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'From the ashes a fire shall be woken.'



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A Sense of Finality

By Markus Tschiedert

17 December 2003

Source: Green Cine

Viggo Mortensen: "I like the kind of king that it seems he's going to be."

For three years now, the crew and cast of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy have been running literally around the world giving interview after interview in which each and every one of them talk about the unique, life-changing experience of making these movies, and most of all, the sense of family that permeated what was not so much a set as a full-scale community the size of a small city. And if you missed the message in the papers, magazines, TV and radio interviews, you'll get it on the DVDs.

What's remarkable is that all this talk of family and warmth and a common sense of a shared mission seems to actually be true; what's doubly remarkable is that such a sense could be sustained over all those years among such varied personalities, from Elijah Wood, a kid of 18 when shooting started, to Ian McKellen, the seasoned stage actor in his 60s; it's also a group, or if you must, a fellowship bearing a wide range of political views, from John Rhys-Davies's outspoken support of the war against Iraq to Viggo Mortensen's just-as-

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outspoken opposition to it.

Mortensen, who made his film debut in 1985 in Peter Weir's *Witness*, hasn't been what most people think of when they hear the word "star," and it hasn't really bothered him. He's been quietly running an independent publishing house with a partner, shooting photos, drawing, writing poetry and short fiction and speaking at anti-war rallies. Sudden, immense fame is going to take some getting used to, but he seems to have a handle on it.

MT: Would you say that acting isn't necessarily a priority as far as all your other artistic activities are concerned?

VM: I wouldn't separate it any more than I would separate any other activity like photography or writing or any other interest I had as far as expressing myself or interacting with people or the world goes. I don't isolate it or give one precedence over the other or even separate it. It's all in the same bag, you know? You just reach in and say, "Oh, ok, camera. I'll do that. Audition? Ok."

MT: Did you enjoy being a king?

VM: Well, I didn't have long to be a king. It was mostly a story about becoming a king. What I like about the character and what I like about all the leader characters in the story, whether they be Galadriel or Elrond or Gandalf or Aragorn, is that they have open minds. They lack arrogance and have a great deal of humility. For the most part. I mean, they'll have their bad moments, too, which is interesting. All the heroic characters in this story have faults, or if not faults, moments of doubt.

I think it should almost be a requirement that leaders in our world have self-doubt, that they display a certain hesitation in certain situations. I mean, the price of acting rashly in our times, because of the weaponry involved and because of the amount of people involved, is great. And if you don't hesitate or if you don't consider the effects of your thoughts and your actions and your words on others around you as an individual or as a leader of a nation, then it's a dangerous thing.

I like the kind of king that it seems he's going to be, Aragorn. Because he's always shown an interest in finding common ground with others. If you think back before the Battle of Helm's Deep to the discussion with Theoden, he stands up for the idea of working with others rather than isolating yourself. He's always been that kind of character. With Legolas and Gimli, he tries to get them to get along, if he can. There are moments when he's impatient - I'll have to take these hobbits, or I'll have to do this or that.

He's accustomed to being by himself, and so, his task as an individual is to get used to being around more and more people. Which is not unlike the task, I suppose, that, as actors, because of the success of these movies, we've had to get used to, at least for the time being. Mostly, it's a good thing. It means you're connecting with people, that you've

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helped in some way to bring Tolkien's story to the screen, that you've captured the spirit of that. But on the down side, or the strange side, it's also a little weird sometimes, you know? You have to make this effort that you didn't expect to have to make in your life to make personal space. You have to think twice before you walk out the door, which is not something... It's different, but it's mostly a good thing. It's flattering, I guess. Mostly.

MT: How do you handle it, then?

VM: I don't go out. [laughs] No. I don't know. You just do. Every day is a little different and I'm aware of the fact that that's not going to last forever. A year from now, by virtue of what your job is or what public interest is, there'll be some other story that journalists will be into. But I do think that this one will have a lasting impact, just as the book has had. Not just because of the incredible advances, especially in this last part of the trilogy, that Peter made in terms of special effects, but because of what the story does. It does deal with things that we're not unfamiliar with; I think we all believe in one way or another that it is better to connect with others than not. Nobody tells you you have to do it. You can just go through your life in your decline, you know, that everybody has, that Galadriel calls the long defeat. Everybody's life is a long defeat. You lose your memory, you lose your strength, and then, you die. We all have that. But you can make something out of your life. You can connect with others. You can leave something for others. You can have some respect and consideration for what came before. These are ways in which you can live. It's what Tolkien was writing about. He was showing respect for other people who had told the same story in their way. And Peter Jackson, whether he was conscious of it or not, was respecting the sagas or any number of stories that Tolkien was respecting.

MT: Shooting these movies was especially painful for you. You broke a tooth...

VM: Yeah, but no more than... I don't know how painful in relation to other jobs or other things people suffer in life. Everybody involved in those battle scenes, for example, all the stunt players and all the actors, every single one of them, had similar injuries. It's just because I did so much of it, because my character probably fights - compared to how much I get to say and how much I fight, I probably fight more than anybody else. [laughs] I guess. Or right along with Gimli and Legolas, same thing. But we all got hurt. Everybody that was involved did. Now, the stunt players, they're not named individually. Whoever sprained an ankle or broke their leg or cut their head open, they're not written about. It's obviously because I'm an actor.

MT: What's the biggest change these films have brought about in your life?

VM: One obvious one is that I and others have been given other opportunities. I've already shot - it's finished and coming out in March - a movie called *Hidalgo*. It's directed by

Joe Johnston, who directed *October Sky*. Nice story, and we shot a lot of it in the Sahara Desert and in Morocco. Some of the same places where *Lawrence of Arabia* was shot.

