

Despite being 6 ft 2 (1.88m) and being in his forties, Richard Armitage (Heinz Kruger in Captain America) was chosen to play a dwarf, who leads his people against the Orcs in Middle Earth.

What did you do during the casting process to impress Peter Jackson and Guillermo del Toro and succeed in getting the role of Thorin Oakenshield?

I should clarify that I met Peter Jackson but, unfortunately, I haven't had the opportunity to meet Guillermo del Toro. At first, I was supposed to take part in the auditions for another character, that of the Bard, which ended up being played by Luke Evans, but I was also offered the chance to audition for Thorin. The scene I had to play had been specially written for the casting. It was extremely well crafted since it showed different aspects of Thorin's qualities to explain what the story would be like. I had the chance to spend about two hours with Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens to perform the whole scene for the first time after which I did it a second time when they gave me some new information. As it turns out, the day we met I'd finished shooting a show and had hurt my back pretty badly during a stunt that very morning! Since the bruising was extremely painful I had had to take a strong dose of pills to put up with it and be able to attend the audition. In retrospect, I tell myself that the way I had to deal with my pain that day brought me closer to Thorin, who had to internalise very painful aspects of his life. Things went really well with Peter, Fran and Philippa in that little room that day. They liked what I did and they chose me, which was a real surprise for, being 1.88 m, I had never expected to be picked to play a warrior dwarf! [laughs.]

What are Thorin's defects and qualities? And what's his relationship like with his nephews Fili and Kili and with the rest of the Dwarves and Bilbo?

Thorin is a truly interesting character. When he's introduced in the film, we learn he's carrying a very heavy burden on his shoulders. He's Prince of the Kingdom of Durin and must avenge the disappearance and death of his grandfather and his father, the King. His mission is to recover his kingdom. He has got very little time to accomplish this huge task and this great responsibility rests only on his shoulders. If he fails and dies, his family's entire royal bloodline will be dispossessed forever and disappear with him. The vital importance of his mission and the tension it creates in him has repercussions with his relationship with the other characters. When Gandalf asks him to let Bilbo join the team he's gathered, Thorin's furious because he thinks the Hobbit will be the weakest link of the group and will put everyone at risk. If Bilbo is a source of anxiety, irritation and animosity at the beginning of the journey, the rapport between Thorin and him will evolve in a positive way over the three films until they get to trust and respect each other. As regards his personal story, Thorin became Thorin Oakenshield after fighting bravely by his late brother's side. After their father's death, Thorin's nephews Kili and Fili have grown very attached to him and, therefore, Thorin has become their paternal role model. Likewise, Thorin's very fond of Kili

and Fili. He knows they've never been to the mountains, that they've never fought against a dragon or seen their homeland after Durin's people were chased away, but he's indulgent with them. The way his nephews view the unfolding of the journey is very optimistic and innocent. Thorin will therefore protect them during this quest and watch over them to make sure their integration to the group of warriors is a smooth one and that they can help recover that which is theirs: their family's kingdom.

THE PRINCE OF DWARVES

Considering your character has also got a kingdom to recover, could it be said Thorin is “the Aragorn of the dwarf people” in *The Hobbit*?

There is indeed this similarity between both characters, but Thorin is a lot tougher than Aragorn. He's cantankerous and often cross... I found this characteristic interesting and, at the beginning, it was a bit hard for me to determine where it sprang from. I'd say this surly and aggressive side is something all the warrior Dwarves share, but Thorin, on top of that, can't stand the thought that he's been stripped of his kingdom in such a violent way. In addition, he's suffered the loss of his rank in the dwarf society, going from the privileged status of a royal family member to that of a wandering warrior. He's ashamed of such a decline... He believes that if he confides in anyone, he'll be robbed. That's why he refuses to reveal to anyone the details of his quest and never shows them the itinerary he's drawn on his map. At first, Thorin also displays rather nasty behaviour.

Was it easy to get used to performing all the time wearing lots of prosthetics, amongst them a sort of cap with fake ears? Were you able to understand your co-stars and the directions of the filmmaker?

Actually, it was the main problem I had with my make-up. What is interesting is that once the prosthetics were glued onto my skin and I moved with them they no longer bothered me. On the other hand, the ears, at the beginning, prevented me from hearing my own voice properly and that really annoyed me because I'd modified it a lot to play Thorin. I chose a harder tone, which suited the character's temperament and allowed him to be understood when whispering and to speak loud for longer periods of time. The problem with the ears is that you seem to be wearing a helmet that isolates you from any surrounding sounds. By trying out different ways of positioning and supporting the ears we found out how to align the fake ear with the external auditory canal of the real one. I was able to hear what I did with my voice and also understand the filmmaker's directions. Apart from that, since I sweated profusely under the prosthetics, I could usually feel perspiration trickling behind my true ears. Despite these disadvantages, the make-up had a huge impact on me when I looked at myself in the dressing-room mirror every morning. I became the character.

