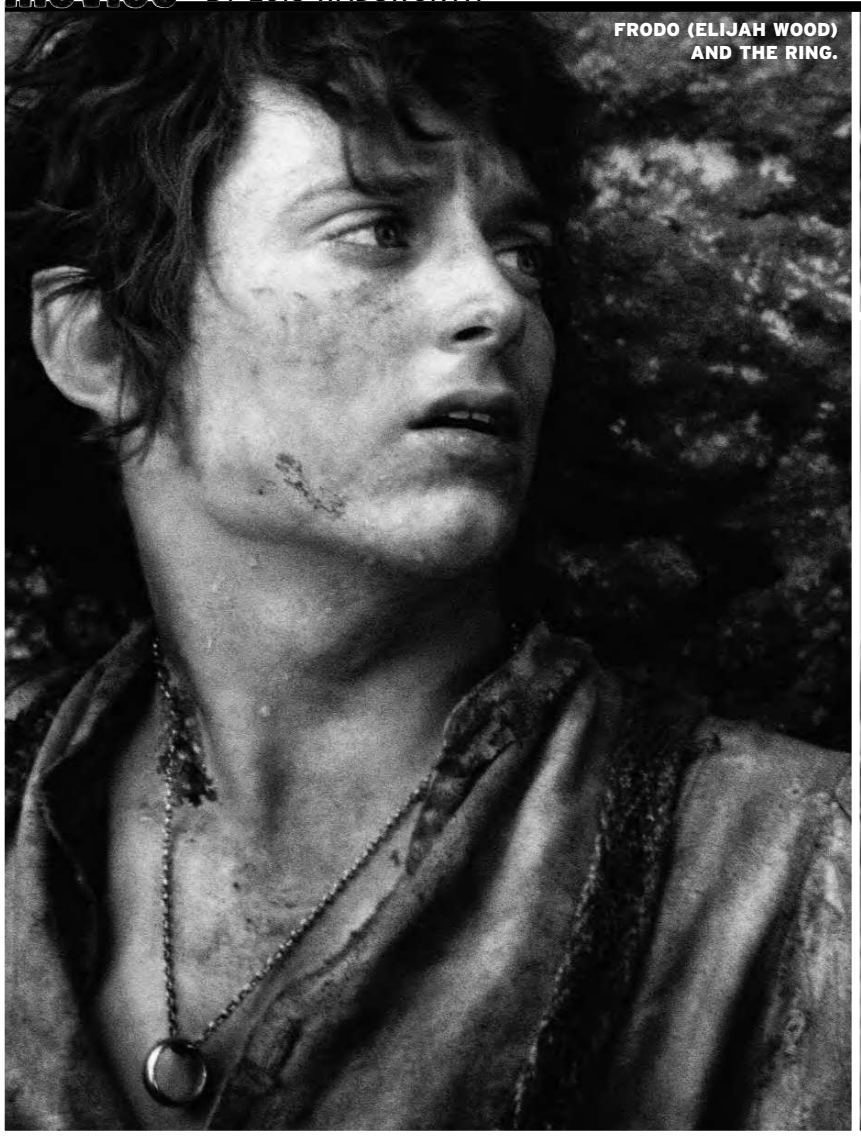
FRODO (ELIJAH WOOD) AND THE RING.

SAM (SEAN ASTIN) IS CONCERNED ABOUT FRODO.

ARAGORN (VIGGO MORTENSEN) READIES FOR BATTLE.

MIRANDA OTTO AS EOWYN.

GANDALF (IAN MCKELLEN) IN THE HEAT OF BATTLE.

PIERRE VINET/ NEW LINE PRODUCTIONS (C) 2003.

Epic Closure

Capturing the dream of Middle Earth

LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING: Written, directed and produced by Peter Jackson, based on the novel by J.R.R. Tolkien. Producers, Barrie M. Osborne. Writer and producer, Fran Walsh. Writer, Philippa Boyens. Executive producers, Robert Shaye, Michael Lynne, Mark Ordesky, Cinematography, Andrew Lesnie. Production design, Grant Major. Special effects supervisor, Richard Taylor. Costumes, Ngila Dickson. Composer, Howard Shore. Visual effects supervisor, Jim Rygiel. Conceptual design, Alan Lee, John Howe. Supervising art director, Dan Hennah. Make-up and hair design, Peter Owen, Peter King. Starring Elijah Wood (Frodo), Ian McKellen (Gandalf),.Viggo Mortensen (Aragorn), Sean Astin (Sam) and Andy Serkis (Gollum). With Liv Tyler (Arwen), Bernard Hill (Theoden), Billy Boyd (Pippin), Dominic Monaghan (Merry), Cate Blanchett (Galadriel), John Rhys-Davies (Gimli), Orlando Bloom (Legolas), Hugo Weaving (Elrond) and Miranda Otto (Eowyn). Also with David Wenham (Faramir), Karl Urban (Eomer), John Noble (Denethor), Ian Holm (Bilbo) and Sean Bean (Boromir). New Line Cinema. PG-13. 200 minutes.

