

Becoming the "Star Wars" Man

by Charlie Ross

I'm a thirty-five-year-old Canadian actor, and for the last seven years I've toured my *One Man Star Wars Trilogy*, a solo stage show in which I recreate the 1977–82 films. I play all the characters, sing the music, and mould my body to imitate everything from planets to laser blasts. I've performed it over 1200 times, in 230+ cities, and across four continents. These numbers continue to grow way beyond my expectations. I believe that my experience, apart from the *Star Wars* aspects, will become more common for small Canadian theatre companies and solo performers.

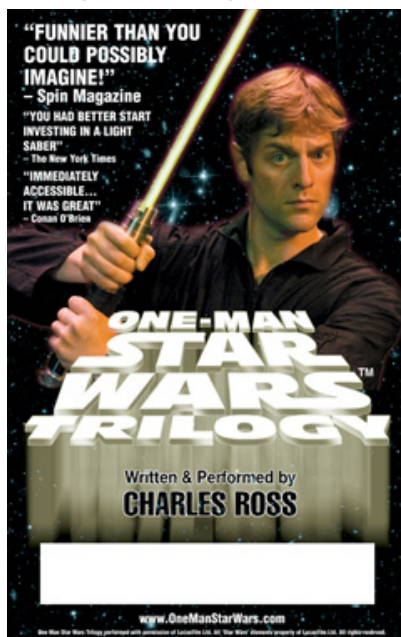
As theatre people, we're uniquely conditioned in Canada to overcome our geographical remoteness, our economic limitations, and the simple lack of employment opportunities. Generations of small Canadian theatre companies have formed, some who subsist outside of more "legitimate" theatre circles. While some companies become the local alternative theatre in a community, others tour almost exclusively. Some do a bit of both. Alternative theatre productions are easy to spot: full of pop-culture references, some shows are more novelty than theatre. They're sexy, they're current, like micro versions of mega-theatre productions such as *Hairspray* or *Spamalot*; it's all about putting a new spin on something we know and love. Eventually these alternatives become the establishment as many of their shows segue from the fringe to Off-Broadway and beyond.

Canadian theatre: its small-scale, separated by its vast distances, forced me to turn obstacles into assets. I sought out work in the mountains or conjured it from the ether. My relative state of poverty became the seed of innovation. While my experience might be obscure to some, the journey is valid. My experience in Canada helped me to carve out a niche in the theatre world with *One Man Star Wars*: a show that's given me a unique legitimacy as a theatre artist. *One Man Star Wars* reflects a Canadian style and scale—

attributes that a company like Lucasfilm has embraced. To be Canadian is to be alternative and it's something to be proud of.

Trying to make it as a theatre actor in Canada is sort of like trying to climb the Rocky Mountains with our lips. The business requires a frustrating amount of patience and drive. We identify ourselves as actors even when there is no work in sight. We forsake reliable employment to instead advance at a glacial pace in a vocation almost guaranteed to fail. Yet with every little victory comes the exhilaration of "maybe I will make it" that propels us further down the path.

I was born in Prince George, a remote and laid back town in the centre of BC. Ever since my childhood (even though I was born premature) I've preferred to take the scenic route get to my destination. As an actor, I tend to procrastinate, tempering periods of laziness with bouts of extreme productivity. Biding my time, or wasting it, depending upon your outlook.



Charlie Ross stars in One Man Star Wars
Photo by Jason Woodruff

Prince George is where my actor's journey began. One morning, when I was four, my Mom found me weeping over the death of a firefighter on the *Hawaii 5-O* television series. It was tragic to see but Mom assured me that he was only an "Actor" and that it was all just pretend. And sure enough, a week or so later, I saw the very same guy marrying Morgan Fairchild on the *Love Boat*. As far as I could gather, these people were a bunch of liars and for some reason we believed them. I began to notice that actors were everywhere and the world worshipped them. (I failed to notice they were all American movie stars and TV personalities.) To me, they were like magicians and we were happily under their spell. I wanted this.

Later that same year, a new sensation invaded movie theatres, toy stores, and the imaginations of kids everywhere: *Star Wars*. It made a huge impression on me. Here was a guy, Luke Skywalker, from nowhere who



Charlie Ross as a Pineview Cub Scout, Prince George, BC, 1984.
Courtesy Pineview Cub Scouts

got whisked away into space. I was from nowhere too! I wanted this, too.

This is me at eight; the laid back procrastinator, sporting a solitary merit badge for "House Keeping" (there's a vacuum on it). Not exactly the pride of my Cub Scout troop. My greatest unrewarded achievement was that I'd seen *Star Wars: A New Hope* around 400 times. Believe me, if they considered that worthy of merit I'd be standing next to Queen Elizabeth.

My Dad was right when he said I "needed motivation"—all actors do. (Dad actually met the Queen, and not for watching *Star Wars*.) What he didn't explain is that people are motivated to do what comes most naturally to them. Mom must have understood this: she let me skip Cub Scouts one

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evening to attend an acting workshop that I'd expressed interest in taking. It's funny how a single night can change your life. It's even funnier that it can take twenty years for a penny to drop—for my love of *Star Wars* to marry my passion for acting. I've never met the Queen, but I've had lunch with one of her Knights; and I've also been favoured by the King of *Star Wars* himself. All it took was a little motivation in the right direction.