How long did it take to have your make-up applied?

At the beginning of the shoot, it took about three and a half hours, but after getting used to applying it every day, Tommy Lane (sic - Tami Lane) and Jennifer Stanfield, my make-up girls, managed to speed up the process and shorten it to two hours. They did a remarkable job. Every detail was exactly the same every time.

Did Philippa Boyens, Fran Walsh and Peter Jackson tell you anything specific about your character during the rehearsals and the shooting? And what suggestions did you make to them concerning your portrayal of Thorin?

All of us spent some time discovering the character when the production of the film started. Philippa, Fran and Peter had a very precise idea of the way they wanted Thorin to behave, and I thought their concept was fantastic because it was clear, perfectly justified, and would allow the character to develop over the course of the three films. The main idea is that Thorin's a hardened warrior who will come to life little by little as he fulfils his destiny. What's more, I remember asking them why they'd chosen a forty-year-old guy to play such a role since it might have been more appropriate to cast someone older. They told me they needed an actor capable of showing a lot of energy in the fight scenes and expressing physically all the rage that Thorin gives vent to in order to reconquer his kingdom. We all worked to achieve that, the decisions concerning the way he'd speak and behave and the choices he'd make throughout the story were taken together. It was a very democratic process during which Philippa, Fran and Peter listened to my ideas attentively, while I also found huge inspiration in their suggestions. That allowed me to let myself go completely when acting and to follow the filmmaker's directions with complete confidence. I knew that Peter Jackson had reflected upon even the smallest detail of a scene and the reactions of the characters. All of his instructions were pertinent.

Which are Thorin's favourite weapons and his special talents when he fights?

Thorin is rather old school in the realm of combat. To start with, he carries a big axe. Later, when he finds the elven sword Orcrist in the trolls' cave, this magic object that lights up when the creatures approach becomes his main weapon for the rest of the film. Thorin's an accomplished swordsman so, since he's destined to become a king, he's undergone training in sword handling since he was very young. He fights so well that he could clear a path through a mob of Orcs and decimate them to cross a battlefield! In the appendices of *The Return of the King*, Tolkien says that Thorin, who was 52 then – a young age for a Dwarf – had led his powerful warrior army during the Battle of Azanulbizar. When Thorin's shield was destroyed, he used an oak branch to protect himself. That's how his nickname Oakenshield was born. Thereafter, Thorin kept that piece of wood as a shield and carved it and this piece of branch became a symbol of pride and honour.

ABOUT DIRECTING AN ACTOR

Did you have your say when it came to your make-up, your costume and accessories?

Yes, at every stage of the process. We did several tests to determine the look of the character, the length of his beard, his hair colour, his hairstyle, etc. We were all convinced that Thorin's costume had to be conceived for the journey and the fights and not to represent his rank as a Prince by means of sophisticated elements, which wouldn't have suited the character's personality.

You eliminate a lot of Goblins and creatures in the first episode of the trilogy, don't you?

Yes! We have several interactions with Orcs and Wargs like those we were able to see in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. They're huge beasts that resemble dogs. In The Hobbit, they're somewhat different, more sombre, with heads that make them look more like wolves. There are also Goblins, something the fans of the book are aware of, since there's a whole sequence where we fight against them. Goblins are smaller and less heavy than Orcs but they're a lot faster and more vicious.

Could you give us examples of the different special effects that were used to make you look smaller, from the simplest to the most complex?

At first, during our physical training we were encouraged not to behave as small and discreet people but to make big movements and use all the space necessary. Later, during the first part of the process, when our make-up and costumes were being developed, we had the proportions of our body changed. We wore foam muscles under our costumes to look thicker and to present a heavier and stockier figure. With the aid of the fake ears, the facial prosthetics, the wigs and the beards our heads were made bigger. We also wore huge walking boots that increased the size of our feet. Once all this was in place, they had to shrink us on the screen when we appeared next to an elf or a human being. In most cases, the tricks used were quite simple: by playing with perspective, we looked a lot smaller than the actors placed closer to the camera. On occasion we also had to act next to huge doubles of the actors, which measured between 2m10 and 2m20. However, more complex tricks were used to shoot certain scenes, notably with the master/slave system which links a camera dolly mounted on a track as it films the main action on the set with a second camera mounted on another track that shoots an actor performing next to a human or elf against a green screen, in such a way that it'll correspond to what's shot by the first one. Once the actor's been enlarged and digitally embedded, one gets the impression that we're 1m20 high. Still, we made most of the shots using very simple tricks, such as having Ian McKellen stand on a wooden box to appear taller.

A TRUE BROTHERHOOD

What kind of a second unit director is Andy Serkis and what was it like working with him?

