

A movie poster for 'Bridge to Terabithia'. The background is a lush, blue-toned forest at night. A boy stands holding a rope, and a girl crouches holding a glowing lantern. In the background, a car is partially visible through the trees, and a small house is nestled in the distance. The scene is magical, with glowing particles in the air.

DISCOVER A PLACE THAT WILL  
NEVER LEAVE YOU,  
AND A FRIENDSHIP THAT  
WILL CHANGE YOU FOREVER.

WALT DISNEY PICTURES AND WALDEN MEDIA  
PRESENT

# BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA

THE BELOVED NOVEL COMES TO LIFE



---

# BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA

## PRODUCTION NOTES

*“Just close your eyes and keep your mind wide open.”*

—Leslie

Deep in the woods, far beyond the road, across a stream, lies a secret world only two people on Earth know about—a world brimming with fantastical creatures, glittering palaces and magical forests. This is Terabithia, where two young friends will discover how to rule their own kingdom, fight the forces of darkness and change their lives forever through the power of the imagination.

From Walt Disney Pictures and Walden Media, the producers of “The Chronicles of Narnia,” and based on one of the most beloved novels of all time, comes an adventurous and moving tale that explores the wonders of friendship, family and fantasy: BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA.

The story begins with Jess Aarons (JOSH HUTCHERSON), a young outsider on a quest to become the fastest kid in his school. But when the new girl in town, Leslie Burke (ANNASOPHIA ROBB), leaves Jess and everyone else in her dust, Jess’s frustration with her ultimately leads to them becoming fast friends.

At first, it seems Jess and Leslie couldn’t be more different—she’s rich, he’s poor, she’s from the city, he’s from the country—but when Leslie begins to open up the world of imagination to Jess, they find they have something amazing to share: the kingdom of Terabithia, a realm of giants, ogres and other enchanted beings that can only be accessed by boldly swinging across a stream in the woods on a strand of rope. Here, Leslie and Jess rule as King and Queen among the incredible creatures they create, and not even the forces of evil can break their bond. Now, no matter what happens in the real world, in Terabithia, Leslie gives Jess a magical place that will always be filled with amazing stories and dreams.

An imagination-fueled production, BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA is directed by Gabor Csupo, the world-renowned animation artist who makes his live-action debut, from a screenplay by Jeff Stockwell and David Paterson, based on the Newbery Award-winning novel by Katherine Paterson, who wrote the story for David when he was a boy. Bringing the dazzling, original creatures of Terabithia to life are the Academy Award®-winning visual-effects wizards at New Zealand’s Weta Digital (“The Chronicles of Narnia,” “The Lord of the Rings,” “King Kong”). The film’s producers are Hal Lieberman, Lauren Levine and David Paterson. The cast includes rising young stars Josh Hutcherson (“RV,” “Zathura”) and AnnaSophia Robb (“Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,” “Because of Winn-Dixie”) along

---

with Robert Patrick (“Walk the Line,” “The Unit”) and Zooey Deschanel. The behind-the-scenes team who merged reality and fantasy on location in the forests of New Zealand includes two-time Academy Award®-nominated cinematographer Michael Chapman (“The Fugitive,” “Raging Bull”), production designer Rob Gillies (“The World’s Fastest Indian”), costume designer Barbara Darragh (“River Queen,” “The Frighteners”) and Academy Award®-nominated editor John Gilbert (“The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring,” “The World’s Fastest Indian”).

### **MAKING THE IMAGINARY REAL:** **BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA COMES TO THE BIG SCREEN**

In the last few years, some of the greatest novels ever written for children and young adults have been transformed into hit movies—from “Holes” and “Charlotte’s Web” to “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,” and “Because of Winn-Dixie.” Still, for years, many have wondered if one particular book that has had a most powerful effect on millions growing up in America would ever truly come alive on the screen. This was *Bridge to Terabithia*, the deeply moving, imagination-sparking tale that stands out because it takes place in a magical kingdom that exists only in the mind’s eye of its two unforgettable main characters, Jess and Leslie.