The conclusion of a sprawling epic such as the final installment of Peter Jackson's brilliant adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy must meet unreal expectations or else disappoint those who have already spent $1.8 billion to see the first two episodes. No one leaving the theater looked disappointed. No one left early, either, despite the film's 3-hour, 20-minute running time. (Add in another 20 minutes for the ads that precede the feature, at least half-an-hour of standing-in-line time, driving and parking time, and you're looking at a 5-hour project.)

No one complained, because *The Return of the King* delivers the goods — moving human relationships; complicated characters brought to life with heart and craft; breathtaking spectacles; stunning vistas; and a story with elemental, universal appeal. Escalating tension is balanced by intimate moments, and the forward momentum is broken by respite. The viewer is not driven to a state of frenzy, but the last great battle at Mordor intercut with Frodo and Sam's final assault on Mt. Doom creates stress that longs for completion.

The action here accomplishes the hopeless task undertaken by the ring-bearer and the fellowship. But the film takes its time to get there, showing how success was won only by the collaboration of many individuals, rather like this stunning film series itself.

You may already know that all three *Lord of the Ring* films were made simultaneously, forging film history. But did you know that the movies had 114 speaking roles or that more than three million feet of film was shot during production or that principal photography took 274 days? Here are a few more random facts to help put this massive enterprise in perspective:

• 10,000 crowd participants were recorded making orc sounds at a New Zealand cricket game; and 200 individually crafted orc masks were made for film production.

• 2,000 illustrations were drawn for the production by conceptual designer Alan Lee.

• 180 artists created the computerized effects in the series.

• 1,600 pair of prosthetic hobbit feet were used during production by the principal hobbit cast.

• 48,000 swords, scabbards, axes, shields and other implements were made for the production.

• 12,500 hand-linked rings were used to create the chain mail.

• 900 suits of armor were made by hand.

• 15,000 costumes were made by the costume department, including about150 costumes for each Middle Earth civilization.

• 2,400 crew members were employed at the height of production.

• 20,602 extras were used to make the films.

• 350 sets were constructed, and more than 100 locations were used.

• 250 horses were used in one scene, while 70 specially trained horses were used in the production.

One character who really comes into his own in the film is Sam (Sean Astin), the stouthearted friend who wouldn't let Frodo leave him behind. Sam's compassion saves Frodo again, and he becomes the quiet hero of the story.

Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen), the returning king, gives only one rousing speech, but it is a beauty, mindful of the oft-quoted speech William Shakespeare wrote in 1599's *Henry V*. Some 4,000 ragtag English troops faced 60,000 French at Agincourt in 1415 and defeated them. In the film, Aragorn speaks eloquently of the need to stand together, and while he does not say "We few, we happy few" as Henry did, he does remind the warriors of the Middle Earth civilizations assembled that to fight the good fight is its own reward.

I was happy to hear the text rise to Shakespearean heights, because the beauty of Tolkien's language is often swallowed up by the action onscreen. If there is a commentary on the current world conflict in the film, it would be in this speech, even though principal photography for *Return of the King* was shot in New Zealand in 1999-2000, well before the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Eowyn (Miranda Otto) gives a performance sure to thrill every girl and young woman in the theatre. Forbidden as a Rohan woman to fight, Eowyn dresses as a man, straps on armor and faceplate, grabs Pippin to ride with her, and takes off for Minas Tirith on her horse. She is fearless and courageous, and she saves the life of her Uncle Thoden (Bernard Hill) in a standoff with the masked rider of Mordor, king of the Nazgul. Little known to American audiences, Otto starred in the wonderful *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1992), directed by Gillian Armstrong. Otto deserves your attention; she is that good.

Frodo (Elijah Wood) has changed greatly from the carefree Hobbit lad of the first film to the troubled young adult in this film. Frodo manifests the physical and emotional maturation Wood has undergone in this role. Certainly the character of Frodo has deepened, but the actor seems different as well. This arduous three years looks to have made an already accomplished actor (*The Ice Storm*) ready for anything.

Peter Jackson is the man of the hour. He should not be denied the awards due him for this extraordinary seven-year effort, which is as heroic as any on the screen. This is a nearly perfect film, with Jackson's overarching vision in every frame. A co-worker asked me what Jackson will do now that the last film is done. "A remake of *King Kong*," I said. He starts on the script in January, after a brief vacation.

Don't even think about missing this film, now playing at Cinema World and Cinemark. Very highest recommendations. EW