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KING KONG

From Merian C. Cooper
to Dino De Laurentiis

Sonny, Cher, and Me
by Samson Raphaelson

Reflections on TV Violence
by Robert Sklar





GORILLA POWER

Producer Dino De Laurentiis came to Hollywood, via Rome, filled with *brio* and a dozen projects. A year later, the flops outnumber the hits, and don't ask about Robert Altman. Now—*mamma mia!*—here comes *King Kong* to the rescue.

Bernard Drew

The road from Rome led Dino De Laurentiis first to New York a little over three years ago, where he paused long enough to make three Charles Bronson money-makers, *The Stone Killer*, *The Valachi Papers*, and *Death Wish*, plus *Serpico* and *Mandingo*, and then to Los Angeles a year ago, where he established his operations in luxurious offices on Canon Drive in Beverly Hills, and settled himself, his wife, Silvana Mangano, and their four children on a ten-acre estate known as The Knoll, for which realty man Mike Silverman asked \$3 million.

What De Laurentiis actually paid for it is not available for public record—about half would be an educated guess. But one turns north on Sunset Boulevard, past the 700- and 800-blocks, and begins to climb winding roads up to God's country, into the large estate area, where \$150,000 and \$200,000 homes look like Hooverville shacks, to finally reach the Promised Land, the electrically controlled iron gates of The Knoll, with its reminder atop the gate that only one car may pass through at a time.

It is early Saturday morning. The clouds have not yet lifted, nor has the smog disappeared, to turn Los Angeles into the sunny paradise everyone expects it to be. De Laurentiis's publicity director, Gordon Armstrong, who has never been to the house before, gets out of the car, and says, "What do I do now?" as he approaches the gate.

"I see a phone," I suggest, "and a buzzer. Just ring and state your name, age, and occupation."

He presses the buzzer, screams, "Armstrong," into the grilled apparatus above, and is greeted by a crash of silence.

"What happens now?" he asks worriedly, returning to

Producer Dino De Laurentiis at the World Trade Center in New York. *King Kong* has just fallen from the tall buildings.

the car, as faint, extraterrestrial squeaks begin to emanate from the grilled box. Armstrong rushes back to it, shrieking, "Armstrong! Gordon Armstrong!" and then races back to the car, starts the engine, and drives through quickly before the gates close again.

The trip from the gate to the main house seems almost as long as the road from Rome, long enough anyway to mutter the opening of *Rebecca* to oneself—"Last night, I dreamed I went to Manderley..."—or to recall the visit I had with De Laurentiis a year ago, in his offices at Canon Drive. Newly arrived in Los Angeles then, and flushed with the success of *Serpico*, *Death Wish*, and *Mandingo*, he had been ebullient and full of *brio* and hope and *gemütlichkeit*.

"I love New York," he'd said then. "It's very exciting and stimulating, but I had to move here because this is where the action is. If you make one picture a year, you can live anywhere, but if you make six to ten—" He shrugged one of his eloquent shrugs and went on to explain why he'd felt compelled to leave his native Italy.

"The political and economic situation kept getting worse and worse. By 1972 it became impossible. I was forced to come to the conclusion that if I was going to continue to make movies, I'd have to move to America. It's the only country in the world where you can work in complete freedom. Imagine trying to make *Serpico* in Italy with police cooperation. You wouldn't last one day."

He had beamed expansively and said, "I can make anything I want to, and I have many ambitious plans. Ingmar Bergman is making *Face to Face* for me, and after that we'll do 'The Threepenny Opera.' He, Fellini, Buñuel, and Kurosawa are the greatest."

"And only one American director is in that class," he'd continued. "Bob Altman. He's an absolute genius. Even Francis Ford Coppola is not in the same class, and I've tied up Altman for his next five pictures, starting with *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, which he's shooting now in Canada. It stars Paul Newman. It should be magnificent. I've made commercial pictures and I've made artistic pictures, but you rarely can do both in the same picture. But with *Buffalo Bill*, we'll do it. We're going to spend \$6 million on it. When has Altman ever had so much to play with? And who's a bigger star than Newman? It should be a sensation."

"Then, after reading *Ragtime* in one night," he had added, "I bought it for Bob to do next, long before it was published and the reviews came out. I thought Bob was the only man to do it."

"Next, I want Roman Polanski to remake *King Kong*. You can't make bullshit these days, only quality, and our new approach to it will be *Beauty and the Beast*."

"We'll do *Lipstick*," he'd gone on. "This is a very exciting project about feminine problems, which uses rape as the springboard by which we'll go into feminine problems of today. Lamont Johnson will direct, and it will have an all-star cast, including Faye Dunaway, Ali MacGraw, and Anne Bancroft."

He had then proudly continued: "We'll do *The Shootist*,

which is about a cowboy with cancer. Don Siegel will direct, and John Wayne is the cowboy. Peter Bogdanovich will direct *King of the Gypsies* from the Peter Maas book. Charles Bronson will star in *The White Buffalo*. We'll do *Drum*, which will be a sequel to *Mandingo*, and, of course, *Three Days of the Condor*, with Robert Redford and Faye Dunaway, will be out next month. From February 1976 until Christmas, we should have ten pictures in release."

