

Having been able to interview a Hollywood legend and Oscar winner must have been the highlight of my blogging career. It was my honour to speak to special effects maestro Brian Johnson. While it was never Brian's intention to work in the film industry, he worked on some of the most significant science fiction films as *Alien*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *2001: Space Odyssey* and also TV series *Thunderbirds*, just to name a few projects.

I got the chance to speak to Brian after the screening of my favourite film from my childhood: *The NeverEnding Story* at Genesis Cinema. It was 30 years after its release and for me the first time to actually see it on a big screen.

This article is a combination of Brian's answers to the questions from the Q&A and the one-on-one interview I had with him afterwards.

It was never Brian Johnson's dream to work in the film industry. His wish was to become a pilot, but unfortunately his mathematics weren't good enough. Or, as he told me: 'I was a bear with a fairly small brain. I've only got one O level, didn't get any A levels and never went to university.' So, instead of becoming a pilot, he ended up working at Cement and Concrete Research at Langley, near Pinewood Studios, in the fifties. His job was to build 5-inch concrete blocks and testing them for motorways. One night Brian went into his local pub and a chap in there that he knew, named Les Bowie, said: 'Boy, you look fed up.' Brian told him that he would go mad if he would have to make any more concrete blocks. Bowie was one of the best special effects experts of his time and when he asked Brian if he was interested in a job in the film studio, Brian uttered the legendary words: 'Oh, YEEEAH!' Although the job meant sweeping the floors at Anglo Scottish Pictures (ASP), Brian happily took up on the opportunity and this would later prove to be the very first step into his successful special effects career.

First special effects jobs

Besides sweeping the floors at ASP, Brian was taught how to load up film into camera magazines, but also got directly involved in filmmaking. ASP made 16mm and 35mm documentaries and 35mm TV commercials. At a certain point, when Brian was about 17 years old, they needed a goofer for one of their productions. Brian: 'Jim Davis, the managing director of ASP, said to me one day: "We're going to send you on location. There's a documentary that needs to be done in Wales for the cooperative wholesale society for cheesemaking." So I went along with a few other people and we shot the documentary. And that was the first time that I got involved in filmmaking as such. When I came back to ASP, Les Bowie was doing matte paintings for *Dunkirke* (1958) and I had to go out with an effects camera and shoot a glass shot at this disused beach for *Dunkirke*. With glass shots, you shoot a steady plate of whatever it is you want to add things to. Then you take a sheet of glass and you paint on the glass. You put the glass in front of the camera and you shoot that. You shoot it frontlit and backlit. When it's backlit it's just black. And then you burn in whatever you shot on the location. You get a combination. That's one way of doing a matte painting.'

Dutch Girl: Was that the start of your special effects career?

Brian: Yes, thanks to Les Bowie, who was my mentor. He got me in the business in the first place. He was an amazing man and a very talented artist. And a good very practical special effects man. When I was 18 I went into the airforce for two years, for the national service. When I came out Les said he was doing a picture called *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961) which was the story of an atomic bomb changing the track of the earth, going 'round the sun so it was getting hotter and hotter. And that involved a lot of effects stuff and I helped Les on that. That's when I really got into the effects work.

Ironically, Brian wasn't much a fan of science fiction as he preferred working on more 'human things', but he ended up working on lots of science fiction films, many of them are quite pivotal for the history of cinema. Here are some interesting trivia and funny anecdotes you have probably never heard before about some of the famous films Brian has worked on.

The NeverEnding Story

The film production took place in Bavaria at the German studios Bavaria Atelier near Munich for two years (1982-1984). After the screening Brian told me the curious story of a secret bar in the Neulampe Halle studio in Munich. 'The bar up on the second floor was where all the old Nazis would get together. In Munich they used to have Hitler's old beer cellar where they used to sit and drink and they still do. After a certain time when everybody of the production company was drunk they would sing old Nazi songs.'

For the post-production Brian and his team had to pack up all their equipment and go back to Industrial Light & Magic in California where they did all the matte paintings. Brian Johnson did not only supervise the special effects team for the film, but also directed some sequences, for instance the entire sequence with the wolf. Brian: 'Hannes Nickel, who was the editor, directed the second unit in Spain, of the horses going across the landscape. And I directed the aerial unit. Wolfgang Petersen didn't like doing anything that didn't have human beings in it so he left me with the wolf because that was just a wolf basically, snarling and speaking. The aerial sequences I did out in California. The scenes with the luck dragon flying over the mountains, were done in Alaska, Oregon and Washington. I shot 80.000 feet of film and only used about 800 feet of film.'

