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Photos by John Brown and Nancy Moran

Labyrinth and Legend, Big Screen Fairy Tales

by Ron Magid

Like a sleeping dragon, the fantasy genre has lain dormant for over a year, as if under a strange enchantment after the poor reception afforded such films as *The Neverending Story* and *Return To Oz*. Now the evil spell seems to have lifted and the slumbering beast has once again raised its fantastic head. This time around, the offerings are promising: Ridley Scott's long-awaited epic saga of elves, fairies and goblins pitted against the Lord of Darkness, *Legend*; and Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*, an allegorical depiction of a young girl's struggle against responsibility and temptation. If the subject matter of both films sounds somewhat similar, then ponder another coincidence: *Legend* and *Labyrinth* were photographed by the same man.

"It sounds very similar, but when you put the two together, they're not really," insists cinematographer Alex Thomson, BSC - and since he worked on both films, it's difficult to

argue the point. "I think *Labyrinth* is more like 'Alice In Wonderland,' and *Legend* is more like a fable. I don't know exactly how to differentiate them in literary terms, but they're not the same. *Labyrinth* is a lighter film; there's probably more humor in it and there's music and it's not meant to be taken seriously, whereas there are elements in *Legend* that are quite serious, like the confrontation between good and evil."

This difference in tone necessitated a very different photographic approach in each film. In *Labyrinth*, the premise was partly determined by the limitations imposed by the muppet characters, while in *Legend*, the darker tone demanded a more extreme treatment. "For a start, on *Legend*, we changed the diffusion quite often to suit the mood of the shot," Thomson recalls. "I mean even in the midst of a sequence we changed the diffusion from shot to shot, whereas in *Labyrinth*, I used a

flattop texture screen on every shot. I probably used a lot of light on *Labyrinth*, all huge 8K HMIs and things, mainly because you need the depth of field with the puppets. If you don't stop down, they don't look real. I used the same kinds of lamps on *Legend*, but I used less light."

Legend was shot almost exclusively on sound stages at Pinewood Studios, most notably on the huge, famed 007 stage, where an incredibly detailed and elaborate forest set was constructed. In order to make the set appear as real and as large as possible, Scott had the trees built all the way up to the iron gridwork at the top of the stage, and he used a set of stretched metal mirrors running on frames 20'x4' wide to extend the forest setting to infinity. Additionally, because the film began shooting in winter but required a summer lushness for its initial settings, Scott had leaves tied onto the bare branches of the trees, and brought in

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Ethereal lighting
lends unicorn a
fantasy aura.

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Tim Curry as *The Lord of Darkness*.
Below: Tom Cruise
on the forest set.



other leaves and flower petals to drop onto the set for certain shots. Thanks to this obsessive attention to detail, the forest set is convincing throughout the film, in almost every conceivable type of weather, and from every possible angle.

Due to the unusual parameters of the forest set, a number of innovative techniques were employed, both in terms of the way the set was rigged and the type of lamps that were used. "Since the set actually went right up to the iron gridwork and you couldn't build any more stage space beyond that point, I had to put all the lamps above the girders, which had never been done before, and of course it made it dangerous for the electricians because they

were actually walking on girders rather than on gantrys," Thomson recalls. "To actually move a lamp was a bit of a drama, you had to take it out of the stirrup and get it on a rope tackle and then drop it and haul it back up again and hope to goodness that you've chosen the right spot for it. Above the gantry, I had 50 dinos and I had 26 8K HMIs, which were the square-waved ones, which meant we could shoot at any camera speed we liked and it wouldn't make any difference. It was the first time they'd been used on a big production, so we had a lot of trouble with the HMIs, only teething troubles, since they hadn't quite perfected the bulbs and they kept blowing."

One of the most memorable shots in the entire film, the introduction of the unicorns as they frolic in an idyllic little brook bathed in a holy stream of sparkling sunlight, might not have turned out that way at all had it not been for a horrible disaster that befell the production only days before its extensive shooting schedule ended. "We had a fire. The 007 stage burned with everything in it, the Chapman crane and all of those lamps!," Thomson explains. "Fortunately, it happened at lunch time or we wouldn't be here talking about it! We had three days to go, and they were going to revamp the set anyway, but rather than do that, Ridley had it rebuilt outside. Although we were going to shoot with the unicorns on stage originally, they were actually shot in a stream that we build on the backlot. I had a huge canopy suspended on a crane over the top of the set, so I could move that to make the foreground darker or lighter, but God did the rest."