"But there is no sure way of knowing what will be commercial," he had concluded. "You have to be able to smell what an audience will want. Today, the audience is tired of television; they're going back to movies. After *Sound of Music*, we had to wait ten years for *The Godfather*, but since then, there have been ten pictures that have made more than \$30 million. There's never been a time like now. I have been making movies all of my life, and I can't remember a time when I was more encouraged."

Back to 1976. The reverie is over. We have arrived at the portico of The Knoll, and Armstrong parks the car in the porte cochère. We cross the huge courtyard past the swimming pool, pavilion, dressing rooms, and outdoor kitchen. Two Filipino maids unlock the front doors, usher us into the entry and galleria, where, if things should ever get as rough in America as they are in Italy, De Laurentiis can always remake *War and Peace*.

And we move toward the regal, circular staircase, catching glimpses of the living room, dining room, cocktail room, and library, and slowly and gracefully ascend (there is simply no other way to do it) to the second floor, with its two-bedroom suites and God knows what percentage of the house's fourteen other emergency bedrooms, and are ushered into a large, comfortable sitting room where De Laurentiis smilingly awaits.

His greeting is as warm as it was a year ago, but some of last year's ebullience is gone. Perhaps it has something to do with his last year's releases, which, to put it as charitably as possible, did not turn out as they should have.

There is something slightly measured and cautious about him now. He could be a little worried, as upward of \$23 million has been expended on *King Kong* (now awaiting release after eight months of shooting).

Also, *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* is certain to be a financial disaster. *Lipstick*, without Faye Dunaway and Ali MacGraw as promised, but with the Hemingway sisters, turned out to be one of the jokes of the year. *Drum* was released with De Laurentiis's name removed from the credits at the eleventh hour. *The Shootist*, even with favorable reviews from some critics who believe that the earth was created in three days by Don Siegel and John Wayne, can at best look forward to only limited success, because what the world needs now is hardly the sight of America's most durable cowboy plotzting away with cancer.

Only Bergman's *Face to Face* is an unequivocal success. But since the Swedish master's biggest box-office triumph, *Cries and Whispers*, took in a mere \$5 million around the entire world, at best, *Face to Face*'s profits will not be able to pay for one of King Kong's toenails.

The maid brings in the espresso; De Laurentiis looks at me carefully and waits for me to begin. As I sip the coffee, I tell him that several of the New York critics used their reviews of *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* as platforms for damning De Laurentiis for taking *Ragtime* away from Altman, who had prepared a screenplay with the novel's

author, E. L. Doctorow, which was reportedly long enough for two pictures.

Though the criticism I recounted was harsh and must have hurt, De Laurentiis's face remains impassive, betraying no emotion at all. He nods slowly and says, "To make an art movie is always very complicated, because it doesn't only belong to you. It is a collaboration between the producer and director, or it should be, and when we made *Buffalo Bill*, we wanted to make an artistic and commercial success. It looks as if we failed at both."

"Altman is one of the greatest American directors," he goes on, allowing a soupçon of grimness to cross his face. "But he wouldn't listen to anybody. We are showmen in this business, we are working for an audience which is going to spend money for a beautiful evening in a theater, and if we forget we're showmen, we're dead."

"I made the deal with Altman to produce his next pictures," he says carefully, "and when Vincent Canby says I made it after *Nashville*'s release, he's wrong. I made it three months before. Bob came to me after a couple of months and said, 'I'd like to make *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*,' and I said, 'How much will it cost?' and he said, '\$6-\$7 million,' and I said, 'That's too expensive.' "

"Then I read the script," he continues, "and I said, 'I don't want to go with this script for \$6-\$7 million.' I felt it needed more story. With the exception of *Nashville*, I felt that all of his pictures needed more story, and Bob said to me, 'I agree with you. Don't worry about anything. I'll change the script.' "

"He started the picture and he had made no changes, none at all," De Laurentiis says. "He shot it as he wrote it originally. So"—he shrugs—"I lost confidence in him. I wrote to him that though I still admired him as an artist, I no longer trusted him as a man. I could not take a chance on him with the \$12 or \$15 million *Ragtime* will cost to make."

Shaking his head sadly, he says, "I never argued with Fellini on the final cuts of *La Strada* or *Nights of Cabiria*, nor with Bergman, but after the first preview of *Buffalo Bill*, I told Bob, 'You can see the audience is bored and restless. Don't you think it's too long?' Well, he didn't. 'Then why do you bother to have a preview if you're not going to watch the reactions?' I asked him."

"He tried to repeat in *Buffalo Bill* what he did in *Nashville*," De Laurentiis says, shaking his head. "But *Nashville* was a fresco about a city where everybody wanted to sing and a few people did, and *Buffalo Bill* was a confrontation between him and Sitting Bull, and what you do in one picture, you can't do in another."

What happened to *Lipstick*? I ask.

"That," he says with a faint smile, "was a little disappointing. But it's doing all right. You have to consider it a successful movie. What did it cost?" He shrugs and adds almost contemptuously, "It's a commercial movie."

For most of his career, De Laurentiis has tried to draw a careful distinction in his own mind between artistic movies and commercial movies and exploitation movies, trying to combine two out of the three, if possible, in one movie, but if not, content to settle for the rewards and punishments which grow out of each category.

He has a pragmatic view of moviemaking, the result of having spent nearly forty of his fifty-six years in the industry, working in every capacity under every conceivable

political, social, and economic climate.

