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Keeper of the Star Wars *secrets*

With just one phone call, Geelong's Andrew Mackinnon was off on his own Stars Wars adventure. GUY DAVIS reports

There are a few million film fans around the world who would love to find out what Andrew Mackinnon knows.

After all, Andrew is one of the few people in the world who has read the screenplay for the new *Star Wars* movie.

Even the stars of the show have only received sections of the script relevant to their own characters.

He has witnessed scenes for the film being shot in the massive soundstages of the Fox Studios complex in Sydney.

He has actually seen the next chapter in George Lucas's enormously successful science fiction saga taking shape before his very eyes.

Unfortunately, he can't talk about it.

"I signed an agreement that says I can't divulge anything about the story of the movie," Andrew said.

"I can't say a word about the plot or even the way it looks. Not a word. I can only say it's going to look awesome."

Filming on the new film, currently known only as Episode 2, has now moved to Italy and Tunisia, and the soundstages that masqueraded as galaxies far, far away now lie empty.

Most of the workers on the film have moved on as well, but a few including Andrew are still based in Sydney.

There's little evidence that one of the most anticipated movies of the next few years was shot here but there's still an energy surrounding the place.

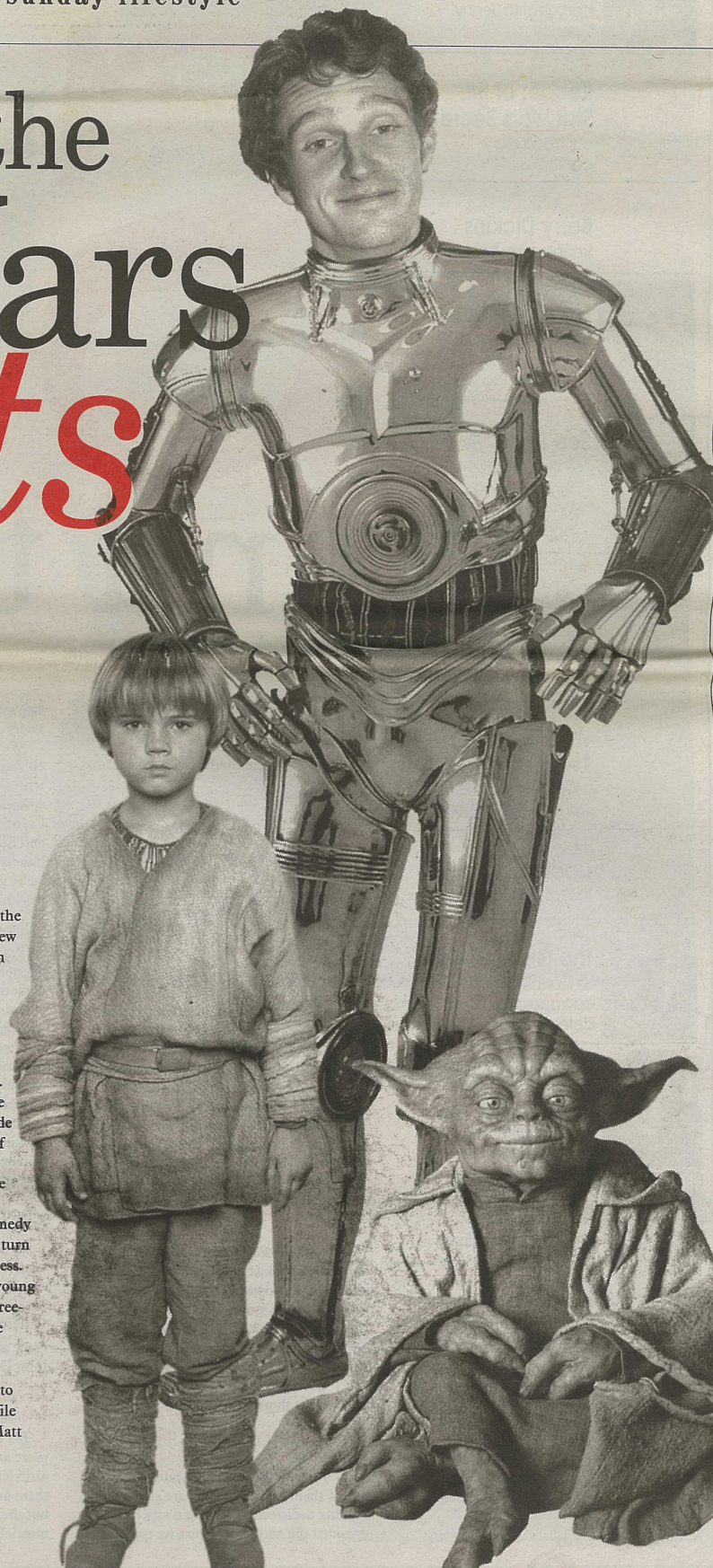
Chances are, however, that it's coming from 22-year-old Andrew, whose laid-back demeanor can't entirely disguise how stoked he is to be associated with the *Star Wars* saga.

