



The Fellowship of the Black

# TOLKIEN ON FILM

Even though the sf movie explosion has not yet even begun to subside, a new cinematic trend is being warmed up in the wings to challenge the apparently unassailable position of the sf movies at the top of the box office charts. Already

under way are umpteen projects in the heroic fantasy vein, among them a high-budget, animated version of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Despite the poor reception of an earlier animated

Tolkien project, *The Hobbit*, which saw TV release in the US last year, *Lord of the Rings* forges ahead, though we'll reserve final judgement on this Ralph (Fritz the Cat, *Wizards*) Bakshi production until the project sees the light of day.

Feature by Bob Sheridan

## THE HOBBIT OR THERE AND BACK AGAIN

Tolkien's beloved tales of the fantastic world known as Middle-earth would seem to make ideal source material for animated films. However, lovers of both J.R.R. Tolkien and cartoon animation have already suffered one disappointment in this department, in the form of the television presentation of *The Hobbit*.

Produced by Arthur Rankin Jr and Jules Bass, *The Hobbit* was highly touted prior to its premiere on the American NBC television network. The advance information on the show was quite encouraging. Reportedly, the Rankin/Bass organisation rejected half a dozen scripts before settling on one which satisfied all of the "experts" involved in the project (exactly what these people were experts at was never revealed).

For the voices of Tolkien's characters, such talents as Orson Bean, Cyril Ritchard, John Huston and Hans Conreid were rounded up. Nearly 200 artists — illustrators, background designers, inkers, continuity and layout artists — were employed, and this team produced more than 110,000 drawings for the 90 minute show. Advance stills from *The Hobbit* revealed the artwork to be lush and pleasingly stylised.

Unfortunately, most hopes raised by the advance publicity for *The Hobbit* were quickly dashed when the show was actually aired. While the art was indeed as

lush as expected, both the animation and overall pacing of the show were curiously lifeless. It would be difficult to evaluate Romeo Muller's script, as the sluggish quality of the visuals rendered the film totally uninvolving. Worse, the show

incorporated 13 songs of embarrassingly poor quality even by the standards of "kiddie" shows, which *The Hobbit* was presumably intended not to be. Despite all this, the plot gave the impression of being workable, and one can only wonder how such a magical tale could be filmed so unengagingly.

Hobbits, for those unfamiliar with Tolkien, are small, gentle fellows who are quite content to live uneventful lives. Bilbo Baggins (voice by Orson Bean) is the hobbit of the tale's title, and we first meet him in his cave-like home, sitting by the fire reading a book and smoking his pipe. Unfortunately for Bilbo, this peaceful existence is not to continue for long. Gandalf the Wizard (John Huston) stops by, offering to send Bilbo off on a great adventure. Bilbo is somewhat less than ecstatic about the



From the opening sequence of the tv movie, *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins settles down by the fire.

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idea, maintaining that hobbits are "plain quiet folk" who have "no use for adventures".

Despite his objections, Bilbo is convinced to take up Gandalf's quest. Accompanied much of the way by thirteen bearded dwarfs, Bilbo sets off eastward to find a stolen treasure which lies in a remote and foreboding locale called Lonely Mountain. Along the way, Bilbo and his comrades encounter a succession of oafish trolls, menacing spiders, friendly elves, and heroic eagles.

Somehow all of these incidents in Bilbo's great adventure are equally unexciting, leading up to a spectacular climax which unfortunately only points out how far superior Walt Disney's finale for *Sleeping Beauty* was. Like the Disney film, *The Hobbit* concludes its adventure with a battle against an enormous dragon, Smaug. But, despite an evil voice provided by Richard Boone, it does not manage to produce the obviously intended thrills and catharsis which viewers had every right to expect.

Only one sequence in *The Hobbit* stands out from the rest. It involves an eerie "creature of darkness" called Gollum (voice credited to "Theodore"), with white eyes and a chilling raspy voice. From the moment when Bilbo enters Gollum's subterranean domain the tone of *The Hobbit* changes. The previous blandness is replaced by an effective mood of atmospheric terror, which sadly gives way to the previous tone as soon as the sequence ends.