Another exquisite scene involving Tom Cruise's tearful confrontation with the last surviving unicorn was made particularly powerful by Thomson's dramatic lighting. In this sequence, Cruise falls to his knees in the snow before the mystical beast, and begs forgiveness for having accidentally allowed its mate to perish. The unicorn, at first rearing in anger and then moving resolutely towards Cruise, is lit with an angelic blue light that makes it almost seem to glow with an inner brilliance. "That works very well," Thomson comments. "I used reflective light from down on the snow, which was made of polystyrene, and I was able to make a bank of it just beyond where Tom Cruise stood, and by backlighting the scene very strongly, I was able to bounce the light back up onto the unicorn. It looked quite magical, and part of that was the way that Tom's arms were outstretched in this quasi-religious pose and the low angle of the shot." Though this sequence appears later in the film, it was shot much earlier on the forest set before the fire occurred.

Some of the most difficult things to light in the film were Rob Bottin's beautifully designed and crafted, but rather unflexible makeups, which appeared in virtually every shot! In order to give Bottin's characters an additional quality of animation that they

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might not otherwise have possessed, Thomson opted to move his lights across the creatures' faces. "It just makes it interesting to keep something moving," Thomson says. "We used shafts of light that I sometimes had moving. Much of that was Ridley's idea, and it followed through from the thing he did in *Bladerunner* with searchlights that moved about for no reason at all except that they looked quite good. He asked had I thought of doing that and I said, 'No, I hadn't,' so we tried it and it worked. In some shots I moved the lamps purposefully, I actually panned them on to let the makeups go a bit dark and then come a bit lighter, but I don't mean violently."

Much of Thomson's most intricate character lighting effects were used to bring Tim Curry's bullish satyr demon, Darkness, to vivid life. In the domestic version of the film, the first time we meet Darkness is at the very beginning of the story, where he laments his lack of power while bathed with a majestic purple light, his eyes and fingernails glowing green in the semi-gloom. "We used an ultraviolet lamp to light that scene," Thomson remarks, "but what we forgot - if we ever knew it - is that it alters the focal length. The scene is slightly out of focus for that reason. Apart from that, it was difficult to measure what the exposure was, but I guess we hit it about right. It was a curious effect."

Another curious effect, and one that was somewhat problematical to film, was Darkness' emergence from out of a mirror as he reveals himself to his unwilling bride-to-be for the first time. "We had to shoot it with two cameras so that we could get the reflection of him in the mirror," Thomson says. "Dennis worked out the camera angles for me so I'd know exactly where the reflections should come if somebody were to actually pass through a mirror. I don't know how he measured it, but he did! When you first see Darkness emerge from the mirror, I had a lamp above him and I was actually swinging it over the top of his head so that it appears to get lighter and then darker. I think Dennis rigged the insert shot of his cloven foot coming through the mirror using a touch of mercury."

