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Return of the Junket



Amidst tears and tattoos, after working on possibly the most ambitious film project of their careers, *The Lord of the Rings* cast says goodbye

by **Laurel DiGangi**

Seven years ago, New Zealand director Peter Jackson began the seemingly insurmountable task of creating the quintessential, cinematic version of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The release of the third and final installment of this trilogy, *The Return of the King*, marks the culmination of this massive accomplishment. For many of the actors involved in these films, this unprecedented undertaking meant spending as long as 18 months filming in New Zealand, followed by three years of post production, reshoots and press junkets promoting the trilogy. Actors are quite fond of talking about the "bonds" forged among them on various productions, but the very nature of this lengthy, intense project points to the sincerity of these bonds. Proof further are the matching Elven tattoos that many cast members in the fellowship now bear—although most won't reveal exactly *where*.

For Elijah Wood, the heroic ring-bearer, Frodo, the overwhelming emotion of wrapping up the trilogy happened with the pick-ups last July. "It's difficult to actually articulate how we felt," says Wood. "I couldn't really come to terms with it. I couldn't believe after four years, it was all coming to an end. My last day, I was completely drained. I had knots in my stomach all day, and it came time to do my last shot, and last shot was too perfect, actually, because it was

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one of the last scenes in the movie, before Frodo goes to the Greyhaven. So there's a shot where he's writing the last bit of the book and Sam comes and says, 'It's all over,' and Frodo says, 'No, there's room for a little more,' and it had this whole meaning tied into it. Hearing me say the line knowing it's my last shot and also the symbolism of the scene and I'm like, 'Oh fucking hell!' And everybody came on to see it, and I remember we did five or six takes, and they checked the gate, and Peter came over to me and broke down, like gave me a hug and broke down on my shoulder. It was so, so sad—everybody was crying.”

During this same period when Jackson was shooting pickups, he had 15 going-away parties for the actors, poignant experiences for everyone involved. “For each actor it was emotional because it was either Elijah’s last day or Liv’s last day or Ian or Viggo, and we’d go through the day shooting,” says Jackson. “And we’d get to the last shot and we didn’t say this is the last shot, it was unspoken, and we’d set it up and I’d say, ‘Cut.’ And they’d be waiting for me to say, ‘Let’s go for another take,’ or, ‘Check the gate.’ And if I said, ‘Check the gate,’ that was the door slamming shut. It was a traumatic period of shooting actually.”

At these goodbye parties, the crew would gather around as the actors were presented with the last clapper for the last take of the last shot they were in, as well as gifts related to their characters, typically their signature weapons. Says Wood, “I was given Sting [Frodo’s sword] and the last pair of feet that I wore — I bet they smell like shit now. I haven’t opened the box in quite some time!”

Sean Astin remembers his last day’s shoot as his character, Sam Gamgee, crossing the Gorgoroth Plateau, near Mordor. “Elijah’s got to fall down, and so there was a lot of falling and getting up,” says Astin. “And when it was over, Fran [co-writer and co-producer Walsh] wanted us to run over to the sound-mixer and record this four page speech of poetry. She didn’t really need to do it then, but I think she didn’t want to let go of that moment. Then we went into the Hobbiton set... and everybody was there and they gave me Sam’s backpack, which I really wanted, and a sword and a pair of feet, and they gave my daughter [Alexandra Astin, who plays Sam’s daughter] the dress that she wore at the end of the movie.”

Ian McKellen, who portrays the wizard Gandalf recalls his last shot, which was filmed last July. “I had done some generic fighting which you see in the film — swinging the white staff... and knocking Orcs out of the way. Then

Peter said, 'That's the end of principal photography.' But this time when we finished, at the end of the day, the crew and anyone working on the film was invited to a reception that took place after dark on battlements of Minas Tirith lit by flares."

Billy Boyd, who portrays the hobbit Pippin, was also given his goodbye party that same evening. "I ran around and kissed everybody. I was really emotional," says Boyd. McKellen was presented with Gandalf's sword, while Boyd was given the sword he slays an Orc with. "My last shot was, kind of looking at my sword with the blood on it, and I thought, that's great!"

John Rhys Davies, whose character of Gimli the dwarf lends the trilogy some gentle comic relief, also had a remarkable—albeit chemically enhanced—final day of shooting. "The penultimate day was worst," says Davies, who admits that the prosthetics were so uncomfortable he often felt like ripping them off. "So I went to the doctor and I got some valium and took eight aspirin and some antibiotics and the next day I flew through," says Davies. "But come evening and we all got together to say goodbye, I was in tears."

The experience was emotional for Dominic Monaghan, who portrays the hobbit Merry. At the parties, each actor had the chance to make a going away speech. Says Monaghan, "These films changed the way that my life had been leading on a certain path and moved it on a 90-degree angle to a different way of thinking. Not only was it hanging out with Bill and Elijah but down to the people behind the camera and the people that made our swords and the people that dressed us in the morning; their influence over the past three years has helped me change huge facets of my life."

Viggo Mortensen, who portrays Aragorn, heir to the throne of Gondor, was presented with his "well-worn" Ranger sword that he used on his first day of shooting in October, 1999. "But the best thing I got was this friendship with these people, is the memory of being in New Zealand and retelling the story with Peter," says Mortensen. "That's the thing I have that I'll remember most. I mean, if somebody steals the sword or it gets lost... you know what I mean? It's just a thing."

A certain material object, however, was very "precious" to Andy Serkis' character of Gollum: one ring to rule them all. In the reality of the film world, several rings of various sizes were cast. Appropriately, Serkis got one as a goodbye gift, as did Wood. But an even more precious gift to Serkis was

clapper 558B, signifying his last day on set. "I was completing a scene which, ironically, we started shooting on my first day on set," says Serkis, "which was a tussle between Frodo and Gollum."

Even director Jackson was graced with a special presentation, his during the film's wrap party. "It was really touching, a complete surprise," says Jackson. In Jackson's cameo role in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, he was eating a carrot. So his crew gave him a framed carrot. "I wish I had done a cameo with a sword," laughs Jackson. "I didn't, so I got a carrot."

Jackson's crew also put together a blooper reel of him, to the tune of the Beatles' "Carry That Weight." In fact, the principle actors were all treated to gag reels of themselves that were screened at their respective going away parties. Liv Tyler, who portrays the Elf Princess Arwen, says that her reel's soundtrack was Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart." Tyler turns her head around in slow motion and sings, "turn around." She laughs, "It's like I'm flirting with the boys."

Orlando Bloom, who portrays Legolas the Elf, was presented with his bow and quivers, plus a gag reel that hinted at a special friendship between elf and man. Says Bloom, "My gag reel's got 'Hungry Eyes.' Legolas is turning, and then Aragorn pulls out his sword and then I'm throwing my bow." Bloom laughs. "Hungry eyes!"

Tyler would love to see these gag reels make it to the final cut of the DVD. "A lot of times when you go to the movies and you see someone you think, 'Oh, that's kind of like them,'" says Tyler. She'd like audiences get a chance to see the cast members as they really are. "We're total geeks!"

But no matter how much interest the general public might have in these gag reels, there's a good chance that, like the mysterious placement of those Elven tattoos, they will only be seen by the fellowship and its close, inner circle.
