

= The Dragon 's Call =

" The Dragon 's Call " is the first episode of the first series of the British fantasy @-@ adventure family television series Merlin . Written by Julian Jones and directed by James Hawes , the episode was first broadcast on BBC One on 20 September 2008 .

The episode tells the arrival of Merlin (Colin Morgan) as a young man in Camelot , where magic is banned by King Uther Pendragon (Anthony Head) . Taken under the wing of Camelot 's physician , Gaius (Richard Wilson) , he is warned that he must keep his innate magical ability a secret . In Camelot , he meets Uther 's heir , the arrogant Prince Arthur (Bradley James) , as well as Lady Morgana (Katie McGrath) and her handmaid , Guinevere (Angel Coulby) . As a witch (Eve Myles) plans revenge on the King 's heir for the execution of her son , Merlin is informed by a cryptic dragon (John Hurt) that his destiny is to protect Arthur .

Merlin was conceived by Julian Murphy and Johnny Capps to be an origin story for the characters of the Arthurian legends , with family @-@ centered entertainment . Young actors with little experience were cast as the four lead characters , while better @-@ known actors were cast in supporting roles . Many of the scenes in Camelot were filmed in France , at the Château de Pierrefonds , while the rest was filmed in England and Wales . Special effects were done by The Mill , who had the task of creating the talking dragon . " The Dragon 's Call " was watched by 7 @.@ 15 million viewers in the UK and 6 @.@ 3 million in the US on NBC . Critical reception was mixed , with some feeling the show had promise but lacked imagination , and the actual plot of " The Dragon 's Call " was deemed slight .

= = Plot = =

Merlin (Colin Morgan) , a young sorcerer , arrives in Camelot just in time to witness the execution of Thomas Collins , a man accused of sorcery , by the order of King Uther Pendragon (Anthony Head) , who has banned the practice of magic in his kingdom on pain of death . As soon as the man is beheaded , Uther declares to the watching crowd that he shall throw a festival to celebrate twenty years since he wiped out magic and magicians from the kingdom . When he finishes his announcements , a hideous old hag , Thomas ' mother Mary (Eve Myles) , swears revenge for the murder of her son , " a son for a son ! " , before vanishing to avoid arrest . The King 's ward , Morgana (Katie McGrath) , warns that Uther may be making enemies through his hatred and radical methods of wiping out magic .

Merlin reports to Camelot 's physician Gaius (Richard Wilson) and saves the old man 's life when he falls from a balcony by magically moving a mattress to cushion his fall . Though initially denying his abilities , Merlin later admits that he has had magical powers since birth , which Gaius warns him to keep secret . Reading a letter from Merlin 's mother , Gaius realises that the boy was sent to Camelot for protection . Meanwhile , in the forest outside Camelot , Mary kills Lady Helen (Myles) , a singer who is to perform at Uther 's court , with a poppet . Mary assumes Helen 's appearance using an enchantment , though her true hideous appearance can still be seen in her reflection (like in mirrors or water) .

Outside , Merlin stands up for a servant who is being bullied by his master , but as the master turns out to be the King 's spoiled son , Arthur (Bradley James) , Merlin is imprisoned . For the second night in a row , he hears a voice calling his name . Gaius frees him the next morning , though Merlin has to spend time in the stocks . There he meets Morgana 's handmaiden Guinevere or " Gwen " (Angel Coulby) , who commends him for being brave . Merlin confronts Arthur after being released , who tricks him into a fight with maces . Merlin keeps Arthur away using magic , which is met with ridicule by Gaius . Hearing the same voice calling his name that night , Merlin follows it to a cave where a dragon (John Hurt) informs him that he is destined to protect Arthur with his powers .

Gaius instructs Merlin to deliver elixirs to Morgana and Lady Helen ; in the latter 's room he finds the poppet , but bluffs his way out of discovery . Later , Helen kills a handmaiden who glimpses her true form in a mirror . At the feast , Mary sings an enchantment as Lady Helen , causing all the guests to fall asleep . Merlin , realising what is going on , covers his ears . Mary attempts to kill

Arthur , but Merlin drops a chandelier on her with magic before she releases the dagger . As she has stopped singing , the enchantment is lifted and her true appearance is revealed . In a last effort she throws the dagger at Arthur , but Merlin slows time to pull him out of the way . Mary dies from her injuries , having failed in her attempt to avenge her son . Uther rewards Merlin by making him Arthur 's servant , though neither boy is thrilled with the idea . The next day , Gaius gives Merlin a book on magic , under condition that he keep it hidden .