After high school, I attended the University of Victoria's Theatre Department, eventually graduating with a BFA. During my summers, I tried landing one of the few acting gigs available in Victoria, with little success. But I refused to be daunted. Longing for experience and adventure (with no appreciation of what a ruined credit rating might mean) in 1994, I joined a theatre company to tour across North America to five Fringe festivals. Our company went \$5000 into debt in exchange for some valuable life lessons. A memorable part of the tour was seeing the brilliant Michael Schaldemose impersonate *Captain James T. Kirk* in his play *The Scions of Hydra*. It had high production values (for the Fringe) and was based upon the hugely popular *Star Trek* series. Michael Schaldemose directly inspired my eventual *Star Wars* show. Seeing Schaldemose reinforced a sentiment: we're motivated to do what comes most naturally to us. On stage, if you love your source material (as Schaldemose clearly did), that passion shines through in your performance.

Fringing was an expensive summer school, one I couldn't afford to continue. I needed something that paid me actual money. So in the summers that followed, I worked in the mountain town of Barkerville, BC, a provincial historic site eighty km away from a grocery store. Up there, I felt I could try anything: stand-up comedy, interpretive dance, and improvisation. Barkerville awoke a kind of can-do, almost pioneer, spirit in me.

After graduation, in 1998, I moved to Toronto, hungry to climb the ranks at Shaw and Stratford from Spear Carrier #3 to play leading roles. After a few months it became clear that I was merely one mediocre actor amongst hundreds who shared my dream. Plus, I had less "legitimate" experience than others: no Director had ever heard of Barkerville, nor had any come to see my

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Fringe show in '94. While Toronto seemed like a great place to perform, the futility of auditioning soon sucked away my confidence. I felt like Luke Skywalker, hoping for greater things while being stuck in a self-perpetuating funk. This time, daunted but still optimistic, I stepped out of my comfort zone and moved to Halifax in pursuit of a gig (which I got) and a girl (whom I married). In the following years I crisscrossed the country chasing down work, sometimes travelling from

one coast to the other.

In the summer of 2002, I returned to Toronto for the Fringe festival to perform the *One Man Star Wars Trilogy*. I'd rehearsed/performed a short run of it while working for Western Canadian Theatre in Kamloops, BC, earlier that January. I'd even made enough money to cover my festival entry fee and plane ticket. I didn't anticipate success at the fringe. I figured I'd do the show, recover my overhead, and move on.

When I rehearse a play with other actors, my character takes shape in relation to the rest of the cast. We bounce off each other, and eventually the play comes together. Then we go for beer, or wine, or both. One-person shows are very different. While rehearsing *One Man Star Wars*, I discovered it wasn't enough to go through the motions of



The first One Man Star Wars "skit" marquee, Silverton, BC (pop. 300, maybe), March 2003. Your show being referred to as a "skit" is not quite a solo actor's dream, but a marquee is a marquee, no?

Courtesy Charlie Ross



The Lucasfilm "audition." It went very, very well.
 Courtesy Charlie Ross

acting. I had to recapture the genuine love, the uncensored fanatical gusto reserved for eight-year-olds and lunatics. I needed to find my inner eight-year-old and transpose him to the stage. People would either get it or they wouldn't.

When *OMSW* came to Toronto's Fringe Festival it did very well. I actually made money. I was crushed that I'd not taken a bigger risk and arranged for a more extensive tour. I actually went back to the mountains in Barkerville, because it was my safety gig, the work I could count on. In 2003, I toured *OMSW* around BC to rural elementary schools and art galleries, trying to keep it fresh in my mind and to polish it up. I'd scheduled a nine-city Fringe tour of *OMSW* for the summer. Again, I thought, "I do the show, recover my overhead, and move on," but my situation was about to change significantly when I met a producer from Chicago: Daniel Roche. He invited me to come perform in the Windy City after my fringe tour was done. I hoped I'd be able to quickly try out Chicago, and move on.

Up until Chicago, I'd been off the radar. I'd never asked Lucasfilm for permission to do the show. Suddenly I was getting all of this high-profile press, parading my existence around, until an e-mail arrived from Lucasfilm. The gist of their three-sentence message stated that they'd heard about me and that they had a "project" to discuss with me. I was certain the "project" was them suing me into oblivion.

I need to mention that in 2002, I'd met an ex-theatre company from Chicago whose *Star Wars* musical had been shut down by Lucasfilm. The difference between their more

American-style musical and my Canadian-mimed dork-fest was obvious. They'd found investors for their musical production and so developed what they must have figured would be a theatrical gold mine. When Lucasfilm "contacted" them, the company had risked everything—the money had been spent, and the result of the contact was not good. TJ Dawe (my director) and I had styled *OMSW* to be a cheap, bare bones production, so my financial investment was minimal. If Lucasfilm chose to squish me, I'd be the only one to suffer.

