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THE VULTURE COVER

# In Diego Luna's Orbit

The *Andor* star won't take credit for reshaping *Star Wars*. He should.

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Photo: Bobby Doherty

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Inside the smaller of two movie theaters at L.A. film mecca Vidiots, Diego Luna is telling me about the time he got detained at Heathrow. It was the day after the *Andor* wrap party, a raucous event that celebrated the end of six years of work on Tony Gilroy's critically beloved *Star Wars* series. Tequila was flowing, and after two seasons of strict COVID protocols against socialization, Luna went hard. So hard, in fact, that when he was packing the next morning, he casually threw a memento he had taken from set — the blaster belonging to his character, rebel spy and resistance leader Cassian Andor — into his suitcase. He showed up at the airport toting an MW-20 Bryar pistol and a severe hangover, and security didn't love it.

"I could barely speak English. My eyes were red, and I had a blaster that, because we have the best props team, looks real," he says, pitching his voice as he recreates the anxious moment. "I said, 'Have you seen the show? I'm the guy from the show!' One guy recognized me from *Narcos*, which also didn't help. Then another guy went, 'That's true, he's a guy from *Rogue One*.' Then everyone wanted to touch it."

It was Luna's idea to meet at Vidiots, nearly two years after the movie theater and video-rental shop relocated from Santa Monica to Eagle Rock and became a fixture of the neighborhood. A black Yankees cap covers his lustrous hair as he strolls through aisles of meticulously arranged DVDs organized underneath dozens of signed VHS cases. "I spent a lot of time here when I was 20 years old," he says. "If I'm here, I immediately think of the Coen Brothers. I immediately think of *The Big Lebowski*. I immediately think of many European films I got to see through this store." Luna is 45 now, but back when he was living in Venice Beach and snagging supporting roles in films like *The Terminal* and *Criminal*, he used to travel with his DVD collection in a thick black binder. Now it's on a hard drive and in "the cloud or whatever." He smiles when Vidiots executive director Maggie Mackay, who is showing us around the space, informs him that the store no longer collects late fees, explaining that he once forgot a film in his apartment before returning to his home base of Mexico City and racked up hundreds in fines. Noticing a bottom shelf labeled "Samurai," he kneels down to hunt for the last movie he saw in a theater, the 1967 Alain Delon neo-noir *Le Samouraï*, at New York's Film Forum.

In *Andor*, the prequel to *Rogue One* that ended in May, Cassian is a thief turned radical turned Rebellion leader. Gilroy's original plan for a series chronicling the growing resistance to the Empire stretched across five seasons, but Luna, concerned he'd be too old by the time the project finished, convinced Gilroy to compress it to two. Viewers went into the show knowing Cassian won't see the destruction of the Death Star since he dies at the end of *Rogue One*, and Luna infused this journey first with sly, cocky confidence, then with steely dedication to the cause. *Andor* shirks *Star Wars* convention (no Jedi, few aliens, little interest in the Skywalkers), and the result is a series that builds upon the politics established in George Lucas's original trilogy: Propaganda is sneaky, genocide is wrong, and standing up against authoritarianism is a necessary sacrifice.

Luna is a different kind of *Star Wars* hero. He was an international star before his image reached *Rogue One* posters, but almost a decade later he's achieved a level of celebrity that spans pop culture's high-low divide. Yet he's not just the handsome face selling *Andor*'s weighty themes to the masses. If Gilroy was the series's conductor, Luna was its engine, a performer whose decades of experience made him uniquely suited to an executive-producer role responsible for the hundreds of crew and cast members powering the \$650 million production. "I got used to the size of this show as if it was something normal," he says. "I don't think it's ever going to happen to me in my life again, period, to be in a show of that scale. It got to feel like my house, that place. Like my home."

For much of his early career, Luna's defining role was the competitive, horny, upper-class Tenoch in 2001's *Y tu mamá también*, the coming-of-age queer classic he anchored with longtime friend Gael García Bernal. They play teenagers on a road trip whose relationship changes after they surprise themselves by having sex. The film, which came to him after years spent as a child actor and telenovela star in Mexico, broadened his idea of the kind of art he could make, and soon he was taking roles outside the country, the best of which tapped into both his ferocity and his sensuality: a roguish waiter in the *Dirty Dancing* prequel *Havana Nights*, a besotted lover in Gus Van Sant's *Milk*, a bad-boy artist who can't drive for shit in Katy Perry's music video for "The One That Got Away."

