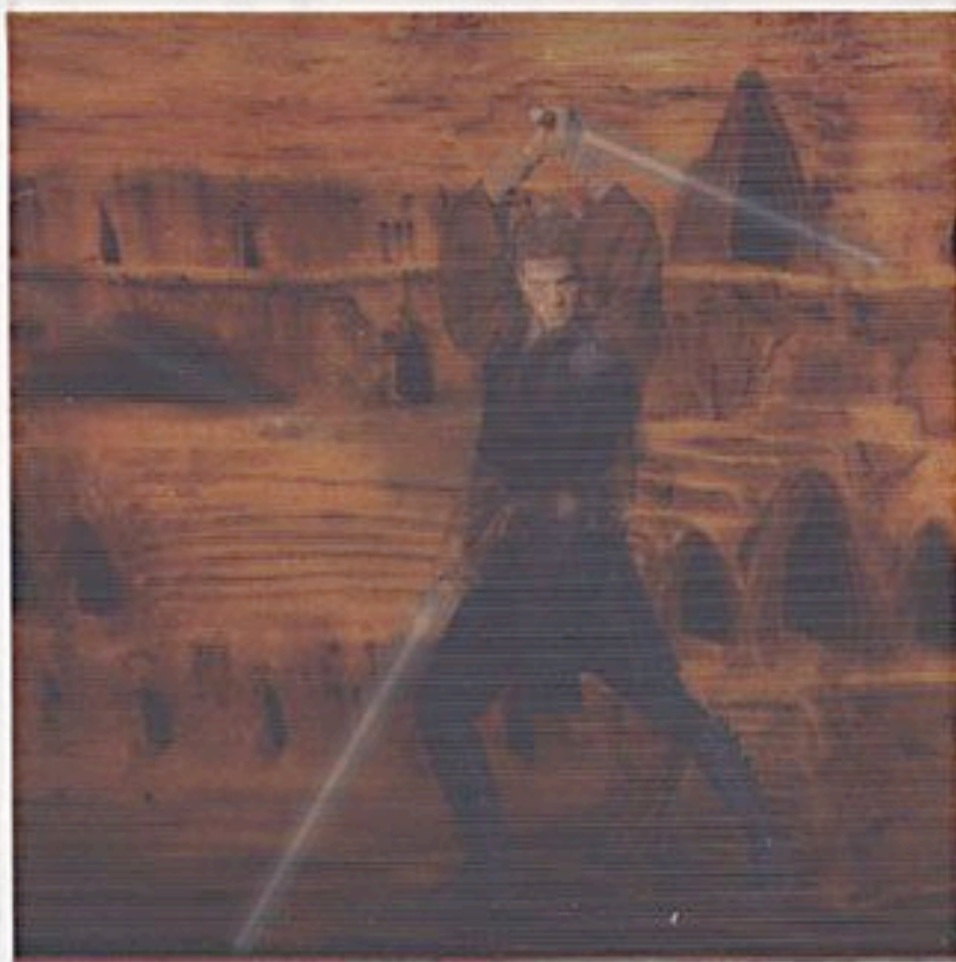




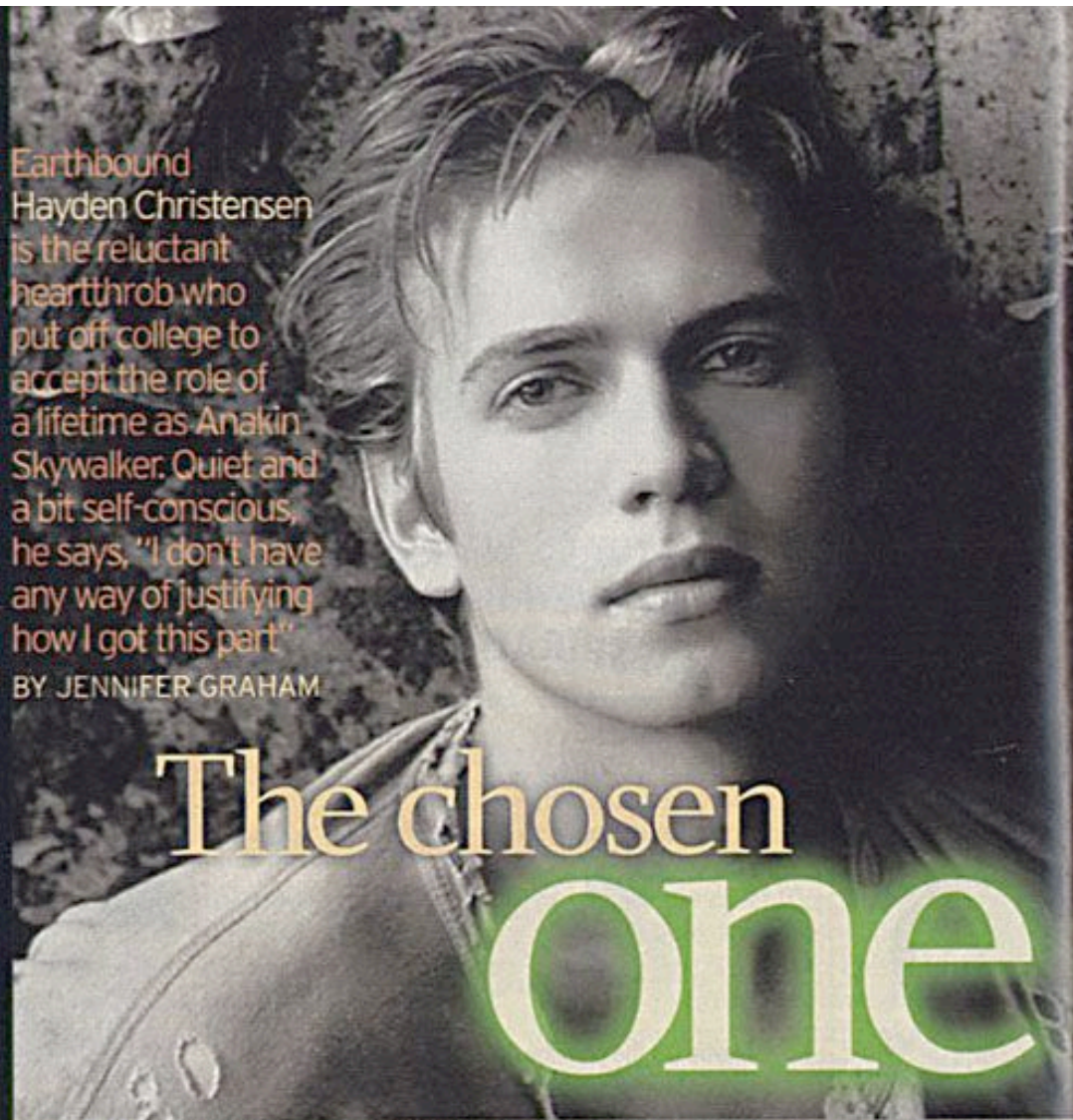
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Earthbound Hayden Christensen is the reluctant heartthrob who put off college to accept the role of a lifetime as Anakin Skywalker. Quiet and a bit self-conscious, he says, "I don't have any way of justifying how I got this part"

BY JENNIFER GRAHAM

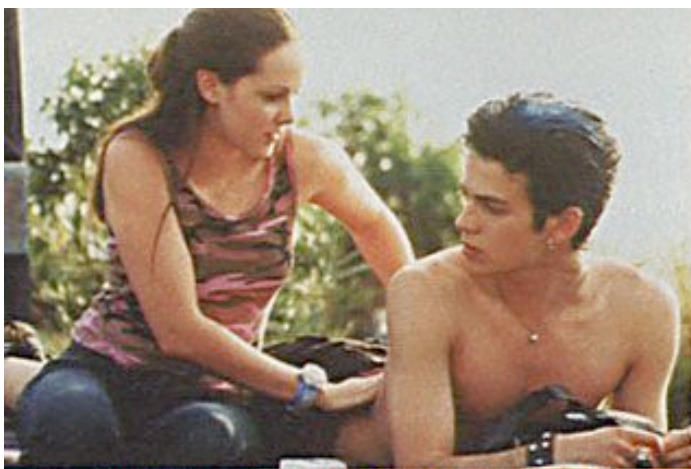
The chosen one

all of teendom is buzzing about the chosen one. He is Hayden Christensen, the 21-year-old Canadian actor deemed singularly fit for the role of Anakin Skywalker—the future Darth Vader. He is the crucial, conflicted heart of "Attack of the Clones." And its *heartthrob*.

At present, he is staring miserably at the cover of *Teen Vogue*. "I look so...*femine*," he says of the photo—though it racily depicts him with a nubile model posed between his legs, on a beach. Doll-faced and slight, Christensen manages to look handsome even now, in old, acid-washed jeans and a nondescript sweater.

He is certainly more at ease in his present confines: a dingy greenroom in London's Garrick Theatre. Here he is appearing in Kenneth Lonergan's play "This Is Our Youth" and avoiding magazines that feature his likeness. "It's hard because you get into acting for—I don't want to say noble reasons, but for the right reasons," he says. "It's because you appreciate the craft." The theater also suits his mild manner. "He's really, really quiet," says his "Clones" costar, Natalie Portman. "When I met him, I thought, 'This is going to be so hard.' But then I got to know him. He's quiet, but it's an attractive quietness."

