

The Frodo Franchise

The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood

Kristin Thompson



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"Thompson has written the definitive study of the remarkable production entity created by Peter Jackson." —**Alex Funke, ASC**, Oscar-winning Visual Effects Director of Photography, miniatures unit, *The Lord of the Rings*

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This book is an independent work of scholarship. It is based on the author's own research, which included interviews with many of the artists, writers, and business people who participated in the making of *The Lord of the Rings* motion pictures and related projects. The author has attempted to verify the factual accuracy of the information presented here; nothing is made up or imagined. Many people involved with *The Lord of the Rings* motion pictures have assisted the author's research on this book by providing information and materials to her. However, no person or entity associated with the producers of *The Lord of the Rings* motion pictures has sponsored the research or writing of the book or endorsed the final product.

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CHAPTER I

Prudent Aggression

I always got the impression that, as far as studios go, New Line definitely had a tradition of allowing the filmmaker to run with it.

RICK PORRAS

Coproducer, *The Lord of the Rings*

THE STORY HAS A CHARMING David-and-Goliath quality. A Hollywood studio entrusts hundreds of millions of dollars to an eccentric, largely unknown director from a distant country where film production barely exists. He undertakes to adapt a beloved classic book with a devoted cult following—a large cult, certainly, but hardly enough to ensure box-office success for such an expensive venture. The director refuses to leave the little country, instead building a world-class filmmaking infrastructure in his neighborhood. He shoots three long features simultaneously and creates the biggest box-office franchise in history. To top it off, despite being in the despised fantasy genre, the three parts of *The Lord of the Rings* win a total of seventeen Oscars.

These days, any expensive Hollywood feature that actually makes it to the screen relies on considerable luck and travels a circuitous path to completion. That said, *Rings* needed—and had—more lucky breaks than most, and its path was circuitous indeed. Peter Jackson has pointed out just how unlikely success might have seemed at the outset:

If you were entrusting \$270 million to someone making three movies, you wouldn't choose me. You would not choose a little New Zealand digital effects company to do your digital effects, either. And you wouldn't choose Philippa Boyens, who's one of our co-writers, to write the screenplay, because she has

never written a script before in her life [laughs]. I like the way that this project has, somehow, against all common sense, gotten itself made.¹

True in a way, but we should probably amend this to “against all apparent common sense.” Hollywood studios do not make such important decisions on whims, and the executives at New Line Cinema and the many other companies that invested in and ultimately made large amounts of money on *Rings* had solid reasons for thinking that there was a decent chance of success.

Despite the high budget and his own lack of a track record, Jackson was able to keep a remarkable degree of control over the *Rings* project, partly by making the film far from New Line headquarters, partly by having sympathetic producers working with him, and partly by sheer stubbornness. (Ian McKellen described him as “a terrier” when it came to disputes with the studio.) The proof was also in the pudding. Even during the early design and shooting stages of production, Jackson and his team were able to show visiting New Line officials props, sets, costumes, and computer images that convincingly displayed the high quality of the work that was going into the films.

So it was common sense, although of a very high order, that brought *Rings* along its convoluted path from cult fantasy to major international franchise.

ZAENTZ AND ZAENTZ ABILITY

Projects to adapt *Rings* into a film began within a few years of the three volumes’ original publication in 1954 and 1955. On 4 September 1957, Forrest J. Ackerman, then a literary agent, visited Tolkien and presented him with some sample pictures and a treatment for a proposed animated film based on the novel. Although Tolkien was impressed by the images, he heartily disliked the synopsis and in June of the following year wrote a lengthy critique of it (“[Morton Grady] Z[immerman] may think that he knows more about Balrogs than I do, but he cannot expect me to agree with him”).²

Yet Tolkien was pragmatic. For many years before the royalties for *Rings* started to appear, he had supplemented his modest professor’s income by drudging at exam grading during the summer. Fearing that the royalties from the trilogy would decline, Tolkien was willing to talk terms: “[Publisher] Stanley U[nwin] and I have agreed on our policy: Art or Cash. Either very profitable terms indeed; or absolute author’s veto on objectionable features or alterations.”³ Rayner Unwin soon succeeded his father as Tolkien’s editor at Allen & Unwin. Inexperienced in coping with movie rights, the firm hired a Hol-

lywood agent—who ultimately proved of little assistance. In 1959, Ackerman abandoned his project. During the previous year he had founded the magazine *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. As part of his subsequent role as the guru of horror fandom, he would also appear in cameo roles in numerous films, including Peter Jackson's *Braindead* (1992).

In 1967, two producers, Gabe Katzka and Sam Gelfman, set out to obtain the film rights to *Rings*, intending to make a feature for United Artists. Unwin writes that their inquiries started “a negotiation of nearly two years’ duration that was eventually consummated in a fifty-page contract, the complexities and uncertainties of which have dogged the publishers and the author’s estate ever since.” In October 1969, the contract was finally signed, and “what seemed substantial sums of money” were paid.⁴ “Complexities and uncertainties” may refer to the fact that the contract granted the film rights in perpetuity, rather than the normal arrangement of a limited period of time. The lapse would prove crucial to Jackson’s project.

During the two years of negotiations, Apple Films, the Beatles’ production company, also became interested in adapting *Rings*, to star the Fab Four. Apple discovered that the rights to the novel were apparently soon to belong to United Artists. Given that the group’s first two films, *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965), had been distributed in the United States by United Artists, a relatively straightforward arrangement for a *Rings* project seemed not impossible, and indeed the *Hollywood Reporter* stated that United Artists was in talks to involve the Beatles.⁵ Not surprisingly, Apple’s inquiries to David Lean, Stanley Kubrick, and Michelangelo Antonioni failed to secure a director for the project, which went no further. Instead United Artists commissioned a script—not intended for the Beatles—from John Boorman, but that project also came to nothing. The rights sat with United Artists.

Producer Saul Zaentz, whose main source of income at the time was Fantasy Records, was also moving into film production in the 1970s. Fantasy Films’ first significant release was *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), which won a Best Picture Academy Award. (Zaentz has also produced two other Best Picture winners: *Amadeus* in 1984 and *The English Patient* in 1996.) Zaentz acquired the film rights to *Rings* from United Artists in 1976. He also obtained from the Tolkien Estate the trademarks for the names of all the characters, places, and objects in the novels. According to Unwin, however, “The 1969 contract, a complicated and ambiguous document especially in its definition of merchandising rights, has been a perpetual source of trouble, and although efforts are spasmodically made to redefine areas under dispute in the

light of the new technologies that are now evolving, the [Tolkien] Estate and Fantasy Films have tended to block each other's actions and have consequently exploited very few non-book rights."⁶ Zaentz set up Tolkien Enterprises in 1978; the company licenses "dramatizations, musicals, puppet performances, services and merchandise using the Tolkien trademarks."

Zaentz produced one film based on the *Rings* rights: Ralph Bakshi's animated *J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings* (1978), which covered the trilogy's first half. Its critical and commercial failure meant that the intended second part wasn't made.⁷ There matters concerning the film rights to *Rings* sat for nearly two decades. (Figure 2 provides an outline of the convoluted path *Rings* took before reaching the screen.)

About ten years after Bakshi's film appeared, a young filmmaker in New Zealand was struggling to make his first feature. Peter Jackson had been born in 1961 in the small town of Pukerua Bay, a short way up the western coast of New Zealand's North Island from the capital city of Wellington. Jackson's fascination with film had been fired at the age of nine, when he saw *King Kong* (1933) on television, and he began shooting his own version of *Kong* and other films on 8mm, using homemade models and prosthetics. Upon getting out of school in 1978, he was rejected for a job in the government's postproduction company, The Film Unit. Twenty years later he would buy The Film Unit and transform it into one of the world's most sophisticated postproduction facilities.

Jackson instead got a job as a photoengraver at a newspaper. On weekends he worked with friends on more 8mm films. In 1983 he bought a used 16mm camera and began a planned ten-minute short, *Roast of the Day*. The next year the success of Sam Raimi's microbudget film, *The Evil Dead*, convinced Jackson that it was possible to shoot a commercially successful horror film on 16mm, and the short quickly evolved into the feature-length *Bad Taste*. In 1986, Jackson applied to the government's funding body, the New Zealand Film Commission, for money to complete his project.

The Film Commission was understandably puzzled by the footage of Jackson's cheerfully gory tale of space aliens invading earth and slaughtering people to supply meat for fast-food restaurants—a puzzlement no doubt compounded by the fact that *Bad Taste* had been shot silent. The commission asked veteran film editor Jamie Selkirk for his opinion. Selkirk was a bit puzzled himself, but he saw signs of a good eye and distinct talent. He recommended that it be funded and ended up serving as editor for *Bad Taste* and nearly all of Jackson's subsequent films—culminating in a Best Editing Oscar for *The Return of the King*. Selkirk also became one of Jackson's business

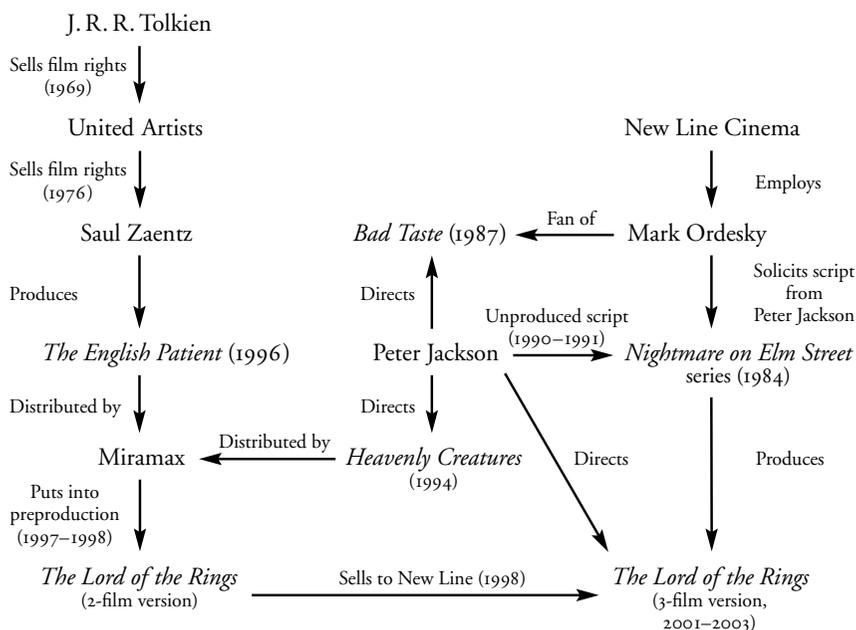


Figure 2. Genealogy of *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. (By the author.)

partners in building Weta Ltd., the special-effects company at the core of Wellington’s growing filmmaking infrastructure.

