TOLKIEN:
The Old, the New, the Never

Article by ROSS PLESSET

DIRECTOR PETER JACKSON'S THE LORD OF THE RINGS comes after decades of ill-fated attempts to bring J.R.R. Tolkien's books to the screen. In 1957, Tolkien was approached by Forrest J Ackerman and two colleagues with a proposal for an animated feature. As is detailed extensively in The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien by Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien liked the art he was shown, which he called "Rackham, rather than Disney," but he expressed only negativity towards the script. He considered the proposal only because his retirement was approaching, and the money was attractive. No agreement was ever made.
Disney was linked to the property in the press kit for Ralph Bakshi’s The Lord of the Rings (1978), but Disney’s legal department and archives dispel this. The same source also claims that Stanley Kubrick was somehow connected to the story. “Stanley preferred to find a book that very few people had heard of, and work on that,” said Kubrick biographer Alexander Walker. The Shining, he claims, was an exception because the filmmaker needed a hit.

In the late-’60s the Beatles tried to acquire the film rights. In Roy Carr’s book, The Beatles at the Movies, Paul McCartney stated that John Lennon instigated it. “We talked about it for quite a while,” he said, “but then I started to smell a bit of a carve-up because, immediately, John wanted the lead. The strength of the other films which we made is that we’re all equal.” Actually, Carr further reveals that John would have been Gollum, Paul—Frodo, George—Gandalf, and Ringo—Sam. The Beatles could not acquire the rights.

Also in the late-’60s, Heinz Edelmann, the designer/art director of The Yellow Submarine, wanted to do an animated version. While the project did not go far, a lot of thought was put into it. “At that time, people had quite different views of animated films from what they do nowadays,” said Edelmann. “The rules of the animated feature were what Disney had done. At that time, it was seriously doubted that animation could
carry action stories and suspense or thrills, and, to some degree, I still believe it cannot. So we thought we would not do The Lord of the Rings as a straight animation story, but as a kind of opera, or a sort of operatic impression. We were not that much impressed by Disney's Fantasia, but [our movie] would have been much closer to Fantasia than to what Mr. Bakshi eventually did. As one does an operatic version of any book, [they] sort of try for a distillation of the mood and the story, but not follow every twist of the plot. One could have packed 300 pages of wandering through the wilderness into a five-minute sequence set to music. Actually, I've never seen the Bakshi film, but from the few stills I've seen, ours would have been more impressionistic, and not so much aimed at a popular market."

Edelmann adds, "Tolkien's original illustrations, which were all based on real medieval art, did not appeal to me so much. I thought of the story more or less in terms of a Kurosawa film than old magicians with grey beards and big hats. If you look at all the fantasy films done in the last 30 years, there is a strong Japanese ethnic influence in the staging, in the buildings, and especially in the costumes. I think at that time we might have been the first to think in those terms. The Lord of the Rings is such a classic right now that almost no artistic freedom is possible. Back at that time, when it was new and Tolkien was still alive, it would have been a contemporary version, and I think that would have given us much more artistic freedom." Audiences inspecting any aesthetic similarities with The Yellow Submarine would have been surprised. "The artwork would have been completely different; much less color and unrealistic, without the art nouveau touch The Yellow Submarine has." Nor would the film have resembled the Tolkien illustrations that Edelmann later did [see above].

The owner of the rights—which Edelmann believes was United Artists—did not agree that animation was an appropriate medium for the story. "I would have loved to do it," he concluded, "Sometimes I do still think about it, but it would have been an awful amount of work. Maybe it's better that it has remained just a concept."
After two years of negotiations with J.R.R. Tolkien, United Artists acquired the film rights in the fall of 1968. According to Publisher's Weekly, "At one time, the Beatles tried to buy the celebrated trilogy. Arlo Guthrie is another who has indicated he would like to be associated with a film adaptation." However, in June 1970, United Artists announced that John Boorman would helm the movie, co-writing the script with Rospo Pallenberg. Boorman had wanted to make a movie about King Arthur, but United Artists asked him to do The Lord of the Rings instead. (Eventually, Boorman and Pallenberg collaborated on Excalibur in 1981, and, in many ways, the Rings project was a dry run for it.) Thus, the two filmmakers spent the better part of 1970 developing it.

"It was my first job in the movie business," recounted Pallenberg. "I met John Boorman in New York. He asked me if I knew the books, and I did. I remember writing up some ideas about three different approaches: One was to do it like a Fellini movie in a never-land, or in a big studio like Moulin Rouge —sort of all fake. Another was sort of a straightforward approach. What the third one was, I can't remember—it's been 31 years! The second approach prevailed.

"The chore that was given to us by United Artists was one movie and, at the time, they produced long movies with an intermission. [The script] is 176 pages with an intermission on page 81, after the fellowship goes down the rapids, and you have a sense that they have now reached a great landscape as the river widens." The musical theme for 'The Road Goes Ever On' accompanies this closing scene.