Though the novel continues to be one of the most significant, widely read and highly acclaimed works of literature for kids, it also laid down considerable creative challenges for any filmmaker: *How do you make a film in which the biggest hero is imagination itself? And how could the imaginary world of Terabithia be brought to life on the screen so it would also feel as incredibly real and meaningful as it does to Jess and Leslie?*

It would take a labor of love that would begin with the book’s multiple Newbery Award-winning author, Katherine Paterson. Paterson, considered one of the finest living authors for children and young adults, is thrilled that her story will come to an entirely new generation in a way it hasn’t been experienced before. “Honestly, when I first wrote the novel, I never really knew if anyone whose name wasn’t Paterson would understand it, and I never dreamed it would take on the life, even beyond books, that it has,” she says. “It’s a magical thing that has happened, perhaps because it is the kind of story that opens itself up for people to bring their own lives to it, in a powerful way, so that the story becomes their story.”

She is especially pleased with the evocation of the imaginary kingdom of Terabithia. “I admit one of my biggest worries about turning the book into a film was what Terabithia itself would be like. For the past thirty years, readers have been creating Terabithia in their own imaginations, and no two readers will ever have the same vision of the place. I write books because I want the readers’ imaginations to come to life and, although I understand films and books are very different, I hoped that this would somehow be honored in the film. I really don’t understand it myself, but through the writing and the directing and the actors and the designs, beginning with the opening credits, you really feel as if you are walking right into Jess and Leslie’s imaginations—which was a very important thing to me. I really hope it will inspire audiences not only to read books but to see the power of what a story can do, that it can enlarge the human spirit.”

Paterson had originally written the story for her then-11-year-old son, David. Published in 1978, the book soon took on a life of its own, becoming the kind of dog-eared favorite parents

would pass along to their own kids and that would be read in schools across the country for years to come. Readers were inspired by Paterson's story, which she imbued with an unsinkable sense of childhood magic that would inspire millions to believe in the power of the imagination. Paterson created Terabithia as a place where Jess and Leslie could use their imaginations to deal with the real world—and in the film, they do just that, as each fantastical character in Terabithia has a true-life counterpart. For example, the school bullies who torment Jess and Leslie every day at school reveal themselves as the villains of Terabithia: Gary Fulcher is the Hairy Vulture (part Fulcher, part vulture), Scott Hoager is the Squogre (part squirrel, part ogre, part Hoager) and, of course, the school's biggest tyrant, Janice Avery, reveals herself in Terabithia as the larger-than-life Giant that they must battle.

Fast-forward ahead and David Paterson was now grown up and, as fate or perhaps destiny would have it, had become a writer himself—an accomplished playwright and rising screenwriter. Having deeply loved his mother's book for so long, he now became devoted to bringing her vision to the screen with complete authenticity. David had also become a father and so had another incentive—to pass down this rich family legacy of storytelling to his own children.

"I always felt so protective towards this story," he says. "For me, it was never just about making a movie but about really honoring my mother, the life of the book and my best friend Lisa, who started it all. The most important thing of all to me was to keep the spirit of the book alive while finding a way to transform it from a novel that takes place mostly in the characters' heads to a dynamic visual medium. But, no matter what, it had to be about friendship and imagination."

When David went to his mother for her blessings, he found her more than encouraging—she essentially told him to take the ball and run with it. "I knew that David was a fine writer, and I also knew how very much this story meant to him," says Katherine Paterson. "The story began with him, so I was more than happy to turn it over to him."

Continues David: "I think she trusted me to do right by the story, just as I had trusted her 30 years ago to tell the story of my friendship with Lisa. Of course, there's always a lot of angst involved in anything to do with your own mom—but she really gave me complete freedom, understanding that literature is necessarily quite different from film as a medium. And I knew she would have to be pleased with the results, or else holidays would be awfully difficult!"

Meanwhile, producer Lauren Levine had discovered the power of Terabithia on her own. Like many people who first encountered the book as an adult, she found herself swept away by its mix of emotion and enchantment—and she knew it would be a great match for Walden Media, the family-focused production company that has quickly developed a reputation for turning classic children's literature into equally classic movies.

"Having grown up in the U.K., I hadn't really known about the book before, but so many people with kids had told me about this story and then, when I read it, wow, I immediately connected with it," she says. "I love that it's a story that doesn't pander to kids. It's straight up about how life is, but it's also filled with all these wonderful elements of fantasy and storytelling. It's really a gift to kids who are facing hard times, and that's why it has been so loved for so long."

Levine was inspired to act. "I was so attached to the story that it led me to David Paterson, who, it turns out, had been trying to get a movie made for years," she says.

Walden Media's CEO, Cary Granat, was just as enthusiastic about the project. "BRIDGE

TO TERABITHIA is the quintessential Walden movie,” Granat says. “Here was a chance to create a great, high-concept film with lots of emotion and, at the same time, to really get the book out there again and explore the many wonderful themes in it as a learning vehicle.”

