

The World of The Dark Crystal

It's another time and another place... a world not ruled by science, but by magic and sorcery. None of its inhabitants are human and some of them resemble our worst nightmares. It is a world torn by unfulfilled prophecy... Welcome to the world of *The Dark Crystal*.

This fantasy/adventure film, which will be released by Universal next month, has been some four years in the making. For Jim Henson, this represents the culmination of 28 years as a puppeteer and the next evolutionary step in puppetry.

Henson, born in Greenville, Mississippi, grew up fascinated by the likes of *Kukla, Fran & Ollie* and Bill Baird's marionettes. Building his own puppets at age 17, he entered the world of show business on a local television station only to have the show fold on him in three weeks. A year later he began a long-running show, *Sam and Friends*, which took a local Emmy award in 1959. Two years before, Henson's first version of Kermit the Frog debuted on the *Tonight Show* with Steve Allen and, after that, Muppets populated prime-time variety shows such as *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Working alone at first, Henson quickly took on Jane Nebel as a fellow performer and after four years they got married. They continue to work together today. The pair developed puppets which went beyond the usual sort of puppets seen in George Pal's *Puppetoons* and Gerry Anderson's supermarionation shows. It wasn't long before the name Muppets became accepted and the band of characters grew, and grew.

In 1969, Henson worked with the new Public Broadcasting System on a children's show that became the Award-winning *Sesame Street*. Bert and Ernie, Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch soon became household names, along with Muppets. A few years later, after having been turned down by all three networks, Henson began the *Muppet Show* in England with Lord Lew Grade which, after five years, became the most successful syndicated series of all time. In reruns now, the show still commands high ratings.

Henson, who was looking for new ideas during the last year of the *MUPPET SHOW*, decided to create a new story starting from the



Gary Kurtz inspects a Landstrider.

visual standpoint. As time went on, the idea was refined and all that was needed was the time and technology to pull it off. At about the same time, Henson and partner Frank Oz were approached to help create Yoda for *The Empire Strikes Back*. The duo met producer Gary Kurtz, who struck up a friendship with the two men and they soon began talking about *The Dark Crystal*.

Henson sought out British fantasy artist Brian Froud to help develop the fantastic world and its inhabitants. Since the entire film was to be made without human actors, everything had to be worked out on paper first. Froud, best known for his *Faeries* and *The Land of Froud* volumes, brought Henson's ideas to life. Meanwhile, Henson, Oz and Kurtz began working on the logistics of constructing and operating the various characters needed for the story.

Sherry Amott was brought on as Creative Supervisor for the Animatronics Department. New mechanisms were developed, tried, discarded and refined for each new lifeform—some 70 species in all were created. Over 900 pounds of foam latex were used to help fashion the creatures, who were given such exotic names as Skeksis, Gelflings, fizzgigs and landstriders. Makeup effects wizard Dick

Smith was called in for some consultation once serious work began.

Dozens of performers had to be trained to use the new devices and the animatronics process, since it was so far advanced from muppets, or even Yoda—a breakthrough creature itself. It took up to five or six people to manipulate some of the constructs, while some required only a remote-control operator. Everyone was working with video cameras and screens to watch how the various pieces fit into place. Unlike most live-action filming, this was a long, slow process.

When all the characters were designed and an initial story developed, screenwriter David Odell was brought in to prepare a shooting script. By then, Henson and Oz had decided to co-direct and production was scheduled for London so the two could continue to work on *The Muppet Show*. [Stingray: mastering.]

Production finally began in April, 1981, and finished about a year later. The film then went into extensive post-production which took

almost another year. As the pain-staking, post-production process continued, Universal decided not to release the film this summer, as originally planned. With constant redubbing, the voices were all made distinctive; alien yet understandable. That being the last serious problem resolved, the film was given its final touches this fall.

A pure fantasy, the film's story involves the last two members of a dying race, the Gelflings, who are trying to prevent the evil Skeksis from performing a sorcerous rite which will solidify their evil power. The key is

the missing shard of the Dark Crystal itself, which is in the hands of the Gelflings. The Gelflings must reunite the missing shard at the moment of the conjunction of the three suns to thwart the Skeksis. Along the way, their lives are threatened by the brutish Garthim, which seem to be a nightmarish cross between a nasty beele and a tarantula. Henson, Oz and Kurtz promise lots of adventure, excitement and wonderment in the world of *The Dark Crystal*. The film opens on December 17 nationwide. (Watch for our in-depth feature coverage, next issue.)

Below left: The imposing figure of Aughra, the "Keeper of Secrets" and chief astrologer/astronomer of the world of *The Dark Crystal*. Below right: A behind-the-scenes shot of how filming was done. The scene in progress is of a wonderful feast thrown by the Pod People. Bottom: Artist's rendering of the Dark Crystal itself, floating in its chamber in the Skeksis' castle, surrounded by the evil Skeksis.

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Roy Carney