Audience: Was it much of a challenge for you to make *The NeverEnding Story*? It's obviously quite full of fantastical effects and creatures.

Brian: Well, it was well before CGI so yeah, we had a few problems. I mean if we had done it just recently, it would have been completely different. We didn't have the same possibilities then. We had to build everything three-dimensional and make it all mechanical. So it was harder, definitely harder then.

Audience: Were you involved in making some of those creatures and making them fly and work?

Brian: My team, because you're only as good as the team you have with you, my team built the dragon and all the other things. Then we animated them mechanically, and we radio-controlled the giant turtle. Everything was radio-

controlled in that. Also the wolf was radio-controlled and it had animatronics in it as well.

For the luck dragon, which Wolfgang Petersen had made look like a golden retriever I think [audience laughing] I got a whole series of German puppeteers from a Bavarian company. And they actually made the whole thing move and speak and everything else, all done with wires and cables inside the head of the luck dragon. So, it was a completely different from how we would do it now.

Audience: What was it like for you to see the film again after so many years?

Brian: I saw all the mistakes. Some of the flying shots we did over Mount St. Holmes after they had a huge explosion, about a year later. We had to fly into the crater sixteen times because every time we flew in, little black flies hit the lens of the camera. We didn't know whether we got it until we landed because it was in the nose of this learjet, and every time we landed there were these damned flies and you can see one of them in the film. There is actually a tiny little black spot. Nowadays with computer graphics you take that out.

Audience: I would like to know how you got those sky effects in TNES?

Brian: We had a big water tank and we put dyes and things in the water tank. Then we filmed it at high speed with lots of light going around. It's a really old technique that was also used on *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and many other old films.

2001: A Space Odyssey

Brian Johnson about his work for Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968): 'I went along to do wirework which entailed suspending a pen on a set inside a Pan-American space craft. The guy [William Sylvester] is asleep and the stewardess comes along and takes the pen which is floating around. Actually, what we did in the end was, we used a huge circular piece of glass which was about 7ft in diameter and we had the camera looking through the glass at the set with the guy in the seat and the pen was actually stuck to the glass with, which was then extremely new, double-sided tape and that was stuck onto the glass. And if you watch the stewardess, you see she comes up and she has to grab hold of the pen and pull it off. And we sort of messed around with that so it was barely on there. It actually fell off three times and then she got it. And that's how we did that shot. I didn't do very much wirework while I was on, but my job was to look after all the models like the Discovery and everything else.'

Alien

Audience: What was your first impression of *Alien* when you read the script?

Brian: I was working on *Space 1999*, I just signed to do the second series with Gerry Anderson, and two Yanks came into Bray Studios and asked if they could look at my setup with my cameras and effects work. They came via someone from 20th Century Fox who I knew so I said 'Yeah come in and have a look' and we showed them what we did. We were using one piece of film and doing multiple exposures on that one piece of film to avoid having to matte anything or add things later. We weren't doing motion control because that was too slow.

Motion control is one of those things that when you are lucky, you get one shot in three days and we needed six shots a day. So, these guys came 'round and said 'Oh that's interesting. Would you be interested in working on a science fiction movie?' I said: 'I literary just signed to do the rest of the series with Gerry which is going to take another year and a half'. So, one of the guys said: 'Well, that's alright. We're going to do six of these feature films and we can get you in to the second one.' And that was Gary Kurtz and the other guy was George Lucas. I didn't know who they were. Nobody at the time knew who they were. So, that's what happened at the start of *Alien* because George and Gary had asked me to do *The Empire Strikes Back*. *Alien* was also a Fox production, and so I was asked to do that one as well. I couldn't do the two pictures at the same time, but there was a possible gap so we would do *Alien* first and then *The Empire Strikes Back*. And Walter Hill was the director of *Alien*...

Wayne Imms, the moderator of the Q&A: One of the producers? Wasn't Ridley Scott the director?

Brian: No, that came later. Walter Hill was going to be the director. So, I sat down with 20th Century Fox and went through the script. It was a brilliant script, I have to say. It was written by Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett. So we sat down, went through the script, 'How would we do this? How would we do that? How would we do the chestbursting sequence in which we would have to lay down the chap through the kitchen module and do a false chest so the thing would burst out through his chest whereas he would be bend round so that his legs would be underneath. We had another pair of legs coming out from the other side. So, we discussed all that. The next day I got a call from 20th Century Fox saying 'We'd like you to do Alien.'

