

Return To OZ



Walt Disney Films have ventured down the Yellow Brick Road for a special effects-filled adventure in the wonderland of Oz. Alan Jones investigates the technical wizardry that has been employed to produce this magical fantasy.

The Scarecrow has been deposed and is being held captive by the tyrannical Nome King. The Emerald City lies in ruins at the end of the Yellow Brick Road and its former residents have all been turned to stone. The Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion are now just mere statues. Where is little Dorothy now that these familiar characters from the pages of American folk-lore need her most?

The answer lies in *Return to Oz*, the Disney studios' \$25 million sequel of sorts to M.G.M.'s classic 1939 *The Wizard of Oz*. Disney have held the rights to all 13 'Oz' sequels by L. Frank Baum for over 30 years, but their attempts at continuing Dorothy's adventures in Baum's fantasy land – including a musical version planned in 1957 – have all come to nothing for various reasons.

Now, with Oscar winning sound technician turned director, Walter Murch, executive producer Gary Kurtz and producer Paul Maslansky, their long cherished ambition has finally reached fruition.

Ten-year-old Fairuza Balk steps into Judy Garland's immortal ruby red slippers as the Kansas farm girl who is swept into the land of Oz – this time by a spectacular flood. With the help of Billina, a talkative hen, Jack Pumpkinhead and Tik Tok, a helpful robot, Dorothy sets out to oppose the Nome King's regime and the evil Princess Mombi who owns a wardrobe of interchangeable heads and wants Dorothy's to add to her collection. Also starring Nicol Williamson, Piper Laurie, Jean Marsh and Matt Clark, *Return to Oz* began shooting at Elstree studios in February 1984 for a Summer '85 release on five elaborate sets, the most impressive being the vain Mombi's mirrored salon which alone cost \$325,000 and used 8224 square feet of glass.

DIRECTION TO OZ

It was in the Spring of 1980 that Walter Murch found out he was on a shortlist of up and coming talent lying on the desk of Tom Walhite, Disney's production vice-president at the time. "He had been given a brief to infuse Disney with new talent," says Murch, "and when I met him our mutual interest in doing something with the Baum books cropped up in conversation. My earliest childhood memory is of my mother reading me the books. I was virtually raised on them and have made the familiar icons a part of my life ever since as probably most of us have."

Of singular importance to Murch was that the spirit of the Baum books remained intact in his approach to *Return to Oz*. "It was important to leapfrog over the 1939 film and get back to quintessential Baum," he says. "*The Wizard of Oz* interpreted Baum in their own way. What I want to do – what you *have* to do – when shooting an 'Oz' story is to accept their conventions but interpret them more personally. My constant worry is in maintaining the balance between what has been established by our immediate successor but discovering a new interpretation of something inherent in an 80 year-old series of

Opposite: Little Dorothy (Fairuza Balk), a young Kansas farm girl, with two metallic friends – a gallant robot named Tik Tok and The Tin Man.



books. I count myself as a purist and have such strong feelings about the books, so my major concern is that the essence of Ozness is well and truly maintained."

And it is this quality that convinces Murch he is the right man for the job of directing. "I've worked in film from the sound editing and writing point of view, (*American Graffiti*, *The Conversation*, *Apocalypse Now*), so I know the basic ins and outs. But although my experience is from the perspective of seeing people go through the basic directing process, my only real tool is an intuitive conception of the story."

One aspect of the *Oz* production that refuses to phase Murch concerns the special effects area. He says, "At first I was worried about using state-of-the-art animatronics, but then so many of the *Oz* personnel are graduates of the Muppets, *Star Wars* and *The Dark Crystal* that I realised it would be pointless. We are necessarily doing things here that are different from anything else you will have seen, and are trying out combinations never attempted before. But then, that's why I wanted people like Gary Kurtz around me."

PRODUCER OF THE FANTASTIC

Like Walter Murch, Gary Kurtz had always had a vision of being able to do something with Baum's stories. "I had talked to Tom Walhite regarding my interest about a year before I knew Disney planned to go ahead with the project based on one of Walter's early drafts," he says, "and I became involved in one of the script revisions when we tried to analyse the production problems concerning the creatures."

"The creatures in *Oz* are very real characters in the sense that they are not just costumed humans. The special effects were very important to the believability of the story and it became patently obvious that the experience we had built up on *The Dark Crystal* concerning the technology was undisputably going to be the best way to do it. I personally thought that it was better to have the creatures appear as creatures that come to life as characters of the film rather than rely on the vaudeville style of an actor in a suit. I love *The Wizard of Oz* – it's one of my favourite films – but at the time it was made it was an extension of the enormously successful stage show version and the vaudeville tradition that goes along with it."