Upon receiving NZ\$30,000 from the Film Commission, Jackson quit his newspaper job and finished *Bad Taste*, which was released in 1988 and distributed in thirty territories internationally.⁸ He cemented his reputation as a director of eccentric, blood-drenched films with *Meet the Feebles* (1989), a perverse tale of Muppet-like creatures involved in the behind-the-scenes intrigues of a popular television program that lead to mass murder. His next feature, *Braindead* (1992; aka *Dead Alive*), was a comic zombie film with a notoriously sanguinary finale.

Jackson’s tongue-in-cheek splatter films, screened at various horror and fantasy festivals, spawned a cult following. His next film, however, brought him a new audience. With partner Fran Walsh, he wrote *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), a psychological drama based on the true story of two teenagers who develop an obsessively close relationship and murder the mother of one of them when she threatens to separate them. The film was a critical success and played widely in art cinemas. It even earned an Oscar nomination for

its script. Ultimately, though, it grossed only \$3 million on a \$5 million budget.

Although it was far from apparent at the time, *Heavenly Creatures* also created two factors that would enable Jackson to make *Rings*. First, the American distributor of *Heavenly Creatures* was Miramax, a prestigious art-film distribution company that would later acquire the rights for *Rings* from Zaentz and launch Jackson's production. Second, in 1993 Jackson had seen Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* and realized that the future of special effects lay in computer-generated imagery (CGI). He and Walsh added some psychological-fantasy sequences to *Heavenly Creatures*, using the creation of these shots as the justification for acquiring Weta Ltd.'s first computer.

Also in 1993, Jackson and Walsh submitted a ghost story script for a proposed *Tales from the Crypt* film series, to be made by major directors like Robert Zemeckis. Instead, Zemeckis offered to produce *The Frighteners* for Universal, to be directed by Jackson, who persuaded Zemeckis to let him make the film in New Zealand. Weta's computing power rose from one computer to around fifty, and 570 effects shots were done for *The Frighteners*. (*Jurassic Park*, made two years earlier, had about fifty computer-generated shots.)⁹

At the same time that he was making *The Frighteners*, Jackson codirected another project with his longtime friend Costa Botes (who would later film extensive candid footage of the making of *Rings*). A TV mockumentary called *Forgotten Silver* (1996), it purportedly told the story of Colin McKenzie, an overlooked New Zealand film pioneer. *Forgotten Silver* featured convincing "talking heads" interviews, simulated footage from McKenzie's silent films, and a framing story of Jackson's earnest search for the remains of the great man's work. Many viewers took *Forgotten Silver* for an actual documentary, and controversy erupted when the public learned that their patriotic fervor over a neglected national genius had been aroused for nothing. Apart from being a clever film, *Forgotten Silver* gave Jackson experience with directing two overlapping productions: "Jackson swore he'd never again make two films at the same time. 'Ultimately it proved to be good training,' he says with a grin."¹⁰

The terms of the *Heavenly Creatures* distribution deal had left Miramax with a first-look option on Jackson's future projects. Any film property that he owned or controlled would have to be offered to the company, and if he didn't control the rights, Miramax would have to try and obtain them. When Zemeckis offered Jackson *The Frighteners*, Miramax had nothing for him to direct, so it agreed to a standard "suspend and extend" arrangement, whereby Miramax's first-look deal would be lengthened by the amount of time Jackson spent on *The Frighteners*.

By the autumn of 1995, the CGI work for *The Frighteners* was going so well that Jackson and his colleagues decided to seek another, even more effects-heavy, project. In late September or early October, Jackson asked his agent, Ken Kamins, to track down the film rights for *Rings*. Kamins quickly discovered that Zaentz owned them. Because of the first-look deal with Miramax, Jackson and Kamins contacted the firm's president, Harvey Weinstein. Jackson's initial pitch was to make *The Hobbit* first and then, if it was successful, to go on to *Rings*, filming it in two parts, back-to-back.

Weinstein was excited about the idea and revealed that, by a happy coincidence, he had recently come to Zaentz's rescue when his project to produce *The English Patient* had nearly fallen through. Twentieth Century Fox had been set to produce the film with Zaentz, but disputes over casting led it to pull the plug about five weeks before shooting was due to start. Miramax stepped in and financed the film. Apart from its six Oscars, including Best Picture, *The English Patient* was Zaentz's top-earning film, with a \$228 million worldwide gross. Zaentz definitely owed Miramax a favor.

The problem was that, although Zaentz owned the production rights to *The Hobbit*, its distribution rights had somehow stayed with United Artists. For *Rings*, however, he had a full set of rights. By 1995, United Artists had merged with MGM to form MGM/UA. Weinstein approached the company about the rights, but since MGM/UA was up for sale, it was not about to let any of its assets go. (Sony's purchase of United Artists in 2004 further delayed any negotiations over *The Hobbit*'s distribution rights.) In early 1996, Weinstein told Jackson that they should start with *Rings* rather than *The Hobbit*. Despite Zaentz's debt of gratitude to Weinstein, the negotiations dragged on for nearly a year.

In the spring of 1996, Zemeckis got wind that one of Universal's planned summer films would not be finished in time. He suggested that Jackson put together a reel of clips from *The Frighteners* to show Universal. The studio was excited by the footage and decided to move the film from its planned Halloween slot and plug it into its June gap. The buzz in Hollywood was that, just as Steven Spielberg had mentored Zemeckis as a director, Zemeckis was now doing the same for Jackson. Jackson began to receive other directing offers. Universal wanted him to do a remake of *King Kong*, a prospect he found just as exciting as *Rings*. Fox came to him with a remake of *Planet of the Apes*, at that time with James Cameron attached as producer and Arnold Schwarzenegger as star. There was still some hope that Weinstein's negotiations with Zaentz would end soon. Jackson found himself with three potential blockbusters on his plate.

On Monday, 1 April, Kamins got home at 11:00 P.M. and found an urgent message to call Jackson. It turned out that as work on *The Frighteners* was ending, headhunters from the big special-effects companies in the United States, who had heard rumors about the film's technical sophistication, were trying to lure away his staff of CGI animators. To keep them on, Jackson had to offer them a project. He needed to know by the end of the week which of the three films he would be making. Kamins requested that the three companies make specific offers immediately, and they did so.

On the *Apes* deal, Jackson was worried about working with two such powerful personalities as Cameron and Schwarzenegger. As Kamins puts it, "There was no way that he wasn't going to be the caboose on that train." Jackson passed on it. (Ironically, in 2001 it ended up being directed by Tim Burton, without either Cameron or Schwarzenegger being involved.) Weinstein still didn't have the rights to *Rings*, but he was furious at the possibility of having to suspend and extend his contract with Jackson again while the director made *Kong*.

Ultimately Jackson proposed a compromise. Universal would own domestic rights on *Kong*, with Miramax taking the foreign rights. For *Rings*, Miramax would distribute in the United States, and Universal would take it abroad. Weinstein complained that he would be trading two films (since *Rings* was still planned for two parts) for one from Universal. Universal agreed to throw in the rights for a project called *Shakespeare in Love*, and the deal was settled.

When *The Frighteners* came out in June, Jackson's team was at work on *Kong's* script and design. In the meantime, Weinstein continued the difficult negotiations with Zaentz over the *Rings* rights. By early 1997, Universal was getting cold feet. *The Frighteners* had opened on the first weekend of the summer Olympics rather than at Halloween, and it had not done well. Moreover, other studios' projects for films about Mighty Joe Young and Godzilla might steal *Kong's* thunder. Universal decided to pull the plug. Jackson and Walsh were devastated at having to tell their crew that all their work had been for nothing.

Fortunately, at about the same time, on 22 January 1997, Weinstein had officially acquired the rights to *Rings*.¹¹ Kamins gives him credit for sticking by Jackson when the *Kong* deal fell through: "Harvey could have looked at this situation with *The Frighteners* and used it as an opportunity either to attempt to alter Peter's deal, because Peter was in a weakened position—he didn't do that—and he could have used it as a opportunity to lose faith in Peter altogether and simply say, 'You know what, I do have these rights, but I don't want to do this movie with you anymore.' And he didn't do that either." Jack-

son's team finally had a big, effects-heavy project that it would be able to finish—though not without further disappointments and deals.

THE MIRAMAX PERIOD

As planning on *Rings* began, Weinstein sat Jackson down in the Miramax screening room to watch Bakshi's animated film. The truncated version was exactly what they did not want to end up with and confirmed the wisdom of proceeding with two feature-length parts shot simultaneously. They were to be tentatively budgeted at \$70 million for both, which seems absurdly small in retrospect but was a departure from the company's typical modest projects.

Working in Wellington, Jackson and Walsh began by writing one long script, planning to figure out later how to divide it into two films: *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The War of the Ring*. In August 1997 Walsh's friend Philippa Boyens, a writer and longtime Tolkien fan who had never done a film script, came on board. Steven Sinclair, who had scripted *Braindead* and coscripted *Meet the Feebles*, participated in the writing for a time and received credit on *Towers*. While they wrote, Weta worked intensively on the designs, construction, miniature building, and R & D for the special-effects programs. *Rings* spent about eighteen months in preproduction.