Then he got *Rogue One*. In the 2010s, *Star Wars* was in expansion mode; the sequel trilogy introduced by 2015's *The Force Awakens* reignited enthusiasm for the decades-old franchise, and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* was conceived as the first of a series of standalone movies. After filming completed, rumors spread that the production was troubled and that Gilroy had effectively taken over the film from director Gareth Edwards. But upon *Rogue One*'s release in December 2016, critics and audiences were surprised by its somber, sincere take on a war film, in which a multiethnic group of Rebels — played by Riz Ahmed, Donnie Yen, Forest Whitaker, and Luna, speaking in his natural Mexican accent — work together to steal plans for the Death Star. Appreciation for the movie steadily grew as 2017's *The Last Jedi* and 2019's *The Rise of Skywalker* divided the fandom and 2018's *Solo: A Star Wars Story* bombed at the box office. In the wake of a theatrical *Star Wars* stalling, *Andor* felt like a gamble: Would people be interested in a prequel TV show when they know the protagonist's fate? Lukewarm reception to *The Book of Boba Fett* and *Obi-Wan Kenobi* already signaled audiences' exhaustion with live-action Disney+ series backfilling character lore. What *Andor* did differently was focus less on big names from *Star Wars* mythology and more on the actual machinations that occur when people are fed up with oppression, a narrative angle whose urgency connected with critics and audiences.



Diego Luna as Cassian Andor in season two of *Andor*. Photo: Lucasfilm Ltd.

As we amble around Vidiots, Luna absorbs Mackay's stories about the 70,000 films available for rent and luxuriates in the archival room full of rare VHS tapes he remembers from the Santa Monica store. Inside the Mubi Microcinema, he remarks on the detailing of its antique seats, then practically skips up a narrow flight of stairs into the spacious, chilly projection room. There, projectionist Olivia Haidar is preparing to load in the 35-mm print for Gilroy's 2007 thriller *Michael Clayton*, which is coincidentally being screened later that night. "I love it," Luna says of the theater's reel-to-reel projector, then rocks back and forth on his heels while checking out the 4K DCP setup. "*Cinema Paradiso* is to blame for us thinking of projection rooms as tiny places," he says, referring to the cozy booth in Giuseppe Tornatore's 1988 film about the unlikely friendship between an aging projectionist and a young boy who will grow up to be a famous movie director. Luna has been hoping to work with a film festival in Mexico to screen all 24 episodes of *Andor*, and spending time behind the curtain at Vidiots has him even more jazzed about the idea.

Much of *Andor* was produced at England's Pinewood Studios, which housed the show's sprawling sets from preproduction to wrap. "That sense of time is there," Luna says of Pinewood, which has been operating since the 1930s. "You would walk around and feel and smell the construction. In every one of these offices or spaces, these warehouses, the feeling of how vast this show was, how much it was covering — it was amazing to witness." Because Gilroy chose to focus on writing future episodes and rarely came to set, Luna served as his consigliere. In addition to advising on casting and production

and art design, he addressed actors' questions about the writer's motivations for a character and asked for certain scenes to be shot again to align more with Gilroy's vision. When deciding whether to give actor Muhannad Ben Amor, who plays young rebel Wilmon Paak, a bigger role, Gilroy looked to Luna. "I go to Diego, 'Man, tell me, what do you think? Let's talk to this kid — can we really get this second season out of him?' Those kinds of things are invaluable." (When asked about shouldering so much responsibility, Luna laughs: "I slept much better than Tony over those years.")

In its final batch of 12 episodes, *Andor* dug deep into the personal cost of the Rebellion through Cassian's romantic relationship with his childhood friend and trusted smuggling partner, Bix (Adria Arjona), leading to a heartbreaking end in which Bix leaves Cassian behind. "Who really gets the essence of the set and who truly is the leader of *Andor* is Diego Luna, and you feel that the second he steps on set," says Arjona. "He's just a ball of information. How Diego runs a set is how every No. 1 on the call sheet should run a set." Maybe it's in his blood. Luna's mother was British costume designer Fiona Alexander, who died when Luna was 2 years old, and his father was Mexican set designer Alejandro Luna, whom Luna shadowed as a child and, later, as an apprentice. "He's been in the circus since he was 2, right? He grew up in the theater. He's never *not* been in the theater," Gilroy says. "He's never not been in a communal situation with other writers, directors, actors. You put that at the top of the call sheet, and you build a healthy environment around it. I can't tell you how crucial that is for filmmakers and producers." Plus, as Gilroy points out, he's just a really good performer. "How many actors can truly play Messianic characters without having a whole bunch of people bow down? He sells it."