Interestingly, I got to do scenes with Omar Sharif and talk to him about that; it was really an unusual opportunity. Obviously. To be in the Moroccan desert in some of the exact same places where they shot that 40 years ago or more with the same guy who, even though 40 years have gone by, has that same light in his eyes, that same intelligent intensity. But that's an opportunity I wouldn't have had if *The Fellowship of the Ring* hadn't been such a huge box office success. It's just a fact of business. So that's been helpful. And the others have had experiences that they wouldn't have had, either. More people have come to my exhibitions, more people have bought books from my publishing company, Perceval Press. Not just my books, but more importantly to me, other painters, other poets. Photographers like **Jorge Luis Alvarez Pupo** from Cuba, thanks to my being invited by the Fototeca; I mean, I had a show there and I met this guy and I never would've met him if I hadn't gone. I never would have seen his pictures, probably, and would never have made his book. So people have been buying this book of his, you know, these beautiful black and white images. Those are things that I'm happy about.

MT: And you've been sent a lot of screenplays.

VM: It's hard for me right now because we've been doing promotion for months and I don't really have much time. You think, "Ok, on the airplane, I'll read this script." But the airplane's also the one place where I can rest. So I usually end up falling asleep. It's hard to keep up right now, but yes, some things come my way. Obviously, the easy thing to do is to have someone do the same thing, so yes, there've been some things that have involved sword-fighting, of course.

MT: It's interesting that you've chosen to embrace the way of the artist as opposed to take the easy Hollywood route. Can you explain why?

VM: I don't really do my job as an actor for anyone but myself. And I don't mean that in a selfish sense. What I mean is, if you're going to interact with other people, or have a relationship with somebody or make something for public consumption, maybe read a poem publicly or in a movie, if you don't connect with yourself and think you've done a good job, how can you expect others to connect with it?

I'd do it for myself anyway. Before I got into acting, I was interested in one way or another in photography or writing stories or poems or making drawings or something because I like doing it. That's who I am. That's my way of being in the world. I imagine I'll keep doing things that way. Who knows? Part of being in the world is being open to changing your mind. But so far, I haven't changed my mind about that. That's what makes me comfortable. If I was going to change my mind and say, "Oh, this is what I want. I just want to be in fancy hotels like this, and I want people to bring me things,

and I want to sleep in as late as I want and I want people to say that I'm famous and that's what I want"; if I was going to do that, I probably would have done it already. I've had a couple of opportunities, and you know, I think it's interesting. You know, they have nice beds in this hotel. It's a nice change once in a while. Just like TV. I don't watch TV at home, but when I come to the hotel, it's like, all these pillows and TV! And it's like, this is great! God, why didn't I do this before, but every time, it lasts about 15 minutes before I get bored and switch off the TV.

MT: Is there a common denominator to all your various artistic endeavors?

VM: Curiosity, I suppose. I've been aware for as long as I can remember of the fact that I was going to die. I don't remember not being aware of that. And that, therefore, life is limited. And no matter how many movies you see or how many conversations you have or how many people you listen to or how many books you read or how many travel experiences you have, how many times you return to the same street or the same tree, you can never do it enough. So why not make the effort? You can't put everything off until tomorrow.

MT: Would you make a movie for free?

VM: Would I? Yeah, what have you got in mind?

MT: What sort of movie might it be?

VM: I don't know, I haven't seen one of those yet. But it might be a story that I loved or wrote. I would probably only make a movie for free if I was directing it and had final cut. It's unusual that they let anybody have that.

MT: Have you thought about directing?

VM: Yeah, I've thought about it. Obviously, I like imagery, I like words, I like actors, I like the process of storytelling. I wouldn't mind giving people an opportunity to be comfortable and tell a story together in the way we did *Lord of the Rings*. But I wouldn't do it unless I had final cut. Everybody has a different point of view. Everybody has a different point of view of Tolkien. If it was up to me, I certainly would have included scenes that aren't included in each of these three movies. Fortunately, many are included in the extended versions. But everybody has their point of view. I wouldn't go through the effort of making a movie or telling a story in that way for free necessarily unless I could finish it.

MT: May I ask you, why the United Nations?

VM: Why not? That's the point. Why not? That's the problem.

MT: Can you elaborate?

VM: Well, I think that you can say about the United Nations that there has been hypocrisy, that there have been problems

with the organization, but the actual phrase, United Nations, is one of the better phrases I know of. In some way, that's what this story is about, *The Lord of the Rings*. I have a problem with any individual in the story of *The Lord of the Rings* and in life who separates himself or herself. It's only pointless to do so in the end because, like it or not, we are all connected. I mean, we just are. And we are connected to our environment. These aren't just pretty concepts. It's just a fact. And if you deny that and separate yourself, then you're enslaving yourself in the end. You're imprisoning yourself. Just as anybody who is tempted by the Ring to control other people's wills by ignoring a connection they might have with them is imprisoning themselves and losing their individuality.

The United States, by evading responsibility to the environment in the case of, say, the Kyoto Protocol - which obviously, there are problems with just as there are with any idea, but the idea is good - by disregarding the United Nations, or feeling it doesn't apply to them - it's self-destructive. There's no future in that. So the United Nations is, I feel, a good concept and one that ought to be improved rather than disregarded completely.

MT: So it's a humanistic stance rather than a political one.

VM: I don't think you need to separate those ideas.

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Last edited: 19 February 2005 15:50:43 by JaneT