



FIRST LOOK AT HOBBIT

By HOWARD FEINSTEIN

May 15, 2001 -- CANNES - "I'm 23," said Liv Tyler, "a funny age for an actor: not young enough to play the ingenue, not old enough to play the attorney."

But just right to play an elf in "The Lord of the Rings," the film adaptation of British writer J.R.R. Tolkien's cult fantasy trilogy about Hobbits, the good little people who inhabit Middle Earth and are under constant threat from the forces of mainly life-size evil humans.

Tyler plays a tiny creature named Arwen with Spock-like ears as part of a large ensemble cast in the \$270 million project comprised of three separate films, which, in an industry first, were shot simultaneously in director Peter Jackson's home country, New Zealand.

The first installment won't arrive until December. The second quickly follows about five months later.

But it's not too early for New Line Cinema to spend \$1.5 million on a vulgar Cannes launch, treating the assembled press to footage from the movies and interview with the stars.

New Line is taking a big chance on Jackson, a veteran of splatter ("Bad Taste," "Meet the Feebles," "Braindead") and everyday horror ("Heavenly Creatures"), and Hollywood box-office poison since "The Frighteners" for Universal was a commercial bomb in 1995.

"Hollywood would have pressed it all in to one movie," says Jackson. "You'd lose a lot that people loved in the book."

Indeed, Miramax, who had the film rights first, wanted to make a single film. New Line head Bob Shaye proposed three.

Barefoot, smoking one cigarette after another, Tyler held court with several other performers at the Chateau de Castellaras, about a 30-minute drive outside of Cannes.

They were surrounded by examples of the magic created for the film by the special-effects team of WETA - New Zealand's answer to George Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic - such as the miniature homes that house such Hobbits as Ian Holm's comic Bilbo Baggins.

"It's not comfortable being an elf," Tyler said. "They're so centered, so aware. It was strange every morning to wake up and see these creatures, though. I had nightmares for two weeks, then I got used to it."

She did have misgivings. "I wasn't sure about being so far away from my fiance [Royston Langdon of Spacehog] and my family. I don't mean to sound cheesy, but I do believe in things finding ME."

Elijah Wood is more aggressive: He found the project.

His naive Hobbit Frodo is the moral center of the film; he has possession of the powerful ring that such nasty opportunists as the Dark Lord Sauron and the fantastic creatures that he unleashes on Frodo and his small, courageous gang which dubs itself the Fellowship of the Ring.

"I didn't like the idea of going into a casting office," says the actor. "So I got my own costume, made a tape, and sent it."

Wood was the first actor cast, according to executive producer Mark Ordesky, whose people had been scouring the U.K. for their lead. "Frodo arrived in a package in the mail. He is an Everyman Hobbit. He is the 'reader' of the book."

Wood complained affably about the latex prosthetic shoes the Hobbits wore.

"My prosthetics kept falling off. My genetics were not into it."

The 25-minutes worth of footage from the project New Line showed the press was stunning.

Bat-like monsters called Orcs climb multiple columns, a huge Ogre battles Frodo and his pals (played by Sean Astin, Dominic Monaghan, and Billy Boyd), stone arches crumble as Hobbits scramble for safety, holes in the ground lead to an endless abyss.

The film had a crew of 2,000 and WETA created 1,600 prosthetic feet and ears, 900 suits of hand-made armor, and 2,000 rubber and safety weapons.

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