As the script progressed, it became apparent that the film would cost more than the announced budget. Bob Weinstein, Harvey's brother, was in charge of Dimension, a division of Miramax that was coproducing *Rings*. By early 1998, he was concerned about the rising costs and disinclined to continue the project. There were rumors that the company might put the film into turnaround.¹² ("Turnaround" means that a project already in progress is halted and put on the market to find a new producer.) Harvey was, however, keen to carry on, seeking ways to reduce costs. Boyens recalls the scriptwriters receiving a note that read, "What do you need four Hobbits for? Why not two?" and Jackson says: "Harvey was giving us notes, and he sounded like a guy from the mafia and says, 'Look, ya gotta kill one of the Hobbits. One of the Hobbits has to die.'"¹³

In June 1998, when the two scripts were nearing completion, it became apparent that the project would cost close to \$140 million. Harvey Weinstein took his case to Disney's studio chairman, Joe Roth, who in turn took it to the chairman and CEO, Michael Eisner. Eisner, who had recently demanded cost-cutting measures, refused, saying that the budget cap for Miramax was \$75 million. The company was not supposed to be making big-budget films that would compete with Disney's own. Besides, Eisner had no faith in the project.¹⁴

Eisner's refusal meant reducing *Rings* to a single two-hour feature. Weinstein met with Jackson and Walsh to give them the bad news. Miramax owned the rights, the company had sunk about \$10 million into preproduction, and Weinstein had no intention of simply abandoning the project. Jackson and Walsh returned to Wellington and discussed whether they could settle for doing one film. Jackson recalls, "We got home, decided this was not something that we wanted to do. We knew that decision could end our careers, but we thought, We could do TV films." If they abandoned the project, all the designs, models, weapons, and other work already accomplished by Weta would belong to Miramax. According to Jackson, Weinstein's plan was to turn the film over to long-established television director John Madden, who had recently moved into filmmaking with *Mrs. Brown* (1997), a biopic that had been distributed by Miramax. His most famous film, *Shakespeare in Love*, which Universal had traded away to make *Kong* possible, was to be released in December of that year.¹⁵

Had Jackson's team been able to stay with Miramax and make *Rings* in two parts, the result would probably have been fundamentally different from the film that ultimately got made. Possibly Weinstein would have steered the film more toward a middlebrow "quality" literary adaptation of the *English Patient* variety and less toward the genre film that it became. Jackson emphasizes that the Miramax period had very little influence on the finished film, since the casting was crucial and he never even got to the stage of discussing it.

LAST DITCH FOR PJ PITCH

It was a great idea on Peter's part. Let's come up with
a making-of of a movie that hasn't been made yet.

RICK PORRAS
Coproducer, *Rings*

In June, shortly after Harvey Weinstein's ultimatum, Kamins convinced him to give Jackson one last chance by putting *Rings* into turnaround. Such sales of in-progress films are not uncommon, and some have become major hits for their new owners. Warner Bros. decided it did not want *Home Alone*, and the project was snapped up by Twentieth Century Fox—which also bought *Speed* and *There's Something about Mary* in turnaround. Miramax and New Line have been credited as the most successful firms at plucking winners from the ranks of films abandoned by other studios. Miramax obtained *Pulp Fiction* after TriStar put it into turnaround, and it took over *Good Will Hunt-*

ing from Castle Rock.¹⁶ Like *Rings*, both *Rush Hour* and *Elf* were put into turnaround by Disney and picked up by New Line—two more instances of Eisner’s misjudgments redounding to the advantage of New Line founder and copresident, Bob Shaye.

Weinstein has spoken bitterly of Eisner’s decision to radically cut the project’s budget: “Disney didn’t believe in it, wouldn’t give me the money to make the film. I gave Peter the worst turnaround in the history of turnarounds, because I didn’t want to lose it. I gave him three weeks to find another taker. I said, ‘Nobody’s gonna buy it.’”¹⁷ The terms that Weinstein formulated were draconian. The time allotted for the search was short. Any company that wanted *Rings* would have to pay within twenty-four hours a lump sum of around \$12 million: \$10 million for all preproduction costs incurred thus far and \$2 million for the New Zealand currency Miramax had bought forward. (Ordinarily only 10 percent of the total would be paid up front, and the rest after the film was finished.) That studio would then own all the designs, props, and technology so far devised by Weta. Miramax would not help sell the project; Jackson himself would have to find a buyer.¹⁸ Harvey and Bob Weinstein would be credited as executive producers, and Miramax would receive 5 percent of gross international box-office receipts. Zaentz would also receive a significant percentage of the gross.

Jackson quickly returned to Wellington and at his own expense put together a thirty-six-minute VHS tape about the project to use in potential pitch sessions with Hollywood executives. It was basically a making-of documentary about a film that hadn’t yet been made, designed to show that special-effects technology could cope with Tolkien’s story, that the money spent so far had gone for worthwhile film elements, and that Jackson was capable of directing the project. The result contained a few dramatized scenes using storyboard images and local actors’ voices. These scenes were interspersed with dramatically lit images of maquettes (high-quality models) of monsters and Orcs, drawings by noted Tolkien illustrators Alan Lee and John Howe, and talking-head interviews with Jackson, Lee, Howe, and various Weta Digital technicians explaining their early experiments with the Massive program for generating realistic crowd scenes. In the tape, Jackson betrays no sense that the production was most likely coming to an end as far as he was concerned. Instead, he appears utterly confident, even though all the preproduction work had halted abruptly when the film went into turnaround.

Meanwhile, Kamins contacted all the main production firms in Hollywood. Only two were interested enough to make appointments to allow Jackson and Walsh to pitch their project: PolyGram and New Line. PolyGram was a

Dutch company, the world's third-largest producer of recorded music, that had released several successful independent films in the United States during the mid-1990s: *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Shallow Grave* (both 1994), *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *Trainspotting*, *Fargo* (both 1996), and *Bean* (1997). When Turner Broadcasting System and Time Warner had merged in 1996, Time Warner tried to sell its subsidiary, New Line, hoping to use the proceeds to help pay down debt. PolyGram was briefly interested, but ultimately no buyer wanted to pay the \$800 million to \$1 billion asking price. (Turner had paid \$550 million for New Line in 1994.)¹⁹ By mid-1998, PolyGram's costly failures had outweighed its hits, and it was about to be sold and split up, with its film division going to USA Films. When *Rings* was in turnaround, PolyGram could hardly take on any projects, let alone a pricey epic.

New Line's interest in *Rings* initially came from the president of the firm's art-house subsidiary, Fine Line. Mark Ordesky had been a fan of Jackson's ever since *Bad Taste*, and in 1990 he had gotten the director a job writing a script for an entry in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series. The script was never produced, but the two had remained friends. Ordesky informed Shaye of the availability of the *Rings* project and convinced him to listen to Jackson's pitch. Kamins, Walsh, and Marty Katz, Miramax's line producer for *Rings*, were also present at that meeting. This crucial moment in the history of the film has been reported and interpreted by several of the people present. What happened is well known, but why did it happen?

Before the actual pitch session started, Shaye drew Jackson aside. According to Ordesky, Shaye wanted to assure Jackson that he admired *Heavenly Creatures* and hoped to work with him one day even if he decided not to undertake *Rings*. Jackson apparently saw the little exchange as a sign of Shaye's honesty: "The first thing Bob said was, 'I liked "Heavenly Creatures," but I didn't like "The Frighteners."' I thought this was the most amazing thing: In Hollywood, someone is telling you they don't like your film. I just thought, 'cool.'"²⁰

Jackson began with a verbal presentation, explaining why it was the right time to make *Rings*. He showed off art-department sketches and stressed that the novel was an epic drama, not a fantasy. According to Ordesky, "We talked about the two scripts and how Miramax only wanted to make one film, and that was why they had this three-week window to set LOTR up elsewhere. I had already read the two scripts; Bob had not."²¹

This introduction led into the pitch videotape. Ordesky had warned Jackson, Walsh, and Kamins that Shaye might simply turn off the tape after several minutes if he sensed that the project was not for him. As the tape ran,

they nervously waited for Shaye to hit the stop button, but he did not. Instead, after the presentation ended, Shaye changed the trajectory of the project dramatically.

Exactly what he said has been reported in different ways. An account based on Shaye's own recollections has it this way: "Finally Shaye had heard enough. 'It's not two movies,' he said. Jackson's heart sank—he'd already heard this at Miramax. Then Shaye said the magic words. 'Tolkien did your job for you. He wrote three books. You should make three movies.'"²² In an interview in early 2002, Jackson recalled the event:

As the tape comes to an end, he says, "I don't get it," and I thought [sighs], "Oh, OK." And he turns and he says, "I don't get it. Why would you be willing to do two *Lord of the Rings* films? It's three books, isn't it? Shouldn't it be three films?" And I thought, "What's he saying here?! What's he saying here?" and he said, "Look, we're interested, but we're basically interested in three movies."²³

Although Shaye did not make a commitment that same day, he apparently believed that there was competition for *Rings* and urged Jackson not to promise the project to another studio. Ordesky recalls Shaye telling him, "Get into it. Find out what the parameters are, get Michael Lynne up to speed—I want him to see this tape." (Lynne was copresident of New Line.) As Jackson said later, the pitch tape was "probably the most important 30 minutes that I've ever shot in my life."²⁴

Shaye's response—urging Jackson to make the project even more ambitious—may seem strange, and it certainly came as a surprise to others present at the meeting. Yet a look at the pitch tape allows insight into Shaye's reasoning. On a simple level, the tape itself might easily prompt a viewer to think Jackson wanted to make three films. Near the beginning, a montage slowly shows shots of each volume of Tolkien's book while Jackson's narrating voice-over emphasizes how popular and admired *Rings* is. Whether by intention or not, the tape contains no reference to a two-film version—or a three-film version or a one-film version. Instead, Jackson consistently refers to the proposed adaptation as "the film" (and he has continued to insist that, like Tolkien's novel, his version is one story told serially). Simply watching the tape without much knowledge of the two-film project at Miramax, a viewer might well expect that the pitch is for one feature for each Tolkien volume.²⁵ Shaye of course did know about that background—but his suggestion that Jackson make three films was not just a whim.

NEW LINE'S "GAMBLE"

If I really want to shoot craps, I generally go to Las Vegas.