Also coming on board was producer and former Universal Pictures production president Hal Lieberman (“Around the World in 80 Days,” “Terminator 3”), who was instantly compelled by Jess and Leslie’s story. “Once I read the initial draft of the script, I was in with both feet,” says Lieberman. “It’s the kind of story that is filled with fun and adventure, but your heart is also richer for having experienced it.”

Lieberman was committed to doing the characters and their journey justice: “The idea was to really honor the integrity, the emotion and the fun of the book,” he comments. “Just as in the book, combining the real and the imaginary was what this movie was all about.”

David Paterson couldn’t have been more excited with the team that came together behind BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA. “In a way, I was waiting for Walden Media to be founded!” David notes. “The wonderful thing about Walden and Disney is that most studios want to completely reinterpret this kind of novel, but Walden and Disney were open to doing a truly faithful adaptation. They wanted to honor the power of the original story.”

The adaptation, exciting as it was, posed some immediate challenges. For one thing, the filmmakers were absolutely committed to not altering the story’s very heart and soul. “In moving from the page to the screen, I know choices have to be made,” says Katherine Paterson. “But I think the filmmakers have made good choices. They were able to tell this intimate story of friendship and imagination so that it makes sense visually and dramatically.” The only major change brought to the guts of the tale was to pull Jess, Leslie and the other characters into the present day to make it more accessible and immediate.

Then there was the biggest question of all: how to handle Terabithia? In the novel, the scenes of Terabithia take place in just a few pages of writing that leave the portrait of the kingdom almost entirely up to the reader, sparking their imaginations, as Katherine Paterson had hoped to do. But in the visual realm of film, Terabithia would have to be *seen*, so it had to be created as a fully fleshed-out world that could come off both as a child’s ultimate wild fantasy and a wondrously real escape for Jess and Leslie.

Says Levine: “We found out that the world of Terabithia was the one thing everyone remembers who read the book as a kid—they all say, ‘Oh, I remember those incredible adventures they had in Terabithia!’ So we wanted to find a way to make that world as vivid and visually exciting as it would be in a kid’s imagination.”

It was important, however, to keep the balance of real life and fantasy in check, and Levine credits editor John Gilbert for that. “John is an amazing storyteller who really knows how to use music, performance and visual effects to great effort. He never let us lose sight of the fact that this is a story about friendship and discovery. His experience working on the huge canvas of ‘Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring’ as well as smaller, intimate stories like ‘World’s Fastest Indian’ made him the perfect person to edit this movie.”

David Paterson credits fellow screenwriter Jeff Stockwell (“The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys”) with giving Terabithia that dose of magic it needed to come to life on a movie screen: a visual framework. “My focus was on bringing out the emotions of the story, but when it came to Terabithia, I really couldn’t go there because it was too close,” says Paterson. “What Jeff was able to do as an outsider who wasn’t so attached to the story was to really let his imagination go free and make up this world in a wonderful way. My mother mentions giants

---

and ogres in Terabithia, but Jeff took her words and created the kind of world that kids create in their dreams. His Terabithia is imaginary but, most importantly, it is also clearly connected to the real world. It's the place where Jess and Leslie can go to triumph over all the problems of their real lives, together as friends."

### **GABOR CSUPO ENTERS TERABITHIA: AN ANIMATION MASTER MAKES HIS LIVE-ACTION DEBUT**

With such a vividly imaginative screenplay at hand, the search began for a director who could bring his own magical storytelling touches to the film. What was needed, the producers realized, was a rare sensibility that would be technologically savvy and cinematically sophisticated, yet also completely true to the childlike wonder and deep emotions that lie at the heart of Jess and Leslie's friendship and adventures in Terabithia.

It was Walden Media President Cary Granat who first suggested Gabor Csupo, the world-famous animation artist renowned for his innovative spirit in creating and producing such animated hits as "The Simpsons," "Rugrats" and "The Wild Thornberrys." Although Csupo had never made a live-action feature before, this didn't worry Granat in the least. "I knew that inside Gabor is a kid just dying to go on an adventure, and that was the perfect approach for this story," says Granat.

Continues Lauren Levine: "When we talked to Gabor about the story, he had such an inspired take on it—a kind of Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam approach to how Terabithia could be manifested in a very fun and alive way. We collectively got very excited about it—it was clear that he was going to try to break through the usual clichés and find a fresh way to tell this story."