Luna is reluctant to identify specific contributions he made to *Andor*, insisting instead that "everyone is indispensable." That mentality feels shaped by his father's tutelage, and perhaps by his time as a teenager volunteering with an Indigenous-rights movement organized by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in 1994. In *Andor*'s first season, the series introduces Cassian's planet of origin, Kenari, to emphasize the Empire's policy of strip-mining planets for resources and killing the native people who live there; the backstory was created by Gilroy to explain Luna's accent within the usually British-inflected *Star Wars* milieu. That world-building contributed to *Andor*'s rapturous reception, with the first season receiving an Emmy nomination for Best Drama and a Peabody Award. When the series returned nearly three years later, it generated headlines for how prescient it felt considering contemporaneous global events.

When I ask about the series' politics, Luna leans forward and places his elbows on his knees. "Obviously, we as artists, and as citizens, have an agenda," he says. He insists the series was written with a historical approach that wasn't intended to address the specific issues of the day. (Production on season two ended in February 2024, months before Trump's reelection.) But it's not his place, Luna says, to tell audiences how to interpret art: "You have to allow everyone to react the way they want." What he does hope people get out of *Andor* is the sense that "the strength of community is about the need to believe in things, to fight for things ... understanding that we are capable of shaping

reality. This is something good to remind ourselves — that normally you could be doing more.”

That perspective seems to have guided Luna’s career choices, even if he won’t admit it. He and García Bernal produce Amazon Prime Video’s Spanish-language series *Pan y Circo (Bread and Circus)*, in which a panel of experts, with Luna hosting, discuss sociopolitical issues such as abortion and drug legalization; he says a third and final installment will come out soon. A number of the projects he’s acted in, produced, or directed, like *Elysium*, *Sin Nombre*, *Cesar Chavez*, and *Narcos: Mexico*, address wealth inequality, the need for labor protections, and the destructive impact of the drug trade. Scroll through pictures of Luna on Getty Images and you’ll see him at a 2019 event supporting *Hasta los Dientes*, a documentary about the Mexican Army’s torture and murder of two students; in 2018, opposing a security law that militarized Mexico; in 2017, as a member of the Berlinale Jury, attending a protest at the remaining Berlin Wall against Trump’s plans to build a southern partition. García Bernal contextualizes such activism as an extension of their upbringing amid the economic and governmental turbulence of 1980s Mexico. “We became very politicized when we were kids because there were a lot of things happening,” he says. “When we started to grow up, we started to really make use of freedom of expression, of mobilization, of active political participation. There’s a political complexity that we always take into consideration in everything that we do.”

Luna says this thematic through-line in his career, which includes playing Cassian as a refugee inspired by people in Mexico and Central America who are “forced to move, to leave everything behind in order to escape violence, poverty, and zero opportunities,” wasn’t quite planned. He recognizes the pattern but isn’t sure he consciously intended it. “It’s because of that border,” he says. “It is because of the amount of times I had to cross that border. Because I am born because a British woman wanted to get out of Britain and go to Mexico and build a life in a very different context than the one she was born in. It’s something that somehow I always end up talking about.”

Earlier this year, Luna filmed his latest directorial effort, *Ceniza en la Boca (A Mouthful of Ash)*, an adaptation of Brenda Navarro’s novel about a young woman immigrating to Spain. The 30 or so cast and crew members were eons away from the hundreds of people Luna used to see on *Andor*’s set. In the coming months, he’ll appear alongside Jennifer Lopez and Tonatiuh Elizarraraz in Bill Condon’s musical *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and he expects to soon share an announcement about his and García Bernal’s involvement in *The Boys: Mexico*, a spinoff of the popular Prime Video superhero series. A few weeks ago, he received a Gotham Awards nomination for playing a plastic surgery-obsessed boxing manager in *La Máquina*, [a Hulu miniseries he made with García Bernal](#) between seasons of *Andor*. “I was the only actor nominated in a show that was fully in Spanish,” he says. “That gives me hope.” He wants to return to the stage in Mexico, “where I belong,” and direct more. A slower pace will hopefully set in soon, one where he’s perhaps behind the camera more than in front of it. “I’m old in this business,” he says with a laugh.

Near the end of our Vidiots tour, Mackay guides Luna to a shelf with two copies of *Y tu mamá también*, one the Criterion release and the other an earlier DVD prominently featuring a still from the film's sexually charged dance scene. "You will recognize a familiar face here," she teases. After she takes a picture of Luna with the DVD under the Vidiots logo, a couple approaches him. They want to say "hello" because they recently rented (and returned, seemingly on time) *Y tu mamá también*. Luna's face lights up. He's surely been approached this way countless times by viewers discovering the film, but his "Oh, really?" reads as authentic. After they walk away, Luna goes back to browsing.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

- Photographs by **Bobby Doherty**
- Styling by **Malu**
- Wardrobe by **Zegna**
- Grooming by **Jessica Ortiz**