The script's first half, then, would have depicted most of The Fellowship of the Ring. Following the intermission, "we accelerated as we continued the story, and dropped things out. We were propelled by what we liked, and invented as we went along.

The screenplay takes liberties with the book, which would have upset Tolkien purists. Perhaps the most provocative change occurs in Lothlorien where, before gazing into Galadriel's mirror, Frodo must become intimate with her. (This does not cause friction with husband Celeborn because he is not featured.) The adaptation is also highly creative and inventive (ideas which Pallenberg still hopes to use in some other epic project). The history of Middle-earth is told in an interesting way, although the writer would do it differently today. 'I devised kind of a Kabuki play in which the story of Sauron and the creation of the rings was explained in a gathering in Rivendell. [Reading the script] A play has begun. The stage is the table (a huge, round table). The acting is stylized, emphatic. As in a Kabuki Theater, the costumes are flamboyant, and symbolize beings and entities of Middle-earth.' In other words, with the device, we tried to simplify the backstory. But I think if I were to revisit the scene now, I would think of a faster way of doing it."
New material for the dwarf Gimli came from Pallenberg's fondness for the character. "I remember liking him a lot. I knew quite a bit about Wagner's operas and the German literature. I was sympathetic to him, and I tried to work him in wherever I could. I believe it was I who came up with the idea where they bury Gimli in a hole, throw a cape on him, and beat him up to utter exhaustion to retrieve his unconscious ancestral memory." This ancient knowledge allows Gimli to know the word for entering Moria, and to find insights about the ancient dwarf kingdom.

Pallenberg contributed another original idea to the Moria sequence. "I had a rather fanciful idea involving these orcs that are slumbering in some kind of narcotic state. The fellowship runs over them, and the footsteps start up their hearts. John liked that a lot."

He mentioned another change. "There's a duel between the magicians, Gandalf and Saruman. I was inspired by an African idea of how magicians duel with words, which I had read about. It was a way of one entrapping the other as a duel with words rather than with special effects flashes, shaking of staffs, and all that. I tried to keep away from that a lot, and Boorman did too. [Reads from the script]:

GANDALF: Saruman, I am the snake about to strike!
SARUMAN: I am the staff that crushes the snake!
GANDALF: I am the flame that burns the staff to ashes!
SARUMAN: I am the cloud that quenches the fire!

"John Boorman and I didn't give too much importance to the Christian component of Tolkien's work. It came across as a tad heavy-handed at times. It is a story of redemption, and that seemed too broad."

As with Peter Jackson's film, size would not necessarily have been a criterion in casting the hobbits. "When we first started, there was a very vague notion that the burr Beatles would play the four hobbits. I thought it was a wonderful idea, but I thought it would have been an incredible problem of who plays whom. I think McCrory should have played Frodo. If we went with the Beatles, when you saw them, the tables, chairs, plates, knives, and so on would have been bigger, thus making the characters appear smaller, a sup-flying steed, the Nazgûl's horse has a nose that seems to have no skin. Its live, raw, bleeding flesh is exposed." I still have this feeling that the dazey can take away from the fundamental drama. We always tried to do things on the cheap, simply. When you saw a castle in the distance, it could have been made out of anything, even gleaming, high-voltage transmission towers. You saw those in the distance between the trees and men, suddenly, you were inside it. John Boorman is tremendously clever at that."

Nevertheless, the script had its share of technical demands. It begins in J.R.R. Tolkien's book-filled office, with the author disturbed by the intruding camera. Then, as the titles appear, the audience is given a tour of Middle-earth via a combination of model and location photography. "Boorman wanted to build a huge model of Middle-earth—as big as a film studio—curvature of the Earth and all," exclaimed Pallenberg.

The film would have been shot in the highlands of Central Ireland, at Ardmore Studios, and in some of the surrounding country. Years later, Excalibur was shot in the same studio, and in some of the same locations. "We did motor around to have a look at places so we could fit them in. Above where Boorman lived, there was sort of a boggy wasteland, and a road ran through it zig-zagging. You could film it in a certain way, and it would look like a river. As I drove around, taking breaks from writing, I saw all sorts of places. I remember there was one view that he could pass off as the Shire: it looked down towards a little village that was called Anamoe. I believe.' Among the locations scout for this picture that were used later in Excalibur were the waterfall, where Arthur meets Lancelot and where the Lady of the Lake appears, a "beautiful, round lake," in front of which Merlin waxes with his staff and leans on a rock and "a lake with a small stone henge that's about a cannon shot from Boorman's house."

The script ends with Gandalf, Frodo, Bilbo, Gandalf, Arwen, and Elrond leaving Middle-earth on a sailing ship. A rainbow arcs over the vessel. Lippert, who is watching from the shore with Gimli, says, "Look! Only seven colors. Indeed, the world is falling."

"I think that's the whole ideology of the picture," said Pallenberg. "That is from me, not Tolkien. From a physics standpoint, it's incorrect to say that there could be more than seven colors, but what it's saying is, 'we live in a diminished world.'"