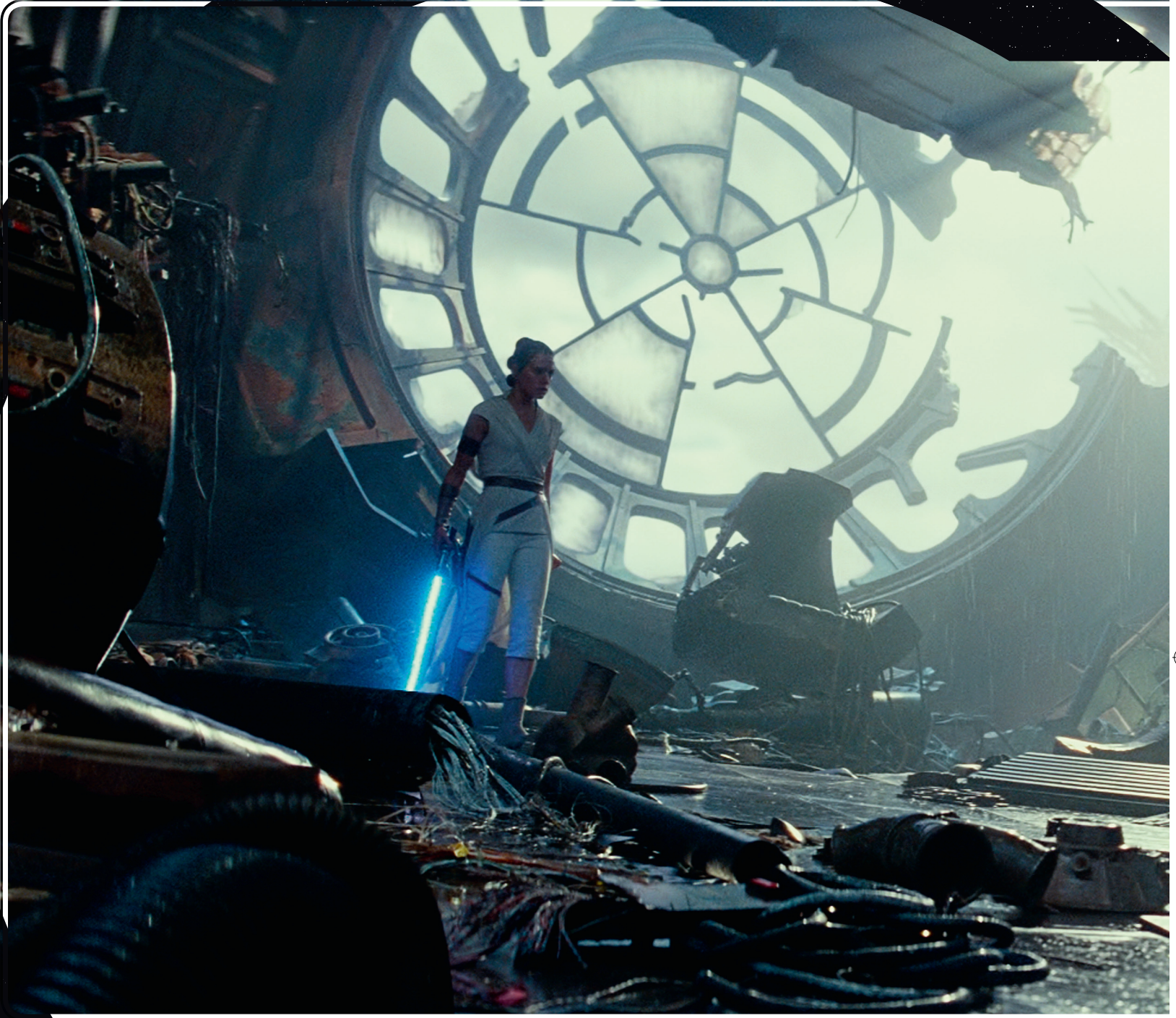


COVER FEATURE



54

# THE CIRCLE




# STAR WARS: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER



55

# IS COMPLETE

Every saga has an ending... **The Rise Of Skywalker** is the conclusion of not just the new trilogy, but the entire nine-episode Star Wars saga. Total Film talks to J.J. Abrams and his cast about endings, emotions, and the return of the Emperor... 

WORDS JACK SHEPHERD

DECEMBER 2019 | TOTAL FILM



our journey nears its end..” The familiar, haunting voice of Emperor Palpatine echoes around the D23 convention centre as the teaser for *Star Wars: The Rise Of Skywalker*, the final instalment in the Skywalker saga, debuts before an elated crowd. The thunderous applause, though, starts a few seconds later – as Rey’s double-sided red lightsaber alights. Fans jump to their feet. Twitter goes ballistic. Has the saviour of a galaxy far, far away turned to the dark side?

