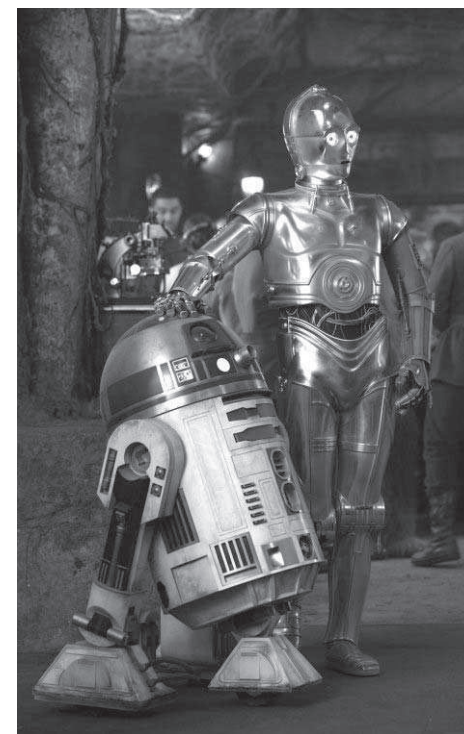
As for the new characters, Ridley's Rey is a dream. She is feisty, endearingly awestruck, capable and magnetic. She is the new anchor. She is our Luke, and she's much

cooler than he ever was.

Driver's Kylo Ren is also a disarmingly powerful presence, whose wickedness seeps through the mask. Boyega is appealing as Finn, too, even if his character doesn't quite make sense on paper. (How do empathy, guilt and personality develop in a man who has been trained since birth to be a Stormtrooper?) But that's taking things too seriously.

Others are less memorable, including Gwendoline Christie's Captain Phasma, and Andy Serkis's preposterous-looking Supreme Leader Snoke.

And while Abrams captures the lively, hokey and practical visual fun of the originals, he occasionally slips into generic blockbuster mode. But those moments pass, and all it takes is a perfect John Williams music cue to transport you back into



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R2-D2, left, and Anthony Daniels as C-3PO, in a scene from the new film, "Star Wars: The Force Awakens."



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Gwendoline Christie plays Captain Phasma in the new film, "Star Wars: The Force Awakens."

the cozy blanket of that galaxy far, far away.

Loving "Star Wars" without reserve isn't an easily justifiable thing, and neither is the fun of "The Force Awakens." They are intrinsically linked. To love the original is to love this one. On its own, "The Force Awakens" probably isn't much. It's not likely to convert anyone, either. But for the rest of us — even the most casual of fans — it fits the bill just fine.

"Star Wars: The Force Awakens," is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for "sci-fi action violence." Running time: 135 minutes. Three stars out of four.