

The Dark Crystal  
By Frederick William Springer III / March 19, 2006

"Another world. Another time. In the age of wonder." So starts Jim Henson's puppet masterpiece "The Dark Crystal," co-directed by Frank Oz, and it never fails to deliver.

It is the story of Jen, a Gelfling, who is told by his dying master, the Wisest of the Mystics, that he must save the world. A thousand years ago, the crystal cracked and the gentle Mystics and cruel Skeksis appeared. Upon hearing the prophecy that a Gelfling would heal the crystal and hence they would cease to exist, the Skeksis eliminated the entire Gelfling race. Or so they thought. Though Jen has never left the valley inhabited by the Mystics before, he must now embark on his journey alone, find the crystal shard, and restore order to his world. But he must hurry because if his mission isn't complete before the three suns eclipse, the Skeksis will rule forever.

Character design and costumes go a long way in a fantasy film such as this. Graphic designer Brian Froud, known for the imaginative book *Faeries* which he co-illustrated, was tapped as conceptual designer and proved to be an excellent choice. Evil oozes from the Skeksis, bird like creatures with sharp features--beaks, teeth and long bony fingers. The Lords of the Crystal are self-involved, walk around with scepters, and dress in gaudy, colorful and ornamental garb. Those under their control are also horrific creatures--giant beetle soldiers, spy bats, and zombie slaves.

On the other hand, the Mystics come across as majestic and serene. Their real-life counterpart is hard to place, perhaps somewhere between a pony and sloth, except with an extra pair of arms. Their features are rounded, they wear simple, naturally-colored clothes, and live off the earth. The Gelfling are a child-sized, humanistic race (making it easier for the audience to identify with them) and they also don simple, earth-tone attire.

The puppets in this movie are more believable than many live actors. They have intricate

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movements in their face that supplementary convey the emotion in their speech and body language. It certainly doesn't hurt to have mimes among the performers.

The sets are beautifully constructed and no detail is spared. Whether it's one of the many rooms in the castle, out in the valley, the wilderness, or exploring ruins, you believe that you have been transported to a real world in another realm.

Trevor Jones' score, performed by the London Symphony Orchestra, compliments the film perfectly. Wind and string instruments are predominant in the themes for the Mystics and other assorted good guys, a seeming overture of awe when Jen discovers something new. The Skeksis and their henchmen are horn heavy with creepy additives. The music completes the fantasy.

Originally released in 1982, "The Dark Crystal" stands the test of time. Twenty-four years later, it is still as imaginative and entertaining as ever. And that's why it remains my all-time favorite film.

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