“It’s fucking awesome,” Daisy Ridley, who plays Rey, teases of the answer, decidedly not getting any more specific. *Total Film* meets the British actress at a Beverly Hills Hotel the day after Darth Rey’s public unveiling in August 2019, and Ridley’s giddy with excitement, finally able to speak about a moment that’s been kept top secret. “I already had an amazing emotional story,” she continues. “But, when [Darth Rey] was pitched, I was like, ‘That sounds amazing.’ It’s fun to do something a bit different.”

Will people be shocked by Rey’s arc in *TROS*? “The whole of *Star Wars* is about good and evil,” she replies. “With every character, you see some struggle. So, in a way, no. Because it’s the most human thing to see someone struggle with two things within them that are pulling them both ways. If you understand why someone is going on the journey, you will be on the journey regardless. So, hopefully, you’re shocked in a fun way, but you’re also emotionally with her.”

Ridley is, as you would expect from a trained Jedi Knight, right. Ever since the *Star Wars* saga began back in 1977, when the world first saw Obi-Wan Kenobi sit a young Luke Skywalker down to explain the ways of the Force, the ongoing story has been about one thing: balance – the eternal fight between good and evil coming to an end. *The Force Awakens* continued that theme, the opening scene featuring Max Von Sydow’s mysterious Lor San Tekka gifting Poe Dameron a map leading to Luke. “This will begin to make things



# STAR WARS: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER



right,” he says. “Without the Jedi, there can be no balance in the Force.”

“We very intentionally started *Episode VII* with that quote,” says J.J. Abrams, who speaks in the kind of riddles you’d expect from a director known for his ‘mystery box’ approach. “The hope was that movie would set in motion a story, ultimately, about these characters dealing with the unresolved story that *Episodes I* through *VI* began. Hopefully, *Episode IX* fulfills that promise.”

A bit more revealing is Oscar Isaac – aka the new trilogy’s Poe Dameron. “What’s amazing about the story and the script is that you learn that both the Sith and the Jedi have been playing a very long game,” he says, slouching back into an armchair, his quiffed hair standing firmly upright. “From the get-go, there’s been this chess match. All these pieces have been played. And now we get to see who gets checkmate.”

We’ve been nearing this finale for quite some time – *Episode VIII*’s title, after all, tantalizingly teased an end to the ancient order of Jedi. That movie is the only instalment in the sequel trilogy not directed by Abrams. Rian Johnson stepped forward to helm *The Last Jedi*, which, upon release two years ago, proved hugely divisive because of the big swings it took with the Skywalker legacy. Some have also speculated that Johnson’s story may

have changed the direction of *Episode IX*, yet Abrams assures that there was always a “loose plan” for the three films, adding: “Nothing Rian was doing was undoing anything that I was thinking would happen.”

Abrams also points out that he was never expected, nor supposed, to direct *TROS*. Colin Trevorrow, of *Jurassic World* fame, was initially expected to land the Death Star-sized saga-capper.

However, after some creative differences with Lucasfilm head Kathleen Kennedy, Trevorrow was out, leaving an empty pilot’s chair behind him. There were few people who could be trusted with such a gargantuan task – the question was, would Abrams want to return?

“It was too tempting – to conclude not just this trilogy, but the three trilogies,” he says. “Coming back, essentially it was a clean slate. Because I wasn’t brand new to the world of it, Kathy knew that there had been a sense of where this thing would go. In a way, it’s like getting a second chance, to go back to something that you really thought you had put behind you.”

An ending of this scale comes with mind-boggling challenges, though. “The ending of this trilogy of trilogies is a tricky thing,” he continues, speaking plainly. “This movie has to work on its own. It’s got to have its own beginning, middle and end. It can’t make the mistake of a lot of

**“From the get-go, there’s been this chess match. And now we get to see who gets checkmate”**

OSCAR ISAAC

**OLD FACES**  
Lando is back alongside Chewie, (top), Rey evolves, (middle), and the droids are back in town (bottom).





# COVER FEATURE

sequels, where you just assume a character is beloved, where the movie suffers because the character is suddenly lacking. We can't assume anyone cares."

## HISTORY IN THE MAKING

After wiping the board clean (and pushing the release date back from May to December), *TROS* finally began to take shape. Abrams approached the story like a "living, breathing thing", exploring ideas to see where *Episode IX* naturally went. "This has to be the war to end all wars," he says. "This has to be the ultimate battle. Not just externally, but internally, for the characters. In *Episode VII* these characters are just meeting, and they were almost separate the entire movie. This is the first time you get to see this group of people, this group of friends, together on an adventure – their most challenging yet, against something that is the biggest threat. Can these new, young characters handle it? That, to me, defines the feeling of *Star Wars*."

