

Entertainment

Bakshi backfires

Lord of the Rings aesthetic fiasco



by Tom Ozere

Ralph Bakshi's animated adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* descended on Halifax this week, amid a great storm of hype and fanfare. Unfortunately, the film was decidedly lacking in quality.

Animation has never been a particularly cinematic genre. It depends on conventional angles, shots and montage—techniques that would seem stagnant in live cinema—for its realism. Ralph Bakshi (*Fritz the Cat*, *Heavy Traffic*, *Coonskin*.) has attempted to extend the art of animation by the use of more cinematic forms, and raise it to a level equal with live film-making. In fact, Bakshi has his name billed as director in the movie's credits, a title not usually used for an animator. However, despite Bashki's admirable ambitions, his movie just doesn't work.

Part of the reason it doesn't work is his choice of material. J.R. Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings* is a ponderous novel that relies on sheer inspired verbiage for its charm. The level of characterization in the

novel is not very deep, and the actors speak in a mannered diction that often strains credibility to extremes. The novel works, however, because of the width of its scope; the movie, necessarily truncated, simplifies Tolkien's vision to the point of banality.

For the benefit of those who have never read the novel, it concerns the adventures of a hobbit named Frodo, and the difficulties he encounters while trying to destroy a magic ring. The ring is the property of the ultimate villain, a bogey-man named Sauron, who will spare no effort to get it back. Sauron's polar opposite is an old wizard named Gandalf, who supplies Frodo with sententious pearls of wisdom and occasional mystical aid. Frodo also has a sidekick, the book's Sancho Panza, named Sam Gamgee, who is one of the novel's only comic creations.

These characters are acceptable in print, but in the film their inherent shallowness expands to massive proportions. Frodo is alternately

irritating and ingratiating, Gandalf's profundity sounds merely senile, and Sam is a great deal less funny than Bakshi intends. Almost the only interesting character in the film is a villain named Gollum, who looks like a green guttersnipe, stutters and shakes like a mad thing, and speaks in the most insinuating cockney accent imaginable.

Because the novel *Lord of the Rings* is so very long, Bakshi adapted only the first half. The film ends with Sam and Frodo on the verge of entering Mordor (Sauron's abode). I am well aware of the budget problems inherent in making an animated film of this scope, but in ending it where he did Bakshi successfully decapitated his movie. Bakshi has said in answer to this complaint that if he had not ended the film at this point people would have thought the film was to have had no sequel. I think he underestimates his audience, after all, Jan Troell's *Emigrants* / *New Land* epic faced a similar problem, but each

half of Troell's work is a perfectly self-contained film.

Bakshi has attempted things in this film that have never been done in animation before. To enable him to show more than two moving figures in one frame, he uses a technique called 'rotoscoping', which consists of shooting a live action film and tracing over it. Sometimes this technique works to breathtaking effect. There is one startling sequence in which Frodo, pursued by 'black riders' rides over an ever-changing landscape, under a sky that is shot through with jagged bolts of lightning. In this sequence, Bakshi settles for surrealism, rather than straining for 'cinéma-verité'.

Bakshi's film works when he wanders into fantasy; when he attempts to be realistic he is responsible for some incredible cinematic solecisms. Animated figures are rendered in the simplest of contours, yet Bashki shows them in extreme closeup, which is quite overwhelming. There are a few shots in which he combines moving and painted figures, and in a misplaced attempt to be the Sam Peckinpah of the animated film, the scenes of violence are done in slow motion, which looks ridiculous. Some of the backgrounds are well painted, albeit a bit flat, but they are completely static. Watching the figures move over these motionless landscapes is like watching cutouts superimposed over a backdrop.

Bakshi makes mistakes with his rotoscoping as well. An

animated figure will be included in scenes with a rotoscoped one, which aesthetically is quite disturbing. Occasionally, the rotoscoping doesn't seem to have been well surveyed, and the live action figures sometimes extend beyond their traced outlines. Also the battle scenes, which take up about a quarter of the film, are crammed with such constant movement that it is often very hard to see what is going on.

The film has other faults as well, the soundtrack is trite to the point of idiocy, the editing is rushed and jerky, some of the animated figures never seem to present the same face twice, and there is a horrible introduction which lowers Tolkien's prose to the level of pop-philosophy.

The film the *Lord of the Rings* is billed as an epic fantasy; as such it is laughable. As popular entertainment it is mildly amusing, as an animated film it is an aesthetic fiasco. I wouldn't recommend it to anyone except the hard-core Tolkien fanatic who might enjoy seeing his mentor's name in cinemascope.



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