

Brill's Balrog



In April 2004, I started discussions with Rob Howell, a leading theatre set and costume designer, who had seen some pictures of my origami work on the BOS web site. He had asked if I would like to be involved with the design of an origami-based figure of the Balrog, a monster, dragon-like creature, which features the Lord of the Rings by J. R. Tolkien. An ambitious musical stage production of the epic story was being planned. The scale was to be huge: the finished figure needed to be 9 metres high and it would emerge from (and later, retract into) a hole in the centre of the stage at the end of the first act of the production, apparently a key point in the plot.

Over the years, I have been involved with many commercial origami commissions for advertising, publicity, photography, promotions and so on. Some have been good, some mediocre; some frustrating, some rewarding; some have been profitable, others I've done for love. Much depends on the individuals I have worked with. Sometimes I've found them fickle and demanding, in love with an idea one day, and changing their minds completely the next. For these reasons I have often steered clear of many tempting projects which had been offered to me. However I felt that the Lord of the Rings project offered me a much greater challenge, and presented an opportunity to stretch my creative ideas while working with positive top-line designers and

artists in quite another field... so I agreed to help.

A few tentative origami ideas had been already explored: Rob and his team had tried to develop some initial designs from variations of John Montroll models, and they had built a miniature stage, installing their attempts there to give me some ideas. It became clear that I would not have to make the full size figure in paper, but I'd be working on much smaller and manageable scale. My first try turned out to be a rather cute looking figure, far away from the menacing, fire breathing monster which Rob envisaged: it was quickly ditched! I travelled to London many times to meet with the team, and soon met Carl

Robertshaw, a designer of competition kites and other kite-related objects who would be building the full size version. You can see some of his work at <http://www.kitestudio.com/home.php>

I was keen that the origami Balrog should have integrity and maintain purist ideals, and so tried some single sheet designs, though these weren't perfect. One of these was a small-winged design, fairly close to the final version, but for practical reasons multi-piece was preferable. At our frequent meetings between April 2004 and September 2005, I found my colleagues Rob and Carl helpful and encouraging throughout: they steered my ideas towards the final version, which eventually emerged in late June 2005. It was a multi-piece design, with separate head with a gaping mouth ("think of 'The Scream' by Edvard Munch!" said Rob), pleated body, two separate wings, and an arm with a skeletal hand. I'd been influenced by many origami designers on the way, particularly, Eric Joisel, Jean Claude Correia, Jun Maekawa, and Takashi Hojyo... my thanks are due to them for their indirect help, of course!

Once Rob Howell had approved the design, it was then down to Carl Robertshaw and his team to start to build the final full-size version. It was to be mounted on an immense steel armature, hidden under the stage and hydraulically powered to push upwards and forwards out of the hole in the stage. Within, the Balrog had an inflatable bladder powered by compressed air to make sure it unfolded fully and took its proper form when it emerged on stage. The materials used by Carl were his familiar kite materials of a strong black polyester fabric, together with very thin steel rods strategically stitched in to the forms to give them rigidity, and yet allow them to collapse. In early October 2005, I had my last hand in the construction of the full-size Balrog, helping Carl and his team by folding from a huge rectangle of fabric into the arm and hand. This took me a couple of days, grovelling on hand and knees in a car park to fold and pin the fabric into its basic shape. The folding of



the small size arm and hand in paper, had taken me a mere 15 minutes...

I was very impressed that the finished full size Balrog was remarkably close to the origami maquette we had built a couple of months before. I'd expected that the original vision may have been simply a starting point and that my ideas would not have been honestly represented. Fortunately my fears were unfounded. The finishing touches to the huge figure, as big as a house, were the distressing and painting of the black fabric to make it look mangled and ancient: during the design process I'd had difficulty to try and set aside precise and perfect origami ideas. The finished full size version looked battered, aged and torn.

The premier of the musical took place in Toronto at the Princess of Wales Theatre in March 2006. Although the producers had hoped to open in London, a theatre large enough was not available for the £14.3 million production, apparently the most expensive stage production ever. Never having previously received an invitation for a premier of anything, I decided that I must go, so I spent a few days in Toronto, hiring a dinner suit and black tie to be there. I was completely bowled over by the show, though the critics didn't share my optimism and excitement.

The production opened in London at the Drury Lane theatre in June 2007. See: <http://www.lotr.com>