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Gary Kurtz, Hands-On 'Star Wars' Producer, Is Dead at 78

By **Daniel E. Slotnik**

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Gary Kurtz, who produced “Star Wars” and “The Empire Strikes Back,” helping George Lucas create one of the most successful franchises in movie history, died on Sept. 23 at a care facility near his home in London. He was 78.

The cause was cancer, his family said in a statement.

The work of film producers can vary; some are little more than financial backers, while others are essentially partners in a production. Mr. Kurtz was emphatically the latter.

“I grew up in the school where the producer was just as much a filmmaker as the cameraman,” he told The Star-Ledger of Newark in 2005.

Mr. Kurtz first worked with Mr. Lucas on his breakout film, the nostalgic coming-of-age comedy “American Graffiti” (1973), before collaborating with him on the first two films of the “Star Wars” saga, which established Mr. Lucas as a major filmmaker.

“Gary’s passing will be felt throughout the Star Wars family,” Mr. Lucas said in a statement. “Through what were sometimes challenging shooting difficulties and conditions, his contributions as a producer helped bring the stories to life onscreen.”

Mr. Kurtz and Francis Ford Coppola produced “American Graffiti” at a cost of about \$775,000 (a little more than \$4.7 million in 2018 dollars). It went on to become a sleeper success that made tens of millions of dollars and was nominated for five Academy Awards.

During the filming, which was frenetic but completed on time and under budget, Mr. Kurtz and Mr. Lucas talked about oneday making a very different kind of movie: a space opera that would break from the trend of post-apocalyptic science fiction movies.

Mr. Kurtz was involved in the “Star Wars” project from the beginning. He helped Mr. Lucas pitch the film to studios, scout locations, hire a cast and crew, and create dazzling special effects with a budget of \$10 million (about \$45 million today).

Mr. Kurtz said that shooting the film, at Elstree Studios in Hertfordshire, England, proved especially difficult because of technical issues and the crew’s lack of confidence.

“They didn’t understand it,” he said in 2005. “It was looked upon as a kind of folly.”

“Star Wars” was released in 1977 and became one of the most successful films of all time, earning hundreds of millions of dollars and winning seven Academy Awards, including a special-achievement award for sound effects. (It was nominated for best picture but lost to Woody Allen’s “Annie Hall.”)

“Star Wars” made major stars of Carrie Fisher, who died in 2016; Harrison Ford, who had also been in “American Graffiti,” and Mark Hamill, who in a post on Twitter after Mr. Kurtz’s death called him “a lifelong friend” whose “contributions to cinema cannot be overstated.”



Chewbacca, C-3PO, Carrie Fisher and Harrison Ford in “The Empire Strikes Back” (1980), the second and last “Star Wars” movie on which Mr. Kurtz worked. Lucasfilm

After the success of “Star Wars,” Mr. Lucas and Mr. Kurtz began work on a sequel, “The Empire Strikes Back,” enlisting Irvin Kershner to direct while Mr. Lucas served as executive producer and wrote the story.

Mr. Kurtz joined Mr. Kershner in Europe for the filming, this time with a much larger budget. They faced serious challenges, including delays caused by an injury to Mr. Hamill, a studio fire that seriously damaged a set in England, and a blizzard on a glacier in Norway used as the setting for scenes on the ice planet Hoth.

"The Empire Strikes Back" was not completed on time and went over budget, costing more than \$30 million (more than \$100 million today). It was released in 1980 to major box-office success but mixed reviews, although many critics now consider it the best film in the "Star Wars" series.

The Lucas-Kurtz collaboration ended shortly after "Empire" was released because of differences over the planned third movie in the series. Mr. Kurtz later said that he had objected to what he saw as Mr. Lucas's overly upbeat treatment of the story, which eventually became "Return of the Jedi" (1983).

Gary Douglas Kurtz was born in Los Angeles on July 27, 1940. His mother, Sara (Briar) Kurtz, was an interior designer, painter and sculptor. His father, Eldo, was a chemical engineer and photographer.

Gary grew up in Northern and later Southern California. He graduated from West Covina High School in West Covina, near Los Angeles, in 1958 and attended the University of Southern California, where he studied music before concentrating on film.

He left college to work on movies, early on acting as production manager for Roger Corman's "Voyage to the Prehistoric Planet" (1965) and "Queen of Blood" (1966).

In the late 1960s Mr. Kurtz served with the Marines in Vietnam, mainly as a photographer. After his service ended in 1969, he met Mr. Coppola through Mr. Corman's production company, and Mr. Coppola introduced him to Mr. Lucas.

Mr. Kurtz's first two marriages, to Meredith Alsup and Roberta Jimenez, ended in divorce. He is survived by his wife, Clare (Gabriel) Kurtz; two daughters from his first marriage, Melissa Kurtz and Tiffany Hillkurtz; a son from his second marriage, Dylan; three stepsons, Corin, Dylan and Luke Howitt; and four step-grandchildren.

Mr. Kurtz's other films include "Return to Oz" (1985), an unsettling sequel to "The Wizard of Oz" that more faithfully followed L. Frank Baum's novels, and "Slipstream" (1989), a science fiction thriller with Bill Paxton and Mr. Hamill as bounty hunters.

Mr. Kurtz may have left the "Star Wars" series not just because he disagreed with its direction. A few months before "The Empire Strikes Back" was released, he told The New York Times that what he really wanted was to make another sort of picture with Mr. Lucas.

"What I'd like to do is a story about two people on a picnic in the country with no special effects or robots or wind machines," he said. "I'd like to. But we won't."

Mr. Kurtz was right. The next film he produced was Jim Henson's "The Dark Crystal" (1982), a fantasy cast entirely with Mr. Henson's puppets.

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