It's no surprise to learn that Abrams is looking backward to move the story forward. Making a successful standalone movie is hard enough, let alone one that concludes over 40 years of storytelling. There was, though, one person who could help bring everything together – the key to all of this: George Lucas. Abrams had a crucial meeting with him during prep.

"He had a lot of things to say about the nature of the Force, the themes that he was dealing with when he was writing the movies," Abrams reveals. "Yes, there were some conversations about Midi-chlorians – he loves his Midi-chlorians. But it was a very helpful thing. Sitting with him is a treat, just to hear him talk, because it's fucking George Lucas talking about *Star Wars*. I always feel it's a gift to hear him talk about that stuff. Because the effect that he had on me at 10 years old is utterly profound."

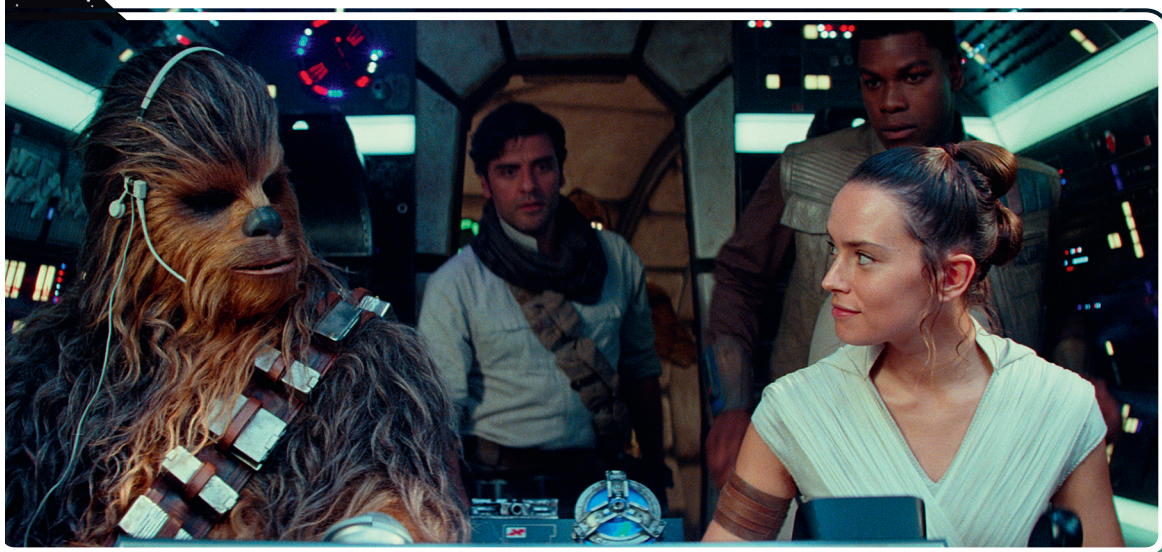
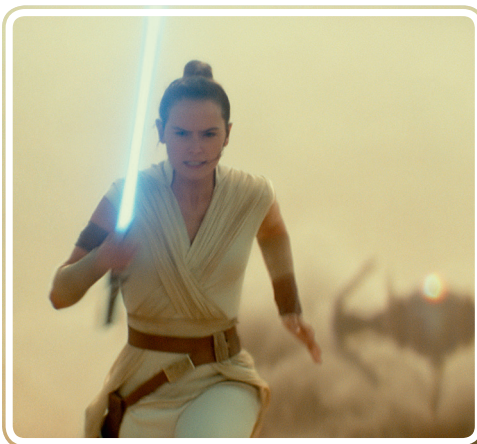
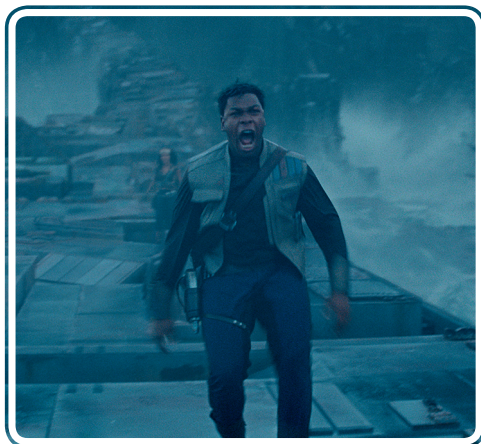
Abrams steers clear of revealing whether any of Lucas's vision has made its way into *TROS*. However, someone

## FRIENDS AND FOE

Rey and Kylo Ren clash sabers in an epic water-splashed battle (right). Finally, the gang's all here (bottom).



