

# THE LORD OF THE RINGS

2001 / 2002

When the first book in the Lord of the Rings trilogy was originally published in 1954, neither author J. R. R. Tolkien nor his readers could have imagined that the carefully crafted mythology would grow into one of the most widely read and beloved works of modern fiction.

That enduring devotion from generations of readers who journeyed to the fantasy world of "Middle Earth," where the fate of all that is good rests on the small shoulders of a three-foot-tall, pointed-eared, furry-footed creature called a hobbit, made the motion picture release of *The Fellowship of the Ring* one of the most highly anticipated films of all time.

*The Fellowship of the Ring* could count itself as one of the most successful movies in motion picture history,



grossing more than \$800 million worldwide.

But even before the film's debut, *The Lord of the Rings* marked a remarkable first in the history of film-making. It had been shot in an aura of secrecy. Industry trade papers and Internet sites were abuzz with excitement. And in a day and age where very little lives up to

its hype, director Peter Jackson knew that this long-awaited movie version of the trilogy ran the huge risk of disappointing millions of Tolkien fans around the world. Much to the contrary, the film was greeted with virtually unanimous praise.

From its very inception, the film was an arduous trek for Jackson, who had earned an Oscar nomination for screenwriting on his 1994 film *Heavenly Creatures* and achieved cult status with the grisly horror thriller

*Braindead*. The prime mover behind bringing Middle Earth to the screen, Jackson wanted to make the film ever since reading the books at the age of eighteen. But most of Hollywood executives did not share Jackson's passion and balked at the idea of producing more than one movie out of the three books. Jackson believed it an injustice not to produce the film in separate installments and took the project to New Line Cinema, where executive producer Mark Ordesky encouraged him to make the film as a trilogy.

And so Jackson and his team embarked on a daunting and formidable task of unprecedented enormity: to shoot three films back to back, with cast and crew living together for sixteen months on location. Never had such an ambitious endeavor been attempted, and Jackson himself said he felt as if they were "in constant danger of the train derailing." After all, he knew that Ralph Bakshi's 1978 effort at turning Tolkien's words into an animated movie was generally considered a flop, never making it past the first installment.

By contrast, Jackson envisioned Middle Earth as a real, three-dimensional world inhabited by living flesh-and-blood creatures. He chose his homeland of New Zealand for the setting. The dramatic snow-capped landscapes and the pastoral wilderness harkened back to an era unspoiled by industry and development, much like the rural England that still existed at the time of Tolkien's writings.

The cast was meticulously assembled. Venerable British actor Ian McKellen would play the noble wizard Gandalf the Grey, charged with protecting the people of Middle Earth from evil. Gandalf is also the protector of a hobbit named Frodo Baggins, embodied by Elijah Wood, who must take the accursed ring of power back to the fires of Mount Doom, where it was forged. Only there can it be destroyed and thus the world be saved. Gandalf and Frodo are joined by the scruffy Aragorn, the self-exiled heir to the throne of the race of men, played by Viggo Mortensen. Along with expert archer Legolas the Elf (Orlando Bloom), axe-wielding Gimli the Dwarf

(John Rhys-Davies), three more hobbits, and another warrior, they become the Fellowship of the Ring.

The road to Mount Doom is fraught with peril. A legion of snarling bloodthirsty Orcs, goblins, and the occasional cave troll try to destroy the fellowship, under orders from a dark lord who desires the ring of power to rule the world.

The cast and crew knew that they had signed on for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity on a scale that none had ever experienced in making a motion picture. Each admitted they became completely immersed in their role, and none more so than Mortensen, who was not the first choice to play the stoic yet gallant Aragorn. Mortensen became so thoroughly dedicated to the character that he carried his medieval-looking sword wherever he went in New Zealand, unwittingly scaring some of the local townspeople. Looking like a crazed sword-wielding monk, still half-clad as Aragorn, he was confronted by police one day as he walked back to his car from rehearsal.

Ian McKellen summed up the collective sentiment among cast and crew, describing his own feelings when he first saw the rows of hobbit homes built into the hillside. "The Tolkien trilogy is a fairy tale," McKellen told an interviewer. "It didn't happen, except in our hearts. But there was Hobbiton, with smoke pouring out of the holes . . . and I believed."

In creating that mystical setting, Tolkien wrote descriptions in such tremendous detail—about the environment, the cultures, and even the languages—that his epic story of good versus evil seemed more like ancient history than a fairy tale. Peter Jackson's edict to the set builders was to embrace that very notion that the people and places described in Tolkien's tales had really once existed. That unswerving dedication became a big asset in moving the production forward, as the crew could rely on Tolkien's own words to create sets, props, and costumes while the screenwriting was still in process.

