

Rogue One: Does it really “stand alone”?

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Directed by Gareth Edwards; screenplay by Chris Weitz and Tony Gilroy

December 16 saw the release of the first stand-alone film in the *Star Wars* series—*Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. After George Lucas retired from filmmaking and sold his production company, Lucasfilm, to Disney, the latter announced that a new film in the franchise would be released each year, with the stand-alone “Star Wars stories” being released in alternate years to the main episodic offerings. Is this necessarily good news for the moviegoing public?

The plot of *Rogue One* is an exact prequel to the original 1977 film, now titled *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, and bases itself on a few sentences that appear in that film’s opening crawl: “It is a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire. During the battle, Rebel spies managed to steal secret plans to the Empire’s ultimate weapon, the DEATH STAR, an armored space station with enough power to destroy an entire planet.”

The new film’s protagonist is a young woman named Jyn Erso (Felicity Jones). Her father, Galen (Mads Mikkelsen), is an energy scientist who has been kidnapped and coerced into designing the weaponized portion of the Death Star. Galen is able secretly to build a weakness into his design that he wishes to transmit to the Rebel Alliance, so they have a chance to destroy the battle station.

To find her father and the Death Star plans, Erso and a Rebel Officer are sent to the moon Jedha to meet with Rebel extremist Saw Gerrera (Forest Whitaker), who has received a message from Galen. They ultimately travel to the planet Scarif, where the Empire keeps its military schematics locked down in a heavily fortified and well-defended installation. The outcome is the costly victory mentioned in the original 1977 crawl, which includes both land and space battles. The film

leaves the audience just minutes away from the beginning of *A New Hope*, with Darth Vader chasing down Princess Leia’s ship.

Unlike previous *Star Wars* offerings, *Rogue One* is much “grayer” (more jaded?) in its approach to moral questions. The Rebel Alliance is not depicted as a cohesive group of “good guys” out to do the right thing. In fact, the Rebel officer who accompanies Erso to find her father is seen murdering people who could damage the Rebellion’s reputation and has secretly been instructed to assassinate Galen. The Alliance also initially refuses to attack Scarif and considers surrendering to the Empire when they learn about the Death Star. It is left to Erso and a small group of “rogue” marines who hijack a ship and go to Scarif to create a diversion and steal the plans.

Ultimately, the rebel protagonists are depicted as a group of idealists without foresight who simply blunder from one decision to the next, only gaining the advantage that will allow the destruction of the Death Star in the subsequent film (which happened to come out almost 40 years ago) through happenstance.

The film’s creators have obviously been influenced by World War II movies and have incorporated elements in line with that into both the story and the costume and set design. Scarif is full of beaches and jungles that at once conjure up images of the Normandy landing and the Pacific theater.

Overall, the resulting product is a fairly typical action film designed to swell box office receipts, as well as the value of the Disney Empire.

A few of the characteristics of the episodic *Star Wars* films were changed to set this first “Star Wars story” apart. There is no opening crawl or fanfare, and this is also the first *Star Wars* film with music composed by someone other than John Williams. The film also makes heavy use for the first time of digital effects to recreate actors from previous films—the now long-

deceased Peter Cushing, as well as a young Carrie Fisher—with some success.

Certain media commentators have paid attention to the fact that both of the more recent *Star Wars* films feature young women as their main protagonists and have inferred this somehow lends a “progressive” coloring to the franchise. Lucasfilm President Kathleen Kennedy rejected this notion, asserting the production simply hired the best actors for the roles. She also defended *Rogue One* director Gareth Edwards and scolded a journalist who accused him of being picked for the job over women who may have been similarly qualified.

While not offering significant insight into our modern condition, *Rogue One* does reflect the current state of things to a certain degree, particularly the militarization of American life. Populations are under constant surveillance and are policed at all times. The military does not hesitate to destroy “problem” cities with its new superweapon in order to tie up any loose ends that might embarrass the Empire, and some of the so-called rebels are strikingly similar to modern-day “terrorists” operating in fundamentalist militias.

In this case, the concerns do not come entirely out of the blue. Co-screenwriter Chris Weitz directed *A Better Life* (2011), about an undocumented immigrant gardener in Los Angeles, and has been involved in some interesting film and television projects—along with a good deal of trivia. (His brother, Paul Weitz, directed *Being Flynn*, 2012). The other screenwriter, Tony Gilroy (the son of playwright Frank Gilroy), wrote and directed *Michael Clayton* (2007), which dealt with a high-powered law firm’s “fixer” trying to save his firm’s defense of a pesticide conglomerate.

The appearance in recent years of socially critical elements in “blockbuster” action or superhero films is often a cynical business, a means of providing what are essentially empty, sophomoric works a bit of “cutting edge” credibility. Occasionally, it seems a more or less spontaneous reaction to existing realities. James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009)—for the most part, a piece of high-tech bombast—did include scenes that strongly brought to mind the US invasion of Iraq. Imperialist violence, repression, endless surveillance—these are features, as noted above, of contemporary life.

One has to seriously question, however, even in the more sincere cases, whether or not such “radical”

moments—surrounded by noise and violent, frenetic goings-on—make any sort of genuine or lasting impression on the viewer.



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