

matt jones

Interview – The Wookiee, Peter Mayhew

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Mayhew's making Wookiee

On the 20th anniversary of the release of Star Wars, Matt Jones talks to former hospital porter Peter Mayhew about his role as Harrison Ford's sidekick, Chewbacca the Wookiee.

Fourteen years after he was last seen in *Return of the Jedi*, Chewbacca the Wookiee is living in happy obscurity not on his home planet of Kashyyyk, or among the Ewoks on Endor or even on Tatooine, where he and Han Solo first met Luke Skywalker, but in a modest three-bedroom house in a small town near the northern English city of Leeds.

Peter Mayhew, Harrison Ford's sidekick in the most successful movie of all time, was – is – Chewbacca.

“If you look at the way Chewie walks, it's the same way as I do, basically because of the construction of my body,” says the 2.26 metre tall Mayhew, who lives in Keighley, a close-knit Yorkshire community.

“And also the blue eyes, those are my eyes. Like Chewbacca, I'm interested in everything that is going on around me. And I'm very patient up to a point, but then watch out because Wookiees are liable to pull people's arms out!”

Sitting in the living room of his detached house, with rain distorting the view of a landscape made famous by the Bronte sisters more than a century before, 52-year-old Mayhew reflects on his unlikely ascent from unknown London hospital porter to cult sci-fi figure.

“I was working at King's College and a guy came along from the local paper looking for people with big feet,” he says. “I think he had been visiting either a relative or a friend in hospital and had seen me wandering around, approached me and said, ‘Can I take a photograph and do a story?’”

“He sold it to the *Evening Standard* and a guy coming home from Shepperton studios saw it, phoned me up and said, ‘Would you be interested in doing a character for a movie?’”

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Mayhew was. The role, cast in 1975 when he was an aimless 30 year old, was the Minotaur in director Sam Wanamaker's *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger*.

As Mayhew explains it, in his matey south London accent – Chewbacca was born in Kingston, Surrey – his casting in *Star Wars* was due to word of mouth.

“The guy that was doing all the big creatures on *Sinbad* talked to the guy that was doing the creatures on *Star Wars* and, you know, they were obviously looking for someone big, and phoned me up,” he says.

According to *Star Wars* lore, Chewbacca was based on director George Lucas's dog, Indiana, a name later used for Harrison Ford's whip-and-wise-cracking archaeologist in the Lucas-produced *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

“Basically, when you look at him he's a teddy bear, soft and yet protective,” says Mayhew, when asked about Chewbacca's appeal. “He's a cuddly character, which none of the others are. You couldn't call Darth Vader cuddly; you couldn't call Threepio [C-3PO] cuddly.

“On *Star Wars* he wasn't considered a major character at the time of casting. It wasn't until *Empire* [*The Empire Strikes Back*, the first sequel] came along that the character actually grew in stature. I think he was included as part of the major group because of the public reaction to him, public affection.”

There's little in Mayhew's home to indicate that he starred in the film that revolutionised American cinema, both in terms of special effects and in film-related merchandising.

“There's not that many souvenirs,” he says. “Nothing off set. At that time I thought, ‘Well, it's another movie. It's a job.’ Nobody knew how successful it was going to be.

“I've got a spare room which is fairly full of posters and stuff like that, but around the house no. I like to keep the working part away from the rest of my life.”

Mayhew doesn't have any of the three yak-hair Wookiee suits he wore for the *Star Wars* trilogy: *Star Wars*, *Empire*, made in 1980, and 1983's *Jedi*. “I think one is in the Smithsonian in Washington, and the other two I believe are at the Lucasfilm ranch in California,” he says.

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Did they itch? “No, because I had a full length leotard underneath so I was perfectly warm and comfortable. Obviously you sweated a bit, but that was par for the course.”

The costume consisted of a mask, body suit and boots. Mayhew could be transformed from hospital porter into hirsute Wookiee in just five minutes, less time than it took to give actress Carrie Fisher Princess Leia’s infamous bagel hairdo.

Says Mayhew: “Because the mask fitted right into the eye sockets, all that was needed was just a little bit of black eyeliner to hide the joins between my own skin and the mask.”

Twenty years on, does he regret that neither his face nor his voice (the Wookiee roar, a mixture of bear and dog, was a sound effect added in later) appear in *Star Wars*?

“Not at all,” replies Mayhew. “I can go around without getting mobbed. I can lead a fairly normal life when I want to. When I go and do conventions, which I’ve been doing for the last 18 months, I can travel relatively incognito and still enjoy the adulation.”

Last year, Mayhew, who has never married (“Never got around to it”) went to 10 science-fiction conventions in the United States with other British actors whose faces were hidden – Dave Prowse (who played Darth Vader), Jeremy Bulloch (bounty hunter Boba Fett), Kenny Baker (R2-D2) and Warwick Davis (Ewok Wicket W. Warrick in *Jedi*).

His signature fetches a modest US\$10 (Dhs36.7) among collectors of *Star Wars* memorabilia, compared to the US\$150 for that of his co-star, Harrison Ford.

Did Mayhew have any inkling that Ford would become the superstar he is now? “Working with him, yes, because there was so much input from him on various things, how to do things properly,” he says.

“Because we were roughly the same age we got on reasonably well. I suppose you had to. In the storyline we’d been together a good number of years. There’s got to be a reasonable relationship between the two characters and this worked over into the relationship between the actors.”

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As Chewbacca, Mayhew – who has only acted in four films and who co-owned a timber business until joining the convention circuit – was guaranteed a place in cinema history even before this year's 20th anniversary release of *Star Wars: Special Edition* thrust him back into the media spotlight.

But despite being one of the few members of the original *Star Wars* cast who won't have aged visibly, he hasn't been approached to appear in the three prequel films that Lucas will make.

"I wouldn't mind being in them," he says in his typically easy going way. "But, when you think about it, whether we will be in there or not is a debatable point because we could be away on another galaxy doing other things."

Like living in Yorkshire and watching the rugby of a Saturday afternoon.

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