Attention to the script was an integral part of the production, and there were countless rewrites. Jackson and cowriters Fran Walsh and Phillipe Boyens regretted that some aspects from the books had to be cut, but they went to agonizing lengths to preserve the crucial elements needed to advance the story. It wasn't unusual for members of the cast to wake up after an arduous day of rehearsals only to find several pages of revisions had been slid under their doors during the night.

Nothing was left to chance. In addition to the meticulous attention to the script, frame-by-frame hand-illustrated storyboards were made of virtually every shot. Then a 3-D computer technique called pre-visualization was employed. Jackson and company actually visited the Lucasfilm ranch in Northern California, the birthplace of many modern special effects, to see its

state-of-the-art previsualization technology. They then adapted that technology—in renderings that looked like 3-D video games—to map out the big sweeping scenes that would become emblematic of the production, all this before even shooting a foot of film.

It's no small irony that the production would rely heavily on state-of-the-art computer-generated effects in order to make Tolkien's ancient fantasy world come to life. More than five hundred visual effects were shot for the first film alone, and many of the most memorable scenes from the film were the most complicated.

First, the critical issue of scale had to be addressed and resolved. That is, men and elves are about six feet tall and Hobbits are only three feet in height, but in reality Elijah Wood and Ian McKellen are not that disparate in height. The problem was solved both by tried-and-tested illusions of camera angle and perspective and with digital superimposition of the actors' faces over small stunt doubles.

Various state-of-the-art effects were employed in the unforgettable and perhaps most dramatic confrontation of the first film. The Fellowship is fleeing down the seemingly endless stairs deep within the ancient mines of Moria in order to cross the Bridge of Khazad-dum. The set, which looks like a cross between the Tomb Raider video game and an intricate geometric puzzle that surrealist M. C. Escher would have drawn, was actually an elaborate miniature model that was scanned and then reproduced with digital computer graphics. The movements of the actors were recorded in the studio through motion-capture cameras and then "digital doubles" of the characters were inserted into the computer-generated shot. The result is a thoroughly believable, action-packed race through the depths of the middle earth in order to escape a fiery demon.

One of the film's most ferocious creatures is called a Balrog. It moves with the bravado of Charles Atlas in the form of a gigantic fire-breathing demon. Fire oozes



from the cracks in the scales of his skin. As our heroes run across the narrow stone Bridge of Khazad-dum, Gandalf the wizard stays behind to confront the demon.

Jackson and his crew of movie magicians were able to pull off this enormous effect by choosing not to digitally synthesize the eruptions of flame pouring from the monster, but rather to film real patterns and particles of fire. Then the computer-generated Balrog was inserted into the shot as the force behind those flames. It took a month of research and development and six weeks of nonstop production to execute this battle between wizard and beast.

As actor Ian McKellen raises both staff and sword to ward off the blows from the Balrog's whip of fire, he shouts, "You shall not pass!" in a flawless representation of the scene as written by Tolkien. The old wizard displays great power as the bridge crumbles beneath the weight of the approaching beast. As the Balrog falls into the abyss, it catches the wizard off guard and he too tumbles into the darkness below.

The second installment of the trilogy, *The Two Towers*, opens with Gandalf and the Balrog hurtling downward into the deepening void. The gray wizard catches his sword in mid-air to smite the demon as they soar deeper and deeper into the depths of the mountain.

It is also in the second film that we are formally introduced to Gollum, the slithering cutthroat creature who also desires the ring of power. He creeps up on the



hobbits Frodo and Samwise and attacks them in their sleep. The ensuing fight between the hobbits and Gollum is so realistic it is dumbfounding to learn that this creature is also computer-generated. But not entirely.

The fiendish Gollum was originally conceived as a computer-generated character, with actor Andy Serkis simply providing the voice. But Serkis's audition for the part was so compelling that Jackson decided to shoot Serkis acting in every scene while wearing a skintight Lycra suit, eventually to be replaced by the computer image. The result is a performance that makes the inanimate Gollum remarkably real. In fact, Serkis's vocal work and the computer character are so convincing that the self-loathing, murderous creature becomes one of the most sympathetic and tragic of all the characters in the saga.

When the first of the three films, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, was finally ready for theatrical release in December 2001 and premiered in London and Los Angeles, thousands of fans lined the streets. But when the film premiered in Wellington, New Zealand, the entire city came out in droves to honor Peter Jackson, the cast, and the crew. The country of New Zealand could take great pride knowing it had played a significant role in a landmark motion picture achievement. In fact, the city even changed its name for the day. Wellington was now officially *Middle Earth*.