Adds Hal Lieberman: "Gabor is such a beautiful and imaginative person. He brought a genuine passion for Terabithia and a conviction to tell the story the right way, as honestly as possible. I also think, as an artist, he related very strongly to Jess, and that helped him to create all the creatures Jess and Leslie imagine in Terabithia in a very memorable and moving way."

When the filmmakers brought the idea of Csupo to David Paterson, he, in turn, asked his kids, who gave the ultimate thumbs-up. "They said he *has* to do it!" recalls Paterson. "The great thing about Gabor is that he has such a tremendous grasp on today's youth, and that was vital to the film."

The multi-Emmy® Award-winning Csupo, a Renaissance man whose interests span from movies to music and beyond, quickly fell in love with the story of BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA—and especially its theme of where extreme creativity can take you. "What I really loved about the story is watching these kids' imaginations start to come alive," he says. "I saw a chance to create a visually astounding movie that would also really touch an audience's heart."

The director was excited not only about the visual challenges BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA would present but even more so about bringing the characters of Jess and Leslie to an even broader audience than the book. Csupo himself felt a deep connection with the characters and believes it is something people of all ages will share. The director explains: "I think everybody can remember a time when it felt like nobody was paying attention to you and nobody believed in you, and then along comes somebody who does, and it can totally rebuild you and rejuvenate you, and you just start to go for it. There is a magic in that."

In Jess's world, the person who comes along is Leslie, and she gives him the most incredible



gift he could ever envision: the land of Terabithia. Csupo hoped to do justice to just how meaningful and powerful Terabithia becomes in Jess's life, even when times get tough.

He summarizes: "In Terabithia, Leslie and Jess can unleash all their dramas and face up to all their real-life problems. What is so exciting about Terabithia is that it is not just a fantasyland where they can play, but also a place where they can fearlessly project all their feelings and the depths of their friendship."

### **BEST FRIENDS IN TERABITHIA: CASTING JOSH HUTCHERSON AND ANNASOPHIA ROBB**

The production of *BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA* now turned into a quest: to find two young, yet very talented, actors who could embody the bold imaginations of Jess and Leslie. To play Jess, the lonely outsider whose eyes are opened to a secret magical kingdom through an unlikely new friend, the filmmakers set out to find someone who could make the part his own—who could bring flashes of humor and charisma to a very demanding role. After an extensive search among thousands of rising kid stars, they were all excited by one person: Josh Hutcherson, the Kentucky-born teen who rose to fame in the action-adventure "Zathura" and most recently starred as Robin Williams's son in the family-vacation comedy "RV."

"Looking for Jess was a really tough hunt," recalls Lauren Levine. "We needed someone who could go from an introverted boy in an isolated world to someone who completely taps into his imagination and becomes a confident, brave leader in Terabithia. That's a heck of a range for such a young actor. And while there are a lot of talented young actors out there, no one else seemed to capture Jess like Josh did. He was able to take the character from the beginning of his journey right through to the end and make you believe in everything he goes through."

Josh was excited to play a sensitive, artistic, rural kid who only begins to realize where the force of his imagination can take him in the course of the film. "He starts out as kind of an outcast," Josh notes. "His family really doesn't pay much attention to him and he feels pretty left out. But then along comes this girl Leslie, from out of nowhere, from the big city, and somehow she befriends him, and they start to create this imaginary world called Terabithia together. Their imaginations are out of this world, and Terabithia becomes this really empowering place where Jess can finally confront the things that scare him in real life."

Josh wasn't surprised to see the characters of Jess and Leslie grow so close, even if they do start off as racing rivals. "I think Leslie is the only person who finally sees Jess for who he is and who truly likes him for that," he says. "Jess's family life is a bit tough, but Leslie makes him feel good about himself because she sees that he's got a lot of artistic talent, and she helps him believe that he's actually good at something."

The tight bond that develops between Jess and Leslie was mirrored on the set as Josh developed an equally tight friendship with AnnaSophia Robb. "We had so much fun on the set, it was hard at times not to crack up laughing," he says. "But she's also a really amazing actress, and I think she brings something very cool and real to Leslie."

The only part of working with AnnaSophia that Josh didn't like was getting beat by her in the all-out sprint that kicks off their amazing friendship. "Just for the record, I could have beaten her. I could have. I think," he laughs.