It turned out that Lucasfilm was curious to

hear about me; they liked the idea of this one-person, low-tech love song to *Star Wars*. They wanted to know if their fans would like it, too. They asked me to come do an audition of sorts before an audience of 4000, and if it went well, I could perform it at an official *Star Wars* convention. I was convinced that if I ever heard from Lucasfilm, it would be over. In Canada, work lasts for a while; you go anywhere to do it, and eventually you move on. Had I sold Darth Vader ice cream bars, or franchised the show out to legions of aspiring über-dorks, things would have ended abruptly. Luckily, I'd maintained the intimate quality of the show and its simplicity. It was a fan's celebration of *Star Wars*. I'd love to think that when George Lucas heard about me he thought, "Charlie's a kindred spirit, give that rebel a ticket to ride." But he probably thought "Man, his poor parents. I guess he couldn't do any harm." I got a super charge from Lucasfilm when they took me under their wing. Suddenly, I had a legitimate, portable show and the *Star Wars* seal of approval. And then, I had no idea what to do. So I got an agent.

As *One Man Star Wars* gained momentum, I planned my next show. Lucky for me, the *Lord of the Rings* was taking the world by storm. JRR Tolkien's books had greatly influenced my childhood. I was initially sceptical of Peter Jackson's films. Of course all reserve was utterly abolished when I saw the epic tale had been reborn as cinematic poetry. You could feel the love and passion for the source material in every frame of the film.

The Lord of the Rings and *Star Wars* Trilogy (despite its

1970s/1980s hairdos) both have something that elevates them beyond other films. Maybe it's Alec Guinness' effortless turn as Obiwan Kenobi, like Ian McKellen's sublime Gandalf the Grey. Perhaps it's the music, the epic scale, or the battle between light and darkness? Whatever it is, I'm reminded of the simplicity of childhood, feeling whisked away upon the adventures of Luke Skywalker or Frodo Baggins. Immersed in a fantasy world of lasers, swords, spaceships, and monsters—fun, FUN, FUNNNNN! I knew that when I saw *The Lord of the Rings*, it was the next trilogy for me to conquer.

However, in grown-up world, intellectual property lawyers have a way of ruining your fun.



Another One Man Star Wars marquee—New York City (pop. more than 300), 2005.
Courtesy Charlie Ross

I performed *One Man Lord of the Rings* on the 2004 Fringe circuit. It went better than *Star Wars* had, not because one was more popular than the other, but I think audiences just knew what they were getting into. The experience was anything but small or off-the-radar. I got tons of press—too much for a Fringe show—and the reviews were the best I'd ever had. At the end of my tour I met Sir Ian McKellen, who attended a Vancouver performance, and not five days after the Fringe ended, I received a "cease & desist" e-mail from the powers that be.

I could understand why it happened. I started to work through legal channels; I spent more money on a lawyer than I'd ever made as an actor, only to no avail. Things were progressing, but I was off to Off-Broadway in New York with

OMSW, and there things fell apart. My New York producers were eager to fast track *OMLOTR* to follow up *OMSW* and it got away from my control. It took one careless mention of *Lord of the Rings* in the *New York Times* and that was it.

When Ian McKellen came to my *OMLOTR*, I was able to ask him about his experiences. He had the attitude of someone enjoying the ride. I don't even know if he had a destination in mind. He told me about an off-Broadway production he'd done opposite Maggie Smith, which apparently wasn't overwhelmingly attended. He wasn't daunted by it—which shows the different levels we're on—he simply enjoyed being in New York. He told me to enjoy myself and to keep creating.

His confidence was infectious. In the years since our meeting, I've performed in a few theatres he's been scheduled to perform in also, and I always wish I could tell him I'm enjoying the ride, too.

My short career has already been full of ups and downs. I've appeared on American television shows like the *Today Show* and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. I do a lot of morning radio shows. DJs often ask me if I'm "the *Star Wars* guy." (It's hardly a surprise being eclipsed by arguably the biggest movie franchise in history.) I'm okay being the *Star Wars* guy. This is what I was made to do. *Star Wars* has been a common point of reference for me to stand before large groups of people (it's the closest I've ever felt to an audience) and celebrate the love of it.

The ironic thing about my *OMSW* success is that just like working in Barkerville, it doesn't open any doors around Canadian theatres. I don't

get work offers, except from theatres I worked at previously to *OMSW*. To those of you who don't get cast here at home: find your alternatives, find what you love, and find a way to share it. For me, it's still a scenic drive—and I look forward to seeing you out here.

Postscript: In April 2009, after a five-year hiatus, I had the opportunity to present *OMLOTR* to the powers that be in Middle Earth (who not so surprisingly live in San Francisco, CA). I'm now scheduled to perform *OMLOTR* at the 2009 Edinburgh Fringe Festival (which took place August 7–31, 2009).

Charlie Ross is a Victoria-based actor who has travelled the world with his solo shows.