J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S

# THE HOBBIT

OR THERE AND BACK AGAIN



THE DELUXE EDITION OF THE WORLD'S MOST BELOVED FANTASY  
With over 230 full-color illustrations from the great animated film sponsored by Arthur Rankin, Jr., and Jules Bass

To tie in with the airing of *The Hobbit* tv show Ballantine Books published a new edition of Tolkien's book illustrated throughout with over 200 stunning colour stills from the film.

"adult" cartoon features. Early Bakshi features such as *Heavy Traffic* and *Coonkin* were singled out for their offensive natures more so than any technical or aesthetic qualities. Even Bakshi's last film to date, *Wizards* (1977, see review in *Starburst* 2), though substantially milder than his other works, was obviously not designed with pre-teen audiences in mind. Both the language and visuals used in *Wizards* derived directly from underground comics, which have always been infamous for going far beyond the limits of so-called "taste" which mainstream comic books conform to.

How, then, is the outrageous Bakshi approaching the world of Tolkien, whose works are beloved by members of every age group. The answer comes from Bakshi himself, who claims that his *Lord of the Rings* will be entirely different from any of his other films — or any other film ever made! In terms of content, Bakshi claims that his film will be a sword and sorcery epic for all ages. Further, Bakshi promises that his film of *The Lord of the Rings* will be as faithful to Tolkien as possible.

Bakshi first became interested in the project when he read Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy when he was an 18 year old unknown. Since then, the Tolkien opus has been announced as a Disney

version of R. Crumb's *Fritz the Cat*, is currently filming Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

Bakshi's main source of notoriety thus far has been centered around the fact that he was the first animator to produce

As most fantasy fans are already aware, *The Hobbit* did not mark the end of the road for Tolkien's creations, as far as animated adaptations are concerned. Ralph Bakshi, who entered the world of cinematic features with his animated

celebration of the world's most beloved fantasy

project, and then the rights went through the hands of such filmmakers as John Boorman (See page 28) and Stanley Kubrick. But now Bakshi has managed to get the rights for himself, and he maintains that he will be avoiding mistakes in approach which the other filmmakers had made. "Their problem was that they tried to take the three books and condense them into one film", according to Bakshi. "We have a legitimate cliff-hanging film that doesn't end."

Exactly how much of Tolkien's work Bakshi is planning to put on film has not yet been made clear, but it is known that *The Lord of the Rings* is currently planned as a four hour, two-part film. Understandably, Bakshi is reluctant to reveal just what audiences will be seeing when the project is completed. Voices for the film will be provided by a big-name British cast, but Bakshi does not want to exploit their names to promote the film. Instead, *The Lord of the Rings* will be promoted as "a Tolkien film".

Once again, a Tolkien project is promising a lot to its audience; but only time will tell whether or not that promise will be fulfilled. Bakshi announced that the film will make a new dimension in realistic animation, but it turns out that his new, "breakthrough" process is actually an elaboration of the rotoscope



*A pre-production colour painting from Bakshi's Lord of the Rings showing Aragorn reviewing the armies of "The Host" gathered to battle the followers of Sauron before the Gate.*

process devised by Max and Dave Fleischer over a half-century ago for their *Out of the Inkwell* series of short subjects. This process employs live-action footage which serves as a direct model for the animation artists. While Bakshi's "innovation" hardly seems to deserve the name, he is using the process on a level never before approached. *All of The Lord of the Rings* has already been filmed in live-action with a cast numbering over a thousand, and Bakshi's 200 man

animation staff is converting this footage into cartoon form.

Meanwhile, the Rankin/Bass team have announced a made-for-TV sequel to *The Hobbit*. Of the two Tolkien projects in the offing, Bakshi's certainly appears to have the better chance for success, at least quality-wise. Only the release of both will put an end to such speculation; hopefully audiences will be given at least one Tolkien adaptation worthy of its source.



*Bilbo's hometown of Underhill as depicted by Ralph Bakshi*