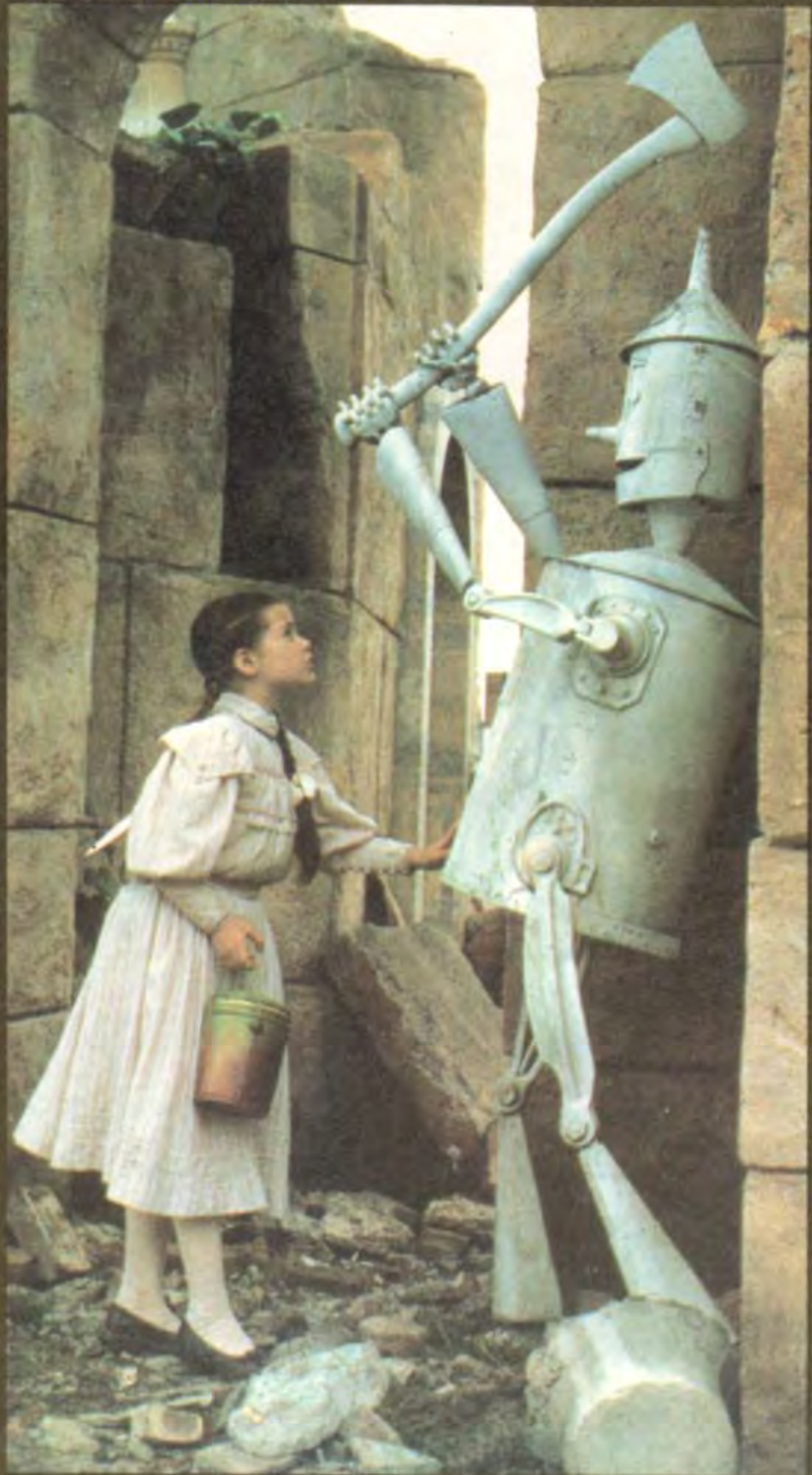
And Kurtz feels that it wouldn't have been possible to take that approach anyway. As he comments, "This story is not a musical. It would have been impossible to compete with the Garland vehicle on that level and not a good idea to try as it has a special niche in Hollywood history. This adventure is more in the tradition of the Baum books and we purposely wanted to make this film as different from *The Wizard of Oz* as possible. The books are good action adventures in their own right. They certainly don't need a musical treatment to tell the story because if you accept them at face value, everything that happens, happens within the context of the reality you are creating. I would hope that the best praise reserved for *Oz* will be audiences not caring or trying to figure out how something has been achieved."

