

# Dance Magic Dance

25 Years Of Labyrinth

When The Muppets met  
David Bowie, George  
Lucas and Monty  
Python's Terry Jones...

Words: Owen Williams





Is that a pixie in your pants or are you just pleased to see us? Bowie as Jareth the Goblin King: every girl's inner fantasy, apparently. Run away!

**F**or Ovid, the Minotaur-housing labyrinth at Knossos was a maze of “wandering passages” that “framed confusion and seduced the eye”. Herodotus believed the Egyptian Labyrinth on the west bank of the Nile surpassed the Pyramids in its spectacle and ambition: “baffling and intricate... an endless wonder.” Jean Luis Borges conceived his stories as labyrinths — cryptic tales in which the reader is tempted down dead-ends of mistaken perception. And Jim Henson’s *Labyrinth*... is all about goblins and David Bowie’s crotch.

After five years developing and creating the crazily ambitious fantasy *Dark Crystal* (see page 103), all involved might have been forgiven for vowing never again to leave Muppet movie territory. But for Henson, not one to sit back, the question was, “Shall we do another one, then?”

“I felt like I’d made my film and had had enough,” recalls *Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*’s conceptual artist Brian Froud. “But when Jim suggested working together again, I found myself thinking, ‘Well, why not?’”

Initial suggestions of “something to do with Indian mythology” seemed attractive, given the opportunities for colour and action and flying chariots, until both men realised they knew next to nothing about the subject. “But what flashed into my mind was goblins,” says Froud, “and Jim’s eyes lit up. Then the idea of the labyrinth occurred to me, because the thing about labyrinths is that they can have a metaphorical sense — they don’t have to just be a literal place. They can be something else as well...”

**P**artly as a retreat from the complexities of the indifferently received and solely puppet *Dark Crystal*, and partly in recognition of the fact that the Muppets had always achieved success when paired with real people, *Labyrinth* was immediately conceived as a project that would feature humans among the latex monsters. “That set the whole film really,” Froud says. “I had an instant vision of a baby surrounded by goblins, which I thought would look really striking. In European fairy tales, that’s what goblins do — they steal babies. I painted a picture of a baby surrounded by goblins, and then continued to paint other conceptual things, just ideas for characters. And the story developed from there.”

Following Frank Oz’s contributions to the *Star Wars* saga with Yoda, *Labyrinth* would in turn see George Lucas teaming with Henson as executive producer. “The reality of the art and science of puppets, and trying to create realistic rather than abstract puppets, was really what Jim and I had been working on from the very beginning,”

explains Lucas of the project’s attraction. “How can we make these look like real creatures? It’s a struggle because it’s a technological exercise more than anything else. Jim’s ability to combine old puppet techniques with state-of-the-art was his genius. He really understood how to make-believe and then make it real.”

With artistic and character designs underway, the writer initially charged with creating *Labyrinth*’s narrative was the Canadian poet and children’s author Dennis Lee (who would go on to write most of the lyrics for the songs in Henson TV show *Fraggle Rock*). Before long, however, the project found its way to Terry Jones. Coincidentally, Jones had been thinking of getting in touch with Henson anyway.

“I was thinking about adapting my book, *Erik The Viking*, into a film, and I thought I’d ring Jim Henson’s office to see if they’d like to do the monsters,” Jones tells *Empire*. “And they said they’d just been trying to get hold of me the day before! Jim’s daughter Lisa had read *Erik* and said I might be a good fit for *Labyrinth*. Jim came round to my house in Camberwell and I remember he couldn’t take his eyes off our dog, which was a long-haired Jack Russell terrier. It eventually became the basis for the knight, Sir Didymus. Mitch The Bitch was immortalised in Muppet form!”

An example of the more obviously Muppet characters that *Labyrinth* sports in contrast to *The Dark Crystal*, Didymus was performed by The Great Gonzo himself, Dave Goelz. Unusually, though, the voice belonged to someone else — David Shaughnessy. “Jim did want to stylistically break from the Muppets,” Goelz explains, “and he just didn’t want any of our voices to be recognisable. There are only so many different sounds one person can make. He later told me that the hard part, once the filming had happened with the original temporary voices — our own — was to find another voice that could be slotted in and still work. But I think he did a great job.”