He was born in a town near Naples. Still in his teens, and a traveling salesman for his father's spaghetti factory, he decided that the world of movies might offer a more agreeable life than the world of pasta, and enrolled in Rome's Film Institute.

When his enraged father cut off his allowance, he calmly supported himself by moonlighting as an actor. Once he mastered the primary rules of the game, he moved into the production end of the industry and by twenty was running the studio. A year later, he decided to produce his own films and arranged the financing for them in Northern Italy.

When the war ended, he was already drawing a neat line between his artistic pictures, his commercial pictures, and his exploitation pictures, which, at that time, were part of the emerging Italian neorealist movement beginning to attract worldwide attention.

His *Bitter Rice* was not only a success but a critical one, and its star, Silvana Mangano, became his wife.

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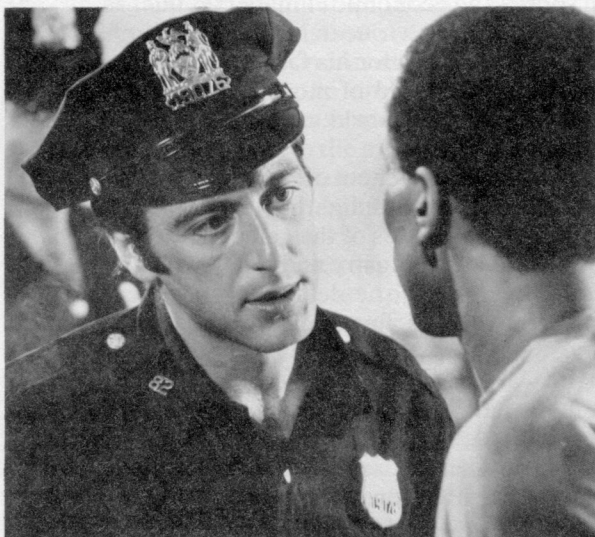
few years later, impresario of his own studios, Stabilimenti (popularly called "Dino Città"), De Laurentiis's production of Fellini's *La Strada* hit the international jack pot, winning many awards, including an Oscar. Yet its artistic success, though certainly welcomed, came as something of a surprise to De Laurentiis.

"It was made as a commercial picture, that's all we ever meant for it," he says with a smile. "It turned out to be a masterpiece, but that was never planned. You never know when you're going to make a classic. You don't sit down with the writer and director and say, 'Let's make a masterpiece now.' You make one and sometimes you don't know that you've made it until the audience and the critics tell you, and sometimes even they're confused."

"When we first showed *La Strada* in Venice, the reaction was only so-so," he shrugs. "But then we showed it in France, and the critical reception was ecstatic. It was the French who launched Fellini as a great artist, and from there, it spread all over the world."

But if *La Strada* was a little commercial picture which turned out to be an accidental masterpiece, De Laurentiis has always taken pains to cover himself by turning out big historical epics like King Vidor's *War and Peace*, John Huston's *The Bible*, and Sergei Bondarchuk's *Waterloo*. The epics, no matter how they ultimately turn out, are begun with the reasonable hope that the most expensive (and sometimes even the best) available talents will combine to make, if not an artistic triumph, at least a respectable try—who is going to knock Tolstoy or God?—and the thunderous pageantry will easily take care of the commercial considerations. Since so many of them have turned out to be lifeless *tableaux vivants*, De Laurentiis has had more than his share of disappointments in this genre.

The exploitation pictures, which could always be counted on to bring in the lire, and which have been, for so long, an integral part of the De Laurentiis annual agenda, have come to an end, he says. That is why he removed his name from *Drum* at the last minute. It is his final exploita-



Left, Al Pacino in Serpico, one of De Laurentiis's first—and most successful—American films.

Right, Liv Ullmann and Kari Sylwan in Ingmar Bergman's Face to Face. For a Bergman film, the returns were excellent.

