

EXCALIBUR

Review by Phil Edwards



Opposite page, left to right: King Arthur (Nicholas Clay) and his illegitimate offspring of the illicit union of King Uther Pendragon and the sorceress Morgana (Helen Mirren). The Queen Guinevere (Cheri Lungal) is seen in the background. Below: King Arthur (Nicholas Clay) and Lancelot (Nicholas Clay) in a scene from the film. Below: King Arthur (Nicholas Clay) and Lancelot (Nicholas Clay) in a scene from the film. Below: King Arthur (Nicholas Clay) and Lancelot (Nicholas Clay) in a scene from the film.

After nearly twenty years John Boorman's film of *Excalibur* is at last a reality. It has been, most definitely, worth the wait.

The legend of Merlin, King Arthur and the court of Camelot has been told on the screen many times. From over-produced musicals to Disney cartoon features to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. However, Boorman's masterwork must surely become the yardstick by which future versions of the fable will be measured.

Despite adverse criticism from some quarters the fact remains that *Excalibur* has made a vast fortune in America, which is testament to Boorman's skill as a film-maker. Every frame of the film shines with the director's love of the project and it is remarkable what Boorman has achieved on a relatively small budget.

But while *Excalibur* is simply stunning to look at, there are times when Boorman's meagre budget does show through. Camelot is reduced to what looks like a lump of silver paper in the long shots and occasionally the battle scenes seemed to need a few more extras to give them a greater depth of scope. But these minor quibbles don't really mar the overall production values of the film.

The production design of Tony Pratt is visually gorgeous, and one wonders what he would have done with *Thongor* had that ill-fated

production ever happened. For *Excalibur* he has created a dream world of glittering armour and beautiful costumes and the few interior sets range from the mysterious passages of castles to the depths of Merlin's lair deep beneath Camelot.

The thread which binds *Excalibur* together is the character of Merlin, a truly superb performance by Nicol Williamson. It is Merlin who weaves a spell which allows Uther Pendragon (Gabriel Byrne) to seduce the bride of his ally, Cornwall (Corin Redgrave). The result of that union is Arthur whom Merlin takes as his own.

Williamson plays Merlin not as a traditional pointy-capped magician but as a clever, cunning sorcerer aware that the days of magic are nearly over and that his own days as a manipulator of men are numbered. It is this aspect of the film which affected me the most. *Excalibur* is about the end of magic and the time when supernatural forces played a great part in the everyday affairs of men. And so, in some respects it is also about the loss of innocence, symbolised by the return of the sword Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake.

Excalibur is also an action-epic, so don't expect a long, lyrical ode to the days of Camelot. Its extraordinary length (it runs somewhere near two and a half hours) accommodates a wealth of incident, action and detail though I can't remember when a film has engrossed me

quite so much.

The battle scenes, though devoid of physical numbers, have an intensity that is often frightening and claustrophobic and there are generous helpings of severed limbs and blood-letting to keep even demanding youngsters happy, though the film has an AA certificate. There is some nudity, though not as much as *Clash of the Titans*, and in a way it is interesting to compare the two films. *Clash* is totally devoid of any sense of wonder, whereas *Excalibur* is positively brimming over with these qualities.

Undoubtly the difference is the love with which the two films were made. *Clash* looks and feels like a marketing exercise whereas *Excalibur* is made with a warmth for the subject. It is this warmth and love which pulls the film over some rough moments in the script, and to a large degree one has to be able to empathise with what Boorman is trying to do. *Excalibur* can be regarded as a personal epic, a humanising of mythological figures and on this level the film works superbly, aided by some remarkable performances.

Nigel Terry has probably the most difficult job and makes Arthur a believable and human figure rather than the hero of previous versions of the tale. Helen Mirren's Morgana is pure evil, though is reduced to something less than she sees herself when confronted by the superior magic of Merlin.

Other performances are equally accomplished, particularly Nicholas Clay as Lancelot and Paul Geoffrey as Perceval, the knight who discovers the secret of the Holy Grail.

For me, John Boorman is Merlin, a weaver of cinematic spells. *Excalibur* is his most potent concoction to date, using modern film technology to tell a story of human weaknesses and strengths, set against a backdrop of magic and wonder.



EXCALIBUR

Review by John Brosnan

Watching *Excalibur* at the preview screening was like being in an aeroplane diving at high speed towards a mountain. You kept praying that the pilot would pull out of the dive before it was too late but a third of the way into the movie I knew there was no way of avoiding that mountain and the collision came shortly afterwards. It was then that I realized *Excalibur*, in which I'd hoped to soar into the heavens, wasn't a Concorde but a dodo.

I tried to like it—I really did—because I had such high hopes for it. And when the titters started early on I just dismissed them as the mindless reaction of a cynical preview audience composed of silly trendies who didn't appreciate what the director John Boorman was trying to do. Didn't they realize, I muttered to myself, that this was *Art*? This was your honest-to-goodness, pure mythology up there on the screen—none of your watered-down rubbish with Hobbits and Yodas getting underfoot. This was the genuine article. Okay, admittedly Nicol Williamson as Merlin seemed to be having a bad day (or several, in fact) but I was sure the sheer visual power of the movie would overcome this handicap. But before long I was tittering away with the rest of them...

Excalibur is an embarrassment, and the blame must fall on Boorman who not only produced and directed it but also co-wrote the screenplay with Rospo Pallenberg. I have come to the conclusion that Boorman is one of those directors who should be physically restrained from laying a finger on the screenplays of his movies. His undoubted talents as a visual artist just don't extend to his screenplay writing. In fact they fall short by a good two or three light years.

