

BAKSHI ON LORD OF THE RINGS



Ralph Bakshi

"WIZARDS came out of my love of comic books more than anything else. What I wanted to do with LORD OF THE RINGS was develop another level of animation—realistic animation. Get away from the WIZARDS cartoon look, or the look of any of my other films, and try to reach a level of painting in animation. That was very important to me. The goal was quality—to bring realistic artists to animation."

With that in mind, Ralph Bakshi, animation's maverick filmmaker, set about to capture on film a dream he had had for twenty years—to make an animated film version of J. R. R. Tolkien's epic *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Bakshi's interest in making a film of the Tolkien fantasy saga dated back to his first reading of the volumes in 1956. He subsequently tried to convince Terrytoons, his employer at the time, to do a Tolkien picture, but found that the screen rights were already tied up. Had he been more successful, Bakshi would have been painting cels on the Terrytoon project. Instead, two decades later, he is directing outright an army of some six hundred artists in providing what may be the most ambitious animation film of all time.

Somewhere Bakshi got the idea that the *Lord of the Rings* property was once owned or optioned by Walt Disney Productions during the fifties, a story he was fond of repeating in interviews which were widely reported, until the Disney legal department pointed out that it had no basis in fact. Bakshi was originally hired to animate LORD OF THE RINGS by Daniel Melnick at MGM in late 1975. When the project collapsed, Bakshi took it to producer Saul Zaentz, who put together the more than \$7,000,000 budget required through his Fantasy Films company, a subsidiary of Fantasy Records.

Very early on, Bakshi realized that earlier efforts by other producers to develop a workable script from the Tolkien novels had failed because attempts to condense the *Lord of the Rings* saga into a two-

hour feature had so truncated the narrative that its basic appeal had been sacrificed. During the project's brief history at MGM, Bakshi planned a feature film for each volume in the trilogy in order to be faithful to the intricate Tolkien storyline. When the project was revived at Fantasy Films, two 2½ hour films were decided on. After three years of preparation and production, the first of the two is now complete and scheduled for distribution in major cities by United Artists on November 15. LORD OF THE RINGS will open nationwide on December 20. Voices for the film were recorded in England, and Bakshi shunned the use of stars or well-known voice personalities. The film's musical score is composed by Leonard Rosenman.

The first drafts of the screenplay were written by Tolkien scholar Chris Conkling and were subsequently revised and polished by Peter S. Beagle. Bakshi's affection for the 1500-page trilogy and his sensitivity to Tolkien's vast cult following made him very cautious in editing or changing the novels. "The picture follows the books pretty much in chronological order. Things had to be dropped that I thought weren't necessary. Tom Bombadil was dropped because he didn't push the story along. Lots of descriptions were dropped—things were shortened. But I think I was faithful to the books.

"The absolute biggest challenge was maintaining the spirit of the story—focusing high for highs in the film, and low for lows. That's always the filmmaker's challenge, and you can't draw that. Everybody keeps hitting me with 'How's a hobbit going to look?' Well, that's not that important. I mean, one million people can do one million different versions of a hobbit. What's important, other than the quality and love that Tolkien put into it and the energy he provides, is that the story is intact. The tendency for animators is to just worry about the drawings. But there's still a film to be made, and it's got to hold together whether the drawings are good or bad."

Bakshi felt that Tolkien's narrative, though epic fantasy in form, had a sustained underlying realism about it that standard animating techniques could not adequately capture. He found the solution to his problem in his previous production.

"Although the whole thing is different, it started with about fifteen seconds in WIZARDS that really worked. It was a sequence we rotoscoped from live-action, and even though it was just black silhouettes, when those horses came overhead, I really got excited." It was Bakshi's footage from WIZARDS, that originally got the ball rolling and convinced MGM that the Tolkien project could be filmed in animation on a mammoth scale at reasonable costs.

Bakshi began rotoscoping—hand-drawing animated images from live-action projections—a number of sequences for LORD OF THE RINGS, and was so taken with the results that he decided to scrap all previous footage and do the entire picture in the rotoscope process, even though several months of standard animation was already completed. In essence, he had to shoot the entire picture live-action and then rotoscope each and every

frame.

"Most directors, they shoot something and they edit it, and they're finished. Not me. I've just started. It's crazy—schizophrenic. I don't think anyone's ever shot an entire live action movie to end up with an animated feature. All rotoscope in the past has been used in a few scenes only, and at that exaggerated—the live action was exaggerated in the shooting or the animator exaggerated the rotoscope itself. In LORD OF THE RINGS, I shot the entire film live, in costume—every scene. The action was designed not to be exaggerated; it was designed to capture the action in realism and motion.

"But it's the most realistic animation I've ever seen. We have cels with a thousand people on them. There are scenes where we panned by rows of orcs [Tolkien's equivalent of goblins]—hundreds of them, all at different levels. In live action, naturally, the background moves slower than the foreground, and when those scenes were rotoscoped, it really freaked me out. I went crazy. From the very first shot, you could see the difference. There's the flight to the ford where Frodo's horse comes right over your head. There're some very strange things that I can't quite understand—new things that happen when you trace each frame exactly. We had one scene where the orcs were standing on a ridge and a big gust of wind came up and rippled their cloaks and the shadows. And it was staggering in animation. That small touch of believability nearly knocked me off my chair, simply because you don't ever think of those things in animation. Those accidents began to happen and it was quite exciting."

Much of the live action footage was shot on Hollywood sound stages with actors dressed in full costume, but without sets of any consequence. More often than not, the actors simply performed against a white backdrop with ladders, chairs and other handy fixtures serving as rocks, trees, and other portions of the animated frame which were being derived from Tolkien's descriptions and rendered by Bakshi's background artists. More than ten thousand painted backgrounds were employed, as compared to the several hundred to a thousand customary in most animated features. Large-scale live action footage was also shot in the California deserts; and a castle in Spain set the stage for the Helm's Deep battle sequence that climaxes the first feature.

For Bakshi, his three-year involvement in LORD OF THE RINGS is the fulfillment of a long-standing dream. As an animator he wanted to do something very special for it visually; but as a long-time devotee of the novels, he did not wish to do so at the expense of Tolkien's narrative. "The energy and love that you bring to a film is more important than intellectualizing about it with an 'I'm going to make it better than the book' attitude. I just hope that I don't get so carried away in technique that I lose what vitality there might be in sitting and reading the book. You know, a perfect illustration is really boring. The golden age of comics showed us that certain things can get too slick. But I think LORD OF THE RINGS was done with honesty. I'm very proud and happy to have done it, and I feel very confident I've done it well." □

by Scott Bruce



LORD OF THE RINGS



Scenes from Ralph Bakshi's LORD OF THE RINGS, the first of two films based on J. R. R. Tolkien's wondrous fantasy trilogy, to be released this Thanksgiving. Left: Orthanc, the fortress of Saruman, the Wisc. Bottom: The Nazgul, servants of Sauron, the Dark Lord, ride out of Bree, in search of Bilbo and the Ring of Power. Top: Gandalf the Gray is betrayed by Saruman inside Orthanc. Middle: The transformation of the Balrog. After three years in the making, Tolkien comes alive on the screen this Fall

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