

# THE DARK CRYSTAL

*Jim Henson brings the land of Froud to life with \$25 million worth of fantasy wonder.*

By Larry Winters

Making the rounds in theaters beginning this past December is a short, but impressive, teaser trailer of scenes from Jim Henson's *THE DARK CRYSTAL*, the most complex and perhaps the costliest fantasy film ever made. Production sources estimate the film's budget to be at least \$25 million. Henson, creator of *The Muppets*, uses no live actors in the film. Virtually every scene has been made into a special effect to bring its cast of amazing non-human characters to life, based on designs by noted fantasy artist Brian Froud.

Though the preview trailer now circulating promises audiences they will see the strange world of *THE DARK CRYSTAL* come to life on movie screens this summer, in January, Universal, the film's U.S. and Canadian distributor, postponed the film's longstanding May 28 premiere to consider more favorable dates. The film will probably see a Thanksgiving release in November. Stiff competition from numerous other horror, fantasy and science fiction releases

slated this summer was cited as the reason for the film's delay, despite the considerable prestige of its Muppets connection, huge budget, and participation of producer Gary Kurtz, whose credits on *STAR WARS* and *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK* are prominently displayed in all advertising.

Co-directed by Henson and his Muppets associate Frank Oz, *THE DARK CRYSTAL* presents a primitive world devoid of technology and science where trees walk, mountains move, and nature is a living force of spirit and intelligence governed by magic. Henson conceived the story idea in 1977 to develop a new direction for his Muppet technology, and was immediately attracted to the work of English artist Brian Froud, published that year in a handsome coffee-table book by Peacock Press and Bantam Books called *The Land of Froud*. Henson hired the artist to design the film and its characters, and *THE DARK CRYSTAL* was born. Four years of preproduction work followed, at a cost of more than \$6 million, before production began in



The mystical chamber of the Skekses, an ugly race of lizard-like beings who use the power of *THE DARK CRYSTAL* to enslave the film's cute-looking characters.

April of 1981.

During the film's lengthy preproduction period, Henson fleshed out his story working with screenwriter David Odell. From Froud's designs, prototypes of characters, sets and costumes were constructed, and comic artist Mike Ploog was brought in to storyboard the action, providing a blueprint for filming. In 1979, after the tremendous financial success of Henson's first feature, *THE MUPPET MOVIE*, the project was presented to financier Lord Lew Grade who agreed to bankroll filming through his I. T. C. Films International company. Grade's movie empire has since collapsed, reeling from catastrophic losses on big-budget pictures, like *RAISE THE TITANIC*, that flopped at the boxoffice.

