

STAR WARS

It's Not Wise to Upset a Wookiee: Spotlight Interview with PETER MAYHEW, aka CHEWBACCA

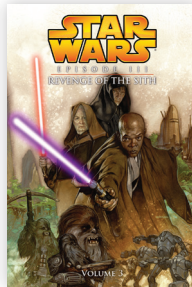
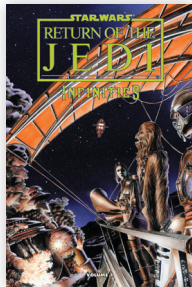
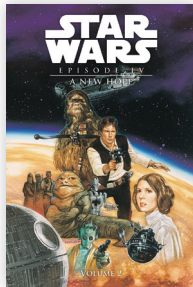


Chewbacca's original costume displayed at Star Wars: In Concert in Minneapolis, July 2010

It was over thirty years ago when *The Empire Strikes Back* was in theaters, the popular second installment in the Star Wars franchise that many fans consider to be the best of the Star Wars movies. Millions of kids and teens and adults saw it in theaters across the world, making it the highest-grossing film of 1980 and the 12th highest of all time.

To celebrate this anniversary, ABDO and Spotlight were thrilled to interview Peter Mayhew, better known as the man behind Chewbacca, the immense, and immensely popular, Wookiee character from Star Wars. Mr. Mayhew, who once said that all he had to do to get the part was “stand up,” is 7’3” tall, and had gotten his first break in movies as a Minotaur,

after a producer had seen a picture of him in a newspaper article about people with big feet. His second role would be as the famed “walking carpet” in the most popular movie series of all time. Mr. Mayhew chatted with us from his home in Granbury, Texas. Below are some highlights:



INTERVIEW

Spotlight: Mr. Mayhew, thank you so much for joining us! When both grown-ups and little kids learned we were going to interview you, their eyes lit up and they got visibly excited. What is so appealing about Chewbacca do you think?

Peter Mayhew: *Chewbacca's main appeal is as your favorite teddy bear, your security blanket, your bigger, braver, older brother who is always there for you in a pinch. The fact that he doesn't speak, and yet everybody knows what's on his mind, I think that's part of the charm of Chewie. He's curious, but sometimes cautious, and once you're committed to a situation, he's right there with you to the end.*

Spotlight: George Lucas once said that he got the idea for Chewbacca when his Alaskan Malamute would sit in the front passenger seat of his car. We loved learning how you threw yourself into the role and studied animal movement at the London Zoo to get ready for the movies. Can you tell us what you noted during those studies, and how you became Chewbacca?

Peter Mayhew: *Chewbacca was a test character intended to have a small role in the first movie, but I think as the relationship between Han Solo and Chewbacca developed on screen, George decided to keep the character. I was a very shy person and had to make a real effort to pantomime feelings in front of the camera. I was a good observer though, both of people and of animals and the costume was a place that I felt comfortable. I think I felt more secure as a masked character than I would have with just me, in front of a camera.*

Spotlight: Chewbacca is a 7-foot tall Bigfoot/dog/bear/alien covered in hair; Han Solo is a smuggler and pirate; the Millennium Falcon is a “piece of junk” that has smuggled spice shipments (among other items); and the ship frequently has melting and burning wires, or is being welded and worked on all the time. If Star Wars fans could smell the movie, would they love you two rascals so much? Is there a wet-Chewbacca smell?

Peter Mayhew: *Too right there was a wet-Chewbacca smell! I sweated profusely every day (except in Norway where I merely got soaking wet from the snow melt) and the smell of warm Yak hair and mohair combined with my own natural perfumes became notorious among the crew. I think they drew straws to see who would collect the undergarments for cleaning at the end of the day's shoot, and the short straw had to do it! My leotard was dyed pink in order to distinguish it from the others, but I don't think they needed the different coloring, I think they could just follow their nose.*

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Spotlight: Please settle a debate among some fans we know: What is the greatest Chewbacca scene? When he roars at Darth Vader, fearless of the Sith Lord who's tricked our heroes in *The Empire Strikes Back*? The board game with R2D2 in Episode IV, when we learn Wookiees are sore losers who will tear the winner's arms from their sockets? Or the Wookiee chuckle when the Princess insults Han Solo? Or do you have a different favorite Chewbacca moment?

Peter Mayhew: *Definitely the chess game scene in my opinion! So many words of wisdom came from that, the most important lesson to be learned: Always Let The Wookiee Win!*

Spotlight: One of the behind-the-scenes stories we love most is when you fell ill during shooting *The Empire Strikes Back*, and the filmmakers decided to use a tall stand-in Chewbacca to continue production and stay on schedule – only to have to throw all the scenes away, once they realized Chewbacca wasn't Chewbacca when they watched the rushes. Did you have any extra Wookiee swagger the day you got back on the set and filming could continue?

Peter Mayhew: *I don't remember anything like that. From my perspective, we just picked up where we left off. I had actually passed out on set on Friday. I was running down the corridor with C3PO on my back and the next thing I knew, the crew were gathered around me asking if I had damaged the 3PO costume when I fell! They sent me home for the rest of the day and then we went back on Monday and reshot the scene. I was dehydrated from all that sweating. I only found out later that they had tried to carry on after I left.*

Spotlight: If you could tell fans one thing about that costume, what would it be?

Peter Mayhew: *Don't try to make the costume at home unless you really, really love Chewbacca. I know that the people who make Chewie costumes only make them as a labor of love because they are very difficult to make.*

Spotlight: What was the process to put the costume on?

Peter Mayhew: *Getting into the original Chewbacca costume wasn't difficult, there was black makeup around my eyes and the pink leotard. The feet just fit over my feet and I was able to just stand on the ground. Most of the guys who do costuming today as Chewbacca have a set of stilts or lifts for height, it can be quite tricky from what I hear to walk on stilts. The new costume for Episode III, *Revenge of the Sith*, was made very differently from the original with synthetic fur, a cooling vest and some fancy motors on the top of the head for extra facial movements.*

Spotlight: You have a new children's book about growing up as a giant. Can you tell us a little about it?

Peter Mayhew: *We are actually working on two books, one called *My Favorite Giant* will be for younger kids and will deal with taking the time to get to know the people around you and learning to respect each other's strength, even if we are not all able to do the same things.*

Growing Up Giant is a kind of an illustrated graphic novel of my life, and what it was like to grow up in England as a giant. It deals with the diagnoses and treatment of giantism and my journey of trying to find my place in the world. I think it's a positive story of making the best of what we have. The publication dates should be in November. You can find out more about me on my website as well: www.petermayhew.com.

Spotlight: What advice would you give to kids and teens who are interested in getting into the movie business?

Peter Mayhew: *Get out there and do it. Get a camera and get started. Make your own movies and tell your own stories. Tell stories about things that you know and then add your imagination. Always be curious and observe the world around you, you never know when it might take you to a galaxy far, far away.....*

ABDO's Spotlight division was the first educational publisher to license comic books for use in schools and libraries, including the Dark Horse/Lucasfilm series of Star Wars graphic novels based on the movies and Clone Wars TV series. In Spring 2011, Spotlight will publish the Star Wars Infinities books, a series based on alternative timelines in the Star Wars universe, including what happens if Luke died in Episode IV, and more.

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