= = Production = =

= = = Conception and development = = =

Merlin was conceived by Shine Television producers Julian Murphy and Johnny Capps , who had worked together on Hex , a fantasy series produced by Shine for Sky One . The two had enjoyed presenting a " high @-@ concept " show , and wished to do more . The BBC had been interested in broadcasting a drama based on the character of Merlin for some time ; a little over a year before the Shine series was initiated , writer and producer Chris Chibnall had been developing a project aimed at a BBC One Sunday night slot , which was ultimately not commissioned . The programme was intended for family entertainment and designed to appeal to a wide audience .

As the Arthurian legends do not reflect genuine historical events , not being set in any one singular period in time , the show 's creators were more interested in conveying a world that felt " real " . Not constrained by historical accuracy , they had many opportunities to build the world in which they set their series ; for example , tomatoes were included despite being absent from Europe in the Medieval era , and there was never a dragon in the earliest texts involving Merlin . The series was intended to have an " epic scale " that would have a wide " cross @-@ generational " appeal ; films such as Raiders of the Lost Ark were cited as inspiration . Despite this , the creators strived to have smaller moments that the audience could relate to and comedy to lighten the darker tone . A fairy @-@ tale aspect was also incorporated - highlighted in " The Dragon 's Call " with the singing and cobwebs - to set the programme apart from others . Beauty and the Beast was an inspiration in this respect . Merlin was also influenced by the US show Smallville , about the early years of Superman ; Murphy and Capps said that Smallville helped provide the idea of a " Camelot that existed before its golden age " . The creators wanted to show Merlin , Arthur , Gwen and Morgana in their youth , " before they were famous " . Murphy and Capps intended for the four young characters and situations to be relatable to young viewers . They also put the characters in unusual positions with respect to their later , well @-@ known roles to make the audience wonder how they would reach those roles ; for example , Guinevere , the future Queen of Camelot and wife of Arthur , is a servant with a romantic interest in Merlin . Looking back at " The Dragon 's Call " , Murphy and Capps felt that it had so much to introduce in terms of world and characters that there was not enough of the main plot of the episode .

= = = Casting = = =

The producers were aware that they would be casting young actors with little experience in film and television . Hundreds were seen for the part of Merlin , with the part going to 22 @-@ year @-@ old Colin Morgan , whom Murphy and Capps felt possessed a broad acting range with good comedic timing and wonder , and who they felt would most importantly be likable to the audience . Bradley James was cast as Prince Arthur , whom the producers saw as a " medieval Prince Harry " . They felt that James ' sense of comedy balanced the fact that the character was intended to first appear acting like an " idiot " . Murphy and Capps had previously worked with James on a pilot , and kept him in the " back of [their] minds " when casting Arthur . Katie McGrath and Angel Coulby , who play Morgana and Gwen respectively , also had little previous professional acting experience . Despite this , it was noted that all four young actors took to their jobs maturely and with energy .

The series also incorporates more experienced and well @-@ known actors . Richard Wilson was

cast as Gaius , who was conceived to have a dysfunctional father / son relationship with Merlin . Murphy and Capps had worked with Wilson before and considered him a broad actor with a " warmth " and " humanity " that would fit the character . The voice of the Great Dragon was given to John Hurt ; he was offered the part , though the producers did not expect him to accept . The role of King Uther went to veteran actor Anthony Head , who was best known for his role as Rupert Giles in Buffy the Vampire Slayer . Head had been one of the first choices for the part ; Murphy and Capps felt that he was good with " high @-@ concept " worlds . Murphy and Capps had also previously worked with Caroline Faber , who briefly appears as Merlin 's mother . The two liked her sense of humanity , though her scene ? where Gaius reads her letter ? was almost cut from " The Dragon 's Call " . Eve Myles guest stars in " The Dragon 's Call " as the villain Mary Collins and her host body Lady Helen . Murphy and Capps remarked that Myles gave a " big " but " truthful " performance , and really " embraced " being a villain . Myles sang during the filming of the climax , though her voice was replaced with a real operatic soprano in post @-@ production . Composer Rob Lane was given little time to complete the song and , though he was given Old English texts , the lyrics do not make actual sense .

= = = Filming = = =

Merlin began production in March 2008 ; as many as three episodes were filmed at a time , and not necessarily in the correct order . Many scenes in Camelot were filmed in France at the Château de Pierrefonds , which was hand @-@ picked by the production team . Castles in England had been looked at , but they were often in ruins and would require more computer @-@ generated imagery (CGI) effects in post @-@ production . A medieval @-@ era road was built around Pierrefonds for some scenes to give the sense of a town , as the castle was in isolation . The execution scene was one of the first major scenes shot . As the production team had to be able to work with French extras , a bilingual crew was required . The cell Merlin is imprisoned in and the banquet hall at the end were both filmed in English stately homes , with real medieval architecture . Other studio filming took place in Wales . The scene at the camp where Lady Helen stays had to be reshot because the tent was seen as " too Monty Python " and distracting .

