

# DREAM CHILD



The attempts to cinematically realise Lewis Carroll's *Alice* tales have met with varying success, but the lure to bring them to the screen continues. *Alan Jones* reports on a new British film, directed by Gavin Millar and featuring the handiwork of Jim Henson's Creature Shop, which peers a little deeper into the mirror and Alice's adventures in Wonderland.

On the 4th of July, 1862, an event of literary importance took place. A ten year-old girl asked a reserved Oxford don to commit to paper some of the stories with which he had entranced her throughout that summer. Her name was Alice Liddell and his, Charles Dodgson – or to use his adopted pseudonym, Lewis Carroll. The book of course was *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Now this uneasily platonic, Freudian relationship comes to the screen as part of Dennis Potter's script for a new £2.9 million movie backed by Thorn EMI Screen Entertainment. Entitled *Dream*

*Child*, it centres on the trip Alice Liddell made to New York aboard the SS *Berengaria* at the age of 80 to take part in the Dodgson centenary celebrations. And it is while she is at sea that her insecurities, neuroses and fear of dying manifest themselves in dreams and nightmares featuring the strange creatures the fictional Alice met during her fantasy misadventures.

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Rick McCullum, Producer.

● Produced by Rick McCullum and Kenneth Trodd, *Dream Child* is directed

by Gavin Millar and stars Coral Brown, Ian Holm, Jane Asher and Peter Gallagher. The ten or so minutes of pure fantasy involving the Griffin, the Mock Turtle, the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, the Dormouse and the Caterpillar were the responsibility of Jim Henson's Creature Shop, under the auspices of Lyle Conway. According to everyone involved in the production, Potter's screenplay is superb. And that is the reason why the usually reticent Henson Organisation decided to do the film for the budget equivalent of the cost of just one of the characters they supplied for Disney's upcoming *OZ* – the antique robot Tik Tok.

● Producer Rick McCullum was a late-comer to Potter and Trodd's *Pennies From Heaven*, and he joined them after a four and a half year stint with John Frankenheimer when he realised they

*These days even the most talented children find the creative process daunting. But here, the young Alice Liddell has set his sights on other, more reasonable projects.*



also shared the same ideals. However, these ideals for quality films from the Potter stable doesn't mean that *Dream Child* will be pretentious. "Far from it", says McCullum, "pretentious is the least word for it. The fantasy in *Dream Child* isn't really of the flashy George Lucas variety, but more evocative of the shifting memories that take place in an old woman's mind. It really will be a film that's accessible on every level, and the most exciting part of it for me is that it has opened the doors for Potter and Henson to get on and really do something fabulous together".

● Henson's organisation was in his mind from the very start, says McCullum. He continues, "It was crucial that the creatures were live action and not animated in any way. We were all very aware that Jim had never involved himself in anybody else's film apart



from Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back*, and that was for a whole set of other different reasons. But it turned out he was a great admirer of Potter's work and I think it has been a valuable learning experience for them as they've never worked under such pressure from such a tight budget. I really don't know how we would have achieved anything like the reality, the *frank* reality, without their help".

● *This is imaginative fiction in the truest sense. I hope the film won't offend any Lewis Carroll purists, but then I'm not making this film for them.*

Gavin Millar, Director.

● McCullum is still surprised at the speed with which EMI gave them the go-ahead to make *Dream Child*. He



"Welcome to my nightmare." The Caterpillar introduces himself to Alice.

recalls, "We wanted to be in control of *Dream Child*, and we were all willing to give up a large part of our salaries for that end. If we had made it in America, it would have cost six times as much and Brooke Shields would have to have been the star. That sacrifice would have been too great. Look what happened to *Pennies from Heaven*! On that I watched a director not being able to deal with the quality of the material but at the same time being fascinated by it and wanting to be over reverent. Luckily we submitted *Dream Child* to EMI's Verity Lambert, who, to her credit, wants to make British films with British talent, and wasn't at all phased by our choice of Director as the Americans were. EMI will never lose on this picture because of the budget".

**We've never worked under such a tight budget, ... (or) under such pressure. We worked it out as one-fourth of the work load on *The Dark Crystal*, at ten times the speed ... It was a killer just to start and finish on time.**

Lyle Conway, Animatronics Designer.