Dennis Lee’s work did not much impress Jones, although it did surprise him. “Rather than write a script, he’d written a poetic novella,” Jones recalls with a degree of incredulity, “and he hadn’t actually finished it, so it wasn’t even a complete thing. I can’t remember if Brian Froud had been designing from this novella or not, but I didn’t really get on with it, so I discarded it and sat down with Brian’s drawings and sifted through them and found ones that I really liked, and started creating the story from them. I think the only thing I kept from the novella was Hoggle squirting the fairies. I thought that was funny!”

Yet Jones quickly found that his ideas were not entirely simpatico with Henson’s, and >>





his intentions to come up with an environmentalist parable, and to keep the Goblin King off-screen for the entire film before revealing him as a Wizard Of Oz-like charlatan at the end, were politely but firmly declined by the director.

"Jim said he wanted it to be more a young girl's coming-of-age story," Jones remembers, "and he wanted to show the centre of the labyrinth sooner, because he wanted to play around a lot there. I really thought we shouldn't see the centre of the labyrinth before the girl does, otherwise what's the hook for the audience? The other thing, of course, was that Jim wanted to approach Michael Jackson or David Bowie to play Jareth, and have him sing and appear all the way through. I had to re-write it to fit in with that."

would allow him to write a whole film's worth of music for children — "I'd done *The Laughing Gnome*, so I thought I might as well go all the way!" — Bowie was impressed by a screenplay he found "amusing without being vicious or spiteful or bloody, and with more heart than many other special-effects movies".

Bowie's time on set was limited, and he was kept sequestered by a somewhat overbearing PA, but Froud says that their single brief meeting was at least a memorable one. "I met David in his dressing room, and gave him this flute that we'd made out of an animal bone. He leapt up onto the dressing table, with the mirror with the lights round it, and he hunkered down and played it, and he just became this extraordinary Pan-like figure. It was wonderful. But he never did it in the film!"

Froud's subsequent dealings with Bowie were at a distance, but "my wife Wendy was often at his feet as he was throwing our child around!" (Baby Toby was played by Toby Froud.)

Bowie's understanding of Jareth was that he was at best a romantic, at worst "a spoilt child, vain and temperamental — kind of like

a rock star!" In that way, Jareth embodies both an alter-ego of the similarly bratty Sarah (Jennifer Connelly), who prays for the goblins to take her baby brother away in the first place, and, in a detail that's sometimes missed, a character cobbled together from Sarah's adolescent preoccupations.

The idea, Froud explains to *Empire*, was always that Sarah, reaching the age of sexual awakening, is a lustful fan of Bowie-like rock stars, and therefore creates Jareth in a Bowie-like image. "We're not looking at reality, we're inside this girl's head," explains the artist. "There are references to all sorts of things in his costume. There's the danger of a leather boy in his leather jacket, which also has a reference to the armour of a certain type of German knight in it; there are references to Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*; and the tight trousers are a reference to ballet dancers. He's an amalgam of the inner fantasies of this girl. Everyone always talks about Bowie's perv pants, but there was a reason for it all! It has a surface that's fairly light, but then every so often you go, 'Oh, my God! How did we get away with that?!'"

## "The Bog Of Eternal Stench? Yes, that sounds like me!" Terry Jones

Following Jones' re-writes, the screenplay passed through other hands — including Ishtar writer/director Elaine May's — before returning to the ex-Python a year or so later. "Jim said to me, 'Er, well, I think we've messed it up. It's not funny now — can you do something with it?'" laughs Jones. "So I basically pulled it back to my second draft. I was actually thinking at one point about taking my name off it, but then Jim rang me up and said he'd like to give me sole screenplay credit, and I just couldn't for the life of me think how to refuse!"

**W**e can only imagine the Michael Jackson Labyrinth, since the role of Jareth the Goblin King ultimately, of course, fell to Bowie, convinced backstage during his 1983 tour by Froud's designs and a video of *The Dark Crystal*. Long on the lookout for a project that



### Fuzzy Morals

When Muppets go R-rated...

#### Meet The Feebles (1989)

In the hands of Peter Jackson, the Muppets get a 'rakeover' as sex-addicted, drug-snorting showbiz monsters.



#### Avenue Q (2003)

Sex. Drinking. Internet porn. A huge West End hit, this explicit comedy for, er, older puppets, is currently touring the UK (left).

#### Stuffed and Unstrung (2010)

In response to Avenue Q, The Henson Company now has its own stage show, a "madcap media romp", featuring 80 puppets and six comedians.

#### Mongrels (2010)

This BBC3 show with animal puppets opened with a cat dining on its owner's corpse. Nice. "It's Avenue Q meets Family Guy," says creator Adam Miller.

