

Under The Mountain: Weta Workshop's Steven Boyle

Cameron McMillan, Yahoo!Xtra December 3, 2009, 11:57 am



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He's helped bring to life Star Wars, King Kong and the Matrix - now it's time for Steven Boyle to have a crack at a New Zealand classic.

When the special effects guru was asked by Weta Workshop to be the creatures designer for Under the Mountain, he wasn't entirely sure what he was getting into.

Unlike most New Zealanders who've read the 1979 Maurice Gee novel and have been haunted by the evil aliens the Wilberforces, the Australian had no idea.

"I hadn't heard of the book before being asked to join the team but I quickly tracked it down, read it and absolutely loved it.

"I saw very early on why it was so popular. If I grew up with that book I would have loved it as well," he told Yahoo!Xtra.

Boyle first worked with Weta on King Kong five years ago and calls the company his home away from home.

Under the Mountain screenwriter and producer Matthew Grainger knew from an early stage that the Academy Award-winning effects company would be vital in bringing the story to the big screen.

"Our film really takes Under the Mountain to the next level, with the sophisticated CGI

and production values that today's cinemagoers expect to see, " said Grainger.

"Thanks to the talented creatives at Weta Workshop, who created our amazingly scary Wilberforces... we can deliver an all-new, updated interpretation of the classic story for a new generation of audiences."

There's no doubt *Under the Mountain* didn't have the budget of Boyle's other films such as *Star Wars* and *King Kong* but this in no way shows on the screen as the effects team went back to traditional methods, such as big sets and advanced make-up, which were just as effective.

"The effects on *Under the Mountain* we hoped to keep at a certain standard that had been seen before, but in saying that they were quite traditionally done. It was still a guy in a suit -it was a practical effect - so we kept with that traditional way. We didn't feel it would take from anything to approach it like this; in fact we thought it would bring so much more to the creatures to have them actually there," said Boyle.

Director Jonathan King agrees and said having the creatures on set, as opposed to working with a green screen, and building the sets for real was vital.

"We didn't want to fall back on digital solutions, so we chose to build the Wilberforce house for real on the edge of Lake Pupuke to give our young actors a real creepy place to investigate.

"Our underground caverns were also physical sets, which were then extended digitally to give the impression of cavernous spaces. And many of our creatures were present on set - suits and makeup effects designed and built by Weta Workshop, that were then augmented and enhanced by our VFX team."

The biggest challenge for Boyle was coming up with an original concept for the Wilberforces that strayed away from the novel's description but still stuck true at the same time. Though he admits it was a lot of fun to come up with the look and feel of a big-screen monster.

"There have been so many good ones made and you always want to go back to something that inspires you but we couldn't do that. We really wanted to come up with something different.

"The reference of these tentacled creature kept coming up. There was just something cool about the idea of these human shapes in the corner that you can kind of see with tentacled stuff happening.

"I think it's still faithful to the book even though we took it in a slightly different direction. It's what Jonathan wanted; it's one of those things that change so much from when you originally designed it, by building it and sculpting it, it kind of evolves and changes. Once we got the design right we were very faithful to it and I was really happy

with it."

Unlike previous Weta efforts where Gollum was created on a computer screen, the same man-hours were applied in *Under the Mountain* but instead were spent in the make-up room.

"In terms of the application it took three hours every morning and it's a new set of prosthetics every day because they are destroyed when you take them off. So every day there has to be a set run and painted and everything to get them ready.

"The Wilberforce make-up had to happen quite quickly as we had only a few days to sculpt it and mould it, then you've got to inject the mould with silicone to create the second skin. It's an amazing amount of work but people aren't quite prepared for how much work is involved in it. It's worth it."

One of the downsides of creating a slippery alien for the big screen? The slime gets everywhere.

"We used different slimes for different purposes and there was a lot of it. But it's all non-toxic stuff which is good as we got it everywhere."