VIAGRA



Turning heads: With Jena Malone in "Life as a House"

He's got that unnameable thing that makes you want to watch someone."

"Out of that shyness there is a real strength," says George Lucas. "There's a real energy that he keeps inside."

The original Vader never had to contend with that undignified "heartthrob" tag. "I should be so pretty," sniffs James Earl Jones. When Jones first provided the character's malevolent voice more than 20 years ago, Vader was shorter on cheekbones and longer on polyurethane. Back then, the Jedi-gone-bad terrorized a generation of children that included Christensen's brother, Tove, now 29. "I think I've kind of ruined this trilogy for my brother a little bit," says Christensen. "That his little brother is playing [Darth Vader] is just not cool."

Unlike his brother, Hayden's childhood heart was not etched with Yoda quotes. Hayden was born in 1981—four years after the release of the original "Star Wars." "My brother introduced me to the films when I was maybe 7 or 8," he says. "And, you know, I enjoyed them. But I didn't watch them every Sunday." Still, he understands their appeal. "It had such fantastical elements," he says. "I'm sure that's why it has a cult following." While he did not faint at the prospect of meeting R2-D2, he respects those who would.

And he knows they have their doubts about him. Can an unknown kid from Canada pull off this high-profile role?

Christensen doesn't even draw his lightsaber. "It's just so daunting to even project my thoughts there," he says. Instead, he destresses by talking often with his mother, Alie, who runs a communications business with his father, David.

"I think that bonds with your family are the most valuable ones," he says. But like Luke Skywalker, Christensen was also

influenced by a paternal schism. "[My dad] doesn't have any interest in acting or in my own building of that craft," he says. So the son pursued his life's course without the father's blessing.

Third in the Christensen sibling lineup, Hayden also has two sisters, Hejsa, 27, and Kaylen, 17. He played competitive hockey and tennis, but high school drama—and then a series of small TV and film roles—distracted him. "I really enjoyed the challenge of [acting]," he says.

His father was less enthusiastic. Even as Christensen was winning numerous roles, "my father didn't have such a high respect for people trying to be somebody else, instead of bettering him[self] or herself," he says. He began in TV-movies (*Love and Betrayal: The Mia Farrow Story*, *Danielle Steel's No Greater Love*) and bit parts in films (1998's "Strike!" and 1999's "Virgin Suicides"). When he was 18, he won the role of Scott Barringer in Fox Family's teen drama *Higher Ground*. The part was a potential breakthrough—and a blow to his dad, who expected Hayden to attend college on a tennis scholarship.

"He wasn't thrilled," says Christensen wryly. "It was definitely the cause of some heartache." Intending to start college after one TV season, he set off for Vancouver, where *Higher Ground* was filmed. But later that year, he auditioned for "Clones." In retrospect, he admits, "I never really felt it" (Continued on page 60)

THE ROYAL COLLECTION/IMMEDIATE FARM/WALLACE, WERE &

THE CHOSEN ONE

(Continued from page 22)

was feasible that I was going to get the part!" When he did, he traded college plans for Jedi training. "But I am going to go back to university," he says. "Not for [my father's] sake, but because I want to. Natalie is in university, and I have a lot of admiration for that."

It may be awhile. Christensen has offers lined up, thanks in part to the critical praise he received for his portrayal of Sam Monroe, Kevin Kline's surly, glue-sniffing son, in 2001's "Life as a House."

"There's a scene where Kevin tells [Sam] that he's dying," says Irwin Winkler, the film's director. "Hayden got so into the role that he banged his fist against the wall, and he almost broke his knuckles. That's the kind of actor he is. He lets the character flow right through him." Such high-placed approval—and his escalating "Star

Wars" fame—have boosted activity at Hayden and Tove's upstart production company, Forest Park Pictures, in Los Angeles. "Most likely the next film that I do will be something that my brother and I coproduce," he says.

Christensen, however, is not in Hollywood's thrall; home is still his parents' Toronto house. "I have a good relationship with my family," he says—and that includes his dad. "I don't know if he's necessarily proud of me," he says. "But he's happy for what I've achieved."

So the actor who would be Vader possesses that villain's gravitas—but lacks his hubris. "I don't have any way of justifying how I got this part," he adds with a laugh. "Maybe George was attracted to me because I wasn't known at all. The audience can definitely believe in someone if they don't have any [previous] idea of who you are." All they know is who he *will* be. ■