BOB SHAYE

To Jackson and his colleagues, Shaye's decision must have seemed like a miraculous reprieve. The project that the scriptwriters and Weta Ltd. had worked on for eighteen months would not be taken out of their hands and produced by Miramax in a self-evidently inadequate single feature film with a \$75 million budget.

Certainly Shaye's inquiry about making three films has usually been portrayed to the public in this way—as a quirky, risky \$270 million throw of the dice. No doubt there was a risk involved, but Shaye's view of the odds would have been very different from those of the filmmakers. A sign in his office reads "Prudent Aggression," a phrase that acts as an unofficial motto for New Line, often quoted by its employees in interviews.

There were obvious disadvantages in producing *Rings*. Jackson was a relatively unknown filmmaker with not one financial success to his credit. The films would have to be mounted on a scale commensurate with the epic novel, and the fantasy elements would require expensive CGI work, as the pitch film made abundantly clear. Expanded to three parts, the undertaking would require a huge budget. New Line, although a wholly owned subsidiary of Time Warner, operated independently and would have to come up with the financing itself, and it had never made such a major project.

Yet the potential rewards were enticing. *Rings* could obviously become a franchise. New Line's growth from a tiny 16mm film-rental firm that Shaye founded in 1967 to one of the biggest independent production/distribution companies in Hollywood had come primarily through two wildly successful series. In 1984, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, made for \$1.8 million, grossed \$25.5 million domestically. Five more cheaply produced entries in this series appeared, the last in 1991 (with two later spin-offs, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*, 1994, and *Freddy vs. Jason*, 2003), and a TV show based on the same material ran for two seasons. Just as the *Nightmare* films were losing steam, New Line paid \$3 million for a comic-book-derived item called *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990), which then grossed more than \$200 million worldwide. Two sequels followed (in 1991 and 1993). The spectacular success of the Turtles (played in that pre-CGI age by Jim Henson creations) overshadowed the more modest but distinctly profitable *House Party*, also released in 1990 and also leading to two sequels (1991 and 1994; in 2001, the fourth went straight to video).

By 1998, all three series were moribund. The biggest one-off hits that the studio had produced, *Dumb and Dumber* and *The Mask* (both 1994), had so far failed to spawn sequels, since Jim Carrey's fee had rocketed beyond New Line's price range. *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997) had been a surprise hit, but the release of its sequel was still a year away when Jackson made his pitch.

During the pitch session, Shaye told Kamins that New Line had eagerly been seeking another franchise. The firm had spent around a year developing a project based on Isaac Asimov's "Foundation" book series. Finally, unable to come up with a viable script, New Line had let its option on the books lapse. That happened only weeks before Jackson's pitch. Shaye saw *Rings* as another chance for a franchise.²⁶ Asked later why he had wanted a three-film version, he said, "It was so wonderfully presold. It was like *Superman* or *Batman*."²⁷ Like those franchises, *Rings* potentially could generate enormous income from ancillary products.

Ordesky's account of Shaye's famous "three-film" remark suggests that such factors were on his mind:

The lights came up, Bob was sitting there, and we were all watching him. Bob said, "Why two movies?" Then Bob said, "There are three books. Why aren't you making three movies?" Peter gives me this sidelong glance like "Dare I hope this is actually being said?" Peter was saying, "Well, Bob, that would be great, of course!" He didn't want to scare it away. Bob was saying, "Well, it makes sense. Artistically, you could follow the books. Then there are three theatrical windows, three video releases." Bob is talking about the fusion of art and commerce . . . brilliant.²⁸

The leap from inexpensively made horror films or comedies to a huge, fairly prestigious literary adaptation was, however, a considerable one. Shaye had always run New Line as a studio that economized as much as possible. Despite the huge potential outlay on *Rings*, Shaye would have foreseen ways to cut costs and minimize risk. As he said, gambling is for Las Vegas.

To begin with, making three films simultaneously in New Zealand saved an enormous amount of money. Not having to start up three separate films reduced expenditures on set building, transport of cast and crew members to and from New Zealand, and so on. One consideration was that many of the pristine landscapes used as locations were in parks, where the filmmakers were required to leave the area exactly as they found it. Crews had to dig up and later replace rare plants, put down sod on damaged lawns, and build

roads that had to be removed after filming was done. Repeating all this for those locales that appeared in two or three parts of *Rings* would have been monumentally inefficient. In 2001, at a press conference in Cannes, Ordesky claimed, “By shooting all three at once, the studio may have saved up to \$100 million.”²⁹

These cost savings alone, however, would not be enough to cause New Line to attempt simultaneous productions. If they were, other films would be made this way. Even after the success of *Rings*, studios are not eager to attempt ambitious simultaneous shoots on potential franchise films. Few, if any, are as “wonderfully presold” as Shaye perceived *Rings* to be. Nevertheless, there have been other franchises where the studio cautiously waited to see if a film was successful and then cut costs by doing two sequels at once. While editing *Back to the Future II*, Zemeckis was shooting the third film, and the second and third films of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise were shot simultaneously. The original *Back to the Future* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* films’ narratives were self-contained. *Fellowship* was only one-third of a story. Shaye presumably trusted that its “presold” nature made treating it as a single three-part film reasonably safe.

Certainly shooting entirely in New Zealand offered many sorts of savings. Most of the crew were Kiwis, and the New Zealand film industry has no unions. Of the 1,200-plus people listed in *Rings*’ credits, most would be working for considerably less than Hollywood scale. Although the exchange rate of the New Zealand dollar fluctuated through the long shoot, it typically remained around fifty cents or less to the American dollar. As of the spring of 2002, about 74 percent of the film’s budget had been spent in New Zealand, so the exchange rate alone would have cut costs by a very substantial amount (though of course transportation expenditures were higher).³⁰ Tax benefits for filmmaking in New Zealand saved additional tens of millions of dollars.

Given the wild success of *Fellowship*, including the rise to stardom of some of its cast members, a single lengthy shoot bestowed another benefit. Shaye describes the project’s savings in the era of ballooning celebrity salaries: “I realized that I could have one of those films in each of the next two years, and we wouldn’t have the aggravation of renegotiating with talent, having to have costs go up astronomically from the first to the second to the third. All of this really appealed to me from a corporate perspective.”³¹ Doubtless Shaye would vividly recall Jim Carrey’s departure after *Dumb and Dumber* four years earlier to a higher salary at Warner Bros. for *Batman Forever*. The eventual sequel, *Dumb and Dumberer: When Harry Met Lloyd* (2003), failed at the box office largely because it lacked the original stars, Carrey and Jeff Daniels.

It's difficult to estimate what *Rings* would have cost if it had been made one film at a time in the United States. We shall never know what such overnight stars as Orlando Bloom, Elijah Wood, Viggo Mortensen, and Ian McKellen might have demanded for the second and third installments. Moreover, Jackson estimates that the nearly 1,500 CGI shots for *Return* alone cost around \$47 million to create at Weta and would have been more than \$100 million in the United States: "Making them in the States would have been too expensive—and they probably would never have gotten made in the first place."³²

On a cost-per-minute basis, *Rings* stacks up favorably against James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), which made a record \$1.8 billion worldwide. *Titanic* was another long, enormously successful CGI-heavy epic that involved no renegotiations of actors' salaries. Its estimated budget was \$200 million, meaning that it cost on average \$1.03 million for each of its 194 minutes. Final budget estimates for *Rings* are inconsistent, running from \$310 to \$350 million.³³ Taking a figure in the middle, \$330 million, the 557 minutes of the trilogy's theatrical versions average out to just under \$600,000 each (with the 677 minutes of the extended versions averaging less than half a million each). To get a vague sense of what *Rings* might have cost to make in the United States (or, more properly, North America, since *Titanic* was shot partly in Mexico and Newfoundland), let's multiply the number of minutes in it by the average cost per minute of Cameron's film. By such a measure, the theatrical versions would have cost about \$544 million, the extended versions about \$700 million. The latter figure is about twice the estimated total budget of *Rings*, including the footage added to the extended editions. In terms of proportion of negative costs to total gross, *Rings* was nearly as profitable as *Titanic*. The cost of Cameron's film was 10.9 percent of its final gross, while that of *Rings* was 11.4 percent. (The difference would have been more than made up for by the larger number of ancillary products *Rings* spawned.) In the long run, New Line got a considerable bargain, and Jackson's team definitely put the money on the screen.³⁴

Shaye presumably would have foreseen only some of these financial advantages when he suggested making *Rings* in three parts, and even in his most optimistic estimates he probably didn't anticipate just how successful the film would be. Still, Jackson could not have picked a better time to approach the studio with an expensive project. In mid-1998, New Line had just come off the most successful year in its history. During 1997, it had distributed a pair of prestigious and successful art films, *Boogie Nights* and *The Sweet Hereafter*; a political comedy, *Wag the Dog*, which profited from its coincidence

with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal; and the first *Austin Powers* film. For once there had been no notable failures among its releases, and 1998 was also shaping up well.

Granted, *Rings* could be seen as having great franchise potential. But why would Shaye take on an expensive project with Jackson attached as director? Unlike Ordesky, Shaye was not a big fan of the Kiwi's films. As he told an interviewer in late 2001,

There's no question that Peter didn't have the experience for a project this big and to be honest, I hadn't liked all his movies. But he's made one movie, "Heavenly Creatures," that I really liked. And I really liked him: He's a decent guy with no arrogance or hubris. So I believed in his good faith and I bet on his ability. It doesn't sound very rational, but sometimes trusting your instincts isn't a very rational thing to do.³⁵

Despite Shaye's admiration for *Heavenly Creatures*, New Line had passed on distributing it—wisely, since the film lost money. Miramax had released it, thus linking Jackson to the firm and, two years later, giving him his chance to obtain the *Rings* film rights.

