

GUIDE TO THE CREATION OF KING KONG

THE MAKING OF A MONSTER

In January, 1976, when producer Dino De Laurentiis held a press conference for his upcoming film, a remake of the 1933 classic *King Kong*, his own version of the legendary monster did not exist. Creators of the first *King Kong* had utilized a small ape model and the special effects of stop-motion photography; the ape model was moved one body motion per each frame of the film. Dino De Laurentiis decided that today's modern technology was capable of much more. A monster film of the 1970's would have to be realistic; there could be no errors such as Kong changing size from scene to scene, in proportion to humans and buildings.

In less than one year, the 1976 *King Kong* was created—in three separate images: a huge mechanical arm and hand; a full-sized 40-foot mechanical monster; and a man in an ape suit. One-hundred and seven full-sized and miniature sets were constructed for the ape to act in. The motion picture was ready for a December release. Final cost of the production? Twenty-four million dollars. And three million of that was spent on Kong in his various forms: the mechanical hand, the 40-foot electronic ape, and the human-sized model.

THE HAND

Kong's automated right hand was the first part of his body to be finished and ready for filming. This separate hand and arm were essential for shooting the scenes between the ape and Dwan, the girl he "loves."

The hand picks up Dwan, holds her, and the fingers move to stroke her. This must have been quite an experience for the actress: to be held in a hand seven feet long, four feet wide, covered with foam rubber and with 20-inch-long dyed strands of horse tails—not exactly romantic!

Kong's paw was capable of many gestures. Off-camera, four men operated the giant hand, activating 16 hydraulic jacks from a panel which controlled spools in the valves inside the hand. Each jack controlled a different hand position through a complex system of valves, hydraulic fluid, and long cables inside Kong's massive paw.

FULL-SIZED KONG

Standing 40 feet high, this King Kong monster had a 20-foot chest span, 20-foot-long arms, and weighed six and one-half tons. Yet it took only seven men to control the giant ape—they worked on a panel of 50 hydraulic jacks; each jack moved a different part of the ape's body. Within this gigantic creation were 3,000 feet of hydraulic hose and 4,500 feet of wiring. Thus Kong performed—his eyes blinked, his feet lifted, his head turned, his jaws moved, his chest heaved, and even his toes wiggled.

Place this phenomenon before a crowd of thousands and let him go berserk. This was the monumental scene in which the full-sized Kong found his glory. After being captured, Kong was brought to civilization by the money-hungry characters of the film. In the midst of crowds of spectators, Kong went crazy, wreaking havoc and destruction all around him—and that was six and one-half tons of heavy acting.

MAN-SIZED KONG

For some scenes, the electronic King Kong was not enough. Then a five-foot, six-inch actor climbed into a monkey suit and worked within proportionately scaled miniature sets.

This was no ordinary monkey suit, though. It was made from six bearskins, each weighing 15 pounds; the hair was trimmed and colored to match the horsehair of the big Kong. The hairs were woven into a net, which was attached to foam rubber. The suit was so hot that the actor could stay inside it for only about three hours, and he sometimes lost five pounds a day while wearing it.

Realism was of overriding importance, and was maintained with the man in the monkey suit. Air was pumped into the chest to create the effect of breathing. And since a gorilla's arms are much longer than a man's, finger extensions were connected to the actor's hands by rings so that he could manipulate the fingers of those long ape arms. The actor inside the suit could only control the up-and-down movements of the head, but cables running out of the back of Kong's neck could change positions in the face, through the turning of levers on an off-camera panel. For these men at the control board, manipulating Kong's face was like running a set of electric trains.

GOING APE

The human-sized Kong did the most emotional acting, using many varied facial expressions. His suit had five separate masks with different expressions: normal expressions (that is, for an ape); menacing looks; big roar; blowing; and more "sophisticated" expressions. Before putting on a mask, the actor had to darken the skin around his eyes so that no white would show through, and insert contact lenses. He had some problems:

"It was difficult at first when John [Guillermin, the director] asked me to show compassion through the eyes," Rick said. "I could barely see anything with the contacts. All I heard were cables squeaking in my head, all kinds of crazy noises." (page 178)

It is the emotional Kong who is the show. After all, it is his love for Dwan that eventually brings about his destruction. Dick Kline, the picture's cinematographer, described the feeling of *King Kong*:

"Everyone knows the monster is the star of this picture . . . and you have to trust Kong, just like any other actor. In truth, Kong's story is told through his eyes and mouth. His true emotions, especially his feeling toward the girl, are in his facial expressions. And Kong is neither gorilla nor man. He's our creation, done in this studio, an enormously proud being who is sometimes royal, sometimes savage." (page 180)

BEHIND-THE-SCENES BOOK

All facts on this page came from THE CREATION OF KING KONG, by Bruce Bahrenburg, a book that tells you much more of how the entire production of *King Kong* evolved. Kong achieved existence among legal court battles over film rights, and with the tensions of deadlines and technical problems. Costs for constructing elaborate and imposing sets grew into millions of dollars. Scenes were shot in the midst of hurricane winds in Hawaii and among unpredictable crowds in New York. The use of new photographic techniques and optical effects combined with all the other elements to make King Kong truly live again.