CLAY CREATURES

With the spectacular array of creatures populating the land of *Oz* and lines in the script that say: 'Mombi goes to one cabinet and takes off her head, walks headless to another, takes out a replacement and puts it on', it becomes quite clear that a high calibre special effects make-up crew were needed to breathe life into Baum's creations. Gary Kurtz thinks that one of the *Oz* showstoppers will be Will Vinton's Claymation sequences. Kurtz explains, "This is the first time the process has been used



Above: Jean Marsh behind bars as *The Wicked Witch*. Below: *The Tin Man* strikes: Right: *The heroes of Oz*: (l-r) *The Cowardly Lion*, *The Tin Man*, Dorothy, *The Scarecrow*, *Jack Pumpkinhead* (with *Billina the chicken*) and *Tik Tok*.





in a feature film for non-humorous purposes. The Nome King and his messengers are very sinister bad guys in the story and Vinton is not using clay as such but a special material that looks more like rock. This way faces can grow and retreat logically".

Vinton, who won an Oscar for his short film *Closed Mondays*, feels he has transformed a very unsophisticated technique into a highly sophisticated one and in his studio in Portland, Oregon has been building 12 inch to lifesize replicas of Nicol Williamson for the more demanding transformations. As the Nome King gains ever increasing power over Dorothy and her friends, he evolves from inside a rock becoming progressively more human as he appears on the surface. Everyone is hopeful that the transition from the animated rock creature to actor Williamson will be as subtle as possible so nobody will notice.

Another special effects pioneer at work at Elstree is Zoran Perisic, the man who made *Superman* fly. His job is to make Dorothy's fall through a rock mass as lifelike as possible. To this end he is using an endoscopic medical camera and a French loaf of bread as the texture of both is remarkably alike. Perisic is also responsible for all the back projected, split screen and travelling matte sequences involving the headless Princess Mombi.

Make-up supervisor Robin Grantham found his work on *Oz* to be a combination of conventional make-up tasks mixed with highly innovative and experimental ones. Grantham, whose most recent credits have included *Never Say Never Again* and *An American Werewolf in London*, admits that the most intricate make-up was for Nicol Williamson's Nome King. "What was unique

about this," he says, "was that this one character had to be created in conjunction with more than the normal partners of make-up, like hair and wardrobe. We had to work closely with the art department and the Claymation specialists as well."

According to Grantham, there are five stages in all for the transformation of the Nome King from stone to human form. "The first three were Claymation," he says, "The last two, live action. The trick was to put the audience off guard as to when the change takes place. It was particularly complicated. For example, in the third stage the eyes are very real looking but he is not in fact real. In the first human stage he looks very rock-like but he is real flesh underneath. We were mainly blurring the edges with prosthetics and it took three-and-a-half hours to cover Nicol at his most rock-like." The scale of *Oz* and the long distance Claymation connection has made this the biggest undertaking of Grantham's career.

MECHANISED MAGIC

Handling the mechanical effects for *Oz* is supervisor Ian Wingrove who has under his belt *The Dark Crystal* and *Return of the Jedi*. One of the industry's most experienced specialists, Wingrove turned down other work to make sure he was available for *Oz*. "Everybody in their right mind would want to do this picture," explains Wingrove, "I wanted to involve myself in a little cinematic magic and film history. I hung on to get on *Oz* and now I'm glad I did. We've had our ups and downs – but what else is new?"

Wingrove's major problem with *Oz* was getting The Gump to fly. The Gump is the contraption that catapults Dorothy, Tik Tok and Jack Pumpkinhead out of one of Mombi's tower windows and is made up of two Victorian sofas roped together with a moose head strapped to the front, a broom for a tail and palm leaves as wings. In all, four different models were needed for each separate flying movement.

"For the take-off from Mombi's castle," explains Wingrove, "we constructed a captive rail system along the lines of a big dipper. The palm wings had to be mechanised for this shot and we needed different types for each action. Some had to be stiffer than others for the various degrees of flexibility otherwise the beating movement would cancel itself out. Engineering the wings into the main base caused problematical torque difficulties as three wings all eight feet long needed a lot of strength to move them.

"The couch also had to be able to fly on wires. Eventually we are going to have the couches on hyd-

Another headache is actually getting Dorothy into the land of Oz according to Wingrove. "We had to build an actual river on Stage Five to simulate the flood that carries Dorothy along in a chicken coop. That Stage does come equipped with a long narrow tank but producing a fast flowing river in such a small area is a real problem. Submersible pumps produced the flow but we also had to control the coop by hydraulic wire rigs to make it bob up and down in the water. Obviously we are pumping water past the coop a lot faster than it was moving so we had to make sure we could hold that position."