You know, one of the greatest pieces of news we got when we started the production of the film was that Andy was going to be the second unit director. When someone has spent as much time as him in Middle-earth, immersing himself in Peter Jackson's vision, one becomes the ideal candidate to carry out that function and do a fantastic job. And that was the case here! He understood exactly what Peter was looking for. To be directed by an actor as accomplished as Andy was a joy. He knows precisely what words to say to you to help you, to give you ideas and inspire you when you're a bit lost. That allows you to get off to a good start and shoot a new take that will be better than the previous one. It was an extraordinarily positive experience – in all respects.

In The Lord of the Rings, Gimli, played by John Rhys-Davies, became the character who relieved the dramatic tension and made people laugh following the leading characters' actions: are there similar funny moments in scenes where we see Bilbo travelling with the group of thirteen Dwarves?

Yes, and what's more, it was one of the things that all the actors who played the Dwarves and all the crew enjoyed very much because, once this group of characters sets off, so many things happen that there's very little room for laughs. The events which unfold plunge everyone into so many dangerous situations that they have to stay focused and serious. That is why we always try to make the most of those little moments where we can inject a dose of humour. Peter is very good at coming up with these kind of jokes. You notice that straightaway during the scene in which Bilbo meets the Dwarves when they arrive at his house in Bag End. It's very funny. Each character within the group of 13 Dwarves is part of a micro-family. Therefore, there are several pairs or trios that work separately and the interactions between these individuals are very charming. Bombur is particularly funny. He's the fattest of the Dwarves. He has one long red plait all in one piece with a curl that links the left with the right side of his face. He's hilarious and is actually one of my favourite characters.

Can you refer to the “group dynamics” that developed between the actors who play the warrior Dwarves both during the rehearsals and the shooting and then backstage?

I believe Peter took a very interesting decision by hiring half of his actors from the UK and another half from New Zealand. It's similar to Thorin's approach when he chooses warrior Dwarves from every corner of Middle-earth to make up the group that will carry out with him the enormous mission they have to complete successfully. Most of the Dwarves don't know one another, just like the actors who had never met before! The age of the actors was another interesting element in our group. The majority were over forty and there is something beautiful and touching in gathering a group of men who were already experienced, who had a long career behind them and lived the adventure of shooting The

Hobbit together. We were together for two years and faced on occasion some extreme situations. One of the actors was seventy years old and that didn't prevent him from running for days on the plains of the southern island of New Zealand! The bonds of solidarity and mutual protection were established very quickly between us. We all looked after one another to make sure the other was OK. The rapport between us was great, and the trials we had to go through contributed to strengthen that complicity. I think the audience will feel it when watching the film.

Which are your favourite Thorin moments that we will get to see in this first episode?

Oh, it's very difficult to choose... I'd say it's the moment when Thorin finds some information he needs in Bag End and when all the pieces of the puzzle finally fall in place in front of his eyes allowing him to go on the journey he's planned. It's one of the key moments in the character's life. And this song all the Dwarves sing together in front of Bilbo is a moment of fervour almost religious in nature, which marks the beginning of their quest towards the Blue (sic – Misty) Mountains. When I recorded this song, I imagined it had been sung to Thorin time and time again when he was still a little baby in his crib, and that it also aroused a strong emotional identification amongst the other Dwarves. They sing it with all the heart even though the group has just met; they show their steadfast attachment to their community and beyond, to the kingdom they've lost. It's a very beautiful sequence.

Was it sometimes difficult to keep your energy as an actor during the shooting against the green screen of those scenes meant to be finished with special effects? And which was the most difficult scene to shoot?

When one plays a character for such a long time, some of the most important things are knowing how to save one's energy, staying focused on the role and understanding what one has to do to play the character sensibly. Peter helped us move forward and improve in every take trying out new things. He was always ready to shoot one more take. It was as if he were waiting for the moment for you to tell him that you'd given your best, that you have no more strength left in you to shoot another take, just because he wants one to feel the characters are very tense. Peter also prevents actors from being too "comfortable" when acting because that will become evident on the screen and as soon as the audience notices it, they won't believe in what we put on scene and will stop caring about what's happening. As regards the special effects, I'd say that the most complex scene to shoot was the one in which we face the stone giants on the slope of the mountain. We shot that in the studio with a huge wind machine which threw a heavy rain upon us. I was wearing a harness under my costume and was hanging from cables to help me climb down the side of the cliff to rescue Gloin and Oin. When you're carrying the harness, the padding of fake muscles, the costume, the bags and the accessories in addition to your make-up and wig, and everything is soaking wet and weighs you down, it becomes extremely difficult to stay on your feet while having to withstand strong gusts of wind. It was exactly what the dwarves were supposed to be going through at the time, an arduous and dangerous test. However, it was

also necessary to be able to keep going physically to carry out the sequence successfully... When we left the set we thought of weighing ourselves to find out how much heavier the water which was still soaking what we were wearing had made us. We realised then that each of us was moving around carrying a total weight of 25 to 30 kilos of soaked accessories and costumes! Getting through such an ordeal contributed to bring us even closer to one another.