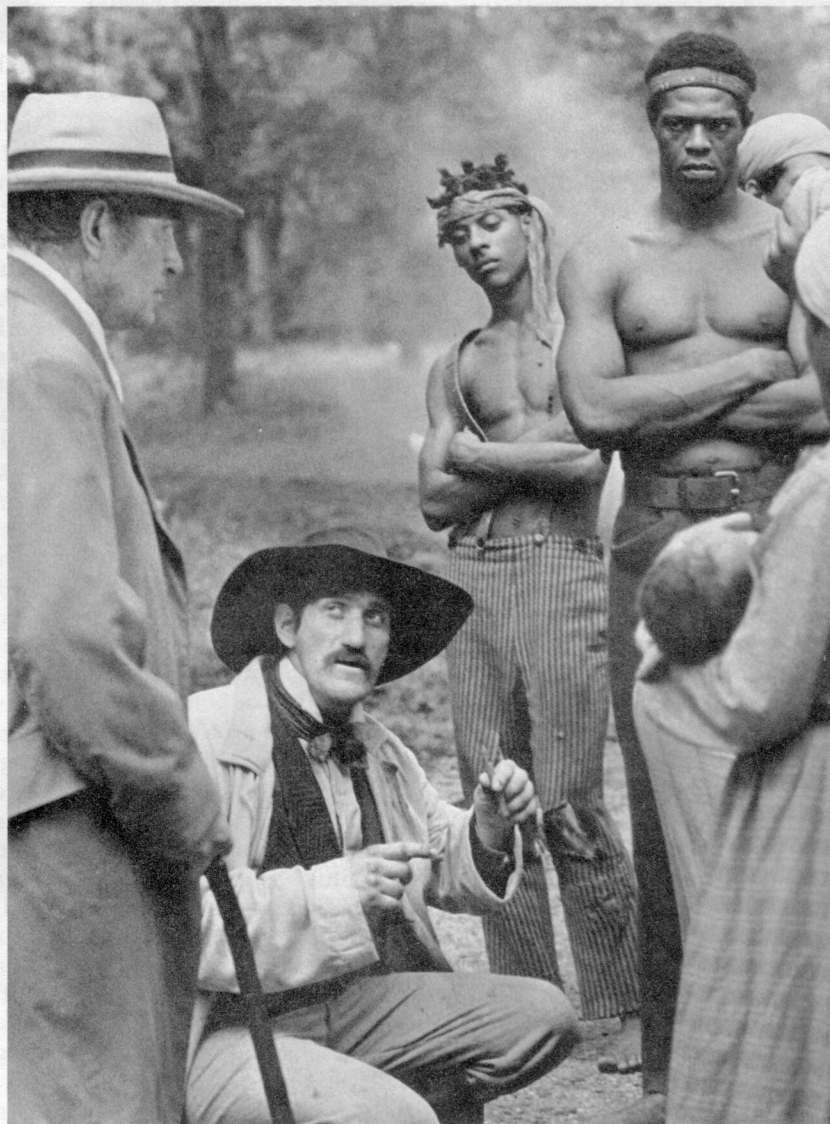


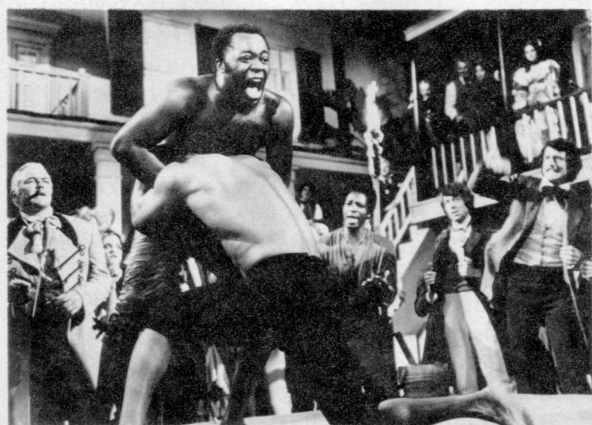
Left, Charles Bronson as an architect turned vigilante in the De Laurentiis hit, Death Wish.



The Shootist, with John Wayne, fired blanks at the box office.

Plantation owner James Mason haggles with slave trader Paul Benedict in Mandingo, an exploitation film that repulsed critics but made millions.





Yaphet Kotto and Ken Norton brawl in *Drum*, a sequel to *Mandingo*, and less successful.

Chris Sarandon and Margaux Hemingway in *Lipstick*, well-publicized but not well-attended.



tion movie, he says, and he no longer cares to be associated with the filthy breed.

"I want to make family movies again," he explains. "There has been too much sex and violence, and people are not buying it any more. *Mandingo* worked well and made a lot of money a couple of years ago, but I don't think it would go today. You have to anticipate the changes in the audience's taste and needs."

"What I mean by family movies," he says eagerly, "are spectacular fairy tales—"

Like *King Kong*?

"Like *King Kong*," he assents. "This will be simply sensational. And like *The Hurricane*, which I'll do next year."

But wouldn't one think that the Merian Cooper-Ernest Schoedsack *King Kong* of 1933 (I mean Fay Wray still lives) and the John Ford *Hurricane* of 1937 (and so do Mary Astor and Dorothy Lamour) were enough for one lifetime?

"Whose lifetime?" he parries. "Let's face it. The people who saw those pictures when they came out, if they're still alive, are old, and the old don't go to movies any more. And the young moviegoers, even if they've seen revivals of the originals, have not seen them with the new technical special effects. The old ones were spectacular for their time, but they can't compare with the new ones."

The White Buffalo, which will be released soon, is described by De Laurentiis, with a slight shrug, as "a good Charles Bronson picture," and it will be followed by *Orca*, a commercial spectacular about a killer whale which Michael Anderson is now shooting in Canada and Malta with Richard Harris and Charlotte Rampling in the cast.

Ingmar Bergman rides again for De Laurentiis with *The Serpent's Egg*, now filming in Munich, with Liv Ullmann and Peter Falk as the two lost souls adrift in Weimar Germany of 1930.

Set for some time in the future are *King of the Gypsies*, without Peter Bogdanovich, *The Great Brinks Robbery*, *The Great Train Robbery*, *Last of the Mohicans*, all on his slate for the last two years or longer, and *Raging Bull*, which the busy Martin Scorsese will direct with the even busier Robert DeNiro, and "several projects still in the discussion stage."

"As you can see, there is no set formula to the pictures," he says. "We are free and we have no firm commitment with any one company. I make single deals with each one. *Serpent's Egg* will go to United Artists, *Ragtime* to Columbia, and if I make more deals with Paramount than anyone else, it's because we have an old relationship that goes back a long time. I have no long-term deals with anybody, certainly not with stars. If you have the right story, directed by the right person, you don't need stars, and long-term deals don't work today."