The last third of the film takes place exclusively in the grim con-



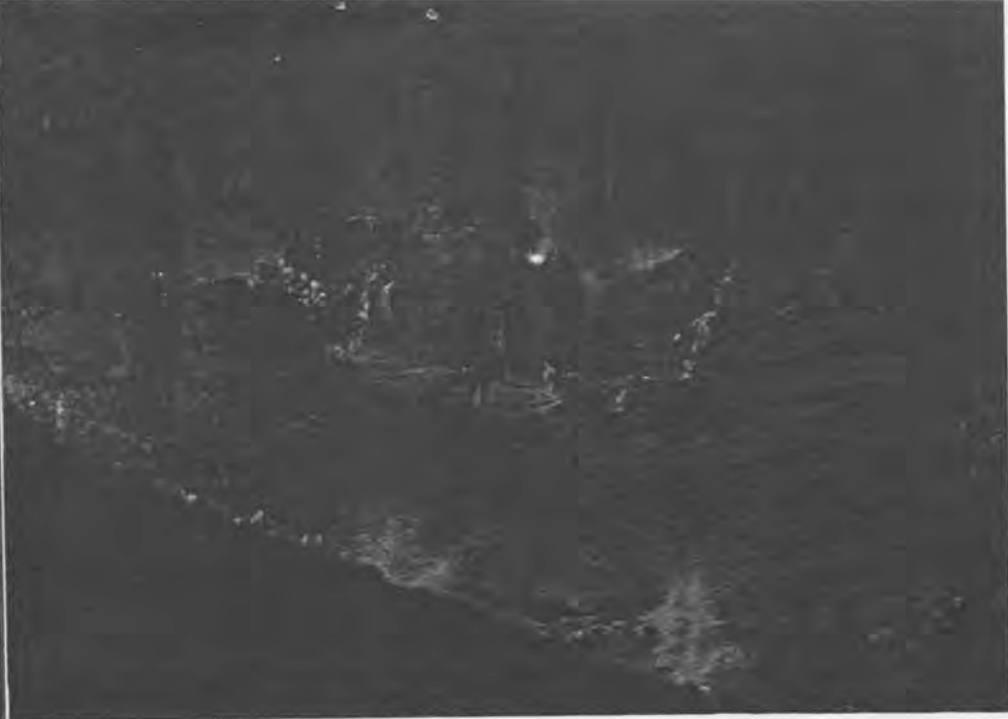
Jennifer Connelly desperately follows the Labrynth seeking her lost brother. Below: David Bowie as Jareth, ruler of the maze.



lines of Darkness' black castle, as hellish a vision as has ever been captured on celluloid, with its burning firepits throwing hot red glows onto the formless stone walls and pillars. "It was a difficult set to light," Thompson admits, "because all the pillars were free-standing, and we had to roll them about. Each time we changed the set-up, we'd push a column in or take one out, which meant that my lamps were always on the move, whereas on most sets, when a lamp's in position, it's in position and you either use it or you don't. So for each set-up, I'd thought I'd hidden my lamps, but then they would be revealed in the next set-up and so I'd have to re-hide them, and every time

we moved a lamp it would create a shadow, so then I'd have to get rid of that shadow. The shadows on that set were very purposeful, though that had to do a lot with the dark color of the set, but lighting it was hard work really."

Lighting for Scott's perfectionist standards was also hard and demanding work for Thomson, and an occasional clash of egos would ensue when he felt that the director was changing the set-up just to exert his authority over the production. "Ridley is very much in control," Thomson is quick to point out, "and he's constantly looking through the camera. Then, at one time during the day, after I had set



Forest set from Legend.

all my lamps, we'd go through this exercise where he'd say, 'What would it look like if you saved that lamp over there?' and I'd say 'Well, it'll go dark over here,' and he'd say, 'Let's just take a look at it,' and we'd switch it off and then switch it back on, and we'd go through all the lamps on the set. We'd do this once a day, and having switched them off and switched them on and maybe used one less or one more, we'd shoot it, but I never understood why we went through this routine. Occasionally, I'd put a couple of lamps on that I knew we wouldn't need and which I knew he wouldn't like and when he'd say, 'What would happen if you saved that?', I'd say, 'I don't know. try,' and then he'd save the lamps that I put on extra! He'd ask, 'Do you think that's better?' and I'd say, 'Yes!', and then he'd be happy and we'd shoot it! It was a bit of a charade, really."

Actually, Thomson found Scott's attention to detail awe inspiring, especially on a production the size and complexity of *Legend*, where any given shot might require several dozen props. The cinematographer credits Scott with capturing the grimly hellish mood of Darkness' abode to begin with, thereby making his task considerably easier. "A lot of the film's atmosphere comes directly from Ridley, because he dresses the sets impeccably and he creates a lot of that mood himself, just through his compositions and because he props the whole thing. Those chairs in Darkness'

castle were made to his design, and the plates and the tables. He's a marvelous sketch artist. At the beginning of the picture when Ridley was working with production designer Assheton Gorton, I was fascinated, because Assheton would say 'What we really need here is this' and then he'd do a marvelous drawing, and then Ridley would say, 'No, I think what we need is that' and then he'd get his paper and pen and he'd do a great sketch - so nothing was ever said in words, it was always done in drawings. It's always marvelous when the sets and the costumes and everything come together, it makes one's job so much easier!"