A look at his previous movies will confirm this—the best of them, *Point Blank* and *Deliverance*, were based on novels whereas the others, *Leo the Last*, *Hell in the Pacific*, *Zardoz* and *Exorcist II: The Heretic* were all based on original screenplays in which Boorman had an increasing hand in the writing. Thanks to the novels *Point Blank* and *Deliverance* have solid narrative flow, but Boorman's other movies tend to be formless and undisciplined. The worst of these is *Zardoz* which Boorman wrote all by himself. *Zardoz*, like *Excalibur*, has some marvellous visual set-pieces but it is a self-indulgent shambles full of pomposity and pretentiousness (not everyone agrees with this verdict—recently a critic described it as "the only truly intellectual science fiction film ever made"!)

Exorcist II: The Heretic is another movie full of brilliant moments that fail to add up to a cohesive whole. Though William Goodheart receives the sole writing credit on this, Barbara Pallenberg's book on the making of the movie reveals that Boorman abandoned Goodheart's script and rewrote it with Rospo Pallenberg who is credited as *Creative Associate* as well as 2nd Unit Director (Pallenberg had previously worked with Boorman on *Deliverance*). You can see, on the strength of *The Heretic* and *Excalibur*, why Pallenberg and Boorman get on so well together as a writing team—neither likes their work to be hampered by such old-fashioned things as dramatic structure.

But it's the banality of much of the dialogue in *Excalibur* that's so depressing. It all looks lovely up there on the screen until the actors open their mouths (after opening their visors) and then suddenly all that beautiful imagery goes for naught. The words just can't compete with the visuals and as the film proceeds the gap between the two



grows insurmountable. I finally decided it would have been better if all the dialogue had been in French, or some other foreign language, without sub-titles. At least it then would have sounded as if it meant something.

Doing it in French would have also solved the problem of Nicol Williamson's funny voice. I still can't figure out what he was up to. Why, at some time during the shooting, didn't Boorman take Williamson aside and quietly say: "Nic, old lad, what's with the funny voice?" Or was it Boorman's own idea to have him speak in that strange way, putting the emphasis on the wrong words in practically every line? Did someone have a brainstorm and decide that Merlin was actually the Wandering Jew (after all, both are immortal)? Was that why Williamson occasionally sounded like he was doing a bad imitation of Fagin in the musical *Oliver*? Answers on a Silver Grail please.

A film that seems to have been a source of major inspiration to Boorman is Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* which is also based on Arthurian legend but is a much more oblique version (so oblique that all the battles are filmed at knee level). The main device that Boorman has borrowed from Bresson is the use of the armour—in *Excalibur*, as in *Lancelot du Lac*, the knights *live* in their armour, wearing it indoors and out, and not even removing it for some rather intimate actions (the exception is Lancelot who strips off at the drop of a gauntlet, but then he *is* French). All of which is used to symbolise the attitudes of men who are trapped in a rigid, implacable code of behaviour that doesn't permit

them to express themselves as individuals or even to acknowledge the fact they are made of mere flesh and blood.

In the early scenes the armour is dark and gnarled, suggesting dinosaurs who are blindly fighting each other even though it means they are heading for extinction—but once Arthur unites them in a common cause the armour changes shape and colour becoming lighter and more radiant though still serving to keep the knights depersonalized.

I suppose one has to admire Boorman for trying to produce a completely straight film version of the King Arthur legend that makes few concessions to contemporary cinematic fashions (apart from some realistic gore in the battle sequences). He courageously refuses to present the characters in *Excalibur* as living human beings, and thus make them more palatable to modern audiences. Instead they remain nothing but walking-talking symbols throughout the film and therefore true to their mythic origins. But I'm afraid I found 2 hours and 20 minutes of watching symbols go through their predictable paces a very boring experience (and I've got to admit I found Bresson's version boring too).

However, as usual, I appear to be in the minority. At the time of writing *Excalibur* is proving to be a big box office hit in America and apparently hordes of youngsters are returning for a second viewing, some dressed in home-made armour, so obviously it's struck some sort of chord with the audiences. But just *why* I can't figure out.



Left: The wise and mysterious Merlin (Nicol Williamson) who guides the young King Arthur through difficult and perilous times. Below: During the climactic battle King Arthur (Nigel Terry) comes face to face with his arch enemy and son, Mordred (Robert Addie). Bottom: The evil Morgana in battle armour.

Excalibur (1981)

Nigel Terry (as King Arthur), Helen Mirren (Morgana), Nicholas Clay (Lancelot), Cherie Lunghi (Guenevere), Paul Geoffrey (Perceval), Nicol Williamson (Merlin), Robert Addie (Mordred), Gabriel Byrne (Uther), John Buckley (Uryens), Katrine Boorman (Isolde), Liam Neeson (Gawain), Corin Redgrave (Cornwall), Niall O'Brien (Kay), Patrick Stewart (Leondegrance), Clive Swift (Ector), Clarin Hinds (Lot), Liam O'Callaghan (Sadok), Michael Muldoon (Astamo), Charley Boorman (Boy Mordred).

Produced and directed by John Boorman. Screenplay by Rospo Pallenberg and John Boorman. Production design by Anthony Pratt. Director of photography Alex Thompson. Edited by John Merritt. Music composed and conducted by Trevor Jones. Costumes designed by Bob Ringwood. Fight arranger William Hobbs. Make-up Basil Newall. Special effects by Peter Hutchinson and Alan Whibley. Arour by Terry English. Special optical effects Wally Veevers. Associate producer Michael Dryhurst. Executive producers Edgar F. Gross and Robert A. Eisenstein.