He suddenly smiles and says, "I must say, despite everything, I feel good about my first year in Hollywood. I'm full of hope. The climate is just right for me, never too hot, never too cold. I don't miss Italy and I don't miss New York. Silvana misses New York terribly, though she doesn't miss Italy. But she knows that this is where the action is and this is where we have to be."

The interview is finally over, and driving downhill toward the great plains south of Sunset Boulevard, Gordon Armstrong tells me that when De Laurentiis states that

this year he has \$57 million invested in film projects, very little of it is his own money.

"Except for the development money to initiate a project which must come out of his own pocket," Armstrong states, "once he starts shooting, the big money derives from advance sales around the world."

Rushing *King Kong* into production to beat Universal's similar plan cost him \$3 million, what with the delays incurred by the company's returning from the Hawaii location and then having to sit around and wait, on salary, while adjustments were made on Kong's hydraulic arms and legs, each of which now rests on a different MGM sound stage.

There were a few minor problems when the roofs of the New York World Trade Center would not accommodate the forty-foot mechanical monster and the scenes had to be shot in Hollywood, but they were more than compensated for by the 30,000 New Yorkers who turned out to witness Kong's final moments on this earth, filmed on the sidewalk below, the tragedy duly reported in newspapers all over the world.

On Monday, I am driven to MGM, where once there were more stars than there are in the heavens, where once Greta Garbo told John Barrymore to go away, she wanted to be alone, where once Norma Shearer and Leslie Howard died for love beneath "an inconstant moon," where once Wallace Beery snarled to Jean Harlow that who did she think she was when he had found her in the men's room of the Hotel Astor. But it's now where one of Kong's hydraulic legs rests on one sound stage, where the other rests on a second, where one arm rests on a third, the other on a fourth, and a hand, which can be moved into sixteen basic positions for close-ups, rests on a fifth, and a huge snake, which is doing battle with Kong, lies now on its track in the midst of a detailed and sizable mock-up valley on a sixth, and where Jeff Bridges, playing the old Bruce Cabot role, is off by himself on a seventh. (*Grand Hotel*, where are you?)

First, I am driven through the old MGM backlot, where a 47-foot high, 170-yard long wall, made of wood, stands. This was where the heroine, Dwan—an homage to Allan?—the old Fay Wray role, now played by Jessica Lange, was sacrificed to Kong a few weeks ago.

According to the production notes, "For a month, 300 extras, playing natives on Skull Island, performed at the wall, chanting and dancing before racing up the ramps to the top of it to see Kong make off with the girl. Visitors to this set included Ingmar Bergman."

A month's further shooting still remains on *King Kong*, and I am taken to the stage, where Lange is being coaxed, in vain, to take a sixty-foot jump from the top of the stage to the inflated air mattress below.

Director John Guillermin (whatever happened to Polanski?) is doing the coaxing, but his entreaties and reassurances of safety fall on deaf ears. So a stunt woman, who rather resembles Frances Farmer, comes in, goes aloft, then stands on the grillwork sixty feet above us to deliver her line to the unseen Kong (who is presumably where the air mattress is) imprisoned in the hull of the ship.

"Hey Kong," she says, "you remember me. I'm your blind date. You haven't forgotten me?"

Suspended by a wire, she walks out on a narrow slat, leans to the left and then to the right, then teeters for a few



Kong's wake, attended by 30,000 curious New Yorkers.

moments before seating herself, cross-legged, on the slat. Air mattress below notwithstanding, I close my eyes. A nervous New York type should never be forced to observe these moments, when four months later, seated comfortably in a Manhattan screening room, the magic of movies will make everything seem effortless.

Charles Grodin, a Manhattanite once-removed, from Pittsburgh, who is playing the third costarring role of the devious oil executive who decides to capture and merchandise Kong, is seated, awaiting his turn to be called to action. He is also entertaining his daughter, visiting from New York, who is blasé about everything.

"And how is this year's Robert Armstrong?" I greet him.

"Devious and oily," he smiles. "Concentrating on my nefarious role. Of course, you must understand that nobody plays an antagonist thinking he's an antagonist. Not even if you're playing Hitler. I'm sitting here trying to justify my filthy actions."

"But I'm waiting, waiting, waiting, forever waiting to go on," he says with a grim smile. "This has turned out to be a seven-month movie, which is exactly as long as my run on Broadway in *Same Time Next Year*."

"But I think it'll all be worth it," he says hopefully. "Why is the 1933 version a classic? Not because of a girl on top of the Empire State Building, but because it's the definitive study of the rape of the environment. Kong is purity, everything else is corruption. That's why it's endured."

"And because that aspect has been enhanced in this version," he continues with a rare solemnity, "and because people are much more aware of the environment now, this could be the biggest picture of all time. It's not so bad being part of that, even after a big Broadway hit."

After his success in *The Heartbreak Kid*, Chuck Grodin

was one of the dwindling number of holdouts who insisted on remaining in New York, where the climate and rhythm of life were more conducive to writing plays and evolving television projects than the more or less eternal sunshine of Los Angeles. But he's showing signs of weakening.

