

THE LORD OF THE RINGS

THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING

Christopher Lee Fulfills a Dream and Gets to Visit Middle Earth as the Evil Wizard Saruman

By Ross Plesset

"I think these films could create cinema history."

- Christopher Lee

Being involved in a film adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* was a dream come true for Christopher Lee, the legendary actor whom director Peter Jackson cast as the fallen wizard Saruman.

The actor's fascination with

like it has ever been written. People like Jonathan Swift, Lewis Carroll, and Mervyn Peake invented imaginary worlds. Then along comes Professor Tolkien. Not only does he invent an imaginary world which, according to him, is 7,000 years ago in England, but he invents imaginary races which you can easily believe in. And what is even more remarkable is that he invented new languages. You can, in fact, learn to read, write, and

nation, the love, the dedication, the genius—I mean, there's no other word... I love fantasy, [so] this was just the sort of book that appealed to me. I read it every year."

It was hardly surprising, then, to find out that Lee had long wanted to play one of the characters. "Of course, being an actor, the thought went through my mind, all those years ago, *Wouldn't it be wonderful if it*

*could be made as a series of films, which is now the case. I also thought, *Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could play in it if it's ever made?* Naturally, in the '50s I was*

nearly fifty years younger, so I had dreams of playing Gandalf. When my dream was realized and a production took place, I met [director] Peter Jackson (*HEAVENLY CREATURES*) in London, and I was asked if I would play Saruman.

"It was a dream come true, because I realized that I was much too old to play Gandalf. I could not have done the physical things that Ian McKellen (*GODS AND MONSTERS*) has done in the production. He's seventeen years younger than me, and I think he found them exhausting, so I never could have played Gandalf. I'm too old and I accept that. The playing of Gandalf could not be in better hands."

What was that initial meeting with Jackson like? "They asked me if I would do a reading. Some people would have

said 'No.' I certainly didn't. I met with him in London in the back room of an old church. He was there with a casting director and his wife Fran, who is one of the writers. They asked me to read a scene in front of a video camera. I read a scene between Gandalf and Frodo, and I think it must have been one of the first ones."

Although he read as Gandalf, "From what I've heard subsequently, Peter had always had me in mind to play Saruman. I think he was just asking me to read something. My passion and love for the work was very obvious to him, because he shares it—as indeed do we all. The whole cast and the whole crew have such a dedication to this work that I have never experienced anything like it.

"I've been very fortunate in recent years. I did *SLEEPY HOLLOW* with Tim Burton—great cast, great crew; *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*—great cast, great crew; and the new *STAR WARS*—great cast, great crew. I worked with three of the finest directors around today. I am very fortunate, particularly at my age."

Lee, who seemed tireless in his willingness to discuss Middle-earth—sometimes talking about it as if it were a real place—described the character Saruman and its appeal: "Wizards are always fascinating characters, aren't they? There's a quote, 'Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger.' You've got such complex characters as

MOLDING MAGIC: Ian McKellen (left) oversaw the makeup and costuming of his Gandalf the Grey, while Christopher Lee placed his faith in director Peter Jackson's crew.



the book goes back nearly half a century, when Volume One, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, was first published. "I was so immensely impressed with what I read—like so many other people—I couldn't wait for the second one and then the third one. I was an immediate...I don't think fan is strong enough a word—I was an acolyte you might say! [Laughter].

"I had never read anything like it. To be honest, nothing

speak Quenya and Sindarin. He was a professor of philology. What he did is something that I think is unique in the history of literature. That's one point.