Myles ' Mary Collins prosthetic took six hours to accomplish , and the shot where she morphs into the younger Lady Helen took seven hours to complete because it required three stages of make @-@ up . Her first performance at the beheading scene was met with applause by the extras ; Head requested that he redo his part of the scene because he felt that it was not good enough . Gaius ' fall from the balcony was done by a stuntman and filmed with a high @-@ speed camera . The mattress that Merlin magically moves across the floor was achieved with rigging it up to hidden wires and pulleys under the set . The knives Arthur throws were actually shot out of a nitrogen gun ; James did throw them in a separate shot , but against a cloth that he still missed . Fake fruit was made for the stocks scene , but it was deemed too fake @-@ looking and was replaced with real tomatoes . The mace fight was originally filmed with plastic maces , but they were not believable as they did not have enough weight . The scene was then shot with real steel maces ; it was one of the most complex and hardest scenes to execute . The climax , where the guests all fall asleep and are covered by cobwebs , took many days to complete . The chandelier falling was also considered difficult .

CGI special effects for the series were provided by The Mill . The production team wanted a talking dragon , but they were worried about the lip sync and did not think it would be believable until they saw the first test . The Mill created a software that would read Hurt 's facial muscles and incorporated it into the animation . Another concern was that the eyes would not convey the character , but this was corrected by the final version . Additional sound effects , such as the clanging chain , were added to give the creature weight . The knife Mary throws at Arthur was also completely CGI , though the shot of it hitting the chair was real .

= = Broadcast and reception = =

" The Dragon 's Call " was first broadcast on BBC One in the United Kingdom on 20 September 2008 . Overnight ratings showed that the episode had been watched by 6 @. @ 65 million viewers live , a 30 % audience share , placing Merlin second for the night behind ITV 's The X @- @ Factor . The episode received a final rating of 7 @. @ 15 million viewers , the sixth most @- @ watched programme of the week on BBC One .

In the United States , " The Dragon 's Call " was aired back @- @ to @- @ back with the following episode " Valiant " on 21 June 2009 on network station NBC , the first time since 1978 's The New Avengers that a British programme was picked up by one of the U.S. ' s four major terrestrial networks , rather than cable . The premiere was watched by an average 5 @. @ 2 million viewers , with an average of 6 @. @ 3 million during the slot for " The Dragon 's Call " .

= = = Critical reception = = =

The premiere of Merlin received generally mixed reviews . Sam Wollaston of The Guardian was optimistic towards the programme , despite the violent content . He wrote that " Morgan is a very likable young Merlin " and the show " looks splendid ? colourful , exciting , and yes , magic " . Daniel Martin of the same paper felt that the series had potential , though " The Dragon 's Call " had " awful dialogue " and was " a flimsy caper memorable only for centring around the wonderful big @- @ eyed Eve Myles " . The Hollywood Reporter reviewer Randee Dawn felt that it would " hurt [the] eyes " of those who were familiar with the Arthurian legends , but " for those new to the legend , this is a fresh , and delightfully color @- @ blind , approach to the tale " . Alessandra Stanley , reviewing for The New York Times , was pleased with the diversity of the cast and the chemistry between Morgan and James , though she felt it " would be better if its creators had taken more liberties and shown more imagination in coloring in the background of their young hero 's world " .

Metro gave the episode three out of five stars , writing that " Colin Morgan makes a likeable boy wizard but there ? s a bit too much formula ? and not in the magical sense " . The review described the episode as a " test of patience " due to Merlin 's inability to use magic and the " hideously jaunty , distinctly non @- @ medieval soundtrack " . Tom Shales of The Washington Post criticised the " sluggish pace " of the premiere , noting that the episode was only " brightened " by the dragon , though similar creatures were common in the genre and it " lacks personality as well as panache " . Shales felt that the series took " the stuff of legend and imagination and makes it dry and commonplace " . Den of Geek reviewer Mark Pickavance felt that the episode was " uneven and often very stilted " , and failed at introducing both the characters and telling the story of the first meeting of Arthur and Merlin . He was displeased with the deviation from established mythology and the lapses in logic . The Times 's AA Gill described Merlin as " bland " , writing that it was for " a large untapped audience that yearns for Abercrombie & Fitch drama " . Hermione Eyre of The Independent called it " horrible " , disliking the " modern " feeling , the " awful " make @- @ up , and commented that " Guinevere looks like a supply teacher " .