As the story moved on to the kingdom of Terabithia, one of Josh's biggest challenges was having to use his own imagination in performing scenes with creatures who would later be

digitally added to the scenes. He was, however, used to working with cutting-edge technology, having previously starred with Tom Hanks in the groundbreaking motion-capture hit “The Polar Express.”

“It’s pretty hard when you have to react to a tennis ball on the end of a stick or X’s on a blue screen that’s supposed to be a giant or an ogre,” he admits. “But imagination is what it’s all about!” Still, Josh had some help from the wizards at the Weta workshop. “They were great because they showed me a lot of the creatures in the computer during the shoot. When I was able to see how amazing and lifelike they were going to be, that really helped, because I knew it was going to look so incredible,” he says.

In the end, Josh thinks the combination of such dazzling visual imagery with such a true-to-life story will speak to young audiences. “The thing I like about this movie is that it’s a really cool adventure—but at the same time, it’s about how creativity can change your life and about how kids have a lot of feelings and thoughts they need to express,” he says. “It’s about time movies like this were made.”

Whereas finding Jess had taken a far and wide search, finding Leslie happened almost in an instant, when AnnaSophia Robb showed up in Lauren Levine’s office before the casting process had even really begun. Levine already knew the blue-eyed beauty who first came to widespread attention in the lead role of “Because of Winn-Dixie,” another Walden Media film, and who went on to win the plum role of Violet Beauregarde in Tim Burton’s “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” with Johnny Depp. But their conversation convinced her that, without a doubt, AnnaSophia was meant for this role.

“We were talking about the new Harry Potter book that had just come out at that time and we were both completely obsessed with it,” recalls Levine. “It was just so clear in talking to her about all this fantasy that I was basically talking to Leslie, that she had that same kind of spark and magical presence. She might be physically different from Leslie in the book, but the spirit of Leslie and the spirit of AnnaSophia are nearly identical. It was a match made in heaven.”

Cary Granat, who previously worked with AnnaSophia in “Because of Winn-Dixie” was equally won over. “In this role, she’s like a little Annie Hall—there’s so much depth and character she brings to Leslie, but at the same time, she’s a very relatable little girl,” he says.

AnnaSophia had read *Bridge to Terabithia* before she auditioned for the film and was already a huge fan. “I remember I would stay up late reading the book and then wake up and start reading again in the morning,” she says. “It touched me in a way I hadn’t been touched by a book before. I really loved the characters and all the imagination. I think it reminds me that even though I have to grow up, I don’t ever have to stop pretending and imagining.”

AnnaSophia especially felt close to Leslie. “She’s one of those people who’s just always lit up, who has this glow about her, and no one can bring her down,” she says. “Leslie’s such a lively and energetic character, it was really fun for me to become her.”

Although Leslie is already an amazing person, AnnaSophia believes she becomes even more inspired after meeting Jess. “She can’t really find Terabithia until she meets Jess,” the actress notes, “but once they meet, this whole world opens up for both of them. They are both kind of outcasts who take a leap of faith to see who they can become.”

AnnaSophia has her own clear vision of what Terabithia is: “It’s a place that is anything and everything you want it to be,” she says. She goes on: “In Terabithia, you just put out your ideas and they happen just like that. It’s about having fun, it’s about friendship, it’s about hope and



it's also about learning to deal with your problems when you go back to the real world. I think Terabithia is a place that's different for everyone. It's a place where you can go if you're feeling sad or down, and you're never really alone because there are always creatures watching you. I think all kinds of people will fall in love with Terabithia."

While preparing for the part, AnnaSophia became even more excited when she first saw illustrated drawings of Terabithia hanging in director Gabor Csupo's office. "I saw some pictures of fairies and I got so pumped," she recalls. "I've loved fairies since I was a little girl, and now I knew this world was really going to come alive for me."

On the set, she was further inspired by the colorful, creative and definitely contemporary costumes designed for her character by costume designer Barbara Darragh. "One of the reasons I adored playing Leslie was because of her clothes," admits AnnaSophia. "They're really, really awesome with all these funky little touches like armbands and bracelets and things like that. It captures how Leslie presents herself to the world and makes a really cool appearance. And it reflects how she responds to life, because she's very funky and willing to break the rules. Her clothes let you know that she believes in who she is, and she's not afraid to show it."