"The other point is that he created a world of beings unlike anything anyone had ever read before, with very long appendices with all the family trees and the names of the previous kings and the hobbits. It's quite incredible, really... The scholarship that went into it, the imagi-

immortals in human form, wielding vast powers, and then in the case of one of them—the greatest of them all—being prisoner of the dark power because of his ambition. This is what happens to Saruman. He, thousands of years ago, was the greatest, the most brilliant, the most powerful, the noblest. Even Gandalf says that, and all the books will tell you that. But at some stage, which is never defined, he feels that he is more powerful than Sauron and that he can take over as Lord of the Rings. Well he learns, to his cost, that he is mistaken. So it's a big question of a man of great intellect, brilliance, and so on, being tempted. Temptation overcomes him."



ENCOUNTERING THE CLASSIC: A long-time admirer of the Tolkien trilogy, Christopher Lee (top) lived the fantasy as maddened wizard Saruman. **LEFT:** Hobbit friends Samwise (Sean Astin) and Frodo (Elijah Wood).

As a rule, Lee never takes a role unless it is a challenge, and Saruman was certainly no exception. "You have to make the audience believe in his immense power. You also have to make [them] believe that he is a very considerable hypnotist, particularly with his voice—it's very hypnotic. People fall under the spell—Gandalf doesn't, of course, Gimli doesn't, and King Theoden eventually doesn't. They see him for what he is, but not at first. So we had to make people believe that there's a man who is an immortal in a human body and he has this immense power. The question is, what's he going to do with it? Does he control it? Does he believe in his own destiny or are there any doubts? All of these things are there, so it is very definitely a challenge. This is not a film for children where you appear as a benevolent Merlin. Far from it.

"I've read one of the Harry

Potter books. I have no idea what the film [will be] like, but it seems

to me that it is for children, although I think grown-up people would enjoy it. **THE LORD OF THE RINGS** is not for children—I say children of eight, nine, or ten. Some of them will go, undoubtedly." He cited the hobbits as the only characters with whom children could associate in this trilogy, which is full of battle, sudden death, and the occasional grotesque creature.

The actor/Tolkien expert had high praise for the people involved in the production, including Peter Jackson. "The fact that Peter Jackson was able to get New Line to agree to make three films is in itself an extraordinary achievement, so he deserves all of the credit. He is the central figure, he is the puppet master. I don't mean to say that we are dancing about at the end

of strings—we aren't—but he's the man who holds the threads of power in the story.

"He's a brilliant man. His knowledge is phenomenal, and his love of the stories and his dedication to the filming is amazing. I never saw him exchange a cross word or lose his cool, ever. He was under immense pressures all the time: shooting three films at once, shooting one scene, which would be in front of him and then

switching to a couple of monitors to watch a couple of other scenes that were being shot on two other stages, maybe even more! The guiding hand, the man in charge, is Peter Jackson, ably helped by Barrie Osborne, the producer, and others like [associate producer] Rick Porras, and [executive producer] Mark Ordesky, and with the full backing by New Line. They should be given great credit for their faith and belief in the films. I don't know what the cost has been except what has been quoted in the press, \$270 million for three films. I don't think they have anything to worry about."

Although Peter Jackson encouraged the actors to present their own ideas, Lee had no desire to deviate from the script.

"From reading the books so often, I naturally already knew Saruman and all of [the characters] intimately. The way he is presented in the script is the way he is presented in the book, more so in some cases. So what was on the printed page was what I did. If the director wanted different interpretation or different meaning or emphasis given to a line, a phrase, or even a word, I did it. To me, he always seemed to be right."

Neither did Lee offer any input into his costume or makeup (as did Ian McKellen). "I accepted the costume design, because it was exactly what I expected it to be, and the makeup was ideal."

Naturally, Lee had to be tight-lipped about certain aspects of the film. "We all had to sign confidentiality agreements. There have been unauthorized things which have appeared on the Internet. In June or July of last year there was a picture of me taken on my first day's work—don't ask me how."

As a Lord of the Rings "acolyte," Lee admitted to being very fortunate, indeed. Besides acting in the movie, "I met Tolkien once in Oxford with a group of other people by sheer chance. I just said, 'How do you do?' that was all. I was very much in awe, as you can imagine."

CFQ