

Hungarian dragon's egg hatches monster action

From the country that invented the ballpoint pen, holography and the BASIC computer programming language comes a tale of flying lizards in a \$100 million blockbuster movie from ex-ILM visual effects supervisor and first-time director Stefen Fangmeier.

You can imagine the telephone conversation: 'Hi Mike, we have this big action sequence to shoot. Yes, several hundred extras, a couple of dragons - with Dragon Riders on top - the evil Varden and lots of Orcs - oops no I mean Urgal. It's a sort of invasion by the forces of dark so it'll be night shoots. No it's in Hungary for three weeks. Yes that's right, and by the way the action all takes place in an extinct volcano.'

Mike Brewster, 2nd unit director of photography, didn't reveal if that was in fact the opening gambit which led to his name on the credits of *Eragon*. It's just the latest cinematic venture into the land of the good, the bad and the downright disgustingly ugly prosthetics. Based on wunderkinder author Christopher Paolini's bestselling fantasy novel, the story follows a callow youth who discovers a strange stone. It turns out to be direct from the Dragon Egg Marketing Board and leads him on a quest to find ... his destiny of course; nothing new there then. As Brewster puts it with something of a twinkle in his voice, "There are good dragons and

evil dragons, and a good princess and a good king." The next part of the sentence is not that they join forces with Luke Skywalker, but a similarly gung ho young man, Eragon, to fight the evil king. "And of course they win through in the end!" laughs Brewster.

His light-hearted synopsis may not be exactly what Paolini fans regard as accurate, or indeed reverential enough, but no matter how Brewster views the plot he certainly regards the filming as seriously as any of his past projects. And those projects look mightily impressive; 2nd unit DP on the last three *Harry Potter* outings and *Lost in Space* as well as 2nd unit director credits on *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*, *Dinotopia* and *Legionnaire*.

With that calibre of listings it is not surprising that 2nd unit director Peter MacDonald called on Brewster to handle this latest monster-task. They first worked together on *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back* in 1980: "He is just the most wonderful man to work with, very talented," says Brewster, "He's like Leonard Bernstein conducting an orchestra - he covers every angle, knows everything and sees everything. He's inspiring and he just pushes you

as far as he can. And you rise to the occasion."

High praise indeed, matched only by Brewster's enthusiasm for Kodak stock; "I always shoot on Kodak. It's easily the most flexible and tolerant stock." As an example he cites a flying sequence he recently did on *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*; "We had to film on the river Thames during the magic hour. The director wanted detail in the sky as well as reflections in the water to register. We were shooting off very powerful RIBS (Rigid Inflatable Boats) doing 32 knots and the camera was rigged off the front on Libra heads and taking an enormous amount of punishment. You would normally shoot that sort of stuff on Hi Definition because it is so forgiving at night - they did a lot of that on HDTV on *Collateral*. But the punishment the cameras were taking, Hi Def units would have lasted about a minute." Brewster's answer was robust film cameras and a versatile film stock. He experimented with KODAK VISION2 500T Colour Negative Film 5218 and forced it two stops. "The results were outstanding - just outstanding," reflects Brewster. "That's what I mean about the tolerance of the stock; it is so durable

"The 5218 stock is such a durable and tolerant stock and I just love the reproduction. And those characteristics are true right through the range."



Above: Actor Ed Speleers takes aim in a scene from the film.

Inset left: Jeremy Irons (right) gives one of his most cherished possessions, his sword, to Eragon.

Inset right: Actor Ed Speleer in a scene from the film.

and you can push it so much. Even pushing it by two stops you were hardly aware of the grain."

Brewster also used the 5218 stock as main unit DP on *Animal Farm*. "Because we wanted a really gritty look, I forced it two stops and underexposed it two stops to try and bring the grain out," he recalls. "It was actually quite difficult! But I think it's such a durable and tolerant stock and I just love the reproduction. And those characteristics are true right through the range."

On *Eragon*, Brewster did not have to force develop, "It was pretty normal filming really." And then, without a trace of irony, he continues "There was a village inside the volcano and its rim was surrounded by Wendy Lights plus 12 and 24kW Dinos on towers when we ran out of cranes for the Wendys. It was a bit like a football stadium. You could turn lights on and off depending which way you were facing and the rest of the village had lamps hidden in huts or behind things. And that was basically it."

The 'normal filming' also involved eight ARRIcam cameras on the floor and on cranes – including the largest Techno Cranes. There was also a helicopter rig for the flying dragon sequence. "It was

just spraying cameras all over the place," enthuses Brewster.

The main unit DP was Hughie Johnson, a name most often seen sharing the credit rolls with Ridley Scott – *Gl Jane*, *White Squall*, *1492: Conquest of Paradise* and *Kingdom of Heaven*. Johnson set the style for Brewster's 2nd unit. "Because the whole thing was at night and it was a big battle scene, there were lots of fires, and that really determined the style."

Much of the action was filmed in Hungary and Brewster found the working conditions and the people outstanding. "One of the most memorable things was the crew – there wasn't one weak link. Everyone was just so good. I had my own gaffer Tommy Finch with me, but we also had a local gaffer to communicate with all the Hungarian guys. He has gaffered for Vilmos Zsigmond, AIC, and it doesn't get much better than that!"

Very often DPs working out of their own country face cultural and working practice differences that can irritate both sides and cause delays and friction. *Eragon* was a very happy exception for Brewster. "The camera crews were just phenomenal. You didn't wait for

anybody." There were four British camera crews on the volcano sequence and one Hungarian. "The local guys were superb," declares Brewster. "I can't really say enough about them – it was just a wonderful collaboration."

With such massive forces to organise, planning and timing were of the essence. However that meticulous preparation took a bit of a knock on one scheduled night shoot: "We were shooting with all cameras – another massive sequence for the invasion. Half way through the night Peter MacDonald said to me 'OK, how long it will take you to turn around and face the other way?'" Brewster laughs raucously. Prefixed with an expletive most definitely deleted, Brewster replied "I don't know! We'll be as quick as we can. Myself and the gaffer and the electricians turned the whole set around in just two hours. I and everybody else thought that was a bit of a miracle." That sort of phenomenal working would normally attract a small beer from the 2nd unit director. And on this occasion? "He bought me dinner!" laughs Brewster. And we can be sure it wasn't dragon goulash either. ■