Culture



Warwick Davis appears as Willow in the Disney+ series "Willow." (Courtesy of Lucasfilm)



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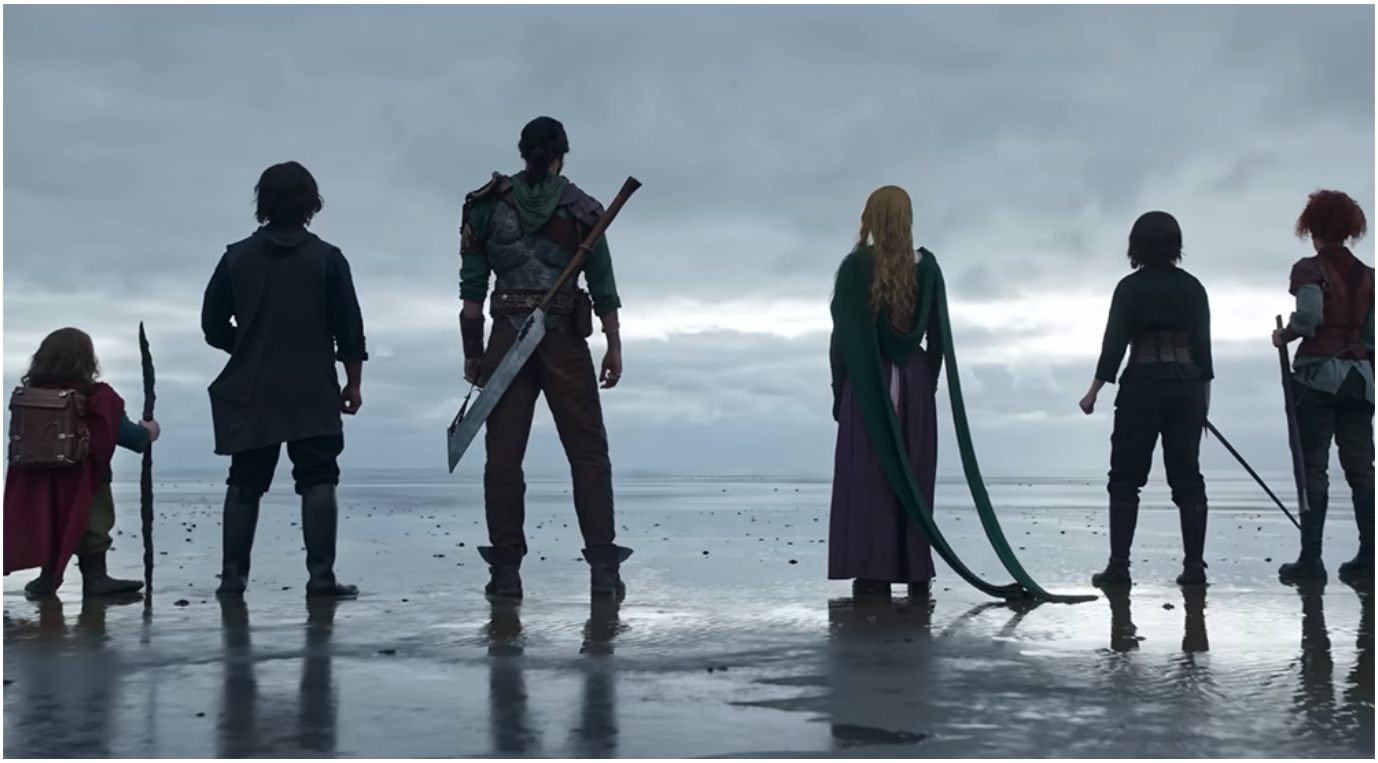
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George Lucas' high fantasy adventure film "Willow" was released in 1988 — a year my dad remembers well: That year, the Dodgers won the World Series. And though 1988 is also the year I was born, I wouldn't actually live through a Dodgers' World Series win until 2020, and I wouldn't see "Willow" until 2023.

Nevertheless, as a devoted "Star Wars" fan, I've known about Willow for a long time. Warwick Davis — the actor who portrays the titular character in both the original "Willow" and the new Disney+ series of the same name — played Wicket the Ewok in "Return of the Jedi," where he first worked with Lucas and where the seeds of the eventual "Willow" film were planted. Davis has been involved in other "Star Wars" projects — not to mention the "Harry Potter" movies — and for years I've been curious about his starring role in that 1988 fantasy film.

