

ENTERTAINMENT DECEMBER 11, 2015

Miami's Oscar Isaac soars to new heights in 'Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens'

HIGHLIGHTS

Isaac describes the new film as “a symphony”

The movie marks a departure from the character-based drama he prefers

The Guatemalan actor was raised in Miami



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BY RENE RODRIGUEZ

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Oscar Isaac was five years old when his father took him to see *Return of the Jedi*. It is the first movie he remembers seeing in a movie theater.

“Maybe I had already seen *Bambi* or something at home, but *Jedi* was the first one that stuck with me,” he says. “I came online with that one. The thing that sticks out most is the moment when Darth Vader’s helmet comes off and you see he’s just this fragile guy underneath. He’s just a guy! This sad sack guy! That scene spoke to that part of me that saw my parents as gods. It was the moment I started to realize they were actually just people.”

When *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* starts screening on Thursday night, Isaac will help bring that same experience to a new generation of younger moviegoers – and giving older ones the opportunity to revisit their youth. In the movie, which is set roughly 30 years after *Return of the Jedi*, Isaac plays Poe Dameron, a hotshot with the reputation for being the best pilot in the galaxy. He flies an X-wing starfighter, he wears the same orange-and-white suit the soldiers of the Rebel Alliance wore in the previous movies, and he’s a good guy – a member of the Resistance, the next-gen incarnation of the rebels.

That’s pretty much all anyone knows about Isaac’s role in *The Force Awakens*. In an era where Twitter and online film sites often dissect movies from start to finish before anyone has had a chance to see them, the plot of *The Force Awakens* remains cloaked in mystery. Isaac has seen the movie, but he’s contractually bound to secrecy: On his last day of filming, as he walked away from the set with his personal copy of the script as a keepsake, a lawyer from Lucasfilm called and asked him to return it immediately (he can have it back after the film opens).

But even if he can't go into detail, Isaac can certainly answer this question: Why would a serious actor who has proven his chops in films such as *Inside Llewyn Davis* and *A Most Violent Year* and the HBO miniseries *Show Me a Hero* want to sign up with the biggest, most commercial movie franchise of all time? *Star Wars* is known for many things, but great performances aren't one of them.

During a visit to Miami to promote the film, Isaac, 36, smiles and nods and concedes the point, although he also reminds you that Alec Guinness and James Earl Jones were two formidable talents who had no problem signing up for George Lucas' pop sci-fi fantasy.

Still, a movie as mammoth as *The Force Awakens* isn't going to provide Isaac the opportunity to deliver the kind of intimate, finely-shaded performance that has become his trademark in films and theater. He knew that going in – and admits he briefly struggled with the question.

“The fun part of acting, for me, is investigating myself – finding very different aspects of myself and magnifying them through a character,” he says. “With *Star Wars*, it's a bit different. You're working with primary colors as opposed to an entire palette. There's popular music and then there's music that's a little more discordant. I tend to go for the slightly more experimental stuff that might make people go ‘Huh?’ for a moment. I'm less interested in doing things are perfectly, instantly palatable. I try to do stuff that won't necessarily be the most liked, even down to choices within a single scene.

“[Director] J. J. Abrams had seen *Inside Llewyn Davis* and *Ex Machina*, and in spite of that – or because of that – he wanted me to add something to this world. I know a *Star Wars* movie is a big pop piece, but I was curious about what he wanted me to add into this thing. When I first met with him and he told me the story, I told him I needed to think about this a little bit. I wasn't sure if that was the right thing for me. Maybe I would rather be a spectator sitting in the theater all excited to watch the movie instead of being part of it.”

Eventually, Isaac says, the script evolved and the character of Poe changed enough to intrigue him.

“I was drawn to the challenge of playing with these slightly more specific set of tools. And because *Star Wars* was such a big part of my life growing up, it was a difficult offer to refuse. So I said ‘Yeah, I'll do it.’ I trusted J.J. completely. And what he has done with the movie is amazing. It's closer to symphonic language than cinematic language. There are movements and rhythms and crescendos and pianissimos. I'm just the oboe that soars over everything for a moment here and there. J. J. was the conductor saying ‘This is the sound and the instrument I need for this part of the music.’ And to be honest, it didn't totally land until I saw the movie. On the set, I felt like I was just out of school again, second-guessing myself and feeling a little self-conscious. I felt like I was yelling my lines the whole time. But when I saw, I thought ‘OK. All right. I get it now.’”

Growing up in Miami

Isaac is the son of a Guatemalan mother, Maria Hernandez, and a Cuban father, Oscar Gonzalo Hernandez. He was born in Guatemala and moved with his family to Baltimore, then New Orleans and finally Miami, when he was a second-grader. The family lived in the suburb of Country Walk and Isaac attended Westminster Christian School until he got expelled for mischievous pranks like spraying a fire extinguisher in the gym. He transferred to a stricter prep school where music and dancing were not allowed (“It was like *Footloose* in there,” he says).