About winning an Oscar

While Brian Johnson was working on *The Empire Strikes Back* he heard that *Alien* had been nominated for an Oscar in the category 'Visual Effects'. During the Q&A Brian gave some interesting inside information about this grand awards ceremony: 'On the afternoon of the event, a chauffeur-driven limousine wafts you off to the theatre. Once you walk down the red carpet, you start to notice that there are real film stars walking down the carpet. But then you get at a point where there is a whole load of sorters and the real film heroes go down on the left-hand side and the technicians and all the nobodies go down the right-hand side and they are not really filmed. We went in at the right-hand side, but thought what the hell, it's still good fun! When you get inside there is this huge auditorium filled with thousands of people! It's all the Academy members and their partners and whoever. You sit down, and where you sit down doesn't matter. When you get up to go to the bathroom or whatever, someone will come down to sit in your seat while you're out off your seat so that when the cameras pan across, all the seats are always full. It's really clever the way they do it.'

'And then they start reading out the nominations and you think "Oh holy cow, are we going to get it or not?" And then you hear you've won, and it's a real buzz when you get it. You get up off your seat, and think "Oh god, I will have to make a speech now and will say something stupid." Right after the speech you are

whisked away from the back and you have to follow this yellow line and you have a presenter that comes with you. We had Farrah Fawcett-Majors who was just wonderful. The four of us walked down this line and went into all these interviews: radio interviews, followed by television interviews and then various other journalists. It's just a massive ego trip and all the time you're holding this very heavy statue which has nothing on it, no engraving whatsoever. Because Price Waterhouse, the people who do the auditing for the Academy Awards, they are the only people who know who've won. Unless it's a special achievement award which we got the next year for *The Empire Strikes Back*. It was decided that year that there was no other film that came near the stuff that we'd be doing. So then we knew it beforehand and didn't have the whole of biting fingernails thinking "Am I going to win this or not?"

Filming in George Lucas' swimming pool

For *The Empire Strikes Back* Brian was responsible for all the practical effects shot in the UK and on location in Norway. 'We did all the explosions and all the rigs for the robots and R2D2s. We had to make a complete new set of R2D2s because the ones on the first film were hopeless. When we were probably three quarters into production I moved over to California to help set up Industrial Light & Magic where we did all the post-production work.'

Brian about George Lucas: 'He's really nice and knows what he wants. He's really shy and he has a real problem dealing with artists. So, when he did *Star Wars* his wife told us that he used to be physically ill in the morning before he went off to work. He was so wound up. That's why he decided after that to get other directors. He got Irvin Kershner on *The Empire Strikes Back*, but George was always standing right behind Irvin when they were shooting. And Irvin would always look round to George who would say "Yeah, that's okay" or "No, let's do another one." So George's always been the boss.'

You don't always have to travel to faraway exotic locations to shoot science films, you can even stay at home and use your swimming pool. Brian: 'There's this scene when they are in the swamps and the R2D2 gets swallowed and then all you see is his little periscope coming up. All the post-production effects for it, we did in George's swimming pool while it was being built. We had a blackish plastic screen in there to make it look dark. George came along and he'd go: 'Right, let's roll the camera. Here we go. Action!' And we'd do all our fiddling around with the various bits and pieces. And he'd go "Yeah, okay. Cut. That's it. Next one." He didn't want to do more than one or two takes. He knew that he could put his scissors wherever and get the bit of the shot that he wanted. So he's very good in his work, but with artists I think it was different.'

Aliens

Brian: 'I was asked to do *Aliens*. I went to meet James Cameron and I was told they liked me to do the picture. Later I heard James Cameron wanted to bring in L.A. Effects to do the special effects in the film. They started to do the picture, but when they were halfway I got a phone call saying they had fired L.A. Effects

because they were useless. If you look at the film credits you will see 'certain effects by L.A. Effects'. You had never seen such a thing before that film or after. I got called in to do some of the model effects and some of the post-production at the end of the main unit shooting. After that it went to the States.

Later the nominations came up for that year and my name wasn't on the nominations for special effects. I received a phone call saying they were sorry, but L.A. Effects had a clause in their contract with 20th Century Fox saying they had the right for one of their people to be nominated for special effects. So they nominated the wife of the man who owned the studio and had nothing to do with special effects. And she got the Academy Award.