58



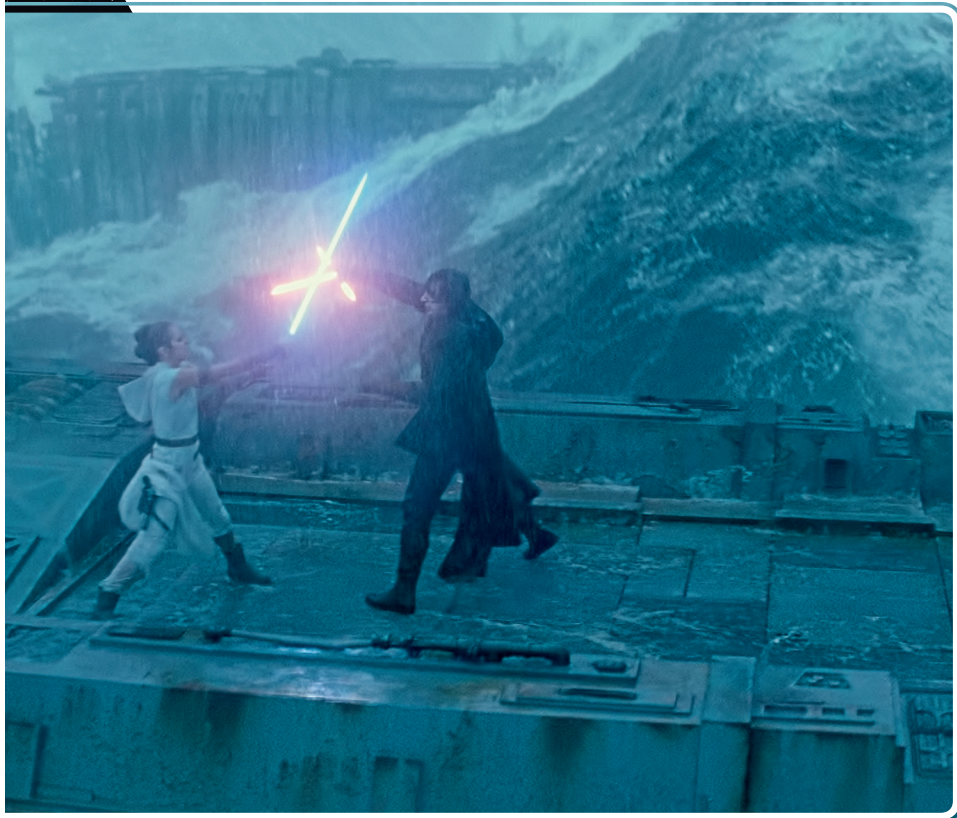
who may know is C-3PO actor Anthony Daniels, the only person to have appeared in every *Star Wars* movie to date (even *Solo*, but as human character Tak). Did Lucas ever share his plans? "Absolutely not," Daniels says staunchly. "I'm not on that sort of radar list."

While he may be unable to discuss plans that never were, Daniels talks more freely about C-3PO's mysterious red eyes, as seen in the D23 trailer. "It was a shock when I put the [helmet] on, because it wasn't like C-3PO," he says. "That's what I found quite scary, how much the colour change made him look totally different. It was totally uncanny, and slightly uncomfortable."

Daniels also hints that the beloved droid will play a much bigger role in *TROS* than in either *TFA* or *TLJ*. "In *Episode VII*, J.J. had so many things to recreate that C-3PO's main thing was a red arm – which we didn't like. And we told him on a daily basis, we didn't like it," he says, presumably referring to himself and C-3PO in a Gollum/Smeagol fashion. "Then in *The Last Jedi*, C-3PO, again, was rather like a bit of decoration at the side somewhere. So I was kind of ready to be an extra again. For C-3PO as a character that I love – if he were to go to the movies and watch himself in this last movie, I think he'd be very pleased. I'll leave it at that."



# STAR WARS: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER



Another familiar face from the original trilogy is Billy Dee Williams, who last appeared as Lando Calrissian (on the big screen) in *Return Of The Jedi*. “I didn’t really expect to be called about doing Lando again,” Williams says, speaking slowly and with the cool collectedness you expect from the galaxy’s slickest swashbuckler. “I figured that I did what I needed to do with Lando, and I made it work, and it lasted 40 years. But when J.J. called me up and asked me to participate, I really looked forward to it.” Williams likewise says there’s “probably a little bit more depth than we’ve seen” with Lando this time around, though he won’t go into any details for fear of being struck down by a Disney-branded bolt of lightning. Presumably, for that reason, Ian McDiarmid, who’s back as Palpatine, has been kept away from the press circuit.