Oddly enough, despite the complexities of Ridley Scott's vision and the demands imposed on him by the heavy makeup, vast sets and production setbacks, Thomson found *Legend* to be a far simpler shoot than *Labyrinth*, primarily because the muppets created their own unique cinematic challenges. "I think *Labyrinth* was more difficult to photograph actually," Thomson says, "because of all those elements. There are more opticals and you've got to watch it because if your images get too dark, then the opticals won't work, it all goes nil for you and it never looks right. There was more straight photography in *Legend*, actually, there were marvelous sets, quite beautiful, but there weren't any opticals. *Labyrinth* is all trickery and so on, so from that point of view it was more difficult."

The need for complex optical effects, the lighter story content and Henson's own reluctance to imitate any of Scott's techniques resulted in a brighter lighting style for *Labyrinth*. "Jim Henson used to say, 'Look, tell me if you did this on *Legend* and we won't do it!'" Thomson recalls. "I lit the film brighter because the sets were brighter. In the hedge maze, the stonework was much lighter in tone, the backdrops that we painted were full blue summer skies, and, of course, there was a theatrical kind of element to *Labyrinth*, purposefully. One sees the hedge maze in the girl's nursery in the form of a toy and there are cut out wooden soldiers that re-echo in the full scale labyrinth, because it is a toy maze."

As the heroine makes her way through the labyrinth seeking her baby brother, she is forced to brave a series of trials. One of the most grueling of these is a deep, dark well which she falls through as myriad hands growing out of the slippery walls snatch at her body. Because the actress actually did her own stunt for this sequence, and because the camera had to fall at the same rate as she did, the set was built only a third as long as was necessary for the sequence, which created its own set of problems for Thomson: "It was difficult, and I don't know that we overcame all of the problems really. I could only light the set from one end of the tube, so obviously, the closer she is to the opening, the brighter she appears, and the darker she becomes down at the bottom, which is only natural. In cinematic terms, I had to make it appear that she got darker and darker as she fell, while still allowing for enough light that you could see her at the bottom of the shaft. Since she had to fall three times, and since we used the same tube and because we had to start her at the top again and drop her down to the lower level each time, that meant she got bright three times and dark three times, which is against the rules, really. I think we get away with it because each time she drops down, I made the set a little bit darker. To execute the lighting wasn't that difficult, I just poured a lot of light down from the top, and we put the camera on a hophead at the end of a crane arm that had a monitor in it. We operated it from the studio floor and dropped it using this mixture of a crane arm and a sort of standing crane rig with hydraulics."

Another grotesque setting through which the heroine had to pass was an overgrown swamp, so foul smelling that it is referred to as the Bog of Stench. Because of the scope of the shots in this sequence, and due to the fact that much of the set was underwater, lighting became critical. "It was in a tank," Thomson observes, "and I was restricted with where I could put my lamps, so most of the light had to come from the top. It was a bit of a combined effort because I started the sequence and then we moved over to another stage and we left Peter MacDonald to finish up, and I think he did very well indeed. I don't know that the Bog of Stench was more awkward to film than anything else, but as far as the puppeteers were concerned, it was difficult."

The single greatest stumbling block during the entire production was actually its strongest asset: the beautifully crafted and articulated muppet characters that comprise 90 percent of the cast. The problem did not lie so much with the muppets themselves as with the large numbers of people and equipment required to operate them,

and the fact that Thomson found them rather difficult to light. "The main trouble with the muppets," Thomson claims, "was getting light into their eyes. It's really strange, I didn't cotton onto it immediately, but unless you see their eyes, their expressions diminish a hell of a lot. That's why I had to try to train a lamp on them, which is something I did myself. For Hoggle and especially Lodo, I had to actually walk around with a hand held lamp which I kept shining in their faces to try to get it into their eyes. Of course, it's always a compromise, because when they look away, I'd need to have a light for each position."