Because of a debilitating illness that Dennis Potter had for 15 years, it was up to McCallum to ensure the crux of his script remained intact. And that, according to McCallum, was the type of love that Dodgson had for the pre-pubescent Alice. He continues, "It is so easy - post-Freud - for our society to analyse what his love for Alice probably was. Child molestation is what first comes to mind, but the force of *Dream*

*Child* is to dispel that notion and outline the reasons why he would never have touched her in a million years. He was incapable of describing how pure his love was because he didn't have the language".

## BETWEEN THE REAL AND FANTASTIC

Gavin Millar was the *Pennies From Heaven* sole choice of Director, mainly because Potter thought his version of the television play *Cream in my Coffee* was the best realisation of his work. His other credits have included the tele-film *Secrets* for David Puttnam's *First Love* series for Channel 4. Millar loved the script as much as everybody else, as he explains. "It was original and unusual,

and I could see the potential as it was an interesting mixture of the real and fantastic and the whole spectrum in between, not just talking heads. It was nice to have a go at the hard fast-talking American mode from familiar patterns of 1930s movies too". The first choice of actress to play Alice was Peggy Ashcroft, but when filming of *A Passage to India* went over schedule, Coral Brown was cast. "Peggy and I had worked so well before on *Cream in my Coffee*", explains Millar, "and Dennis had her in mind when he was writing the script for *Dream Child*. Coral knows this but also knows that we fell on her with glee and delight when Peggy became unavailable. Everyone brings different qualities to a role and, although Coral hasn't done much film work, she instinctively knew what I wanted, as there are character elements very appropriate to her persona".

One aspect of *Dream Child* was very clear to Millar. He had definite ideas on how he wanted the fantasy characters conceptualised. "We decided at a very early stage which creatures we should make", he says, "mainly because of Henson's time scale. We were all anxious to get away from any cuteness of Disney-like approach. The creatures were never meant to be endearing, but as realistic as possible so their emotions would seem as violent as any human ones. The creatures stand for all sorts of tangible things - death, loneliness, worries and regret. They tap all levels of the mind on an emotive plane". Millar cites these examples. "With the Griffin we wanted to intimate that he could swoop down off his rock and peck out Alice's eyes, or worse still bite her head off. The Mad Hatter could well throw a sharp broken plate at her too. And the March Hare represents nature incarnate as his teeth are very feral and he is covered with flecks of blood around his neck and mouth. These creatures are not just a product of an old woman's imagination but true to the feral laws of nature as well". Millar sees *Dream Child* as "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" in front page story only - a book on which the film can hand itself. As he says, "This is imaginative fiction in the truest sense. I hope the film won't offend any Lewis Carroll purists, but then I'm not making this film for them".

For animatronics expert Lyle Conway, *Dream Child* was the first project under the Creature Workshop banner, an idea that had first arisen during the filming of *The Dark Crystal*. He explains, "Back then I tried to get Jim Henson to keep people on specifically to do freelance work. It didn't seem quite so practical back then, but after *OZ* he asked me to organise such an operation. Most of the *OZ* personnel had been responsible for *Dream Child*".



Above: Ian Holm as dream-weaver Lewis Carroll, consoles the young Alice in a scene from *Dream Child*.

Like everybody involved in this prestigious production - one destined as Britain's entry for the Cannes Film Festival - Conway pinned his faith on the Potter screenplay. He continues, "I hate reading scripts but I read this in an evening and I immediately wanted to be involved, as it is far more adult than anything else we've tackled. As a result we all put in that bit extra and that's what got the film done on time and on budget". As one person of two who worked on the film for the first month and a half, Conway feels his input on *Dream Child* exceeds any prior project. "I liked the way I could sculpt everything", he says, "which is something I don't normally do, although strictly speaking the turtle shell, the flippers and the Dormouse were done by somebody else, but it was nice to have that sort of control. I also liked the way everything moved so fast. We had 14 weeks to build the lot which is no time at all for us, and I think we stayed that much fresher as a result. I sculpted four heads in three days early on to get the process on the way because I really wanted to get the mechanical people from *OZ* involved".

## A THREATENING SUBTEXT

Potter's brief to Conway about how the creatures should look was quite simple. He wanted them to be as familiar as possible but far more decadent than people would remember. Millar wanted Conway to invest the creatures with more ferocity than shown in John

Tenniel's original book illustrations. "For example," explains Conway, "The Griffin is a man's body with the legs of a lion and virtually no fur. This we figured would be more sexually threatening. We also did a lot of hare research too which is how we can explain the scars and blood on the March Hare's neck. It would be his mating season and therefore part of his madness. We also went into detail about the Hatter trade and found that mercury poisoning was one of the career hazards. So the Mad Hatter's madness evolves from these symptoms - one being what is known as the Hatter's Sikeak, which is why he keeps spilling his tea all the time. This subtext really helped us understand the characters more and the film is a lot better for it".