## THE EMPEROR STRIKES BACK

How exactly the cloaked villain, who was last seen falling into the second

Death Star’s reactor, will reappear in the movie remains a complete mystery, and no one – not Oscar Isaac, not Daisy Ridley, and certainly not Billy Dee, the most tight-lipped of the bunch – is willing to even comment for fear of spoilers. The biggest clue comes from Abrams, who argues that any story with this many parts relies on what’s come before. “The conversation about bringing people back came from looking at the nine movies and seeing what the story is telling us,” Abrams explains. “There was an absolute inevitability. For someone who says, ‘Don’t bring Palpatine back, it’s not an original idea,’ I would say, if you’re looking at the story these movies tell, he’s very much part of that and the big picture. All the setups that you need are in the existing movies.”

Another key character Abrams couldn’t continue without is General Leia, played by Carrie Fisher. The actress died on 27 December 2016, a year before the release of *TLJ*, and appears in *TROS* in repurposed unused footage from *Episode VII*. “We realised

**“If C-3PO were to go to the movies and watch himself in this last movie, I think he’d be very pleased”**

ANTHONY DANIELS



**DAISY RIDLEY**  
FIFTY SHADES OF REY

**It must have felt very different stepping onto the set of *The Rise Of Skywalker* compared to *The Force Awakens*?**

I was marginally less nervous. When we start rolling, each time I’m like, “Fuck. What if I’ve forgotten how to do my job?” But I have relationships with most of the people I was working with. There’s a comfort in that.

**Is there not a certain confidence that comes with stepping back into this character’s shoes?**

No. Because it’s a different story for me – doing some stuff I had never done before. So it still feels new. People are like, “It’s like throwing on an old thing.” And I’m like, “No, it feels... different.”

**In this movie, Rey deals with the light and the dark. That must have been fun to play?**

Yeah, because you get to do all of the human emotions rather than just, “I am all baddie. I am all goodie.” With the dark Rey stuff – who knows what’s happening there. But that, in particular, was fun. Because even though I’m exploring the light and dark of Rey, there’s a different vibe, she still looks like Rey.

**Was it strange seeing yourself in the dark garb?**

I was like, “I look fucking cool. I look more Halloween-y. This would be fun to dress up like.”

**Can you tell someone like J.J., “I don’t think Rey would do or say that”?**

Absolutely. J.J. has always been super-receptive. The first pitch he gave me for this, there was one thing that Rey did, and I was like, “There’s absolutely no way this is happening.” It wasn’t even a question. And it didn’t happen. Because he was like, “Yeah, that wasn’t a great idea.” It’s not that things change necessarily every time, but I then further my understanding of what is happening in that moment.

**If you had to choose a line from a past *Star Wars* film that would be the key to Rey’s story going forward, what would it be?**

Do you know what’s weird? I’m just getting that Maz line: “The belonging you seek is not behind you... it is ahead.” That one came to my mind.

**How do you feel about saying farewell to Rey?**

I feel amazingly spoiled that the first thing I did was such a great character. It’s not that she’s a “strong female character”. But you can understand where she’s coming from. You’re going through the journey with her. It also feels right to end here, because there’s no way you can carry on after this film. It’s an epic ending to the saga. JS

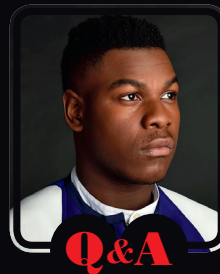


# COVER FEATURE



**HYPERDRIVE**  
The Millennium Falcon flanked by other ships among others, Rebels' The Ghost

60



**JOHN BOYEGA**  
IN LIKE FINN

**Q&A**

**How different did it feel stepping onto this set compared to *The Force Awakens*?**

I stepped onto *The Rise Of Skywalker* set as if I was stepping into my kitchen to make breakfast. I was full of confidence. You know everybody in the kitchen. The whole family is there. There are good vibes. Great conversation. You know the day is going to be good.

**Finn's gone from Stormtrooper to fighting for the Resistance. How does *Skywalker* move Finn's arc on?**

I don't know if Finn was fully confident about his position in *VIII. IX* is where you have a Finn that now knows what team he fights for. There's very interesting beats with Finn in terms of his relations to other characters - there's an aura around him, a new kind of confident energy. He knows he has skills and the strength to be able to handle things.

**Where do we find him at the beginning of the film?**

He's been with Poe a lot. He's been on missions between films. When we find him, he's an active member of the Resistance before things start kicking off.

**It must be quite a bittersweet moment leaving *Star Wars* behind?**

Yeah, 100 per cent, because you no longer have the consistency with these people who you have genuine friendships with. But it feels OK, because, with just three films, there's still a curiosity and a mystery about Finn. There are still certain things that I really don't know about him. It feels like, "OK, cool. It's a balanced, right time." But if my name was Daniel Radcliffe right now, I'd be like, "I'll be playing this guy for years. Yeah! Somebody take this wand!"