"I'm renting a house in Bel Air, which I may buy," he says airily. Then catching a quizzical look from me, he adds quickly, "This-New-York-is-the-only-place-and-the-theater-is-everything attitude is snobbish and unrealistic. Years ago, actors didn't have the options they have today in movies. And don't let anyone tell you that Broadway long runs are fun. Helen Hayes once said that actors were never as good six months later as they were on opening night, so...."

Jessica Lange ambles over and sits beside us. She is a Minneapolis beauty who went to New York to study dance, then to Paris as a model, picking up a little something about mime from Etienne Ducroux, before returning to New York and the *dolce vita* existence of a successful and popular cover girl.

When the call came to test for Dwan, the 1976, rather tougher version of the Fay Wray virgin, she flew to Hollywood, tested, and won, and here she is.

"Me Dwan," she laughs. "And please write down in your pad that I've done every stunt they wanted these last seven months except those two up there."

She stares up sixty feet to where her stuntly counterpart is virtually doing somersaults on a narrow beam, and says, "Can you imagine me doing that? I'm terrified to even think about climbing the ladder for the close shots."

"Are you going to?" I ask in amazement.

"We have to," she replies.

"You too?" I demand of Grodin.

"Me too," he smiles complacently.

Director John Guillermin comes over for a brief second. Since he directed *Towering Inferno*, he's considered the *maven assoluto* on handling huge inanimate objects confronted by acts of God.

A short, pleasant Britisher, he has only time to answer my question of why he took on this assignment with "Because I like to do things that are uniquely cinema rather than something that can be done on television" before he's called back to the camera for another small emergency.

"He's really the star of this movie," Grodin remarks. "He keeps the rhythm and quality of the film in his mind constantly and holds it all together through all the delays. This monster is all over MGM and if there's a delay in one place, as he knows exactly where everything is, he goes someplace else. It seems impossible, but he'll get the picture ready for Christmas."

I saw De Laurentiis again ten days later in New York in one of the Times Square theaters where the only press screening of *Drum* was held the night before its scheduled opening.

This play was meant to discourage attendance by most of the critics who didn't absolutely have to review it and to permit those who did to at least have the opportunity "to see how it plays before the audience for which it was intended"—standard procedure when a major company has a certain disaster and knows it.

I arrived early and greeted Gordon Armstrong who had just flown in from Los Angeles. He was standing ner-

vously in the vestibule of the theater with a couple of United Artists people—(Paramount, for which it was made, had refused to release it when it received an "X" rating because of a particularly grisly scene. United Artists picked up *Drum*, excised the offending moment, and the movie was now a happier "R," but nothing would help it).

Except for a few rows held for the critics, the dispersal of tickets had been ceded to WWRL, a black radio station, and a half hour before De Laurentiis's arrival and the scheduled screening time, the theater was still virtually empty, people were fitfully straggling in, and Armstrong was getting nervous.

Ignoring the middle section of the theater, where a number of rows had been held for the critics, I took my seat in the last row of the side aisle, where, from time to time, I might more easily sneak a couple of puffs of a cigarette before the ushers got to me to warn that smoking was not permitted in this theater.

I took a last-row seat to observe the critics filing into their section and the almost exclusively black, older middle-class audience enter and eventually nearly fill the rest of the house.

One row, three or four in front of me and to the right, was held for De Laurentiis and his entourage. United Artists publicity executive Gabe Sumner was seated on the arm rest of the aisle seat to make certain that no peasant sneaked in.

Twenty minutes late, the lights went down and the picture came on. Shortly after it began, in the darkness, De Laurentiis entered with several men, all of whom took their seats in the row reserved for them.

There was very little reaction from the audience, at the most, a few isolated giggles. After a while, De Laurentiis lit a cigar and an usher came racing down the aisle to protest. There was a brief conclave and the cigar went out and I thought that this must be some kind of new law for De Laurentiis, having to crush out his cigar at a screening of one of his pictures from which he had removed his name.

The young man sitting in front of me, who sported an Afro, shouted obscenities at the screen at one point, when Ken Norton was being humiliated by John Colicos, representing the white race.

I wondered if De Laurentiis had heard those and a few similar remarks hurled at the screen by a few malcontents, but then he had no illusions about the picture. Hadn't he told me that *Mandingo* wouldn't work today? And then, of course, he had removed his name from *Drum*.

I ran into him in the lobby after it was over. He smilingly rushed up to me, clasped my hand warmly, and we exchanged brief amenities. There was no mention of *Drum* and his face was impassive. For some reason, I suddenly pictured De Laurentiis resting, like Fay Wray, in the huge, safe arms of the hairy ape.

He spoke briefly to the United Artists people gathered in small clusters in the outer lobby, and then he and his entourage entered the limousine which was sitting in front of the theater, which would spirit them the four blocks to Pearl's, where Silvana was waiting in his favorite restaurant in her favorite city. ■

Bernard Drew is the film critic for the Gannett newspapers.

MERIAN C. COOPER: First King of Kong

The story of the man and his work in creating the world's most famous monster.

Ron Haver

The time has finally arrived for Dino De Laurentiis and Paramount Pictures to unveil their \$24 million testament to the mythmaking power of movies—*King Kong*. An inch-thick press packet will tell you that the film has been in production eight months, moving men and equipment halfway around the world and employing thousands of extras, and that the star attraction is a forty-foot tall, six-and-a-half-ton mechanical ape costing \$1 million who can do everything except cook breakfast. The credits list almost a hundred names, from producer De Laurentiis and director John Guillermin through screenwriter Lorenzo Semple, Jr., down to the assistant auditor.