When *Oz* reached the final stages of pre-production, with Walter Murch excising 20 pages of script to reduce the cost, Wingrove found that one of the major effects sequences he had been working on for seven weeks had been scrapped. "There was this lovely sequence of the characters rowing across a desert in a boat. It was very amusing and I was asked to achieve it without any wires, rails, tracks or cables. Eventually we constructed a rig that consisted of an upside down conveyor belt on



Below: Our heroes with the moose-headed 'Gump'. Top right: The Oz men: (l-r) director Walter Murch, executive producer Gary Kutz, producer Paul Maslansky. Middle right: The Wicked Witch! Bottom right: A regal portrait of The Scarecrow.

raulic simulators against a blue screen and the characters will also be flown against this on what we call pole-up lines in order to do the necessary twists and tumbles.

"Making the Gumps took five months. As we have never put this amount of weight at the end of a pole-line before. We wanted a nice slow action for the wings as we wanted them to look natural and curl like a bird's. We experimented with different types of fibreglass to get this action."

Operating the Gump may be the major part of Wingrove's role on *Oz* but it certainly isn't the sum total of all he has to do on such a heavy mechanical laden movie as this proved to be. "We are dealing here with a lot of big stage areas having to rock and shake," says Wingrove expanding on this theory, "I don't think this has ever been done to this degree and size before. Instead of the old trick of shaking the camera, Walter wanted this done for real. So we had to build all these enormous hydraulic rigs which tilt and vibrate".

caterpillar treads without any external power supply so it could operate on its own. It was made so that as they rowed it could change its speed. I was very pleased with the challenge and the solution and it was a shame that it had to be cut out."

Wingrove wishes he had been involved on the character side of production and doesn't particularly warm to the fact that mechanical effects and puppetry are now categorised as two different departments. As he says, "Years ago before any of this was fashionable everybody did everything. Now there's this new department called animatronics caused by the very nature of certain films. Nature will run its course though and the rift will mature as it will return to an area where more linking up is essential. We should have more involvement and in some ways I get upset over this craze for special effects because it really isn't anything new. We've all been doing it for years although the more sophisticated an audience gets, the harder my job becomes."

THE PUPPET PEOPLE

Lyle Conway, the Creature Design Supervisor, pioneered the development of major animatronic characters for *The Dark Crystal* which in terms of cable and radio controlled puppetry were landmarks. His most remarkable achievement in *Oz* is Billina, the talkative hen. It is a perfect life-size replica of a chicken complete with remote control units and more than 100 moving parts in the head alone. Explains Conway, "Making the chicken look real was the hardest problem of all and I couldn't have achieved that if Val Jones hadn't come up with a special stretch fabric for the chicken's neck. A chicken's head is only the size of a walnut so you can imagine the nightmare of packing in the circuitry and making it reliable. I'm not too sure about duplicating reality in this way but I'm more than happy with the end result as we couldn't get the real chickens to do enough stuff. They were born to be food, not actresses."

With seven different versions of Billina to contend with to accommodate the various angles needed, Conway comments, "The chickens didn't last long as they tend to get very ragged looking so we had to have numerous back ups. The trouble is that people know what a chicken looks like and how it ought to move, so we couldn't make any mistakes."

Conway was also responsible for the rotund robot Tik Tok which caused some painful problems for its operator, Michael Sundin. "Walter wanted to stick as closely as possible to the Baum books," explains Conway, "but the original illustrations were not drawn with animatronics in mind. Tik Tok had to be changed because as written it would have been impossible to duplicate – and operate – the skinny little legs. Michael was bent double inside the robot's stomach with his head between his legs viewing the outside world upside down on a television monitor. He also had to walk backwards to get Tik Tok to move forwards and he wasn't allowed in the costume for more than ten minutes at a time."

Walter Murch also wanted Conway to stick as much as possible to the original conception of Jack Pumpkinhead, "That was difficult too", says Conway. He continues, "Originally we had all these locations planned, so the puppet had to be one you could perform outside without any additional riggings. Walter didn't want the eyes or mouth to move either, so any expression had to be achieved by moving the shoulder."

In all there are three different models of Jack Pumpkinhead, says Conway, "One is a costume version with an actor in a suit shot so fast that you won't notice the thicker neck than usual. The second is a puppet version worked from below and the third is a flying version that will be tied into some stop-motion animation."

The cut in budget didn't affect Conway's department in any way whatsoever according to him. "We had made most of the puppets in the pre-production time so it was only a case of putting the finishing touches on when the main shooting started. We decided very early on to go in for basic easy mechanics, although strangely enough there is nothing here that needed putting your hand into. Everything was done either by mechanics or a costumed performer."

With over a year of his life taken up with the making of *Oz*, Conway shares the belief, as everyone involved with the production does, that the film is predominantly about personalities and not special effects. As he explains, "I would like to think that the effects enhance the characterisations rather than overwhelm them. I think audiences will remember the story rather than a specific effects sequence. *Oz* will be about people and very real characters with their roots in accessible fantasy – not just a couple of rubber dummies and a little kid!" ♦