**Oscar Isaac said of Finn and Poe's relationship that, "It's possible that [Poe] can be attracted to [Finn]... It's not just a teasing thing." Is that relationship planned or a natural process?**

It all started before everybody knew who Finn and Poe was, in the audition process. They hadn't cast Poe, so they asked me to do a chemistry read with the two potential Poes they had. But there's something about Oscar and me - we like the same things. We play videogames with each other. We have very transparent conversation. This guy knows me. Like, he knows me. There's not one thing that I can't say to him and I'd feel embarrassed or whatever. And that chemistry off-screen - that's our dream as actors, for the audience to be like, "Yo, these two characters are great together." Because we have so much. When people saw that, we were like, "Yeah, people can see that we're actually friends in real life." **JS**



# STAR WARS: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER



## ON A MISSION

Series newcomer Naomi Ackie plays Jannah, a Resistance warrior with a plot-thumping backstory (left, below).

*TROS* hasn't the screentime to introduce fresh faces to the *Star Wars* universe. Guess again. This will be the longest *Star Wars* movie yet (clocking in at a reported 155 minutes) and Abrams has filled those precious minutes with multiple new characters, including *Lord Of The Rings* alumnus Dominic Monaghan's new Resistance fighter, and Oscar-nominee Richard E. Grant's Allegiant General Pryde of the First Order. Details about both roles are being kept firmly under wraps.

*Total Film* does get to speak to franchise newcomer Keri Russell, who previously worked with Abrams on *Mission: Impossible III* and is playing Zorii Bliss in *TROS*. We know very little about her, except she wears a striking red costume and a sleek, visored helmet, and she calls the new snowy tundra planet Kijimi home. "Her costume tells a lot about her," Russell says, having just finished a lunchtime beer. "It shows no skin by design. She's a survivor. If you are not in the resistance, or on the dark side, there's this whole other world to survive in. You do what you need to do to get by like Han Solo did." She sounds like a female version of Boba Fett. "I cannot decline or say," she responds when *TF* make the comparison. "But... Fascinating."

Isaac hints that Poe and Zorii may have a familiar relationship. Russell plays it safe by saying nothing further, but Isaac elaborates when asked whether their relationship is romantic: "Well, every relationship with

there was no way to tell the story of the end of the Skywalker saga without her," says Abrams. "It's so strange, because I'm working in the editing room every day, and she's very much alive in the movie."

Using the footage from *TFA* was almost like fitting a puzzle together – Abrams wrote scenes around the material they already had, deciding against using a CGI version of Leia (as seen in *Rogue One*) or recasting the character (something Abrams says was suggested by someone "high up" but was never considered by the creative team at Lucasfilm). "There are scenes where she's interacting with other characters in a way that is uncanny," he continues. "Hopefully, if it works, it will be an invisible thing and if you didn't know, you would never know. But we got to tell the story with Leia that we would have told had Carrie lived. And that's kind of incredible."

Isaac, who worked closely with Fisher, says not having her on set for the final part of the trilogy made filming a very different experience. "For me, she was one of the most fun parts about doing these movies," he reminisces. "It's just her wild spirit, and her lack of pretension and artifice. She was just such an incredible person to be around. I really loved her a lot. You could really feel the lack of that."

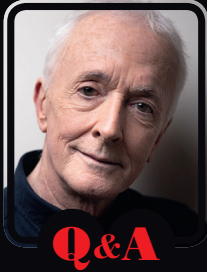
## NEW BLOOD

With Leia, C-3PO, Lando, Palpatine, Chewbacca (played by Joonas Suotamo), and Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill's return has been confirmed, presumably playing a Force Ghost) all returning from the original trilogy, plus Rey, Poe, Finn (John Boyega) and Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) back to complete their own trilogy, you might be inclined to think





# COVER FEATURE



## ANTHONY DANIELS THE DROID WHO'S BEEN THROUGH IT ALL

Q&A

### How's C-3PO doing when we meet him in *The Rise Of Skywalker*?

He's OK, because he is with people he trusts and likes and wants to take care of, but is having a tough time. He would much rather they weren't in the situation they were in and instead on some quiet planet. A little gentle vegetation... but flat paths.

### What was your last day on set like?

It really wasn't easy. I held it together. The scene I was in, the other characters were doing all the talking. It did strike me as being wry that at last C-3PO was silent. There was this terrible silence as I got changed, and I walked out, and there was everybody waiting. I didn't dare look at anybody. If I stopped for a second, it'd be like, "[mock tears] I don't want to go!"