And yet without Merian C. Cooper, there wouldn't have been the eight-month shooting schedule, or the forty-foot ape, and the \$24 million could have been spent on five or maybe six other films, none of which would have had the built-in commercial appeal of *King Kong*. For it was Cooper who originally conceived, produced, co-wrote, codirected, and acted out this twentieth-century version of the myth of Beauty and the Beast and the destructive powers of both love and civilization. He did it at the midpoint in his life, a life which, up to that point, had been as romantic, extravagant, and adventuresome as the monster he devised and called "The Eighth Wonder of the World."

A flying hero in World War I, ex-

plorer, writer, innovative filmmaker, student of literature and art, military theorist, and friend of world-famous figures, Cooper's life was his own best creation, and bits and pieces of it are strewn throughout the more than twenty-five films he produced, which include influential documentaries (*Grass, Chang*), classic adventure films (*King Kong, Son of Kong, She*), and a dozen collaborations with John Ford (*The Long Voyage Home* and *The Searchers*, among others). Cooper's contribution to film history goes beyond his productions. He was among the first to see the possibilities of Technicolor, and he helped to pioneer the Cinerama process.

Cooper was no faceless studio executive or colorless technical innovator. His personality was distinct, a blend of the culture and traditions of the South, where he was born and

raised; the more aggressive and pragmatic North, where he was educated; his reading of romantic writers such as Kipling, Harte, London, and Haggard; and the works of Shakespeare and the Bible, a book he read every day. Muscular, short, with sparse, sandy hair, and an outthrust jaw, he had a blunt, forthright manner. He would size up a person through crackling brown eyes which could freeze to ice when he was displeased or angry.

His rages, when they occurred, were as towering as anything he dreamed up for *Kong*. In 1932, having purchased his first car, he was taking his fiancée, actress Dorothy Jordan, for a drive. The car stalled, and despite Cooper's efforts, would not restart. Frustrated and furious, he ordered his wife-to-be out of the car and shoved it over the cliff, watching with



Merian C. Cooper with miniatures of some of the monsters of King Kong.



From The Most Dangerous Game, with Joel McCrea and Fay Wray, produced by Cooper. The same set was used in King Kong.

great satisfaction as it bounced and ripped its way to the rocks below.

Born in Jacksonville, Florida, in October 1893, Cooper was descended from a long line of wealthy Southern plantation owners. He was inculcated from an early age with the Southern traditions of chivalry, honor, and belief in God and country. When he was six, an uncle gave him a book called *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa*, written in 1862 by Paul Du Chaillu, one of the first to explore "the Dark Continent." Young Cooper read with fascination of the tribes of giant apes that supposedly terrorized native villages; and he read with wide-eyed wonder a description of one of these apes carrying off a screaming native woman into the jungle. *King Kong* had found its seedling, and Cooper had found his first vocation: explor-

ing. To meet the challenge, he took up boxing and wrestling, and succeeded in swimming the St. John's River in Florida.

Cooper was appointed in 1911 to Annapolis, where he developed a life-long love affair, not with ships, but with planes and flying and began advocating the use of air power. He was thrown out four years later, blaming high spirits and high jinks rather than his deficiency in navigation. He soon joined the Merchant Marine, and when the Germans sank the *Lusitania*, Cooper, convinced war was imminent and wanting to get in on it, literally jumped ship in London. He injured himself, and, with no passport, he was shipped back to the United States in steerage. Odd jobs followed, including a stint as a reporter. When Woodrow Wilson called out the National Guard in

1916, Cooper enlisted, hoping that would lead eventually to action in Europe. Instead, he found himself in a unit fighting U.S. border skirmishes against raiding Mexican bandits.

Still hopeful, Cooper volunteered for flight training and became a private in the aviation section of the Signal Corps. He finally got his wings near the end of the war, was sent overseas in September 1918, and was quickly shot down after bringing down two enemy planes. He spent the final weeks of the war as a prisoner of the Germans. Cooper was soon to become a prisoner again, this time of the Bolsheviks in Russia.

He had been assigned, after the Armistice, to an American relief office in Poland, where he came into contact with refugees from the civil war raging in Russia. Seeing signs of an eventual Communist threat to the

world, he quit the army, and joined the Polish Service, then fighting against the Bolsheviks. He flew a fighter plane and resourcefully developed a method of low-level bombardment with crude bombs. But he was shot down by the Bolsheviks, and sent to a work camp deep inside Siberia. He escaped, crossing the frozen wastes in twenty-six days to Latvia, only to be imprisoned as a suspected Communist. An American relief mission found him and he returned, much decorated, to New York in 1921.

