

Ridley Scott's beautiful dark twisted fantasy: the making of Legend

FEATURE



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Telegraph Film

30 September 2015 • 8:37pm

It had Tom Cruise, unicorns, and the director of Blade Runner behind the camera. Why did Ridley Scott's fairy tale end so unhappily? By Ed Power

In the early summer of 1984, the man who would soon be the world's biggest movie star was to be found creeping outside a small cottage in the Buckinghamshire countryside, cradling in his arms an assortment of fake vomit splatters and plastic dog poo.

Flashing the boyscout grin shortly to become famous around the globe the interloper, accompanied by an older, ponytailed accomplice, eased open the front door, pausing to check he was not being watched. Inside, he gleefully scattered the disgusting props everywhere. Overseas on his first big movie shoot, [Tom Cruise](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/mission-impossible-rogue-nation/tom-cruise-stunts-injuries/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/mission-impossible-rogue-nation/tom-cruise-stunts-injuries/>) was having a blast.

The actor was at Pinewood Studios and the modest outhouse he was in the process of defiling was the production office of [Ridley Scott's](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/the-martian/ridley-scott-water-on-mars/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/the-martian/ridley-scott-water-on-mars/>) Legend, a postmodern fairytale starring 22-year-old Cruise as Mowgli-esque forest boy Jack O' The Green.

At Cruise's side, likewise struggling to stifle an attack of the giggles, was novelist William "Gatz" Hjortsberg, hired by Scott to put flesh and bones – and, as it transpired, phallic bull horns – on the filmmaker's vision of a grown-up revisiting of a milieu latterly popularised by Walt Disney.

Legend (1985) Trailer (HD)





"Tom was this sweet young actor – very pleasant, very agreeable guy. I had to make him agree not to call me 'sir'," recalls 73-year-old Hjortsberg from his home in Montana.

"Because Tom had expressed an interest in speaking to the writer Ridley gave me the responsibility for his care and feeding. We hung out a lot and had lunch all the time.

"I remember one occasion we bought all this plastic vomit and fake dog turds from a joke shop in London and snuck into the cottage that housed our production offices and put plastic vomit on a typewriter and a fake dog poo on Ridley's chair. I had a lot of fun with Tom."

Legend was the extinction event that brought to a close the early Eighties mini-boom in fantasy movies. Conceived by Scott as a bleak and lavish twist on Disney and the Grimm Brothers (the latter plenty bleak to begin it), the film was a flop – suffering from endless studio tinkering it earned less than \$15 million on a \$25 million budget and ended Scott's spell as Hollywood golden boy.

When he was entrusted with the keys to the magic kingdom in the future, it was always under intense external scrutiny. After Legend, the creator of Alien and Blade Runner was a wunderkind no more.

As Legend fell – plummeted, really – into obscurity it was as if a spell had been broken and the industry woke up to the folly of its endless attempts, with Conan the Barbarian, The Dark Crystal etc, to establish swords and sorcery as a lucrative cinematic subspecies. Not until Peter Jackson's [Lord Of The Rings](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/lord-of-the-rings/minas-)



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Indeed, for many years there seemed to be an unspoken consensus that Legend, which marks its 30th anniversary this year, should be quietly forgotten. Scott quickly moved on, the director of Alien and Blade Runner leaving behind the Neverland of sci fi and fantasy where he had forged his reputation. His new adaptation of Andy Weir's sci-fi novel [The Martian](#) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/the-martian/review/>) is only his second foray into genre cinema since Legend.

Cruise, for his part, rebounded almost immediately with Top Gun – ironically directed by Ridley's brother Tony. Tellingly, in the recent glut of Cruise hagiographies accompanying [Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation](#) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/mission-impossible-rogue-nation/review/>), Legend hardly merited mention – anyone not paying attention might be forgiven for assuming the young star went straight from his breakout turn in Risky Business to playing fighter ace Maverick. Legend presents such an oddly-shaped blot on his CV we have subconsciously scrubbed it from our recollections.

That Legend should take on the retrospective aspect of an uneasy dream is absolutely appropriate given its nightmarish sensibilities. A truly Freudian fairytale, watched today

the film exudes a disorientating, almost druggy, other-worldliness. It is chiefly remembered for Tim Curry's equal parts camp and baroque turn as the Lord Of Darkness, a Satan archetype with contorted bull horns and perpetually peeved expression.



Credit: Rex

But as vine-swinging hero Jack, Cruise cuts an uncanny figure too, with his pointy teeth, long hair and strange diction (something in the way he elongates his words suggests a fleeting intimacy with the English language). Throw in unicorns, wisecracking goblins, tittering fairies and a chair that bleeds black puss and the result is a carnival of queasiness. It's as if Scott set out to make Tolkien and ended up tapping David Cronenberg instead.

"Ridley told me he wanted the villain to be called Darkness and that he wanted unicorns," says Hjortsberg. "I remember the first time we met – he came up to me in a hotel in New York and said, 'how would you like to make a fairy story?'"

Legend started out even darker and weirder than what ended up on screen, he reveals. In Hjortsberg's original telling the sexual subtexts were front and centre, with virginal Prince Lili (18-year-old Mia Sara) not only kidnapped by the Lord of Darkness but violently seduced too.

