



# The Living Planet

BY JOE FORDHAM

**J**im Henson and his daughter, Cheryl, were stranded at JFK Airport awaiting a flight on board the Concorde, February 1978, when a nor'easter blew in to the East Coast, bringing more than 27 inches of snow to the New York City area. Isolated in his hotel room, Henson sketched out ideas on which he'd been ruminating for an ambitious feature film. Henson's concept was for an adult fairy tale told entirely with puppets, a *Heart of Darkness* fable set on the three-sunned planet Thra, where the last surviving pair of fairy folk — Gelflings, Jen and Kira — and gentle Mystics struggle against cruel Skeksis for power over a Crystal of Truth that can restore peace to their world.

The resulting 1982 film, *The Dark Crystal* — which Henson co-directed with his long-time puppet-maker partner Frank Oz — depicted an extraordinary fantasy world developed with illustrator Brian Froud, production designer Harry Lange and artisans of the Jim Henson Company Creature Workshop. Reviews were mixed, praising the technical achievement while knocking the film for its macabre spectacle and somber tone. The movie eventually found an audience as a cult hit. Spin-off books and rumors of a sequel continued to emerge from the Jim Henson Company, spawning — nearly four decades later — a lavish Netflix television series, *The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance*.

The 10-episode series began its long gestation 15 years earlier, when chief executive officer and president of the Jim Henson Company, Lisa Henson, joined Brian Froud and filmmaker Genndy Tartakovsky at the 2006 San Diego Comic-Con to announce *The Power of the Dark Crystal*, a sequel that did not materialize. “We know that fans have been waiting for a long time for a new *Dark Crystal* production,” Lisa Henson noted. “My team — president of television Halle Stanford and vice president of feature film production Blanca Lista — and I had been developing *Dark Crystal* on two different paths for years. One was a feature sequel, the other was an animated prequel for television. We weren’t sure which would happen first, so we developed both, and they could have coexisted because each took place in different time periods. The sequel was always going to be a puppet production, and that went through development with different filmmakers. The television show was going to be 2D animation, and that went through its own odyssey at various networks. When we took the project to Netflix, we were initially speaking about the animated project. The premise was similar to what emerged as *Age of Resistance* — it had an epic quality, big canvas, many characters, a lot of complexity. Netflix vice president of original content Cindy Holland replied, ‘Why don’t we do this as a puppet production?’ We responded, ‘We would kill to do 10 episodes of a puppet production!’”

Henson teams pooled resources. Director Louis Leterrier, who had been developing the feature film, joined screenwriters Jeff Addis and Will Matthews to develop a pitch for a 10-hour narrative, drawing on material grown from Henson’s publishing program of Penguin young adult books and Archaia graphic novels. “We gave Jeff and Will a lot of homework,” said Henson. “We asked them to read our first YA book and graphic novels, particularly the creation myths that dated back thousands of ‘trines’ before the *Dark Crystal* movie. And we considered the coffee table book, *The World of*

*the Dark Crystal*, which came out at the time of the movie, to be canon. Brian Froud had worked closely with that publication, creating backstories and giving a sense of what happened in Thra leading up to the movie.” Backstories included a *Dark Crystal* bible that Henson’s assembled, years earlier, in a meeting named after Thra’s cosmic alignment. “In our Great Conjunction meeting, we brought together everyone working on the movie, the TV series, publishing, a role-playing game — all parties got into one room, and we spent two days hashing out world-building, creating rules, ironing out inconsistencies about character names, et cetera. We made sure all the ideas for different mediums were playing off the same toolset, and we made sure there was a logic to the world.”

*The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance* was set 30 years before *The Dark Crystal*, when Gelflings thrived in service to Skeksis, unaware that their overlords were using the Crystal of Truth — a giant orb at the heart of the Crystal Castle — to drain Gelflings of their life-essence to prolong Skeksis lives. Told from the point of view of a young Gelfling, Rian (voiced by Taron Egerton), who witnesses the Skeksis Scientist (Mark Hamill) draining a loved one, the story charts Rian’s fate among seven Gelfling clans. Rian’s father Ordon (Mark Strong), captain of the castle guard, and All-Maudra (Helena Bonham-Carter), queen of the noble Vapra, both reject Rian’s revelation. Rian’s allies — including the feisty Vapran, Princess Brea (Anya Taylor-Joy) and the kindly Grottan, Deet (Nathalie Emmanuel) — join him on a quest to liberate Thra. On their journey, they encounter creatures old and new, including the ancient matriarch Aughra (Donna Kimball), the evil Skeksis Emperor (Jason Isaacs) and the obsequious Skeksis Chamberlain (Simon Pegg).

The narrative rekindled classic fantasy filmmaking techniques that had sparked the imagination of a young cinemagoer growing up in Paris in the 1980s. “The puppets, models and miniature photography of *The Dark Crystal* made me fall in love with the technique of cinema,” stated director Louis Leterrier. “I had applied those techniques to hand-offs between actors and CG creatures when I made *The Incredible Hulk* and *Clash of the Titans*.” Leterrier combined his enthusiasm for the medium with modern filmmaking resources to depict the epic scope of the mythology of Thra. “It was a daunting task to tell the story of this civilization, and absolutely impossible to tell in two hours. The only precedent, when we began development six or seven years ago, was the beginning of *Game of Thrones*. We were betting on the future, gambling that people would be captivated by a story told as a streaming series. I’d



never done a puppet show before, so I knew I'd have to go through puppet school to learn how to work with puppeteers."

The filmmakers embarked on a re-immersion into the art of Brian Froud, who joined the new production with his wife Wendy Widener, and son Toby — an artist and filmmaker who stepped up as design supervisor — drawing from influences of English rural landscapes that informed the design of Thra. "I grew up on Dartmoor in Devon," related Toby Froud. "Those locations were the inspiration that my father has taken from, and that's what I call home. My father and mother remained involved with *The Dark Crystal* over the years, consulting and doing artwork. The great thing about that was the writers really wanted to get their hands around the idea of Thra and expand the literature in such a beautiful way." Jim Henson's Creature Shop creative director Peter Brooke — who had guided the creature-making team since 2004, after a career dating back to Henson's *The Storyteller* — visited the Frouds to walk the moors. "Pete was very generous, bringing the ideas and creations into physical form again. We worked with him, Louis and the Henson team to hash out what we could present on screen."

Archival research at Henson's Creature Shop in Bur-

bank, California, unearthed drawings and notes, and creature castings made from original molds, painted as accurate re-creations of long-since-perished foam latex skins. The Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, Georgia, yielded original Aughra and Gelfling puppets. The Museum of Moving Image in New York City made available *Dark Crystal* artifacts from its permanent Henson exhibit. "We accessed a huge trove of material," commented Peter Brooke. "That was very important to making sure our designs kept true to the original film."

As designs took shape, DNEG TV joined the team to discuss parameters of digital enhancements and, in the fall of 2016, Netflix called for a test of creature techniques. "Netflix knew what a Jim Henson puppet production looked like," stated Louis Leterrier, "and they knew my style of high-action, high-octane filmmaking. They wanted to see how we could combine the two, enhancing puppetry and sets through digital technology. They asked us to create a short film, and they wanted to include digital technology to make sure we were making the right choice going for puppetry."

The test specifically addressed techniques for realizing Gelflings. The original film had explored many Gelfling designs, translating Brian Froud's delicate renderings into puppets with empathic humanistic traits. Juxtapositions of rod puppets and wide shots featuring small