THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE WRONG

ALIEN SICK. RANCID BRAINS. EXPLODING SHEEP.
THE WILD STORY BEHIND PETER JACKSON'S EPICALLY ICKY DEBUT, BAD TASTE...

WORDS: NICK DE SEMLYEN  PHOTOGRAPHY: LOUISE HATTON  ILLUSTRATIONS: PETER STRAIN

© Peter Jackson, Craig Smith, Mike Minett, Terry Potter and Ken Hammon. Photographed exclusively for Empire at Pukerua Bay, New Zealand, on October 22, 2014. Digital Artist Justin Metz
Jukerua Bay, New Zealand. It was a chilly Sunday in the mid-1980s, and a young man with a scruffy beard and scruffy clothes has trekked to the top of a remote cliff. Despite the Pacific view, it’s a forbidding spot: harsh winds assault the scrub, there’s a sheer drop just judged short of a cliff edge. Only a handful would go right up to the edge. Today, that young man goes one further. He ties a rope around his right ankle, fixes the other end to a wooden post and

“the ‘puke’ in Pukerua Bay. Along the way, there’s a flying house, a Jackson versus Jackson fight scene, chainsaw madness, and a man headbutting a seagull. Not many Oscar-winners start out like this.

Filling the cast with mates and work colleagues, cooking up the ingeniously gory effects himself, throwing in nods to Doctor Who, Stephen King and The Beatles, and making the whole thing up as he went along. Jackson’s DIY cult classic took four long years to complete. To explain what the hell they were thinking, Empire reunited Jackson with The Boys (sadly minus O’Herne, who died in 2010), plus co-writer Ken Hammon and co-star Craig Smith. The interview refreshments? Naturally, sausage rolls and beer.

Peter, Bad Taste was your first feature film. What experience did you have at that point?

Jackson: I think Ken still has some of it preserved somewhere. Hammon: Pete used to stick used toilet paper to my face with tape. “Hey, you’re sticking toilet paper to my face?” “No, I’m not.” “Mate, you’re sticking bog paper to my face.” “No,” is such a minute executive make-up paper from Ray Harryhausen’s shop in England. “It’s a tube of aseptic-wipe!”

Jackson: The first test-film I ever did was on myself, as my bedroom while my parents were watching TV. I put newspaper on the floor, mixed up a bowl of plaster of Paris and used butter from the kitchen to grease my face. After 20 minutes it got really hot because of the chemicals. I thought, “Just grit your teeth and get through it.” It eventually peeled down and I tried to pull it off. Except I’d forgotten to put butter up my nose, and plaster was stuck onto every hair. The only way I could get it off was to rip it off. I tripped all the hairs out of my nose. Jackson: We went on to make a mould of Pete O’Herne. That time he forgot to grease the eyebrows. So Pete’s eyebrows came out. Hammon: He went on to make a mould of Peter’s nose after that.

Hammon: We’d seen some of Peter’s earlier efforts, like this World War II movie he made. He wanted to make a Conan movie and I was going to be Conan. We walked down into a valley in Pukerua Bay and it was perfect for Conan — there were rocks on all sides and it looked prehistoric. But then Bad Taste took over.

Minett: At first we weren’t even in it. We were just helping him out, carrying stuff around. Then he changed the story and suddenly we were commandos. It took you from 1983 to 1987 to make. Why?

Jackson: We only shot on Sundays, because we all worked six-days a week. And some Sundays we couldn’t shoot at all, because I couldn’t afford it. My parents loaned me two-and-a-half grand to buy a Bolex camera, but I think it was serious expensive: $100 to shoot and process four minutes of film. Also, people often weren’t available. Terry and Mike were playing soccer all the time. That was a bloody pain in the arse, their soccer games. Peter arrived for filming one day, and he was really in a bad mood. He actually called me to be in a flying chair. Jackson: I know. Quite a few people drank you of alien vomit... Minett: You know, it tasted alright. It was mainly yoghurt, wasn’t it?

Minett: You know, it tasted alright. It was mainly yoghurt, wasn’t it?

Peter Jackson: Yoghurt, green food colouring, cans of baked beans and peas. Because every time you vomit, there’s always beans and peas in it, even if you haven’t eaten beans and peas. It was all very thin and runny, so before we filmed we went out in the garden and got handfuls of dirt to mix it into it. Minett: I’ve got told you that. Hammon: I had to drink the stuff!!

Jackson: I know. Quite a few people drank it. But it was clean dirt, at least. It tasted alright, didn’t it? Best dirt you’ve ever had.

Smith: I didn’t drink any of that stuff. But it was amazing how many people got into the spirit of it.

Jackson: I think Ken still has some of it. At least you had time to perfect the “I admit it” bit, but I had to learn several of you drink alien vomit... Minett: You know, it tasted alright. It was mainly yoghurt, wasn’t it?

Peter Jackson: Yes, you were very good at it.

Jackson: It was like The Godfather. You tried to get out, but I reeled you back in.

At least you had time to perfect the “I admit it” bit, but I had to learn several of you drink alien vomit... Minett: You know, it tasted alright. It was mainly yoghurt, wasn’t it?

Peter Jackson: Well, not really.

Jackson: You looked terrible in sandals.

Potter: I was wearing Rayon sandals, and they were quite big. My mum and dad always looked after me, because I was so bratty.