### You were in *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, which went through a director change.

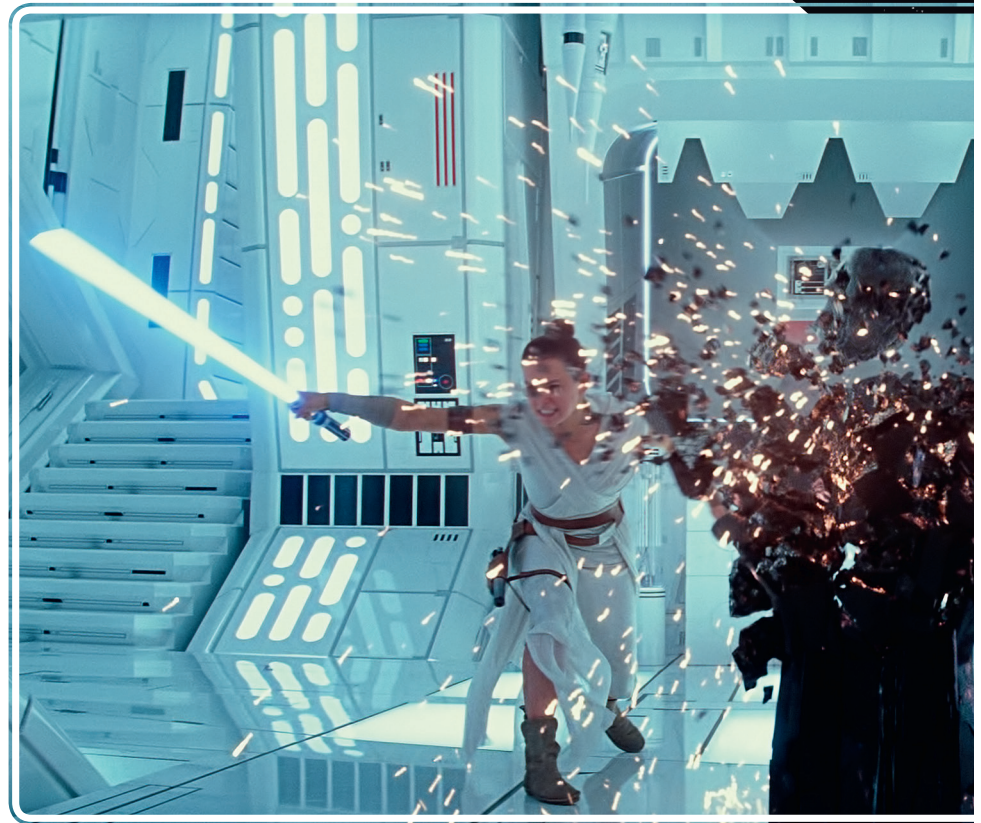
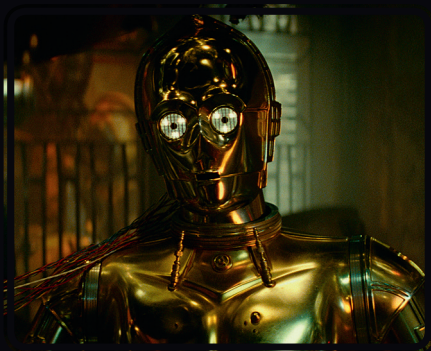
I was there with Ron Howard, and it was an amazing set. It did go on for a long time because it started off with Lord and Miller. What a way not to make a movie. And as a movie itself? Hmm... I did it because it seemed fun to be in every *Star Wars* film, but there was no way C-3PO could be in it.

### How does J.J. compare to George Lucas?

They're both geniuses, clearly. One of the differences is, George came up with the original idea, and so strongly, that those bedrock elements really do stay, whoever gets to mess with the script. George is much more of an internal, introverted person. J.J. has the ability to turn it on in a very genuine way.

### They say there are some directors who would rather make a movie without actors.

George is one of them. He would rather you were a digitised figure. He doesn't find it easy to talk to actors. I mean, why would you? Have you talked to one? **JS**



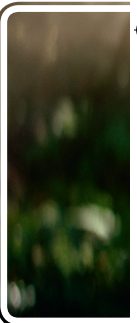
➔ Poe has a sexual element. It's just kind of the way it is. But with her, you definitely get a sense that things were left kind of messy and there's some hurt there. Yeah, you will see that this is someone from Poe's past that really played an important role."

Finally, on the new-additions front, there's Naomi Ackie, who plays Resistance 'warrior' Jannah. "She's got a backstory that means that there's a lot at stake," she says. "And it implicates her in this rise of the Resistance in a specific way. So she's a woman on a mission." There's been some speculation that Jannah may be the daughter of Lando, which Ackie calls "fun" but, of course, doesn't get into specifics. "There's just so much secrecy," she laughs. "When I first got the first audition, it was Untitled Disney Project." She adds that, throughout the movie, each character comes "in contact with the dark side in this new way. It's really asking the question of each individual: 'How much are you willing to give to fight for the greater good?'"