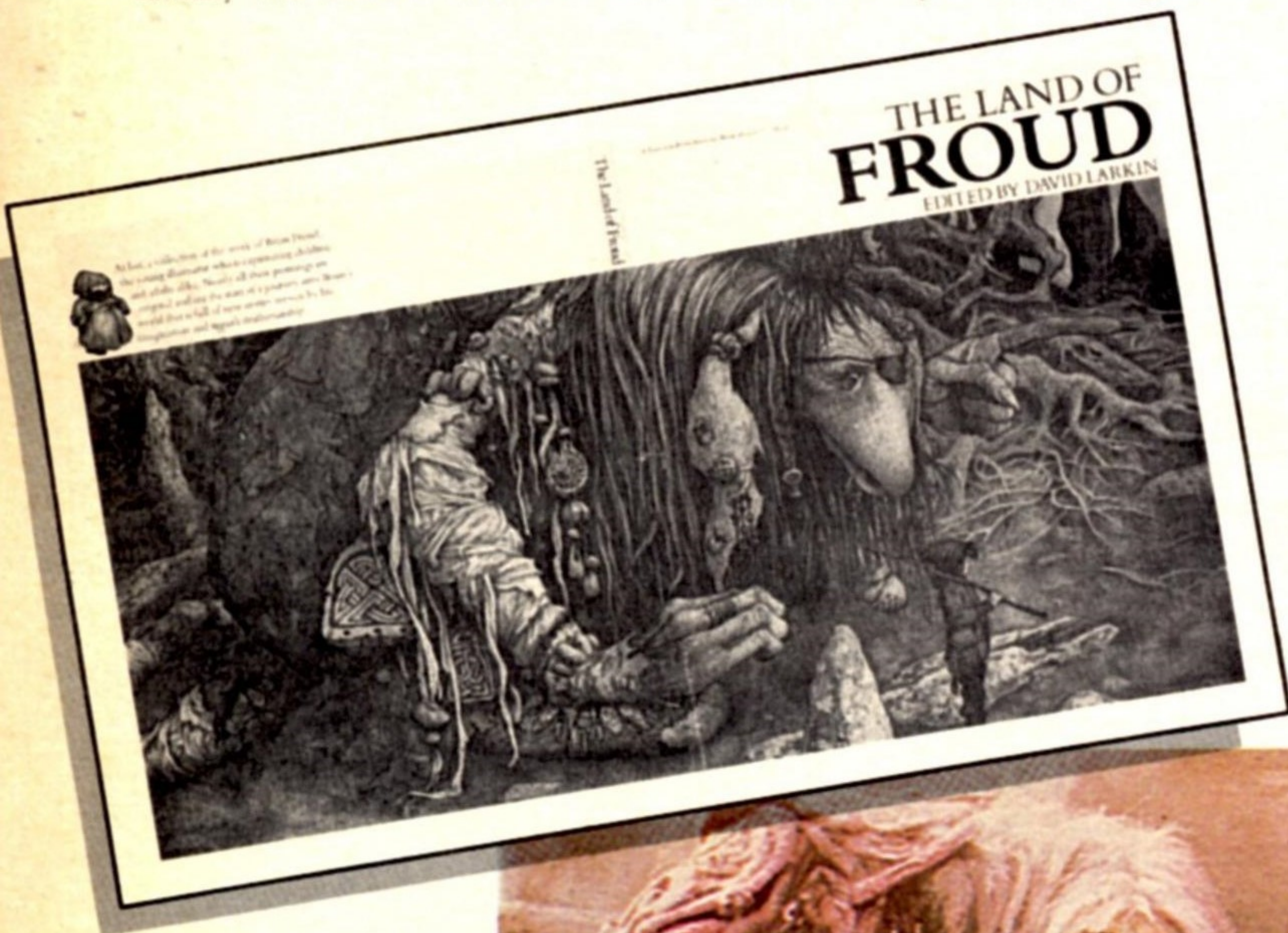
Henson was approached during preproduction by producer Gary Kurtz, then working on *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK*, to provide the technology and expertise needed to film Yoda, the Gremlin-like Jedi master conceived by George Lucas. Henson used the assignment to underwrite

research and development costs for techniques needed to film *THE DARK CRYSTAL*. Yoda served as a sort of dry run for the film. The character's overwhelming popularity also provided a bonus, a promotional hook to win audience acceptance for Henson's risky, unconventional project. Kurtz joined Henson as co-producer in 1980, shortly after the release of *EMPIRE*.

The Yoda connection is particularly important since, as one source close to the production puts it, "'Muppetry' is a word the filmmakers want to avoid." Though Henson, Oz and regular Muppet crews performed the characters, non-Muppet voices have been added in the dubbing room. The performers, no more than three per creature, operate the characters from below stage by direct manipulation or by mechanical means, augmented by radio controlled effects triggered from a distance when needed.

Characters include Gelflings, two human-like elf creatures who serve as the film's hero and heroine; Skekses (sounds like nexus), lizard-like villains who resemble Scrod, the Muppet character from Henson's *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE* segments; and Garthim, the beetle-like henchman of the Skekses. Not only are the names a bit off-putting for general audiences, not to mention the appearances, but some characters speak foreign languages which will not be subtitled.

Filming wrapped last September at EMI's English Borehamwood studios. Final postproduction work has now been completed, including the addition of a symphonic score by Trevor Jones (*EXCALIBUR*), and trimming to a tight 94 minutes. A July release in England, via UIP, is being considered. □



An Ur-Ru, a race of mystic philosophers who raise and train the film's young hero, Jen, the last remnant of an elf-like race called Gelflings, to challenge the evil power of the Skekses. The story, by Henson, is standard stuff. Its visualization from the work of Brian Froud (inset) is the film's main attraction.