Shaye portrays his decision to go with Jackson as a hunch, driven by instinct. Yet Jackson had one enormous advantage that goes unmentioned in accounts of the project's move from Miramax to New Line. For the three weeks during which that project was in turnaround, Jackson essentially controlled the film rights to *Rings*—on loan from Miramax, as it were—if he could find a buyer. It probably did not seem to him during that worrisome period as if he wielded such power, but we should remember that those rights had never been available on the open market. In 1967 (coincidentally, the year Shaye founded New Line), United Artists had approached Tolkien and eventually obtained the rights. In 1976, Zaentz had acquired them through a direct deal with United Artists. After the disappointment of the 1978 version, Zaentz had sat on those rights. They had not gone on the table for bidding in 1995, when Jackson approached Miramax about the project. Weinstein was able to buy them solely because he had helped Zaentz by rescuing *The English Patient*. When Weinstein put *Rings* into turnaround in 1998, it was the first time that the rights to adapt the novel had ever been openly offered for sale within the film industry. Unlike any other executive in Hollywood, Shaye saw the advantages of seizing that opportunity, and only Jackson could bring those rights with him from Miramax to another producer.

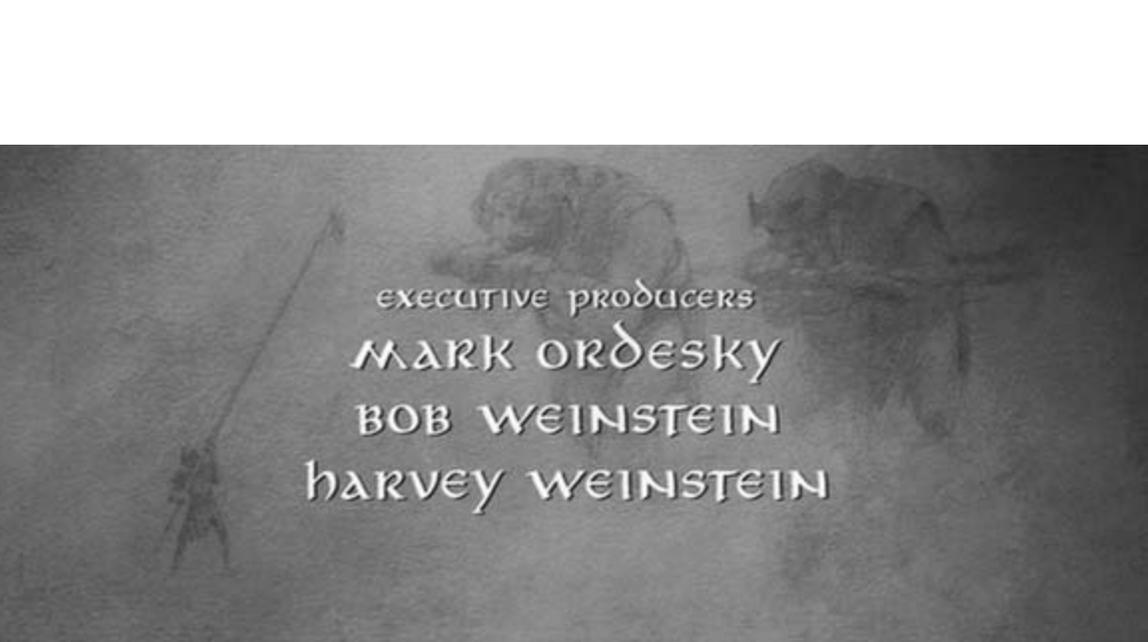
Moreover, Jackson was not selling only the rights but an entire package.

By the time the director pitched the project to Shaye, it had already been in preproduction for eighteen months. Jackson's companies in Wellington had created huge numbers of designs, miniatures, and maquettes. By the conditions of the turnaround, the finished designs, sets, objects, and proprietary computer programs would have to be purchased from Miramax for \$12 million above and beyond the adaptation rights. New Line could hardly scrap them all and start over with a new director and production team. So Shaye's decision essentially was not so much a case of, "We will allow you, Peter Jackson, to direct *The Lord of the Rings*" as it was, "You, Peter Jackson, will enable us to produce *The Lord of the Rings*."

New Line's commitment to undertake the three-part film was quickly made, and Shaye and Lynne agreed to all the onerous terms that Miramax had imposed for the turnaround. New Line would pay the \$12 million up front, as well as the required first-dollar percentages. Apart from a check to cover the costs of the preproduction, New Line also had to promise 5 percent of the gross box-office take to Miramax and another 5 percent to Zaentz. According to Kamins, "Miramax knew this was for real. They couldn't believe it. I think Miramax was utterly stunned. I think Harvey set these draconian conditions under the theory that there was just no way on God's green earth that Peter was ever going to be able to get someone else to bite off on it."

Harvey Weinstein's disappointment must have been considerably tempered by the financial results. So low was Eisner's faith in *Rings*' success that he split the 5 percent evenly between Disney and the Weinsteins personally. (Five percent of the nearly \$3 billion international gross of *Rings* would be close to \$150 million.) Both Weinstein brothers would also receive a credit as executive producers on the film, even though they were paid in full for all their expenditures and did not contribute to the project after the deal with New Line was consummated. (A teasing comment on the Weinsteins' participation appears in the final credits, where the sketch under Mark Ordesky's and the brothers' names shows a tiny figure leading two enormous trolls on leashes; see figure 3.) Later, in 2004, during the acrimonious period in which the Weinstein brothers were about to leave the company they had founded, *Variety* pointed out that Disney's 2.5 percent of *Rings*' gross would essentially have covered its entire \$80 million purchase of Miramax in 1993; by the time the Weinsteins left, the company was valued at \$2 billion.³⁶

The legal wrangling over the deal went on for weeks, and Miramax twice extended the turnaround. Finally, on 24 August 1998, a New Line press release announced that the company would be producing *Rings* in three parts at a budget of "more than \$130 million." That figure was approximately the

The image shows a dark, textured background with faint, ethereal images of characters from the movie. In the center, the text reads: "EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MARK ORDESKY BOB WEINSTEIN HARVEY WEINSTEIN".

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
MARK ORDESKY
BOB WEINSTEIN
HARVEY WEINSTEIN

Figure 3. Harvey and Bob Weinstein's credits in *The Return of the King*.

amount that Eisner had forbidden Weinstein to pay for a two-film version, and it was quoted not because New Line was being naive or disingenuous but simply because a new budget could not be devised until the three-part script was finished.³⁷ Thereafter the official budget was raised to \$270 million. The initial press release announced that principal photography would begin in mid-1999 and last one year, and that the films would be released at six-month intervals, with Christmas-summer-Christmas premieres. It also stated that “Weta Digital, Jackson’s innovative special effects firm based in New Zealand, will be responsible for the elaborate computer generated visuals demanded of the epic project.”³⁸

By the end of 1998, Jackson was already negotiating for a delay, wanting to finish his storyboards and animatics. The contract stipulated that principal photography had to begin by October 1999;³⁹ ultimately it commenced on 11 October 1999 and lasted until 22 December 2000. The parts appeared in three successive Christmas seasons, from 2001 to 2003.

Despite the emotional roller coaster that Jackson’s team went through during the Miramax period and despite the fact that the project ended up much better off with New Line, Kamins points out that Harvey Weinstein made the trilogy possible:

There’s no question that the \$12 million that Harvey spent made New Line saying yes possible. Because I don’t know, if we’d simply walked into Bob

Shaye's office with the three books, saying, "I want to make these three books into three movies, or two movies," if Bob Shaye would have had any reason to say yes. He had the benefit of looking at that documentary. That documentary that Peter made was the result of the \$12 million that had been spent.

CAST AWAY ON A POLYNESIAN ISLAND

Imagine living in a country where the most important industry is making a film of *The Lord of the Rings*.
Isn't that a sign of a world you want to live in?

IAN MCKELLEN

After New Line committed to the production, the Weta team went back to its preproduction work. Once that was well advanced, the process of casting the major roles went on during 1999. *Variety* published notices that actors had been found: Elijah Wood (8 July), Ian McKellen (26 July), Christopher Lee (23 August), Liv Tyler (27 August), Viggo Mortensen (reported on 15 October as being in negotiations to replace Stuart Townsend), and Cate Blanchett (27 October). The policy was one of seeking actors with distinguished reputations but not wide enough marquee recognition to command large fees. Indeed, the amounts offered to the actors for the entire filming period seem to have been relatively small. Sean Astin revealed in his memoirs that he was shocked to discover that the \$250,000 he had been offered was for all three films, not just one. (Later bonuses after the success of *Fellowship* helped make up for the early penny-pinching.) Astin, like others of the cast, whether or not they already were fans of the novel, decided that this was "the opportunity of a lifetime"⁴⁰ and agreed to work for what was essentially scale. One or more of the top names got profit participations.

Behind-the-scenes talent came on board. Many of the designers and department heads had worked with Jackson numerous times, for he tends to be loyal to his collaborators and to inspire great loyalty in them. Most of the team were Kiwis, but staff from abroad filled some core positions in areas where the local film industry was weak. These included Australian cinematographer Andrew Lesnie (who had experience in fantasy films from his work on *Babe* and *Babe, Pig in the City*). The huge special-effects effort was headed by an American, Jim Reigel (*Starship Troopers*, *Star Trek: Insurrection*), and veteran effects specialist Alex Funke (*The Abyss*, *Starship Troopers*) came in as visual effects director of photography. In 1999, American producer Barrie M. Osborne, after finishing *The Matrix* in Sydney, decided not to pro-

duce that film's much-delayed sequels. Instead he took over on *Rings*, replacing Kiwi producer Tim Sanders (whose next project was *Whale Rider*, 2003). Co-producer Rick Porras, an American, was postproduction supervisor on *The Frighteners* and worked with Robert Zemeckis on *Contact* (partially shot in New Zealand). First assistant director Carolynne Cunningham, from Australia, had held that same post on many Australian films and on *Heavenly Creatures*. Hundreds of workers came from abroad for the labor-intensive postproduction tasks of digital animation and sound mixing.

On 11 October, shooting began with the scene of the four Hobbits' first encounter with a Black Rider. The location was a park on the side of Mount Victoria, in the midst of the city and minutes away from the studios in the suburb of Miramar. It was one of about 140 places on both the North and South Islands that would be used during filming. Others were extremely remote. For views of the Fellowship on snowy mountainsides, the cast and crew had to be flown up via helicopter. One of the most spectacular locales, the one used for the Rohirrim capital Edoras, was very difficult to reach. Mount Sunday and the surrounding ranges lie tucked away in an area of the South Island, far from any town and accessible only by air or a dirt track. The crew had to build a road in and spend months transporting material and constructing the Golden Hall and surrounding buildings (plate 2).