One of the things that made everybody's job on the production a lot easier was the presence of a video assist system. Even though the set created problems, Thomson found the video assist to be an invaluable aid. "It was an extraordinary help," he feels, "because often without it, you don't know if things have worked. We could basically do our own match on the video assist so we could tell more or less if things worked or didn't. Also, with pup-

pets, it's vital. The puppeteers all have monitors, there are monitors all over, hundreds of them, because everybody needs a monitor to tell what their puppets are doing, so a common central exists which is the camera, and from that all the monitors are fed. For example, we had a fox character called Didymus, who was actually a real dog in the long shots, but for the closeups we used a puppet dog and we weren't allowed to see its legs because we had puppeteers on a little low platform, so for our tracking shots we'd have to frame above their hands. The video assist was very good because we could then check our work, especially in the tracking shots where we were watching headroom and wires, and we could see whether we'd accidentally cut off the bottom of the dog. Without it, we would have been on tenderhooks because there'd be no way to know until the dailies the next day whether we'd actually done it."

The fact that each puppeteer required a monitor sounds reasonable until one realizes that some of the puppets required up to four puppeteers! This is one reason that the film is

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primarily a series of beautifully composed static shots, because with all the people strewn about the set, there was no way to move the camera. "There's a number that Bowie does and there are about fifty goblins all in the shot at the same time," Thomson recalls. "Each goblin had at least one puppeteer, some of them had two, and the majority had three people operating them. The whole floor was strewn with people and we had to knock holes in the floor of the set where they could stick their hands up through, and some people had their arms through the set walls and there were all of these monitors going! Some of the characters were hand puppets and some were on wires like marionettes. It's difficult to hide the wires and they tend to bump into each other, the problem being that they all create their own shadows. All the puppeteers had a difficult time of it anyway, well, everybody did, because I'd light the set and when I'd say, 'Ready!', I'd find that there were fifty people all lying on the floor! You can't ask them to get in position while you're lighting but all sorts of shadows appear once they actually get in there, and sometimes I'd have to start again because I couldn't really visualize where they were going to be. That's why it took us a long time to make this movie!"

Because of the limited movement afforded the camera due to the large volume of people and equipment on stage for any given sequence, Thomson and Henson designed a striking visual tone for each part of the film. For a glittery and intoxicating masked ball scene, Henson asked his cinematographer to capture the feeling of being inside a bubble. "The special effects people made up a plexiglass dome," Thomson recalls, "quite like an air gunner's dome in the war. They distorted it and hooked it up to a motor that revolved it in front of the camera. Sometimes the image is clear and undistorted and then suddenly all the shapes change, and it worked quite well. I remembered doing this years and years ago when I did a picture with a sort of nightmare sequence in it and I'd got hold of some plexiglass which I heated up and distorted and placed in front of the lens. I did the same thing for *Labyrinth*. The scene is nice because it's all done in warm tones, and the decor was white and frilly and frothy."

Undoubtedly the most difficult sequence to shoot in the entire film was the climactic confrontation between Sarah and Jarrod, the goblin king, in his very unusual palace. Based on the designs of the noted artist and mathematician, M.C. Escher, the palace set is a visual conundrum of impossibly joined cornices and inverted stairways and angles. Because of the tricky perspective, Thomson at first found it difficult to keep his balance from shot to shot, although he soon got the hang of it. "It all got disorienting, really," Thomson says. "The floor of the set was actually on the roof of the studio, and to get them to appear upside down meant that we had to turn the camera upside down, and that meant that somebody else couldn't walk on the walls! It was strange. We also had to have odd bits of sets because some of the shots incorporated mattes, as when Bowie is standing upside down on one side of a landing and the girl is standing rightside up above him—that was two sets. I think matching things up is just a matter of experience, really. If you know what you had on set A then you know what you'll need on set B. I know I've got to match the lighting, so that it comes from the same direction and with the same intensity, and I could match the colors paintwise, so it was just a matter of experience."

Lighting the Goblin King's palace was another matter entirely, since Thomson had never had to light such a peculiar set before. "I didn't quite know how to handle that actually," he admits. "We made a model of it in pre-production, and I couldn't see any way of getting any contrast in it because all the arches and niches in it were blocked off. It's an interior entirely, even though there are a lot of passageways, they don't go out into the open so I couldn't put any light through the arches from outside. In normal terms, I would have had light coming in through the windows and arches, but here I could only do it to a certain degree because a lot of the arches were closed off. I took little lamps and hid them, which was a bit fiddly. It was interesting to do, and it was lovely, actually, and I think it works very well in the picture. It's seamless." Δ

Ron Magid is a regular contributor to these pages.