When Josh and AnnaSophia began working with Gabor Csupo in rehearsals and on the set, the director was thrilled with his good fortune. "These two have amazing chemistry between them, it doesn't even feel like they're acting," says Csupo. "We hoped to create a very, very real sense of friendship—and what is so great is that these two started to like each other so much as friends on the set, that they were able to capture that reality perfectly because it was already true."

Joining Josh and AnnaSophia in *BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA* is an entire ensemble of young newcomers, including Lauren Clinton as the bully Janice Avery, 6-year-old Bailey Madison as Jess's younger sister, May Belle, and Elliot Lawless and Cameron Wakefield as Jess and Leslie's schoolmates, Gary Fulcher and Scott Hoager.

David Paterson was especially gratified by the casting. "It's the kids that really make this story fly, and we couldn't have found a better group of young actors," he says.

### **OUTSIDE TERABITHIA: ZOOEY DESCHANEL AND ROBERT PATRICK HEAD THE ADULT CAST**

The imaginary world of Terabithia is inspired by the real-life experiences of Jess and Leslie, including their interactions, both inspirational and frustrating, with the various adults in their lives. One of the film's key adult roles, that of Jess's beloved music teacher Miss Edmunds, is played by Zooey Deschanel, the award-winning actress whose recent roles include "Elf," "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" and a stint on the acclaimed Showtime series "Weeds."

Deschanel came to the project already in love with the novel. "It was so important to me as a kid," she remembers. "The characters were so unique, and I saw it as this whole beautiful metaphor for growing up. So I was really excited when I got the script because I thought, now there will be a whole new group of kids who will be introduced to this story that I think is such a wonderful thing to have in your life."

She was also especially happy to be cast as Miss Edmunds, her favorite of the book's adult characters. "I think Miss Edmunds represents the attractive part of growing up," she says.

---

“What Leslie is as a child, Miss Edmunds is as an adult, so they’re two sides of the same coin.”

Says producer Hal Lieberman of Deschanel: “She has all the spirit, fun and quirkiness this character needs. She’s basically that one teacher everyone falls in love with growing up and she also turns out to play a very important role in the complexity and beauty of the story.”

Another key adult role is that of Jess’s disapproving father, a hardworking man so worried about his son’s future, he can’t bring himself to see his true talents as an artist—until an unexpected event changes everything. To bring something special to the role, the filmmakers sought out the oft-lauded Robert Patrick, most recently seen playing Johnny Cash’s hard-edged father in the award-winning “Walk the Line,” a World War II colonel in Clint Eastwood’s widely acclaimed “Flags of Our Fathers,” as well as a colonel in the David Mamet television series “The Unit.”

After seeing “Walk the Line,” Josh Hutcherson was a bit nervous to hear that Patrick would be playing his parent. “I was like, ‘Oh, no, that’s going to be my dad!’ It was intimidating,” he confesses. “Then, when I first met him, he started out acting really mean and tough just to scare me. But after I got to know him, it turns out he’s very nice and was really helpful. When I did my most emotional scenes, he was just really there for me.”

The producers were equally impressed. Says Lauren Levine: “When you work with an actor of the caliber of Robert Patrick, no detail goes unturned. He was incredible and took the role so seriously—and he was also so helpful to Josh.”

Like so many adults who first encounter BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA, Patrick was swept up in the story and related deeply to it. “I was constantly creating imaginary worlds as a kid myself,” he recalls. “I grew up in the rural South, so the setting of BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA reminded me a lot of where I grew up. There were places like that, with creeks and forests and forts where you could go and just, wham, you’d be gone all day playing imaginary games and exploring imaginary worlds.”

He also had another reason for being attracted to the role. “I wanted to do a movie that my kids could see, because they haven’t really seen a lot of their old man’s work,” he says. “And this is such a wonderful role because this father has a chance to redeem himself. He starts out one way, but by the end, he begins to realize what’s really important in life.”

Patrick wanted to bring an underlying feeling of love to Jess’s father, no matter how mean he can sometimes seem. “He absolutely loves his son,” Patrick explains, “but I think he’s angry and frustrated and feels like the whole world is taking its licks on him, and that can make you act out on the ones you love. We’re all human beings, you know, and sometimes you don’t realize how hurtful something you say can be. But when life throws a big curve, he’s there for Jess.”

Patrick especially loved working with Gabor Csupo as a director. “He’s a wonderful choice for this movie because, being an artist himself, I think he really understands Jess—and how imagination can be a bridge between your dreams and the realities of the world,” he sums up.