Even with fifteen months, an unusually long period of principal photography, the whole film could not be directed by one person. At times as many as six units were shooting at once, some supervised by second-unit directors far from Wellington. Veteran Kiwi director Geoff Murphy (*Utu*, 1983) returned to New Zealand for *Rings* and shot the Rohan scenes of the Uruk-hai and the Rohirrim riders among Central Otago's bleakly beautiful rolling hills and shale outcroppings.⁴¹ John Mahaffie directed the second unit for a time and moved on to Unit 1B, doing key work on Film 1's chase to the Fords of Bruinen and the Helm's Deep battle. Walsh directed many of the scenes involving Gollum and those with Arwen. Boyens and Porras pitched in by directing additional units, and Osborne filmed part of the fight with the Uruk-hai near the end of *Fellowship*. Satellite feeds were set up, allowing Jackson to track all the active units in real time on rows of TV monitors. At the same time, more work went on in studios and warehouses in Miramar, where sets were built and miniatures filmed. The studios bore letters, and at its height the production was occupying buildings from A to around P or Q.

Early on the decision had been made to create all the props, costumes, and furniture from scratch and from the actual materials appropriate to them. Artisans were tracked down all over the country. Coopers were hired to build

barrels, master leather crafters to fashion horse harnesses, and jewelers to create the various crowns and brooches. At the same time, Weta Digital acquired far greater computing power, and its digital experts developed software programs that could generate huge, realistic-looking armies and render Gollum's appearance convincingly.

In the meantime, New Line was raising money to pay for all this. The firm, although a wholly owned subsidiary of Time Warner, operates independently and had to come up with the financing. The company supported the production in three major ways. Most important, New Line financed the film in traditional independent fashion by preselling foreign distribution rights to companies around the globe. Not surprisingly, though, New Line often faced an uphill battle in doing so, since those companies would have to commit to all three films at once, sight unseen. Rolf Mittweg, New Line's president and chief operating officer of worldwide distribution and marketing, spent more than two years putting together an international ensemble of twenty-five distributors, many of them small, independent firms that already had multiyear output deals with New Line. *Variety* reported that these advance deals secured around 65 percent of the film's negative costs.⁴²

A big franchise like *Rings* also offered another way of making presales: licensing agreements for a wide range of games, action figures, T-shirts, and the like. In November 2002, Lynne revealed that the risks to the firm were not as great as they might appear: "There was a leap of faith. But what Bob and I attempted to do was build in as much protection as we could to a commitment that was unprecedented. We had substantial investment from our international partners on every film and actual cash advances for a variety of licenses before we started one frame of shooting."⁴³ Moreover, Shaye has pointed out that *Rings* was made over three years, and New Line's production budget was big enough to cover its share of the costs.⁴⁴ That would not be surprising, since *Time* reported that "New Line's initial investment in the franchise was just about \$25 million per movie."⁴⁵

A few months after *Fellowship's* premiere, *Variety* summed up how effectively New Line had diluted its risk: "Foreign presales guarantees and merchandising-rights deals allowed New Line to commit \$270 million to the production of three *Lord of the Rings* films, with only 20% of that production expense at risk. New Line is also on the hook for U.S. marketing costs, thought to be about \$50 million for the first installment of *Rings*, though not in international, where foreign territorial buyers shoulder marketing expenses."⁴⁶ Ironically, if New Line's contribution to the cost of the three lengthy parts of *Rings* was indeed in the neighborhood of \$75 million, it approximated

what Michael Eisner had in 1998 wanted Miramax to spend on a single two-hour version.

KIWI CANNES DO

It was very exciting, a kind of buzz in the air. It really seemed like everyone was there just to see *Lord of the Rings*.

JUDY ALLEY

Merchandising Coordinator, *The Lord of the Rings*

In late 2000, principal photography was winding down. The entire production had been conducted with such secrecy that few people—including New Line officials—had any idea what the film would look like. A bit earlier in the process Osborne had had an idea about how to reassure them. He described to Jackson something that had worked for him when he was producing *The Matrix*. That film had also been shot far away from its home base, Warner Bros., in the Fox Studios Australia complex in Sydney. Joel Silver had asked Osborne's team to put together a single sequence of ten to fifteen minutes to galvanize the Warners marketing department by convincing it that *The Matrix* could make a lot of money. The filmmakers quickly edited Trinity's opening escape across the rooftops. That effort had succeeded, and the same thing could presumably be done for *Rings* with New Line. Jackson's team had not had time to do anything with the idea, but on 3 January 2001, Mittweg wrote to Jackson asking for a twenty- to thirty-minute preview that New Line could show in May at the Cannes Film Festival, seven months before *Fellowship* was to be released.⁴⁷

The three-day Cannes event, which followed the preview with publicity interviews and a lavish party, was in its way as dramatic a moment in the trilogy's history as was the little meeting where Jackson pitched his project to Bob Shaye. This time, however, the drama played out on the world stage, as distributors, exhibitors, the press, and influential fan webmasters realized that Shaye's gamble had not been so risky after all and excitedly spread the word that Jackson had fashioned an extraordinary movie.

For New Line, the Cannes event had two main goals. The firm wanted to reassure the foreign distributors, many of whom had waited anxiously for years to see some footage and find out if their leap of faith in committing to all three parts of *Rings* was justified. In a few territories, primarily Germany and Eastern Europe, the second two parts remained unsold, and New Line hoped to obtain the final commitments at Cannes. Second, Cannes would

provide an occasion to present *Rings* to the international press. “Just getting a buzz out there,” Osborne explains, “because there was a lot of negative buzz about *Lord of the Rings*. A crazy, speculative thing to make three films at once. A crazy, speculative thing to give Peter Jackson such a big production and do it in New Zealand.”

The international distributors weren't the only ones who needed reassuring. Jamie Selkirk suggests, “I think New Line was starting to get concerned. They hadn't seen anything up to that point.” As far as finished footage was concerned, this was literally the case, since essentially none of the special-effects shots was in finished form by early 2001. New Line executives had had little but facilities tours and demo reels to quiet their doubts about Weta Digital being capable of doing the film's complex CGI.

The idea of doing a single extended sequence was brought up again, and the question became, what to show? Osborne describes how Jackson used the preview to the advantage of the production as well.

Peter just kind of out of the blue thought—he's a very clever guy—he thought, I'm going to use this not only to accomplish what New Line wants to accomplish, but I want to do something that's going to actually kick-start Weta from being in R and D, thinking that they have all this time to research and develop stuff to actually producing finished shots. So he picked the most visual-effects-intense sequence, which was the Mines of Moria, from Film 1.

Jackson also pointed out at the time that a big action sequence, including the Fellowship's battle with a cave troll and flight from thousands of Orcs, would best satisfy New Line's international distribution partners.⁴⁸

The effects team were convinced that they could never make their deadline. Much of the Mines of Moria sequence involves elaborate miniature sets combined with live action, as when the Fellowship leaps a gap in a stairway, a large portion of which collapses. The actors moving through these miniature sets are often digital doubles, and the cave troll is one of Film 1's most elaborate digital creatures. Weta's Matt Aitken, who was supervising the creation of the cave troll and the actors' digital doubles, recalls:

Cannes, that was a huge deadline for us, really where we had a change of management here, and the people who came in were faced with, like, two or three months where we had to get, really, what is the heart of Film 1 and a lot of visual effects work up to scratch and pretty well finished. A lot of that was the way it went into the final film. We did revisit some of it. In some ways that was the

toughest deadline we've had to work to in the whole trilogy, was getting that Cannes footage ready. And, yeah, people loved it, so it all worked out fine.

As Aitken says, the deadline was only met because the Mines sequence was cut together lacking some of the footage that the filmmakers knew would be in the finished film and with some of the shots also still at the “CBB” (could be better) stage. The preview included a few shots that did not make the final edit, and many that did look distinctly different because they had not yet been digitally graded. For example, the memorable extreme long shot of the Fellowship surrounded by thousands of Orcs shows Gandalf's staff casting a bright light that washes out our view of some of the actors. In the Cannes footage, the glare—later added digitally—is not present, and the Fellowship is perfectly visible.⁴⁹ The preview also jump-started Howard Shore's work on the score, and he finished the music for the Mines of Moria scene in time for inclusion.

During this rush, Peter Skarratt, the first assistant editor, pointed out to Osborne that the sequence would not work on its own because many viewers would not know the characters. The decision was made to include a montage before the Mines sequence, introducing the main characters, the Ring, and the quest. Another montage afterward would hint at action to come in Films 2 and 3. In the midst of the postproduction rush on *Fellowship* itself, a young cutter named Jabez Olssen was assigned the job of editing the opening and closing montages. Temporary music not by Shore was used during these segments.

The result was a twenty-five-minute preview reel. The opening showed Gandalf's arrival at Bag End to visit Bilbo and shots of the main characters in key scenes like the Council of Elrond. The closing montage was faster, more like a theatrical trailer, with a flurry of shots from *Towers* and *Return* that included two high points in Mordor: Sam's declaration, “I can't carry it, but I can carry you!” and Frodo's “The Ring is mine!” So important was the preview to New Line that Shaye flew to New Zealand to see how it was shaping up.

In early January 2001, work on the Cannes party began as well. *Rings* supervising art director Dan Hennah and his wife, art department manager Chris Hennah, were asked to decorate the venue for the party. It was to be held in Le Château de Castellaras, a hilltop castle built in 1927 incorporating elements from actual medieval and Renaissance ruins. The Hennahs visited France for three days to sketch plans and meet the New Line international marketing team. Deciding on an elaborate Middle-earth environment,

they went back to Wellington and packed five shipping containers with actual set elements and props.