#### The Happytime Murders

Brian Henson's comedy thriller promises to do for Muppets what *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* did for 'toons. It's now in development. **David Hughes**



**T**he majority of the beasts Sarah meets on her quest to recover her brother can be glimpsed before she even enters the labyrinth, as stuffed toys, games, bookends and pictures in

her bedroom. Her bookshelves are revealing too — she has copies of *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland*, Grimm's *Fairy Tales* and *Outside Over There* by Maurice Sendak, a book that involves a girl who's jealous of her baby sister, but undertakes a quest to retrieve her when she's kidnapped by goblins. "Jim was an admirer of Sendak," says Froud, "but we based *Labyrinth* on a European folklore. We can only assume Sendak was using the same sources. The link between his work and ours was only noticed well into production." The film's end credits give a nod to Sendak as a non-specific inspiration.

"It sort of fell between two stools," Terry Jones says of the film. "It didn't really end up as the story I wanted to tell, but I don't know if it was quite the story Jim imagined either. I think I was a bit nervous about how much of what I wrote would end up in the film, but it does mostly resemble my second draft. The hands that help Sarah down the shaft are mine, and the hat that talks back to the old man. The Bog Of Eternal Stench? Yes, that sounds like me!"

"At first I felt the girl was not sympathetic," laughs Goelz, "but I'd never had a teenage daughter at that time. I didn't realise that this is a normal thing! Once the film came out, I watched it a few times and I started to really feel what it was about, and now I love *Labyrinth*. It's all over the place but it's so good in its own way."

"It wasn't 'cobbled together' exactly," says Froud, "but Terry was writing new scenes very late into production. He kept flicking through my sketchbook and going, 'Ooh! I like that!' The door-knockers and the hat were classic examples. Terry just ran with that stuff. It didn't end up as his whole vision, but it wouldn't have been the same without him!"

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Left: Jennifer Connelly says she felt like "a walking puppet" during her child-star days. We wonder why... Below: Producer George Lucas with Dave 'n' Jim.



## Dark Muppets

**Before *Labyrinth* there was *The Dark Crystal* — Henson's fantastical '80s oddbod...**

One of the earliest Muppet Shows sees the Presidents on Mount Rushmore swapping jokes with one another, but Jim Henson's earliest treatment for what became *The Dark*



*Crystal* features talking edifices of a different kind. "The mountains converse with one another in incomplete thought phrases," the treatment reads. "Their speech pattern is slow and mannered. Although sometimes forgetful, they are environmental historians, witnesses to all past and present."

It may make you question what Henson had been smoking, but it's clear evidence of *The Dark Crystal*'s ambition. The film took five years to make. Author ACH Smith, brought in to write the novelisation, recalls wading

through "two feet of research, sketches and background thinking stuff", including an entire language created by children's writer Alan Garner, later discarded when it was decided that titling all the monsters might be *A Bit Much*.

The film marked the first collaboration between Henson and Brian Froud, a relationship that would continue through *Labyrinth*, *The Storyteller* and an unrealised troll project.

"In the late '70s I got a call from Jim's office," Froud says. "Jim had seen a couple of my books and had asked if I'd like to meet with him. He outlined a few possibilities of what *The Dark Crystal* might be, and asked if I'd be interested in the project. It ended up being years of my life! We started with nine people and eventually ended up with nearly 400."

"Jim had a Victorian Empire sense of design style," says producer Duncan Kenworthy. "It was a quite high-style — a lot of red plush, and slightly *Grand Guignol*. Allied to Brian Froud's vision, it made for a lot of *The Dark Crystal*'s look."

"One of the inspirations was a kid's book with crocodiles living in a castle," Froud reveals. "He liked the juxtaposition of something reptilian with something palatial and beautiful."

The story concocted was one of a fantasy land in turmoil, with the evil Skeksis and the kindly UrRu ("They were the OoUrs until we realised it sounded like Frankie Howerd!" laughs Froud) and a prophecy involving the almost extinct Gelflings. "All the big concepts came from Jim," Froud says, "but as we were designing it, the personalities came through. It developed organically." The artist recalls co-director Frank Oz gleefully encouraging him to "make the Skeksis worse!"

After its release in 1982, the perplexing vision finally found its fanbase on video.

"It's a strange film," says Froud. "But there's a purity to it that will always hold up. Nobody would dare attempt anything like it again! Jim was always pushing the boundaries of puppetry. With *The Dark Crystal*, we didn't once consider who the audience might be. We made it for us."

**Owen Williams**