Jackson: Mmm. A lot of sandwiches and beans.

Smith: There were other delays, too. So much happened to us. Marriages, divorces, health scares, deaths, nervous breakdowns. I had at least two. Midway through, I had a religious awakening and walked out of the film. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t be in a gory film.”

Jackson: Yeah, yeah. And you eventually came back, having been through your transformation.

Minett: But I was a much better person after it.

Jackson: No, not really. Peter: You looked terrible in sandals. I quickly put on weight in six months, because I decided I wanted to go to Australia. We shot a death scene for me and it was a nasty transformation.

Jackson: I think Ken still has some of it preserved somewhere. Hammon: Those things never die.

Terry and Mike, how did you meet Peter?

Peter Potter: We were all photo guys.
Peter, dare we ask what the ingredients were of the brains you munch?

Jackson: The brains were real brains. Sheep's brains from the butcher. The meat had gone off, too. It was rancid as all hell.

Hammon: Yeah, he took it home from work, forgot to put it in the fridge and left it in his bag overnight.

Smith: Peter was retching, going, “Bleerugh! Keep filming! Bleerugh!” We shot the scene again using jelly. See, the whole film was about experimentation. Throwing yourself in and seeing what would work. We were young, enthusiastic and up for anything. Remember that day we went to the firing range and used real guns?

Jackson: Yeah, to shoot some close-ups of pistols and things.

Smith: It was ten degrees below zero and I nearly got hypothermia.

Hammon: Cold, wet and we were firing live ammo. A good day.

Jackson: Yeah, it was cold. We never shot when it was warm — that's my abiding memory.

Jackson: The toughest thing for me was hanging upside down off that cliff. It crushed all the nerves in my foot and it took about six months for the sensitivity to come back there. But I got used to it after a while. After three or four hours it loses its terror and becomes a bit boring.

How did you pull off convincing gun battles?

Smith: I’m amazed we never got arrested. I remember one time there was a Scottish country-dancing club practising on one side of the building, and we were on the other unleashing mayhem.

Hammon: Derek was named after an Australian metalwork teacher we had, Mr. Bayliss. He always used to say, “Well done, lads.” He happened upon us shooting our gun battle one day, watched for a while and said, “Well done, lads.”

Jackson: In those days you could buy very realistic-looking replica pistols. One night I was driving home at 2 am, all these fake guns in the back with a blanket on top of them. Suddenly there are flashing lights behind me and it’s a bloody cop. I was driving my old blue van, which couldn’t speed if it tried. But this guy came up with a real attitude. He went through the glove box, where he found an old rolle someone had left in there. Fortunately it was tobacco. Then he started really aggressively turning the car over for about 20 minutes. I was starting to see myself spending a night down at the cop shop, trying to explain my way out of this. But the one thing he didn’t do was lift the blanket up in the back of the car. It was my lucky day.

Potter: I’ve always loved the flashes on the guns.

Smith: They were scratched into the film. Jackson: Whenever these guys were pretending to shoot their machine guns, I would mark the positions of the muzzles with specks of dirt. Then I’d go home at night and scratch gun-flasy shapes on the neg, lined up with the dirt. I’d send it off to be developed and hope like hell it all lined up. Sometimes it didn’t and the flash would be up on Mike’s head.

Hammon: We also used to stick firecrackers in the barrels of pistols.

Jackson: Yeah. We could only get those at Guy Fawkes time. So I had to buy as many as I could, hang on to them and wait for November 5 to come around again. Then they banned firecrackers, but fortunately not until we’d finished the film.

Minett: I was late one day and walked around the corner and Pete shot me with a blunderbus. I nearly had to go back home and change.

Jackson: I shot him with black powder from a Brown Bess musket. Sorry, Mike.

No conversation about Bad Taste is complete without a mention of the poor sheep that gets blown up by a rocket launcher. It’s hard to think of a finer ovine moment in cinema...

Smith: It was actually meant to have a much bigger part. We came up with this idea of a rabid sheep.

Jackson: That’s right. With an eye-patch.

Smith: The idea was Pete O’Herne and I would walk away from the battlefield and come across this crazy sheep, which would chase us. So we got a pet sheep from the next farm.

Jackson: And told it: “You’re rabid.” But it wouldn’t do anything.

Smith: We had to figure out how to get this placid bloody sheep to chase us. Jackson said, “We’ll shoо it off in this direction and you two get in front of it.” Now, you have to understand that Pete O’Herne was not the most athletic guy in the world. So he was lumbering around and we could never get in front of it. No matter which way we went, it would go the other. That sheep was smart.

Jackson: Smarter than us. Except one time it got stuck in a fence.

Smith: And a little later it got so freaked out, it ran off a cliff. Luckily it landed on this little ledge. I remember Peter saying, “It’s going to jump. Back away, back away.”

Minett: We had to talk it down.

Hammon: We carried it back up to the cliff, but then it collapsed. And we were feeling really guilty at this point. “Oh God, we’ve killed these people’s pet.”

Smith: But it survived.

Potter: “That’s enough mouth-to-mouth, Craig.”

Smith: In the end it was just that brilliant sheep. If only people realised what went into that moment.

Jackson: Did we ever manage to put an eye-patch on it?

Hammon: No.

Jackson: That’s a shame. A real shame.

nick@empiremagazine.com

BAD TASTE IS OUT NOW ON DVD.