Returning to Cannes in April, the Hennahs had six weeks to construct the portions of the party settings that could not be shipped. The budget did not allow for many of the Kiwi art department staff to travel to Cannes, but some paid their own way to help with the actual assemblage of the sets and props on the site. Judy Alley, who had handled cloth props and other set decoration, was one of these, and some of the film's staff members who happened to be traveling in Europe cut short their vacations to pitch in. Some ended up sleeping on the floor in other staff members' rooms. They had five days to transform the château and its grounds into something resembling Middle-earth.

New Line flew in print and media journalists from all over the world, as well as several of its nervous foreign distribution partners. As an acknowledgment of the new importance of the Internet to publicizing films, the company also invited a few webmasters: Harry Knowles of the influential general movie site *Ain't It Cool News*; Calisuri, one of the founders of *TheOneRing.net*; and representatives of major Dutch and German sites. Around three hundred journalists participated in the junket, though no doubt many of those were already in town to cover the Cannes Film Festival.

New Line rented an auditorium in one of the main festival venues, the Olympia, a nine-screen multiplex in the center of town. Coproducer Rick Porras supervised the installation of special equipment needed to project the print, the sound track and images of which were still on separate strips of film. Backup prints and equipment were brought, to ensure that these crucial screenings were not botched. Secret design and technical elements absolutely had to be kept from spies and thieves, and a guard remained in the projection booth at all times when the print was there.

The first screening was for the film's cast and crew, as well as New Line VIPs and guests. Kamins recalls the atmosphere:

Right before the first screening at the Olympia theater Peter and Bob Shaye and Fran and Mark Ordesky and I, we were all kind of huddled in this little stairwell. There was a look on Peter's face and on Bob's face that I'll never forget, because it was this bizarre combination of the most exciting kind of hope combined with the most unbelievable, gut-wrenching terror. The answer to that question as to which one they should ultimately feel was going to be realized in a matter of moments.

One of Jackson's Wellington facilities, The Film Unit, which combined editing, sound mixing, and processing, was responsible for putting together the preview and projecting it. CEO Sue Thompson describes how nervous she was before the screening, knowing how much was hanging on it: "It does make for interesting tension when your chairman and your biggest client is sitting there watching the preview of *Lord of the Rings*, and they're all in one and the same person. That sort of means that failure is not, as they say, an option. I also knew that at that stage Pete and Fran had a lot to risk on the success of the films." By that point, Jackson and Walsh were deep in debt after building up the filmmaking infrastructure in Wellington—including loans they had taken out to buy The Film Unit—so they had an enormous personal stake in the preview.

Jackson gave a brief introduction, and the twenty-five-minute film was screened without mishap. Thompson recalls watching it not as a technician but as an audience member: "I just burst into tears. It was a sort of relief and pride, all at the same time. And I looked over, and there was Mark Ordesky going like this [presses hands together in a prayerlike gesture], with his hands in front of him like that. I think that was probably a shared moment. We both sort of looked at each other and . . . [heaves big sigh of relief]."

Many of the actors were present, and according to Orlando Bloom, "Afterwards there was a stunned silence, and then it was like, 'Can we see it again, please?'"⁵⁰ That reaction seems to have been typical for the cast and crew. Judy Alley recalls, "I can remember at the end of it there was just this moment of absolute silence. I think some people started clapping. There was a bit of a standing ovation, and no one quite knew what to do. We were just a bit starstruck, having seen this amazing thing." Even the ordinarily phlegmatic press were overwhelmed. Chris Hennah says, "The press are usually pretty reserved. They clapped and cheered." Dan Hennah adds, "Suddenly this thing that we'd put so much into had got this really positive reception from people you didn't expect to respond at all. You'd expect a few murmurs and a lot of walking out of the theater."

The auditorium held only a few hundred people, and interest quickly became so great that extra screenings were held. Memories vary, but it seems that three were planned and ultimately five presented. Sitting behind two reporters at one of the screenings, Osborne heard one of them remark to his companion when the lights came up, "I thought Tolkien was going to be boring." The preview had achieved its goal with the press.

News of the screenings spread quickly. Kamins recalls, "It was viral. It was incredible. I was walking around not only wearing my Cannes badge but then

New Line had given me this sort of all-access badge that had *Lord of the Rings* on it, and literally everybody would stop me, wherever I went: ‘God, is it true, is it true that the footage is great?’” Invitations to the Sunday night party became the hottest item at Cannes.

As for New Line, Osborne describes the change after the preview: “I don’t think anybody at New Line was really convinced that it was going to happen until we were in Cannes in 2001, that they really, really knew that they had something. Maybe Mark Ordesky might have believed that we had something earlier than that, but I think that they were probably skeptical all the way up to that time.” Harvey Weinstein, who must have been torn between regret at losing the project and glee at the prospect of his and his brother’s 2 ½ percent of the gross, was gracious, calling the footage “spectacular” and predicting, “They have another ‘Star Wars’ on their hands.”⁵¹

New Line and the distributors could also have taken heart from a Canal+ interview with Jackson that ran on 11 May. Sound bites from people exiting the preview screening were interspersed with the interview. Apart from the “It’s wonderful!” and “I can’t wait to see the rest!” sorts of remarks, one comment was prophetic: “There’s in my opinion one of the biggest babes I ever saw, Viggo Mortensen.”⁵² New Line’s initial fear that the film would not attract women or be a good date movie would be put to rest as the film’s male-babe factor set in.

After screenings, reporters were bused out to the château, where tents had been set up on the grounds, and cast and crew were waiting for interviews. One day was given over to print reporters, arranged in groups of around fifteen each. The interviewees would appear in succession for brief question sessions, and the same ones cycled through the process for each group of journalists, all day long. To speed things up, the interviewees were also grouped: the Elf actors who were at Cannes (Liv Tyler and Orlando Bloom), the older, distinguished British actors (Christopher Lee, Ian McKellen, and Ian Holm), the three writers, and so on. Broadcast journalists had their turn on another day, with each crew getting one-on-one access to each interviewee for five minutes. Jackson claimed that on one day he was interviewed seventy-five times.

On Sunday evening, 13 May, the event culminated in a party planned for 1,500, though people who were there estimate the crowd at somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000. The weather was hot and clear, perfect for an outdoor evening affair. New Line had remembered to invite all the Kiwi crew members who had come to Cannes. At party time, they were still racing to put fresh fruit, bread, flowers, and other perishables into the Hobbit market, and as the first guests arrived, they dashed off to change their clothes.

The party decor had been arranged to give guests a sensation of entering into the world glimpsed in the preview, with areas given over to the Elves, the Hobbits, the Rohirrim, and other cultures. The process began as guests alighted from their cars and walked up a red-carpet-covered path toward the château. An Elvish chamber group played music off to the side. Dan and Chris Hennah describe the scene just inside the entrance:

- DAN: We got about ten children there—wonderful little French children—who we costumed up as Hobbits, and we gave them baskets full of rose petals—
- CHRIS: Real rose petals—
- DAN: The idea was that they gently threw them up in the air and they'd sort of flutter down on the red carpet—
- CHRIS: in front of people as they arrived—
- DAN: but of course the children got far too excited and started throwing them at people. It was great!

The guests also encountered sinister Black Riders circling on their horses in the gloom beyond the lighted path.

As Osborne put it, the setting gave “a flavor for the quality of the production. Not only would you see this film, but the people that came through this party would see the quality of the props and the set dressings and the wardrobe.” Inside the château, for example, Théoden's throne, gleaming and intricately carved of solid oak, stood in a room simulating the hall at Edoras. To reach the refreshments and dancing area, guests strolled through a recreated Hobbit village, with a market square and pub. A “party field” with bunting and lights strung in the trees suggested Bilbo's birthday party (glimpsed in the preview). It had picnic tables in the center and was lined with tents where food and drink were available, with “Hobbits” serving refreshments (plate 3). Tucked away to the left of the main entrance, the facade of the Green Dragon Inn served to hide the portable toilets.

The decorations were intended to keep guests talking about the preview. The Hennahs describe how people could get drawn into the Middle-earth environment:

- DAN: What we'd done was taken the small Bag End over there, deliberately so that people could walk right through inside Bag End.
- CHRIS: But they'd have to bend over—



Figure 4. Galadriel's boat on the swimming pool at New Line's Cannes party, Le Château de Castellaras. (Courtesy Judy Alley.)

DAN: from a Gandalf point of view—

CHRIS: and then we built the oversized Prancing Pony so that they'd go into the bar and have to sit on the high stool—

DAN: from a Hobbit point of view—all of their drinks at the bar, which was way up there.

The château's long, slender swimming pool, located on a terrace overlooking a mountain view, had Elvish arches placed around it, and Galadriel's boat floated on the water (figure 4). As guests departed, they were handed a swag bag, a collection of *Rings*-related gifts, including a Hobbit-size pipe and pack of tobacco and a small model of Frodo's sword, Sting.⁵³

The Cannes preview reel went through many later screenings in various international cities for press, distributors, and exhibitors. Since Jackson would not be attending to present the footage, that spring, during the pickups for *Fellowship*, he shot a brief introduction. A single tracking shot shows Gandalf's cart moving along a country road, just as when Frodo and the Wizard meet early in *Fellowship*. McKellen, in costume as Gandalf, drives

the cart, and Jackson, in his ordinary clothes, sits in the false-perspective seat, so that he appears the size of a Hobbit. Gandalf begins: "I'd like to introduce you to my friend and passenger, Peter Jackson." Jackson responds, "Thank you, Gandalf," and gives a little background to the production: "New Line Cinema have given us an amazing opportunity to live and breathe Middle-earth for the last fourteen or fifteen months. We actually started shooting on October the eleventh, 1999, and we're actually still shooting today, which explains why I can't be with you for this screening." When he finishes, Gandalf murmurs, "Very good, Peter," and they rush off, supposedly to Bilbo's party.