Isaac, who dropped his last name of Hernandez when he decided he wanted to become a performer (Isaac is his middle name), describes his adolescence as a typical Miami upbringing by a father who was “a super Miami Cuban right-wing guy” who also happened to love Bob Dylan and Cat Stevens and Jimi Hendrix. Although his English is flawless, Isaac is still prone to occasionally breaking out the Cuban slang (“*No jodas, chico!*”) and frequently visits the city to check in with his family, who still live here.

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Oscar Isaac

After Hurricane Andrew demolished their home, the family moved to Delray Beach, where Isaac graduated from public high school. He returned to Kendall and began attending in Miami Dade College. Already, he had decided he wanted to be a performer, alternating between acting in local productions and fronting the ska-punk band The Blinking Underdogs, which generated a strong local following.

Isaac admits he doesn't know where his innate drive to express himself artistically came from, but he's carried it his entire life.

“I remember being in kindergarten and pretending to have gotten beaten up by a bully, the same way it happened in *The Karate Kid*,” he recalls. “Even though the other kid didn't do anything, I went ‘*Augh!*’ And fell down and closed my eyes and pretended I saw Mr. Miyagi coming to save me. At that age, I was already imagining stuff and play-acting a lot. I don't know why that happened. Maybe it was some weird genetic thing. But from the very beginning there was this sense of always observing things and later trying to express those experiences. For me as an actor, the point is that whole Plato thing: Know thyself. The work is simply the fruit of that investigation.”

Also after graduating from high school, Isaac set a daily task for himself – what he describes as “doing two things that move the chains down the field.” That could be anything from reading a play to shooting a new headshot, calling a casting director to watching a movie – something that constantly made him feel like he was growing.

A natural-born talent

During that period, he attended a presentation of the David Mamet play *Oleanna* at the Area Stage theater in its former digs on Lincoln Road. After the show, he hung around the lobby and struck up a conversation with John Rodaz, the theater's founder and artistic director, and a lifelong friendship was born.

“Oscar had a natural ability right from the start,” Rodaz says. “He had a great magnetism and presence onstage. That is something you have to be born with. It's innate. But he also liked to talk about the history of theater and the acting process. That's what brought us together. He was interested in learning and growing. He questioned everything. You very rarely come across people like that. A lot of actors get wrapped up in the glamour of it and forget you need to establish a foundation if you want to grow.”

After performing in several plays at Area Stage, Isaac landed roles in Joseph Adler's productions of *This Is Our Youth* and *Side Man*, both performed at GableStage in 2000.

“The first thing you noticed about him was his raw talent,” Adler recalls. “But there was also the seriousness with which he approaches his craft – his discipline and professionalism. Combine that with his incredible intelligence and he's unstoppable. He was also very clever. He had a way of saying things that he knew would drive me nuts. I have always been an ardent liberal Democrat, and he is too. But he would intentionally say things about the Cuban situation or other topics that he knew would get me going. He has a great sense of humor.”

Rodaz, who was one of the people who advised Isaac to apply to New York's prestigious Juilliard School in 2001 (where he found an agent and his career took off), says that sense of humor persists.

“I got a text from him one day that said ‘I got cast in *Guerras Estrellas*,’ Rodaz says “I go ‘What are you talking about?’ He goes ‘*Star Wars*.’ I said ‘B-----! Who do you play?’ And he said ‘I can't tell you.’”

Isaac laughs heartily when you remind him of that story, remnants of his impish adolescence. You get the sense that this brooding, commanding actor still has many facets left to unveil. After *The Force Awakens*, Isaac will be seen in another big-budget popcorn picture – next summer's *X-Men Apocalypse*, in which he plays the eponymous villain, alongside Jennifer Lawrence, Michael Fassbender and James McAvoy (“That was like doing kabuki theater on a gigantic scale,” he says of his first comic-book movie).

After another week in the U.S. doing the *Star Wars* press rounds, he will fly back to London where he's currently filming *The Promise*, a period drama co-starring Christian Bale and Charlotte Le Bon. As the interview wraps up, he stares out the window of a suite at the Mandarin Oriental hotel overlooking downtown Miami.

“I did always feel a little bit like a fish out of water here,” he says, contemplating the city. “As soon as I got to New York, it felt right. I felt like I was home there. But I love to come back here. My family is here. I'm infused by the craziness of this city. I was in the Design District and it felt more free somehow. Some of the cultural rigidness has gone away.

“Has the city changed? Has it grown a lot?” he turns to ask you. Yes, it has. But so has Isaac.

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