Like "Star Wars," "Willow" is an ode to the kinds of myths, epics and legends that so inspired Lucas in his storytelling. "Willow," too, was a groundbreaking entry into the world of special effects — another staple of a George Lucas project. "Willow" — both the original and the sequel series — is a lighthearted, fun and funny adventure where good fights evil against the backdrop of trolls and castles and magic, where unlikely heroes rise to meet near-impossible odds and save the day.

The original "Willow" follows the young Nelwyn farmer and would-be sorcerer, Willow. A baby girl is found floating down the river near his village. We quickly learn that protecting this child, Elora Danan, is paramount to the future of the world. The evil queen, Bavmorda, is haunted by a prophecy that says Elora will be her downfall, and so she seeks the child. Importantly, she doesn't want the child *destroyed*; she wants to *banish* the child to another realm, thus neutralizing the threat.



The heroic ensemble appears in the Disney+ series "Willow." (Courtesy of Lucasfilm)

Obviously, Bavmorda fails, Willow succeeds, baby Elora is saved and 17 years of relative peace pass as we transition from the 1988 film to the 2022 Disney+ series. Unfortunately, in those intervening years evil has only grown in power. Bavmorda, it turns out, was merely a pawn of a greater foe — the Wyrm — and said foe is still determined to banish Elora.

The new series follows Elora (Ellie Bamber), Willow and a delightful cast of new characters as they quest through this much larger, richer and oddly comedic world in an effort to rescue Prince Airk Tanthalos (Dempsey Bryk) who has been kidnapped by the Gales, a hodgepodge of very evil-looking fiends. Airk and his twin, Princess Kit (Ruby Cruz) are the grandchildren of Bavmorda; turning them to the proverbial dark side would be a real boon to the Wyrm's cause.

But what is most compelling from a spiritual perspective is that this high fantasy adventure *doesn't* center on tempting heroes to the darkness; it *doesn't* revolve around possessing or disposing of magical talismans or secret knowledge. Sure, there are talismans to find, magic to learn and good guys to turn bad — this is fantasy, after all. But that's not the key.

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Remember back to the original film: The goal was not to destroy Elora but to banish her, lest her spirit return and fulfill the prophecy. And in the new Disney+ series, we get to see what that banishment entails. In the finale, Elora very nearly *chooses* to stay in a walled-off realm. She's tempted to waste away her life and her destiny in a dreamlike, fabricated utopia where pain is replaced with pleasure.

(*Spoilers follow in the next three paragraphs.*) With the help of Willow and his magic, Elora sees through the lie and elects to return to the difficulties of the very real world. Good thing, too, because in doing so, she defeats the Wyrm's latest champion, the Crone, and brings our heroes' quest to a happy-ish ending. (At least, as we wait to learn whether the series gets renewed for a second season.)

I'm struck by this idea that evil wins when heroes are tempted to waste away God-given talent and holy desire. In short, evil wins when we are kept from becoming who we are meant to be, when we toil away at trivial tasks or are absorbed in fruitless uses of our time. What are the walled-off realms of our lives? Do we get stuck in social media rabbit holes? Do we allow all of our attention and energy to become absorbed in some silly squabble?

Elora needed her friends to pull her back into the real world — not just their actions but their destinies. They needed her, as she needed them; who she was — and might yet be — was key to them becoming who they must be.

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We're all in this together, and we all have a God-given purpose. To use Ignatian language, the enemy of our human nature wins when we fail to recognize and live into our deepest desires and longings. We must act against the temptation to ignore or give up on who we know we are, who we might yet become and what we know we are invited to contribute to the common good.

"Willow" the series is important, too, because it seamlessly portrays a fantasy story driven not by white male heroes but by a diverse cast of characters — and actors — who invite us, the viewers, to sink into a world that is big and beautiful. And ultimately, in doing so, by inviting us to cheer for this band of unlikely heroes, we realize that maybe there's nothing unlikely about them.

After all, we're all called to be heroes. It's evil — in whatever form — that tries to convince us otherwise.

Official teaser trailer for "Willow" (YouTube/Lucasfilm)