One person who has already risked everything for the Resistance is Rose Tico, played by Kelly Marie Tran, who returns after debuting in *The Last Jedi*. At the beginning of *TROS*, while the Resistance may be on the back foot, Rose has seemingly taken on a

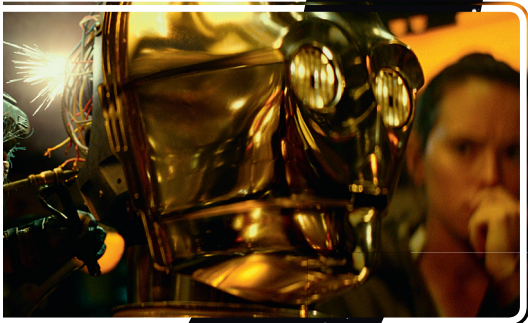
### STRONG WOMEN

Ren's not just battling with the Empire in *Episode IX*, but also herself (above). Carrie Fisher makes a tear-jerking final appearance (right).





# STAR WARS: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER



leadership role. Yet, last we saw, she passed out after kissing Finn. “People are going to find it really interesting how we’ve sort of evolved,” Tran says of the duo. Unfortunately, the romance and the character of Rose were not met with open arms by all areas of the *Star Wars* fandom, leading to Tran receiving abuse online and leaving social media.

“If anything, this is gonna sound crazy, that made this experience better,” she says, reflecting on the past, “because it taught me how to draw boundaries, and how to protect myself and how to move forward. In a way that was really, really empowering for myself. When you go into something like this it is a very scary thing. And learning that I am a totally confident and capable person, regardless of what anyone says about me, was a pretty cool discovery.”

What helped was having confidants in the likes of Ridley and Boyega, who had similar experiences. “We have all been really able to find the support network within each other,” Tran adds. “And I think that’s been really, really special.”

## BEGINNING OF THE END

Two months later, *Total Film* meets Ridley again, this time at a swishy London hotel. Ridley mentions the improvisational feel of *TROS*, which seems at odds with the how you imagine a studio blockbuster is normally filmed. “With J.J., I don’t know my lines until the day, because they will change,” she says. Boyega, in the room next door, adds that the *Episode IX* script has changed much more than the others. “I actually really genuinely don’t know,” he says of what has ended up in the final cut. “I know it’s going to be like an epic. But this one’s been the hardest to trace.”

Abrams acknowledges the ever-changing nature of the movie, adding that he felt more confident to try new things this time around. “On this one, I let myself be, at least in the way I was approaching the thing, freer,” he says. “In *Episode VII*, I was adhering to a kind of approach that felt right for *Star Wars* in my head. It was about finding a visual language, like shooting on locations and doing practical things

as much as possible. And we continue that in *Episode IX*, but I also found myself doing things that I’m not sure I would have been as daring to do on *Episode VII*.”

That sounds like a cue from Rian Johnson, whose *TLJ* was a breath of fresh air in the *Star Wars* universe. “Rian helped remind me that that’s why we’re on these movies – not to just do something that you’ve seen before,” Abrams says. “I won’t say that I felt constrained or limited on *VII*, but I found myself wanting to do something that felt more consistent with the original trilogy than not. And on *IX*, I found myself feeling like I’m just gonna go for it a bit more.”

Abrams adds that he made “bold and surprising” choices with the story, while also keeping it connected to the eight previous movies. “I wouldn’t want someone to see this and go, ‘That’s crazy’. But, if you’re not doing something that’s going to shock some people, you’re probably not going as far as you should.”

Being that ambitious with the final part of the trilogy of trilogies was a challenge that blew *Episode VII*’s demands away. “*Episode IX* has just left it in the dust in terms of what our ambitions were in the actual shoot itself,” beams Abrams. “But it was also equally gratifying, the experience of working on the movie. Everyone, for whatever reason, showed up bringing a level of commitment that I didn’t even see on *VII*. Everyone wanted to do it proud. And the experience of being back working on this story, bringing it to a conclusion, has been very specific and very special from the beginning.”

But is this, as Palpatine says, really the end of the journey? Surely, there’s another sequel in the offing? Ridley, riffing off a quote from the late, great Luke Skywalker featured in a *TROS* trailer, has perhaps the perfect answer. “This is the end of the Skywalker saga,” she says. “So the film will come out, and we’ll all go our separate ways. I mean, for now, it really is the end of the saga. But who knows?” She smiles. “Because nothing really ends.”

STAR WARS: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER  
OPENS IN THE UK ON 19 DECEMBER.

“I found myself doing things that I’m not sure I would have been as daring to do on *Episode VII*”

J. J. ABRAMS