"In the first draft, one of the unicorns is shot with a crossbow – it jumps up and scratches the

princess on the shoulder," he says. "Later, she notices hair sprouting out of this nasty wound in the shoulder. She wanders to a pond and sees her reflection in the moonlight. She turns into a beast. Darkness looms behind and basically seduces her. They are coupling frantically when Jack and the fairies break in to save her."

Legend - I Want to Kill the Unicorn



Not surprisingly the sex sequence was quickly cut ("you can't have the villain f__ the princess," an exasperated producer told Hertz at an early read-through). "We went through many drafts and a lot of the strong stuff got muted. The entire sexuality thing ... in the final version, she wore a black dress and was invited by Darkness to sit on a chair that was alive and vaguely repulse and bubbling ... That was it."

The script was soon the least of the production's woes. On June 27, 1984, Pinewood's famous 007 set burnt to the ground. Under Scott's meticulous gaze the sprawling soundstage had been transformed into a fantastical, snow-covered forest, where many of Legend's key early scenes had yet to be filmed.

"I could see from all the buildings a giant column of smoke, like from a battleship that was sinking," the director later said of the incident. "All my gas bottles were exploding inside the steel corrugated walls. Every time a bottle exploded, the walls ballooned. A fireman said, 'I think you've lost it'. I said 'I think I have, mate'. I went immediately – because this is what I

always do, it's slightly Zen – I went and played tennis."

"We were still working on the forest scenes," says Kiran Shah, who played helmeted goblin Blunder (ultimately revealed to be a good fairy in disguise). "We had to go into the backlot at Pinewood [to shoot the remaining scenes]. We had a couple of months left. Nobody knew why the soundstage had burned down. It was a mystery."

"A lot of the budget had gone into building that enormous forest set," says Hjortsberg.

"There were a whole lot of important sequences yet to shoot. Such as the one where they first see the unicorns. And now the \$10 million dollar set was gone and Ridley still had to do the scene. His solution was to shoot in this park around Pinewood. There were these paths through the woods – he got a couple of giant fire hoses and started pouring the water down the path. Suddenly you had this stream and that is where he shot it."

Though the fire seemed an ill omen, it was only after production wrapped that Legends' troubles truly began. Scott was given creative control over the movie outside the United States (where 20th Century Fox held the rights). In America, however, Universal Studios had issues with the film and exerted firmer oversight. First for the chop was Jerry Goldsmith's swelling soundtrack, replaced by the atonal strains of krautrock group Tangerine Dream. Multiple test-screenings, meanwhile, resulted in the US running time reduced to 89 minutes from the original 94 (a DVD director's cut would later be released at 114 minutes).

"Back in those days, North America was the more valuable commodity," says Hjortsberg.

"Sid Sheinberg from Universal had also tried to interfere with Terry Gilliam's Brazil. Gilliam had a much stronger final cut clause in his contract and refused to [bow to the studios's demands]. Ridley didn't have that strong a position. He kind of knuckled under and did what Sheinberg demanded.

"They wiped every note of Jerry Goldsmith's score and got Tangerine Dream to do the soundtrack And they cut quite a bit out of the movie. A lot of it didn't make sense."

While critics praised make-up artist Rob Bottin's extraordinary prosthetic effects and Curry's performance as Darkness, overall the response to Legend was negative (it today languishes with a 48 per cent Rotten Tomatoes ratings). In particular, the storyline was disparaged as simplistic and crass – a source of enduring hurt to Hjortsberg.



Credit: Rex

"The reviews slammed the screenplay as extremely shallow. I felt really bad about that. I did everything they wanted me to do. My first draft was a lot more intriguing ... I was disappointed to get slammed for being a shallow screen writer ... I was just doing my job."

"Legend was ahead of its time," argues Kiran Shah. "A lot of the fantasy movies from that period have become cult films. Dark Crystal is a cult movie. And so is Legend. It took a little bit of time for people to understand what these movies were about and how good they were."

In a reversal that could have been scripted in Hollywood, Legend was toppled in the United States by Tony Scott's Top Gun, after an underwhelming \$4.2 million opening weekend.

"There was always a slight edge of competition between Tony and Ridley," says Hjortsberg. "Tony saw something in Tom Cruise, as did Ridley. So he made this film with Tom for Paramount and that was Top Gun. Sid Shineberg would have known what Paramount was up to with Top Gun. If that was me and I was aware another studio was about to put out this movie about fighter pilots and it was very likely to be a big hit, I would have held off on releasing Legend until Christmas and let Top Gun soar to glory and make a star out of Tom Cruise."

"He had a Tom Cruise movie in the can that featured unicorns and snow. Why not hold off and make it a Christmas film? He didn't do that – he released Legend three weeks before Top Gun and then Top Gun opened wide and bounced Legend out of every theatre in America."

Despite their friendship Hjortsberg and Cruise did not keep in touch. Hjortsberg would go on to write the script for Alan Parker's Angel Heart (based on his book Fallen Angel) and thereafter drifted back into novels. (He confesses he recently reconnected with Scott for a hush-hush fantasy treatment.)

"I saw Tom Cruise once more," he says. "It was in a parking garage in LA, some years later. Tom was a big star by then. He was with some beautiful woman and he immediately recognised me and called out 'Gatz!' We ran across the garage and had a hug. And that was it, the last time I laid eyes on him in person."

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