### **IMAGINING TERABITHIA: THE FILM’S DESIGN**

As a movie that celebrates imagination, the production of BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA would ultimately come to involve an entire team of exceptionally imaginative people—especially when it came to bringing the kingdom of Terabithia to life, just as Jess and Leslie do in the forest.

The task was unlike any other, because there was no map or blueprint to follow. Terabithia wouldn't be based on any particular history, mythology or even on Katherine Paterson's words, since she left the job of imagining Terabithia largely up to her readers. So here was a rare chance for the filmmakers to forge creatures and a whole kingdom out of thin air, as Leslie and Jess do—with total freedom. The creatures would be entirely wild, unlikely and flamboyant, yet would also be filled with the qualities of the real-life people from Leslie and Jess's life who inspired their forms.

Jumping off from what was already put into the script, Gabor Csupo decided to bring in a man he considers a brilliant visual genius to turn out a series of gorgeously detailed illustrations. This was Dima Malenichev, the award-winning visual thinker who had served as an art director at Klasky Csupo after coming to the U.S. from his native Russia. From his pen sprang the whimsical yet richly organic vision of Terabithia that Weta Digital would later create in three dimensions on the screen.

"Dima is an amazing conceptual artist," says Csupo. "From the beginning, we talked about the idea of what Terabithia should be. We knew we did not want any cutesy creatures. Instead, I asked him to think about what would Terry Gilliam do, what would Ridley Scott do? I wanted the unexpected and a far more fantastical look than you might think you would see in this kind of movie. I wanted to really surprise the audience, both children and adults, with very unorthodox creatures."

Csupo was especially aware that kids today are living in an intensely visual universe—and have highly sophisticated cinematic sensibilities. "We live in an age where you have video games and designs that are unbelievably complex, so I think with this kind of fantasy world, you really have to push the envelope so that kids aren't saying, 'Oh, I've seen that before,'" he says.

To the filmmakers' delight, Dima Malenichev was able to forge creations—ranging from a leafy Giant to fairylike Dragonflies to Hairy Vultures and, to top it all off, the Squogres, super-speedy, squirrel-like ogres based on the school bullies at Jess and Leslie's school—that made the familiar seem entirely new.

"Dima's creatures were incredible," says Lauren Levine. "They don't simply imitate other fantasy films but feel very different and create their own kind of world. We thought it was important to have the creatures completely emerge from Jess and Leslie's real lives and from the forest they are in, and Dima's illustrations hit the nail on the head."

Adds Alex Schwartz, Executive in Charge of Production for Walden Media: "The creatures are very edgy and in keeping with the sensibility of kids today. It's a real visual feast that I think will dazzle young audiences."

But the illustrations were just the start of the process—next would come actually sparking the creatures to living, breathing, moving forms in the computers of Weta Digital.

### **TERABITHIA COMES ALIVE: THE WETA WIZARDS TACKLE GIANTS, VULTURES AND SQUOGRES**

There was only ever one top choice for who could handle BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA's visual effects with just the right mix of magic: Weta Digital, the visionary Academy Award®-winning wizards who transformed the whole of Middle Earth into something palpably and unforgettably real for awed film audiences in "The Lord of the Rings." Based in Wellington, New Zealand, Weta Digital is an artist-led facility that specializes in creating creatures—



---

taking projects from conceptual design all the way through to state-of-the-art 3-D animation.

“Why go anywhere else?” asks producer Lauren Levine. “Weta is the best digital house in the entire world, and if you have a chance to work with the very best, you take it! Watching Weta turn the pictures of our Terabithian creatures into three-dimensional living and breathing beings was an unbelievable treat. They’re miracle workers, alchemists and geniuses.”

For Csupo, who is used to working in the entirely unreal realm of animation, seeing what Weta could create was awe-inspiring. “You look at these creatures, and you know they don’t exist, and yet it’s like, wow, are you sure they aren’t really alive? It’s really kind of spooky what they do,” he admits.

Richard Taylor, a director of Weta, saw BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA as a perfect match for Weta Digital’s specialized art form—and a distinct challenge. “It was a very exciting project for us,” he says, “because it was a chance to make real a world that is very intangible. It’s not like ‘Lord of the Rings,’ where you can lock it all down to certain descriptions and cultural influences. These creatures in Terabithia are completely from inside the minds of children. They’re make-believe in the best sense, which actually makes it harder to find visual solutions.”