The film industry is a difficult one to crack but this guy's ascent has made it appear easy. A two-page synopsis of his first screenplay saw him and his writing partner invited to develop the script at Fox's TropNest facility.

The script, *Six Feet*, is a black comedy about a pair of funeral directors who turn to murder in order to drum up business.

The detailed 30-page outline the young writers came up with during their three-month Sydney stay so impressed the executives at 20th Century Fox they signed them to a development deal, paying them an undisclosed amount to complete the script. A magazine profile dubbed them Australia's answer to Matt Damon and Ben Affleck.

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And the connections Andrew made while he was based at Sydney's Fox Studios held him in good stead to land his job on Episode 2, even if it was a position for which he wasn't really qualified.

"George Lucas' personal assistant was working at Fox at the time I was working at TropNest, and she said I should send my resumé to the production company," Andrew said. "I still had to apply for the job and I managed to get it because we got along so well."

Andrew was given the job of stills image co-ordinator. Even though he had no experience in the position, he admits he would have taken on any job to be part of the team working on Episode 2.

"If it had involved sweeping the floors, I would have done it," he laughed, adding that the job was both a tremendous learning experience and a great deal of fun.

One of three co-ordinators, the job involves organising what the photographers will be shooting on a particular day, scanning the actual photos into computers and e-mailing a selection of them to Skywalker Ranch, Lucas's production facility near San Francisco, California.

"The production has three still photographers and they take shots of everything they've taken 30,000 photos so far," Andrew said.

The amount of photographs taken may seem excessive, around 80,000 were taken during the making of *The Phantom Menace*, but they're required for a number of purposes, including publicity (such as the film's official website, www.starwars.com), the preparation of movie-related merchandise and the director's own comprehensive library.

"From what I've heard, his production company's files are just immense," Andrew said.

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Lucas' hands-on approach to the production, as well as his penchant for secrecy, meant that Andrew was working frequently with the film-maker.

"He has to approve every photo that is used on the website, because you can't print anything that may give away plot points in the film, so I had a lot of interaction with him.

"Considering who he is and what he has done, he's the most down-to-earth guy I've ever come across," he said.

"I mean, if anyone is entitled to have an ego, it's him. But he's so into it, and it's really cool to see.

"His kids were on the set, and his little daughter was saying she wanted to be a Jedi, so George was talking with her about what it would take for her to be a Jedi knight. He genuinely loves it, and hearing him talk about it really grabs you."

Rubbing shoulders with one of the most successful film-makers of all time, working alongside stars like Samuel L. Jackson "a very cool guy, watching him smoke a cigarette, it was almost enough to make you take it up" and bumping into visitors like *Godfather* director Francis Ford Coppola would make most people wide-eyed, but Andrew took it in his stride. Well, mostly.

"I don't really get starstruck," he said.

"These are just people who are really good at what they do, good enough to do it on a world stage but I'll admit that when Coppola came to the set, I was like 'Whoa, that's Francis Coppola!'"

Andrew was keen to break into the film business since he was young.

"Rather than head straight for university when I left school, I took a year off and wrote letters to hundreds of production companies, saying that I wanted to get into the industry and was looking for the best way to do it," he said.

Ben Gannon, a film and television producer who lists *Heartbreak High* among his credits, responded, inviting Andrew to visit Sydney and gain some insight into the workings of the industry.

"Seeing the reality of it only encouraged me more," Andrew said.

"I haven't met anyone with an ego. They just love what they're doing. Everyone thinks it's glamorous, but it's really a lot of work – long hours but very satisfying.

"It's great working with creative people and on Episode 2 they're possibly the most creative people in the world. They're like the best of the best."

