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I Saw 'Star Wars' With George Lucas

The announcement of a new film with the original cast took me back to the day I crashed a legendary screening

posted by **John Stark**, March 21, 2013 [More by this author](#)



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I was thrilled to hear George Lucas' recent announcement that he has signed Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher and Harrison Ford to recreate their iconic characters – Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia and Han Solo — in the next *Star Wars* movie.

But I couldn't help thinking, *what about me?*

Let me explain: A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, I was a young feature writer at The San Francisco Examiner.

I had a friend who booked Hollywood movies into theaters. He was always getting me into premieres. One day he asked if I wanted to go with him to see a sci-fi film. It was being shown on Sunday at 10 a.m. at the Northpoint Theater near Fisherman's Wharf.

"No press allowed," he told me, "It's a single screening by Fox and Lucasfilm to gauge audience reaction. If you want to go I can sneak you in with the projectionists. You'll have to get there early."

I was in my 20s in 1977, and more open to invitations than I am now. So I said OK. Today I would say, "I'm not getting out of bed for a movie."

There was no buzz about the film. How could there be? No one had seen it. Its title, *Star Wars*, sounded to me like a rip-off of *Star Trek*, the TV series. There were no plans to make a movie of Captain Kirk and the Enterprise crew in those days. The sci-fi genre was considered dead.

Nobody asked to see my ticket when I got to the Northpoint. "He's tech crew," my friend told the person guarding the door.

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The Northpoint, which opened in 1967, was the last single-screen theater built in San Francisco. It closed in 1997 and is now office space. I remember going there to see *Cabaret*, *The Exorcist*, *Alien* and *Earthquake* (in Sensurround!). I once went to see a restored print of *Fantasia*. I saw Steven Spielberg in the lobby when it was over. I couldn't resist introducing myself to him. He told me that the animated Disney classic was his favorite film.

At show time I took a seat next to the person who sneaked me in. "That's the director, George Lucas, sitting in front of us," my friend whispered to me. Preview cards were passed around for audience members to fill out before leaving. The auditorium was packed with people of all ages.

There were a lot of families.

The theater went dark and the gold curtains in front of the Northpoint's super-wide screen parted. Then on came the words that would inspire a pop-culture empire: "*A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.*" Seconds later the "Star Wars Theme" announced itself.

I was taken aback. The past? Whoever heard of a sci-fi film that didn't take place in the future? But that was only the first of the film's many startling innovations, which didn't take a huge budget to achieve. Creativity rarely does.

As the film's plot unfolded the audience became more and more pumped: cheering, laughing, clapping. It was as if we were all passengers on a fantastic journey. I've yet to experience a more electric moment at the movies than when Han Solo's spaceship, the Millennium Falcon, jumped to light speed. The man sitting next to me had his little girl on his lap. They both screamed with joy. The whole theater did.

At the end of the film the audience went ballistic. They couldn't stop applauding. I watched Lucas slump in his seat, overwhelmed, as if he'd just outrun the Death Star's super laser. Attendants tried to collect the preview cards, but nobody was filling them out. There was no need.

(I later read that Fox President Alan Ladd Jr. had flown in from Hollywood for the screening and that he was moved to tears. He had green-lighted the film two years earlier and his reputation was on the line.)

(MORE: 'Star Wars' Force Will Be With Us Forever)

The next day at work I tried to describe to my colleagues what I had just seen. I told them about The Force, Darth Vader, Obi-Wan Kenobi, the cantina on Tatooine. "*Star Wars* is going to be *The Wizard of Oz* of our generation," I proclaimed. They thought I had lost my mind. I shut up.

The test screening took place on May 1. The movie opened on May 25. I was on vacation in Barcelona at the time. I remember walking past a newsstand when I did a double take. Pictured on the cover of *Time* were two of the film's stars, R2D2 and 3CPO. "The Year's Best Movie" proclaimed the magazine's main cover line. I jumped for joy.

Dear Mr. Lucas:

I hope that you do a test screening of the new Star Wars film when it's finished and that I can be sitting behind you — as I was 36 years ago. The Northpoint Theater may be gone, but like Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher and Harrison Ford, I'm still here.

Call me.

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