Taylor continues: “I devoured the script and I loved the subtle interplay between the real world and the fantasy world. It’s an incredibly heartfelt and touching story that reminds me of all the books and films I love the most. This kind of story that celebrates that spirit of creativity comes along so rarely.”

Once Weta came on board, another creative duo began to add their efforts to the mix: Weta’s visual-effects supervisor, Matt Aitken (who has worked on such films as “X-Men” and “Lord of the Rings”), and the film’s New Zealand-based production designer, Robert Gillies. The two worked very closely with one another to assure that every aspect of the film’s design—both the real and the fantastical—would be woven together as a piece.

“The collaboration between us added to the quality of the design,” notes Aitken. Adds Gillies: “Our creative process was a bit like a ball game—one of us would take the ball and run with it and then kick it off to the other person.”

Aitken’s work began by taking Dima Malenichev’s drawings and turning them into moving, leaping, stunning 3-D images. “The illustrations are incredibly evocative, but they’re still in two dimensions. It’s not the same as, say, taking a photograph of a Squogre or a Hairy Vulture, which is what we really needed to do,” Aitken explains. “So the first thing we did is explore what these creatures would really be like in three dimensions through a lot of experimentation. Then we start making computer models, adding in the skin, the hair, the fur, the feathers and other fine details.”

He continues: “We go through a lot of iterations for each character, figuring out each and every nuance of the facial expressions and how their hair and skin moves. And we do this for a long time before we even start putting the characters into the film’s shots.”

Adding more complexity to the creatures is the fact that many are hybrids—mergers that mix imaginary beasts and monsters with qualities of real-life humans back in the real world. To create this effect, the Weta team referenced photographs of several of the actors in the film, then enmeshed subtle details with their wholly imaginary creations. Explains Aitken: “For example, the Squogre involves subtle elements of Cameron Wakefield, who plays Jess’s schoolmate Scott Hoager, and the Hairy Vultures are a combination of a crow with Elliot Lawless, who plays Gary Fulcher, while the Giant has elements of Lauren Clinton, who plays the bully Janice Avery.”

---

Most everyone on the set developed a favorite creature of his or her own. The Giant especially struck Gabor Csupo's fancy. "It's an extremely beautiful creation, and I love that this is a character who turns out to be something different than what it first appears, who takes a wonderful emotional turn," he says.

While Aitken focused on creatures in the computer, Gillies was working with hammer and saw, building key sets including a traditional farmhouse for Jess's home and, perhaps most spectacularly, the tree house that becomes the launching pad for Leslie and Jess's creation of Terabithia. "For building the tree house, you had to kind of tap into your inner kid," comments Gillies. "Although we started with an illustration that Dima had drawn, we went into the forest in New Zealand and built the house according to the trees we found there, just like any kid would in any woods around the world."

For many, the set became a favorite. Says producer Hal Lieberman: "It represents every kid's dream tree house."

In further enhancing—not to mention enchanting—the look of the film, Gabor Csupo also worked closely with two-time Academy Award®-nominated cinematographer Michael Chapman, aka Chappy, who has shot more than 40 feature films, ranging from Martin Scorsese's "Raging Bull" and "Taxi Driver" to the action classic "The Fugitive."

"I was so happy when I heard Michael was going to do the film because he is like a legend," says Csupo. "And then he came in to talk with me and he was like an excited child. He acted really humbled and said, 'This is such a beautiful story, and it's exactly the kind of movie I want to do at this time in my life.' So I knew it was going to be great."

Csupo continues: "We work together very well because Michael has a very different mindset from mine. "He's very practical-minded and, with his 40 years of experience in the movie industry, I couldn't have been happier than to have a great pair of eyes like his."

With the decision to use Weta Digital as the visual-effects house, it made sense to shoot the film in New Zealand, but it wasn't until Csupo arrived in that lush island nation that he realized just how perfect the natural environment there—rife with pristine forests and awe-inspiring landscapes filled with a sense of possibility—was for a film about turning reality into fantasy. "Auckland is already a magical place," Csupo says, "and there's so much talent there."

Between the natural beauty of New Zealand, the eye-popping digital creations of Weta and the powerful performances from the cast, BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA began to come alive on celluloid, just as it had in the hearts and minds of every child who had ever read the book.

For David Paterson, seeing the story that had begun with his own childhood heartbreak come so thrillingly to life brought everything full circle. "It's been a long, long journey, but it's been completely worth it," he says. "To continue the legacy of this story is wonderful, because in the end, it's always going to be friendship and imagination that keep the world going."