Jim and his wife very kindly gave me a huge Tiffany crystal which said 'Aliens special effects nomination' which was very kind of them. And then BAFTA gave me a BAFTA so BAFTA didn't mind. They changed the law in the Academy for the following year saying that only people who were involved in special effects could be nominated for special effects.'

On CGI

Audience: We've been discussing films that rely largely on physical special effects opposed to CGI. Obviously, the film *Gravity* which was a huge success, all of that is CGI. What are your thoughts on CGI?

Brian: My thoughts on CGI is that it is a wonderful tool. It enables films to be made now that would have never been made otherwise. But I don't understand why the camera has to be travelling at 900 miles an hour and the shots last half a second and there's a series of shots, and there's too much information going on as I am concerned and not enough time to show it all in.

Also, once the object you're looking at, goes through the camera, you know it's a CGI-shot, there's no magic to it. People aren't left thinking 'I wonder how they did that.' They think 'oh it's CGI.' That's the major failing as far as I am concerned with CGI. You get these really impossible camera shots. In *The Aviator* there is this one shot where the aircraft comes right through the camera. You know it's a phoney shot. Yet, there are some superb films using CGI.

Audience: If you had the choice to make a full physical effects feature film or a film in which you could mix CGI and physical special effects, which one would you do?

Brian: CGI and effects or wholly effects. Oh, a combination of good CGI and good practical effects, you can't beat that. But there's got to be a good script because in lots of films you see some amazing effect works, but the script is crap. Which is sad.

Last questions

Audience: Which one of your films is your favourite?

Brian: *Alien* was satisfying, because when you read the script in the beginning and saw the finished film afterwards, it was pretty exactly as the script had been written. *Revenge of the Pink Panther* with Peter Sellers was very satisfying. It had nothing to do with special effects, just practical effects. Also *Aliens* was satisfying.

Dutch Girl: Have you ever made your own film?

Brian: No, I should've done and I regret it now. It's one of those things. I was just too busy doing so many other things. I had a young family and never had the money to put aside, because you need a lot of money to make a movie or you need the time. And I had a mortgage and I had to keep feeding that. And if I was out of work, I didn't have time to make a movie, I was cleaning cars which paid just enough to pay the mortgage.

I have been offered directing opportunities a few times, but they all failed due to lack of money or other practical problems.

Dutch Girl: Are you still involved in filmmaking? During the Q&A you said you went to the *Star Wars* set the other day, do people then ask for your advice?

Brian: People do consult me and ask my advice for things. I also go to signings.

Dutch Girl: Do you still watch films?

Brian: As a member of the Academy I get sent DVDs every year of all the films that are up for consideration that year. So we have stacks and stacks of them at home when they arrive, but then we have to destroy them because they are DVDs or Blu-Rays which are master copies so you have to sign an agreement to say that at the end you will burn them or destroy them. So we see everything.

Dutch Girl: And can you watch them without thinking about special effects all the time?

Brian: If I haven't worked on the movie, I just relax and watch the movie for what it is.

Dutch Girl: You're not too critical?

Brian: Occasionally, if there's a shitty shot in it. But I never criticize other people's movies because you never know what the producer has made available in the way of money to make the picture. Sometimes producers do the most awful things to you. For example, I once worked on this picture with Richard Burton, called *The Medusa Touch*. It was about this clairvoyant who can make aircrafts change direction. He causes an aircraft to crash into a skyscraper having taking off from Heathrow. The producer phoned me up asking me if I would do this shot. It needed a big model 747, a big stage at Shepperton studios, a big 35 ft high model skyscraper. And we had to crash the 747 model into the skyscraper and blow it up. The night before I was due to do it, he phoned me up saying 'I've got great faith in you Brian, I decided not to take out insurance on the model on the shoot.' In other words: he was letting me know I was responsible for everything. Those are strokes that some producers pull.

Dutch Girl: Is any of your family involved in film?

Brian: Anny's [Brian's partner] youngest daughter Gemma is a make-up artist. She was on a Wolfgang Peterson picture with Brad Pitt, *Troy*. She used to work for me. I directed 52 episodes of a 7-minute kids TV show called *Dream Streets*. It's about cars and little characters that roam around in this fantasy world and Gemma helped me doing some of the model work. Gemma ended up being a sought after make-up artist, but is now a fulltime mother.