Solo: A Star Wars Story—Adventure without much substance

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Directed by Ron Howard; screenplay by Lawrence Kasdan and Jon Kasdan

On May 25, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures released its fourth *Star Wars* film since purchasing the production company Lucasfilm in 2012.

Solo: A Star Wars Story (budget $250 million) follows the exploits of a younger Han Solo making his way into the crime world from which he eventually emerges in the original trilogy produced in the 1970s and ’80s.

The film is set approximately a decade before the 1977 *Star Wars*. It opens with 18-year-old protagonists and lovers Han (Alden Ehrenreich) and Qi’ra (Emilia Clarke) seeking to escape an “orphanage” organized by a local crime lord, who uses children for nefarious operations. Qi’ra is captured by their patron’s thugs, but Han manages to flee, and joins the imperial military in order to illegally slip through one of the Galactic Empire’s immigration checkpoints on his home world. Since he claims to have no family or surname, the imperial recruiter dubs him Han “Solo.”

Three years later, Solo is taking part in a ground battle (reminiscent of World War I trench warfare) where imperial troops are attempting to overthrow a local government on the planet Mimban and install their own puppet dictator. Han points out to his lieutenant that they themselves are the real “hostiles” on the planet, and as a result is thrown into a muddy pit with a “monster” who has not eaten in three days. The monster turns out to be Chewbacca (Joonas Suotamo), and the two manage to escape together and join Tobias Beckett (Woody Harrelson), who happens to be stealing an imperial frigate to use in a criminal operation on another part of the planet.

The focus of most of the drama in the film is the pursuit of a “hyperfuel,” a valuable commodity sought by both the empire and the criminal gangs at large in the galaxy. Beckett’s operation to steal a large amount of the stuff fails and results in the death of most of his crew, and leaves him in “debt” to his own crime overlord, Dryden Vos (Paul Bettany), who demands that Beckett, Solo and Chewbacca steal another load from a rival syndicate to make up for it. Solo discovers that Vos’ second-in-command is none other than Qi’ra, who is also ordered to accompany them on their mission. They enlist the help of Lando Calrissian (Donald Glover), the owner of one of the fastest ships in the galaxy, the Millennium Falcon.

Calrissian’s droid and co-pilot, L3-37 (Phoebe Waller-Bridge), starts a slave-droid rebellion in the stronghold of the rival crime gang, and the crew manages to steal the hyperfuel. They escape an imperial blockade by traveling through a dangerous part of the galaxy, allowing Solo to demonstrate his superior skills as a pilot. More action ensues, some of it setting up the next installment.

The film was originally being directed by the team of Phil Lord and Christopher Miller (*21 Jump Street*, *The Lego Movie*), but they departed (or were fired) more than halfway through the shoot due to “creative differences.” Ron Howard (*A Beautiful Mind*, *Apollo 13*), who appeared in George Lucas’ *American Graffiti* and directed the Lucasfilm movie *Willow*, replaced Lord and Miller and is credited as the sole director of the film. Lord and Miller are credited as “executive producers.”

The screenplay was co-written by veteran screenwriter-director Lawrence Kasdan and his son, Jon Kasdan. Lawrence also co-wrote *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *Star Wars : Return of the Jedi* (1983) and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015). The new film was intended to be more of a fun

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adventure film without the quasi-tragic elements that have ornamented the first three Disney-produced *Star Wars* films.

Solo is generally predictable and is not very challenging for the viewer. It does include some references to the current global situation. The Galactic Empire is clearly meant to bring to mind the US political establishment and the film, to its credit, includes shots of people seeking to flee their oppressive home worlds but being waylaid and arrested at immigration checkpoints. The importance placed on hyperfuel also mirrors the continuing centrality of energy supplies in the present world economy, a major impetus for US-led interventions in the Middle East.

The aforementioned battle on Mimban appears to be a criticism of imperialist policy, in which the lieutenant in charge of Solo's unit refers to local insurgents as hostile rebels even though it is the imperials who are invading and seeking to establish a government more favorable to the empire ("regime change"). The imperials are also generally depicted as being on a par with the criminal syndicates, engaging in the same activities as their rivals and pursuing some of the same goals.

However, as is generally the case with such political "insertions" in Hollywood blockbusters, it is unlikely that these criticisms, if criticisms they be, are going to make much of an impact on the viewer in the midst of generally trivial goings-on and masses of special effects.

Ehrenreich, a talented actor (*Hail, Caesar!*), offers the stand-out performance in the film, particularly because he was tasked with inhabiting the role of Han Solo, seen as an iconic figure among fans of this genre who are very attached to the performance turned in by Harrison Ford more than 40 years ago. Ehrenreich manages to capture the essence of that character, including body language and tone, without giving a distracting impersonation.

Clarke, best-known for her work in *Game of Thrones*, and the nearly ever-present Harrelson are decent but generally not distinguished. Harrelson in particular is more "Woody Harrelson" than he is a distinct character. Glover, aka rapper Childish Gambino, performs more intriguingly, but is hampered by the script, because Calrissian often appears as a simple parody of the character portrayed by Billy Dee Williams in the original trilogy. Suotamo goes to extreme lengths to ensure that his physicality and movements match those of the original Chewbacca performed by Peter Mayhew.

Although the story and acting are lacking, the technical aspects, as in most *Star Wars* films, are well done. Most of the Academy Award nominations and awards that *Star Wars* films have received over the years have been in categories such as visual effects, costume design and film editing. If nothing else (and, unfortunately, there isn't that much more), Lucasfilm employs and develops many of the leading creators in these fields.

The next *Star Wars* film, which will serve as episode nine of the roman-numeral saga, will be directed by J.J. Abrams (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens*) and will not be released until December 2019.

There are also plans to create a trilogy of Star Wars films written by Rian Johnson (*Star Wars: The Last Jedi*) and another series of films written by *Game of Thrones* creators David Benioff and D.B. Weiss. Additionally, unofficial reports indicate that an Obi-Wan Kenobi film starring Ewan McGregor (*Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* and others) is in preproduction.

It goes on.

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