Shortly after Cannes, Shaye and Lynne returned to New York and showed the preview to the AOL Time Warner board, which was impressed, and to a group of U.S. distributors. There were subsequent screenings to distributors, exhibitors, and press. A witness's account of one of the more routine later screenings suggests that the enthusiasm generated at Cannes was generated again in less high-profile circumstances. At the end of August, Cliff (Quickbeam) Broadway, a regular columnist for *TheOneRing.net*, was invited to a showing at New Line's Los Angeles office. He was eager to see the famous footage, but the rest of the two dozen or so attendees apparently were not. Broadway describes them:

The audience, all jaded Hollywood types, seemed mainly talent management and reps from different exhibitors. I heard bitchy gossip about how "difficult" some stars were and some hushed bits behind me concerning the "desperate financial gamble" of the three films. Catty and restless people. Typical L.A. . . . When all was done, I led the applause. It didn't take much. A noticeable change had come over the jaded audience that was so unconcerned 24 minutes earlier.⁵⁴

By this point trailers in theaters and on the Internet were showing briefer glimpses of similar footage, and, despite some lingering trepidation, fan enthusiasm was growing.

NEW LINE'S GAMBLE REDUX

Despite the triumph at Cannes, New Line had some reasons to be nervous in the months leading up to the December release of *Fellowship*. For one thing, the company's fortunes had declined dramatically since the successes of the late 1990s. The firm's 1998 output had included the Adam Sandler hit *The Wedding Singer*, as well as the debut films of two future franchises, *Rush Hour*

and *Blade*. In 1999, the second *Austin Powers* film far outgrossed the original. But in 2000, Adam Sandler's popularity was not enough to carry *Little Nicky*, which became one of the most prominent of New Line's failures of the period. It was eclipsed in late April 2001 when, less than three weeks before the *Rings* Cannes event, the notorious *Town & Country*, a much-delayed Warren Beatty romantic comedy, opened. With a \$90 million budget and \$15 million more in publicity costs, it grossed \$3 million domestically on its opening weekend and went on to an international total of a bit over \$10 million.

The *Town & Country* disaster came in the wake of a major shake-up at New Line. AOL and Time Warner's merger had become final on 15 January 2001, and mass layoffs in various subsidiary companies quickly began. In what seemed a harbinger of things to come, Warner Bros. was entirely spared, while New Line lost more than 100 employees, or roughly 20 percent of its staff. By the end of January, AOL Time Warner had fired 2400 people overall.⁵⁵ New Line was also ordered to keep its budgets for individual films down in future.

No doubt the positive buzz from the Cannes preview provided a needed boost, but as the December release of *Fellowship* approached, the trade press began to play up New Line's high-stakes risk again—especially when the November release of Warner Bros.' *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* proved an enormous success that might eclipse that of the conglomerate's other wizard film.

At the end of November, *Variety* ran a front-page story suggesting that AOL Time Warner was throwing its support to the *Harry Potter* franchise and giving short shrift to *Rings*:

These must be strange times if a \$270 million, star-laden project based on an all-time bestseller with a rabid global following can be considered an underdog. But that's the perception of New Line's "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy in the wake of the extraordinary promotional hoopla and record-breaking B.O. for "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" from sister company Warner Bros.

The worldwide launch Dec. 19 of the trilogy's first installment, "The Fellowship of the Ring," will be an acid test of New Line's ability to pull its weight within the AOL Time Warner empire, and to justify its continued existence as a quasi-independent unit.

NL has released more than its share of flops in recent years, and AOL is not likely to be impressed by anything less than a blockbuster.

But tongues wagged when the New Yorker's interview with AOL TW chief Gerald Levin hit newsstands Oct 16: "Harry Potter" was held up as the acme of corporate synergy, while "Rings" rated no mention.

And in London's Financial Times Nov. 16, AOL TW chief operating officer

Richard Parsons said, “The biggest thing on the marketing council’s agenda this year was ‘Harry Potter,’ because we all appreciated what this means to AOL Time Warner in terms of the magnitude of the franchise.”⁵⁶

About a week later, the *Los Angeles Times* reiterated that New Line might be at risk of being folded into Warner Bros.: “The early reviews [of *Fellowship*] have been raves. But with AOL Time Warner making cutbacks everywhere, the movie’s box-office performance could play a major role in whether New Line survives as a stand-alone studio or is absorbed into big-sister company Warner Bros. Films. In short, ‘Rings’ could be Shaye’s last hurrah, the final dice roll in his 34-year tenure at New Line.” The author pointed out that Parsons had recently said he had “‘looked real hard’ at merging the two film companies” and had imposed a “voluntary” cap of \$50 million on the budgets of future New Line projects.⁵⁷

The press is always concerned to dramatize its stories, and articles about the potential demise of New Line made for good copy. As we have seen, however, New Line had effectively underwritten large chunks of the film’s costs with its distribution and licensing agreements. Under Shaye’s leadership, it had weathered lean years in the past. A number of people within the production or experienced in the workings of the independent film market have claimed that New Line was unlikely to have lost its identity through absorption into AOL Time Warner even if *Fellowship* had been a box-office disappointment.

IN THE DARKNESS SPELLBIND THEM

Accurate or not, all such speculation vanished as *Fellowship* grossed \$47 million domestically on its opening weekend.⁵⁸ Although that was only the tenth-highest opening weekend for the year, with *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* first at \$90 million, *Fellowship* proved to have stronger legs. Whereas *Sorcerer’s Stone*’s opening was 28.3 percent of its final \$317.5 million, only 15.1 percent of *Fellowship*’s total \$313 million domestic gross was earned during that first weekend. *Fellowship* did not completely disappear from theaters until 22 August 2002, more than two weeks after the theatrical-version DVD was released.⁵⁹ By February 2002, another front-page story in *Variety* showed a cartoon of Gandalf and Harry surveying a map of the world, cooperatively conjuring up “World Wizardry” for AOL Time Warner.⁶⁰ *Fellowship*’s international gross was \$860.5 million, comparing favorably with *Sorcerer’s Stone*’s \$976.5 million.

The first film’s immense popularity had a major impact on the remain-

der of Jackson's project. Across Films 2 and 3 the growing budget is apparent, especially in the number and complexity of the CGI shots. Jackson's hope to release both theatrical and extended-version DVDs became a reality. The constrictions of budget that had forced designers into compromises for the first film eased. Principal photography had long since finished, but a large portion of the film's cost was absorbed by special effects. Over the next two years, as the second and third parts went through postproduction, the overall budget crept to somewhere around \$330 million. The filmmaking team was able to bring the cast and key crew members like Andrew Lesnie back to New Zealand for months of pickups during both 2002 for *Towers* and 2003 for *Return*. Ambitious upgrading of the technical facilities in Wellington was undertaken, with a view toward making these two parts more polished and more epic in scale.

Fellowship drew mostly favorable reviews. It received many awards and a remarkable thirteen Oscar nominations, given that there was only one for a cast member (McKellen as supporting actor). It won in four of those categories. Speculation immediately began that *Return* would take Best Picture two years later. New Line and the filmmakers continually tried to downplay such talk in the press, but within the company and among the filmmakers there grew to be a definite focus on Oscars.

Towers came out as planned on 18 December 2002, and, like the first part, showed remarkable staying power. It did not go out of distribution until the end of July 2003, a few weeks before the theatrical-version DVD appeared in stores. The film's reviews were even more favorable. *Towers'* international gross was \$926 million. It received six Oscar nods, including Best Picture, and won two statuettes. The smaller number of nominations plus the failure to nominate Jackson for best director led some commentators to speculate that the trilogy had peaked early and missed its chance at anything but technical and design awards. Clearly, though, the decline in nominations simply signaled that the Academy members were waiting for the trilogy to be complete before showering it with honors. As *Variety* pointed out, "While most audiences concede it's superior to the first one, many media stories clucked that 'Towers' got 'only' six nominations. Compare that with one for the 'Star Wars' sequel and none for the second 'Harry Potter,' and it's clear the franchise has widespread industry support."⁶¹

Anticipation for the third part was even keener, fueled by Jackson's and the cast's and crew's frequent claims in interviews that it was the best and most spectacular of the three. New Line agreed to set the world premiere not in one of the American or European cities where such events usually take place

but in Wellington—even though its population was only around 300,000. Jackson had backed New Line into that agreement a year earlier, when at the New Zealand premiere of *Towers*, held in Wellington, he had claimed that Mark Ordesky had an announcement to make about where the world premiere of *Return* would take place. Trapped, Ordesky said Wellington—a moment captured on film and included in the supplements to the *Return* extended-version DVD.⁶²

Return outgrossed its predecessors, bringing in \$1.1 billion internationally, putting it second only to *Titanic* (in figures unadjusted for inflation).⁶³ The film was withdrawn from distribution earlier than the other two parts, its last day in theaters being 3 June 2004, a little more than a week after the theatrical-version DVD appeared. Presumably the timing resulted from the fact that New Line did not need to sustain interest over the summer leading up to the marketing campaign for another part.

Return was nominated for eleven Academy Awards. The filmmakers were confident about the technical and design Oscars but less certain that the picture, director, and scriptwriting prizes were in the bag. Philippa Boyens confessed to me that she had expected the latter award, along with the male acting statuettes, to go as a consolation prize to *Mystic River*—a plausible worry, given that in recent years the Academy voters had tended to share the wealth and not give any single film a large number of Oscars.⁶⁴ Bookies in Britain had no doubts about the top prize, however. The odds at betting chain Ladbrokes saw the film go from a solid 1–2 favorite when the nominees were announced to an unprecedented 1–12. Five days before the ceremony, a Ladbrokes spokesperson announced, “We have been forced to close the books on the Oscars. Everybody thinks that this is one film to rule them all.”⁶⁵

Science-fiction/fantasy buffs were less sanguine, being used to seeing their favorite genres passed over for industry awards, and perhaps simply not wanting to get their hopes up too much. They need not have worried, for as Steven Spielberg said upon opening the envelope to present the final award of the evening, Best Picture, “It’s a clean sweep!” The total number of Oscars won by the trilogy was seventeen, though in a less publicized ceremony, the Academy also gave two technical awards to programs and applications developed for the trilogy.⁶⁶

Bob Shaye’s supposed gamble was vindicated, and six months later he and Michael Lynne found themselves on the cover of a thick supplement to *Variety*, named as the trade paper’s “Showmen of the Year.”⁶⁷ Shaye’s prudent aggression had led to an instant classic and one of the most successful franchises in film history.