Despite this facet though, Conway isn't sure if the Creature Workshop made major advances on the animatronic state of the art. "Different approaches were taken, surely. We had to solve movement problems. Like *OZ*, *Dream Child* had reasonably well delineated characters to begin with, so we had to take them as they were and interpret them to make them function. In *The Dark Crystal*, the creatures were planned around the restrictions of puppetry. The Mad Hatter was probably the most difficult to accomplish because the puppet, or rather man in suit with a mechanised head, was most like a real person and as a result I've a feeling it may be the least successful because of that. The Caterpillar had to be designed from scratch as Tenniel had only ever drawn it from the back, so we had to find



Above: *The Mad Hatter*, in a moment of rare composure, takes his cuss from Director Gavin Miller.

a definite look for him which we decided was a human face".

According to Conway, everybody worked on everything with a lot of overlapping mainly because the lack of money made dividing the work into groups impossible. And the only luxury they allowed themselves was to have the Griffin's wings made with 1000 handmade silk feathers which kept four people busy for most of the hectic production period. But a first was clocked up with *Dream Child* as Conway explains. "We used a drama coach to co-ordinate and rehearse the creatures. The discomforts of wearing a rubber suit for four hours is part and parcel of our trade now and one we will never be able to eliminate. In having every scene blocked out, not to mention suggested movements and voice inflections, it certainly saved a lot of time. This individual rehearsal worked so spectacularly that it seems a certainty to be used in the new Henson fantasy, *Labyrinth*".

All the Lewis Carroll inspired creatures were built with a maximum three-day life expectancy in mind, says Con-

way. He continues, "We did so much on the cheap, and if we had had puppets like these on the *OZ* shoot, they would not have held up. In reality, we were amazed that we didn't let the production down in some respects, as we couldn't rely on the normal Henson back-up. We did fall one and a half days behind schedule during our nine-day shooting stint, but that was due to the lighting and not us. Everything happened so damn fast! We had that 14-week build and the two-week lead up and I'm sitting there thinking it isn't going to get done while tearing my hair out. Nine days later it was all over and it was say goodbye to Lyle and Co. time. Talk about an anti-climax! In all honesty I was shocked by it as I was putting in a 20-hour day working on both *OZ* and *Dream Child* at the same time".

Conway has nothing but praise for Director Miller though, as he was always available for conferences whenever he was needed, and no-one seemed particularly phased by the unusual rigours of working with lifesize puppets either. Except Coral Brown. Con-

way recalls this little anecdote. "I think Coral was slightly put off by it all. At one stage she was miked up and told her make-up lady, 'My dear, 50 years ago people warned me never to work with children or animals. Now look at what I'm working with!' Whether that was meant to be heard or not I don't know, but it's pretty funny all the same".

Regardless, Conway admits that the *Dream Child* experience has been good for the Henson Organisation. He expands on the theory. "We've never worked under such a tight budget, one that even producer Rick McCallum was honest enough to call non-existent. And we've never worked under such pressure. We worked it out as one-fourth of the work load on *The Dark Crystal*, at ten times the speed. Any overtime we did was on our own back. It was a killer just to start and finish on time".

But for a project that nearly ended up as a Stephen Sondheim musical on Broadway, that's what excited Lyle Conway the most. "I can't imagine how they are going to sell this picture", he says, "but it does have the enormous potential to crossover to an audience who would never normally come an see our stuff. You can't pigeon-hole *Dream Child* at all".

He loved the child  
we will never forget...



# Dreamchild

Wonderland  
was just a memory away...

WARNER BROS. ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS A PERFUME CO. FILM "DREAMCHILD"

A FILM WRITTEN BY DENNIS POTTER. STARRING JANE ASHER NICOLA COWPER CAROL COBURN WITH ANELLA SHANKLEY AS YOUNG ALICE  
ALICE IN WONDERLAND CHARACTERS DESIGNED AND PERFORMED BY THE HENSONS CREATIVE SHOP DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY BILLY WILLIAMS  
MUSIC BY DONALD BYRD EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS DENNIS POTTER A VARIOUS LOWEY PRODUCTIONS BY BOB McALPIN & KENNETH THORNTON DIRECTED BY GAVIN MILLER

