

Richard Armitage

The king of the dwarves takes the floor

Richard Armitage, whom we were able to see most recently in *Captain America*, takes on the role of Thorin Oakenshield, the chief of the company of dwarves and the instigator of their journey. A difficult character, charismatic but of a rare intensity, which offered the actor one of the greatest challenges of his career.

What did you feel upon arrival at the shooting of such an anticipated, emblematic film?

Richard Armitage: I was a little jealous when I got to the set. The people who were working on the first trilogy had the chance to work in ideal conditions because there wasn't any great attention around the first films. At the same time, I think that the attention from which *The Hobbit* benefited let each of us raise the bar higher and work in a different way. I was impressed to discover the size of the stages and the workshops, all of it giving off an energy that I had never seen until here. But I have to recall that what was the most impressive was finding myself on set, face to face with Ian McKellen (Gandalf)! It was then that I felt something totally new to me, like an impression of coming back into a film, or more not really a film, rather in the world of *The Lord of the Rings* as I had seen it in the cinema. What's yet even more impressive, it's that in looking at Ian, you see Gandalf straight away because he is Gandalf. For the whole shoot happened a little that way for me. Each time that we arrived on a set, it drew me back to the first trilogy, which I loved. Peter Jackson has a gift for creating an atmosphere, giving life to a world and this is, again, even more true this time, at least for me, maybe because I was able to blend into it totally.

Why did you want to be part of this adventure?

Richard Armitage: It was just an incredible opportunity to slide into the skin of a character drawn from a book that I had bought, read and adored as a child. Besides, my first experience on stage was on the occasion of an adaptation of *The Hobbit*! It was in the Alexandra Theatre in Birmingham and I was playing a elf. Gollum was a little marionette made of papier-mâché, while an actor was speaking its voice behind the curtains. Tolkien's work made up part of my life for a long time, and to be able to follow this journey today is an astounding opportunity. What's funny is that *The Hobbit* is a book written for children, but it also speaks to adults, who can find other things in it. That's the talent of J.R.R. Tolkien, to be able to succeed to create a rich universe, peopled with fascinating characters, at the possible risk of frightening the youngest: Tolkien is a fantasy author of rare power.

How did you experience playing with so many comic actors, most of them being the ones portraying dwarves?"

Richard Armitage: I loved working with all these great actors, and we were a real troop. There was a real brotherhood between all of us, and a big diversity of cultures and of careers, with several English actors who came from television, theatre or film. The company

of the dwarves wasn't all that different from our group. When Thorin assembles this team to best take charge of his quest, he draws together very different dwarves, with various sensibilities and origins, which was also the case with the actors who were cast.

Thorin is the chief of the company of the dwarves, but he also has a quite dark side, which we discover without any question in the course of the films. How did you approach this aspect of the character?

Richard Armitage: The fact that Thorin was charged with a mission to lead his people to their country, which is an ambition that's overwhelming at the least, it makes him into someone who is necessarily a little lonely. Knowing that his grandfather and his father had failed before him, and that if he fails, no further member of his line could ever carry the torch, adds to the complexity of such a task. If he fails, he could become the king who never succeeded at his goals for the good of his people. I think that it is a terrible responsibility to carry on his shoulders. At the same time it is this goal that drives him, but also the thing that terrifies him, because there's a huge chance that it will all end badly. But in the first film, we don't yet get truly to the heart of the darkest part of the story, in which Thorin has to face the madness of the dragon. In the end, I approached this part of the story thinking about an addiction that led to physical, but also moral consequences for Thorin. In the meantime, the force of his involvement and his will are able to encourage him toward greatness and help him to become the king that he has to be. Of course, all of that has its price ...

With that we find again a central theme of *Lord of the Rings* with Frodo carrying the ring. Is there a parallel between Frodo's journey and yours?

Richard Armitage: Your remark is interesting because I never thought about it until just now. I think that there are really multiple possible parallels, because various characters in *The Lord of the Rings* reclaim something that they think believe should come to them by right. It could be that Thorin is a little more mercenary in his soul in comparison to all that. The desire to recover the Arkenstone plays an important role in Thorin's decision to start the expedition to Erebor, because he's convinced that without it, he will never truly be able to be a king. This jewel thus takes a primordial place for him, a little like a talisman with which he is obsessed, something that isn't without reminders of what happens with the One Ring. But it isn't something that he carries with him for the whole adventure, it's more something that he's seeking to accomplish and to recover. On the other hand, what occupies him permanently, it's the memory of a glorious past before the dragon came to destroy everything, and the notion he makes of his future, once his quest is completed. All of that is heavy to carry and to live with every day, and that's what I have to show in the film.

Why do you think that Thorin agrees to take Bilbo, a Hobbit, into his company?

Richard Armitage: When we started to work on the film, I was trying to understand why Thorin agreed to drag a Hobbit along with him on a quest that was so important in his eyes. He really did have a reason that explains why a Hobbit was needed to recover the Arkenstone. In fact, the dragon can't recognize the scent of a Hobbit, while it recognizes the scent of a dwarf without any difficulty. Besides that, a Hobbit with its naked feet would be

more agile and less noisy, and thus the best able to penetrate into Smaug's lair without making himself noticed. But I think that Thorin never really accepted that explanation. I think that he has such need of Gandalf to be able to lead his mission to success, and if Gandalf says that they have to take along this Hobbit as compensation, that's not insurmountable for Thorin who, in every situation, can't do without the wizard because he has the map and the key. Additionally, this "agreement" gives rise to a certain tension between Thorin and Gandalf, because Thorin is testing to prove that Gandalf isn't really playing with an open hand, and that Gandalf wants to take away his place as the leader. When Gandalf is away, Thorin becomes the true chief, so that he is more submissive in his presence, a situation that strongly displeases him.

Outside of the fact that *The Hobbit* is a book for children at the outset, the tone of the two trilogies will inevitably be different because they don't occur at the same time, nor with the same things at stake.

Richard Armitage: Actually, there's a lot more humour here than in the *The Lord of the Rings*. The dwarves are very strange little creatures. They are coarse, greedy, and I have to admit that I had a bit of a hard time finding bits of humour in Thorin. He doesn't have many reasons to smile. But there's a true feeling of camaraderie that he gives off. The place where they are the most relaxed remains Bag End, before the quest begins. And once that's begun, one can't say that it's teeming with moments of calm and full out laughter. (Laughs.) However, they manage to get some short breaks during which they have fun. Thorin and Dwalin are quite close and there is a profound bond that that brings them together. In the battles, they support each other and maintain some one-upmanship in terms of skills in battle. In the end, then, there's a lot of humour, but it doesn't come strongly from my character.

Andy Serkis, reprising his role as Gollum, was put in charge of the second team. Did you shoot any scenes under his direction, and how did it go?

Badly! (Laughs). No, Andy is brilliant. He knows Peter Jackson's vision perfectly, and he has an incredible relationship with him, and with the other actors. And because he's acting in the film, too, he's mastered all the processes and he knows what we're going through. We shot some combat scenes together, mostly at the beginning when the dwarves are at the gates of Moria. This was an incredible day, with the orcs there in droves, and the inherent rage of a scene of this magnitude, full of fury, blood, and brutality. It was really a good day. It's fantastic to be able to work in an energy like that, and Andy knew how to communicate all his energy to the rest of the team. The only difficulty was that Peter wanted to direct both units, and so it was necessary to wait for his approval, which is incredible because on top of that, [Peter] approved all the scenes that had been shot. It was an unprecedented experience, and doubtless unique in my career.

-Edward Carter