

LORD OF THE RINGS

Feature by Alan Murdoch



*Three Rings for the Elven Kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the land of Mordor where the Shadows lie,
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.*



Twenty five years ago the publication of a book by an English professor revolutionised the world of fantasy literature. The book was called *The Fellowship of the Ring* and was the first part of a projected trilogy *Lord of the Rings*. The author was John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, professor of English Language and Literature at Pembroke College, Oxford. His teaching interests were in the linguistic and literary fields of Anglo-Saxon and especially in such works as *Beowulf*, the *Arcene Wixae* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Tolkien was also well-acquainted with old Celtic, Germanic and Icelandic manuscripts.

His first book concerning Middle Earth, *The Hobbit*, was published in 1937 and was met with resounding enthusiasm. But it would be 17 years before his fans would read another of his works. In 1954 the sequel to *The Hobbit*, a three-part work entitled *Lord of the Rings*, appeared. The three volumes, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* were released at nine month intervals and have since acquired a huge cult following.

Tolkien's works, concerned as they are with wizards, elves and strange creatures, seemed to be perfect candidates for screen treatment. Indeed the film rights have pas-

sed through such distinguished hands as Walt Disney, John Boorman and Stanley Kubrick before finally coming to rest with Ralph Bakshi.

With his first film, *Fritz the Cat*, Bakshi caused quite a stir on two levels. On one level the establishment was shocked that a film-maker could produce an animated cartoon film that would rate an x certificate. On another level Robert Crumb, who originally created *Fritz the Cat* for the underground comics of the late 1960s, and his purist followers were outraged that Bakshi could so twist the concept of Crumb's character. But Bakshi merely shrugged his shoulders. The film was a commercial success.

Born of Russian parents, Bakshi was raised in Brooklyn, New York and graduated from the High School of Industrial Arts in Manhattan with a cartooning medal. He was hired by Terrytoons, home of *Mighty Mouse*, shortly after his graduation and became the youngest animator in the history of the art. His rise was swift and he was running Terrytoons at the age of 26. After a short stint at Paramount's animation studio (during which time he handled the poorly-animated *Spider-Man* and *Fantastic Four* half-hour shows) Bakshi branched out to produce *Fritz the Cat*. This was followed

by the equally controversial *Heavy Traffic* which also rated an x-certificate. His next film, *Coomskin*, was plagued with poor distribution and has rarely been seen in this country. Then after a long gap, Bakshi shifted his sights away from social and political commentary that were so popular during the late sixties and plunged feet first into the worlds of fantasy with a film called *Wizards*.

Wizards, however, was not as far away from his previous films as first appears. While *Fritz* and *Heavy Traffic* have their roots firmly planted in the underground comic books of the late sixties *Wizards* owes more than a little to the fantasy orientated 1970s underground comics of Vaughn Bode. Unfortunately Bakshi's reputation as a producer of "adult" material had preceded him. *Wizards'* distribution was spotty in Britain and the film played in only a few selected cinemas.

It was with these credentials that Bakshi approached United Artists, owners of the film rights to *Lord of the Rings*, to see if he could succeed where so many other talented film makers had failed. Bakshi realised that the mistake of his predecessors was that they had tried to compress the gargantuan *Rings* trilogy into one film. He decided that to do justice to the story the adaptation would have to take the form of a two-part



film with a running time of at least four hours. He also realised that to try to make the film as live action would be a total disaster. He based his case for animation on the fact that "Tolkien asks us to suspend our disbelief, to accept the whole physical universe of Middle Earth, its history and its inhabitants. How can you create the concepts of all that in live action? Where do you get live action hobbits, elves and orcs? The answer is, of course, that you can't. Also, a live action version of *Lord of the Rings* would cost at least \$30 million!"

Bakshi turned to his long-time friend Saul Zaentz for help in the negotiations with United Artists for the rights to the

Rings trilogy. Prompted by his own love of the Tolkien books Zaentz was more than happy to involve himself with the project, and after the purchase of the rights by Zaentz and his Fantasy Films Company Bakshi was able to turn his attention to actually putting *Lord of the Rings* on celluloid.

The first drafts of the screenplay were written by a fan of the Tolkien books Chris Conkling. Then Fantasy/non-fiction writer Peter S. Beagle was brought in for revisions and final polishing of the script. Bakshi's instructions were to "become as 'Tolkien' as they could in remaining faithful to the books."

Armed with his new screenplay Bakshi

was able to begin shooting a live action version of the script. The idea was that this footage could be translated into animation by the huge team of animators and artists that Bakshi had gathered together. Bakshi had been building up his company over the years. Just before production began on *Lord of the Rings* his staff of artists and animators numbered just under the 100 mark. Within two months he had swelled their ranks to almost double that figure, hiring many art students from the Art Centre College of Design in Pasadena and the California Institute of the Arts. Bakshi soon headed the largest apprentice programme for animators in Hollywood.

It was during these early stages that

Opposite: Boromir of Gondor, one of the Nine Companions on the Quest of the Rings. Below: Grima Wormtongue, evil lackey of Saruman the Wizard, weaves his web of deceit around King Theoden and Lady Eowyn.



Bakshi achieved what he styles "a breakthrough" in animation. In fact the breakthrough is nothing more than tracing the animation cels over existing live action footage of actors decked out in rudimentary costumes. Though the technique required more in the way of backgrounds than the average animation film, the realism of the motion and figurework is supposed to be improved by the process. And for the first time on screen, audiences will see slow-motion animation. Another by-product of the process is that a higher "density of action" is possible than ever before. With most cartoon films rarely more than two or three characters are seen in frame together at any one time. Bakshi's process

makes it possible to animate entire battle sequences with casts of thousands and make the whole thing not only convincing but cheap!

The entire production was completed in less than three years, an incredibly short time for an animated feature of this length and scope. This period includes the filming of the live action version of the film on which the animation was based in Californian soundstages and on location in Spain. The Spanish location being used for the spectacular Helm's Deep battle sequence. Bakshi also spent several weeks in London recording the soundtrack for the film, which features a number of top British actors and the music of

Academy Award winner Leonard Rosenman.

Though *Lord of the Rings* does not open in Britain until July 5th this year, reports are already filtering through from America. US sources tell us that the film will be better appreciated by those who are already familiar with the *Rings* trilogy according to Tolkein. But whatever the result Bakshi must be applauded for at least attempting to commit the story to celluloid despite the adverse criticism heaped upon his earlier fantasy offering *Wizards* (see *Starburst 2*). Let's hope that *Lord of the Rings* fares better than its predecessor.



LORD of the RINGS - The Movie.