Cooper found work writing of his war-time experiences for the *New York Daily News* and then the *New York Times*. Now twenty-six, he still longed to be an explorer, and while holding down a newspaper job began studying at the American Geographical Society, where he learned map-making and survival techniques. When he saw an ad for someone with writing and navigating ability to join an expedition to uncharted regions of the South Seas, he applied, was accepted, and joined the ship, *The Wisdom II*, in Singapore. The expedition, organized by a man named Salisbury, hoped to gather material for magazine articles, films, and, possibly, a book. The cameraman who had been hired for the trip had dropped

out after a frightening typhoon, and Cooper suggested a replacement, a young combat photographer he had met in Poland. His name was Ernest B. Schoedsack. Six-foot-five, called "Shorty" by his friends (except Cooper, who called him "Monty" from his middle name, Beaumont), Schoedsack had been trained as a cameraman at Mack Sennett's Keystone studios. When war broke out he enlisted and was assigned to the newly formed photographic section of the Signal Corps.

Cooper wired Schoedsack in Paris, and he agreed to join the expedition, shooting all the footage that might later be turned into a travelogue. As it happened, the only kind of film both Schoedsack and Cooper liked was travelogues, though most of what they saw they regarded as only collections of pretty pictures. By the time the expedition was over, they had decided to strike off on their own and make a travelogue unlike anything ever seen before.

Cooper, in his studies at the American Geographical Society, had read of the nomadic Persian tribes called the Bakhtiari, who were forced to migrate over the virtually impassable mountains of central Persia in search of grass to keep their flocks of animals alive. Primitive, fierce, and sus-

picious of strangers, their customs and ways were largely unknown to the Western world. After discussing the subject, the two men decided that if it could be photographed, a film of this epic migration would be a sensation. Cooper went off to New York to raise money, and came up with \$10,000, twenty thousand feet of 35mm film, and a woman named Marguerite Harrison, who had put up part of the money on condition that she could be the third partner. Cooper had met Harrison a few years before. In one of his newspaper pieces, he had described how she had saved his life, when he was a prisoner in Russia, by smuggling him food. When the newspaper pieces appeared in book form, he got a letter from Harrison warning him that the book's distribution would endanger her life. She was engaged, she said, in undercover work for the anti-Bolshevik allies. Cooper quickly bought up all unsold copies of his book.

Schoedsack was less than enthusiastic about having a woman along on what promised to be a dangerous expedition, but faced with the actuality of the arrangement, he reluctantly agreed and the three were off to Persia. Traveling by horse and on foot, they arrived at their jumping-off place: Shustar, capital of Arabistan,



The uses of a Hollywood set: left, the back lot of RKO Pathé in 1931; the tall structure is a temple left over from King of Kings. Below, the wall and gate of the temple as used in filming King Kong.

where it had been arranged for them to meet the khans of the tribes. After explaining what they wanted, they received the hesitant permission of the khans to accompany the tribes on their impending trek. With warnings ringing in their ears about the hardships and dangers involved, they set off with one of the tribes, living their lives, eating what they ate, sleeping as they slept, and traveling the wild country. The trek lasted twenty-six days. Fifty thousand people and a half-million animals took part in this vast undertaking, fording rivers, fighting off other hostile tribes, scaling unbelievably steep, snow-covered peaks, until they at last reached the valleys of grass on the other side of the Zagros mountain ranges. Cooper and Schoedsack photographed their struggles with Schoedsack's Debie camera on its heavy tripod. In spite of the hardships and difficulties involved, Harrison was able to keep up with them.

Cooper took the completed film, called *Grass*, on the highly lucrative lecture circuit in the mid-twenties, while Schoedsack joined an expedition to the Galapagos Islands headed by William Beebe. *Grass* was a great success on the lecture trail, and it came to the attention of Jesse Lasky, head of Paramount. He immediately

offered to release it. The picture created a sensation, receiving excellent reviews and grossing several times its cost. The film, along with Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, made four years earlier, set the style and standard for a completely new kind of film, the documentary-nature film-travelogue, which opened up untapped avenues for the motion picture to explore.

Lasky offered the men carte blanche for their next film. This time, the two focused on the jungles of Siam. In *Chang*, they told a fictitious story of one man's efforts to protect his family from the dangers and encroachment of the savage jungle. Marauding tigers and other wild animals provided the danger, but the drama was mainly offscreen in the arduous and hazardous filming. Schoedsack was attacked by a tiger. Cooper, enraged at something a native chieftain had done, slapped his face in front of the tribe. That night, at dinner, the chief's wife served Cooper a chicken stew which, unknown to him, was laced with tiny bamboo barbs. A missionary doctor saved his life.

The film opened at New York's Criterion Theater in April 1927, with a special musical score by Hugo Reisenfeld, the musical director of the

theater. The musicians included twenty men behind the screen pounding six-foot native tom-toms during the climactic elephant stampede. As an added bit of showmanship, Cooper used Paramount's new Magnascope process, which opened the screen to about twice its normal size for the stampede. The film drew glowing reviews from the critics and standing-room-only crowds. *Chang* was one of the biggest hits on Broadway that year and was awarded one of the first Academy Awards for "most artistic quality of production."

The team's next film, *The Four Feathers*, is noteworthy on several levels. It was the first Hollywood film to make extensive use of carefully matched jungle and desert exteriors, with interiors shot in a Hollywood studio. It was also the first time that Cooper and Schoedsack would come into contact with Fay Wray, who had been picked to play the female lead; David O. Selznick, who was assigned by Paramount as production supervisor; and the Hollywood studio method of moviemaking.

During the filming in Africa, Cooper became fascinated by a colony of baboons living in a dry river bed. He began studying their habits, their movements, and social patterns. Conjured up in him was the child-

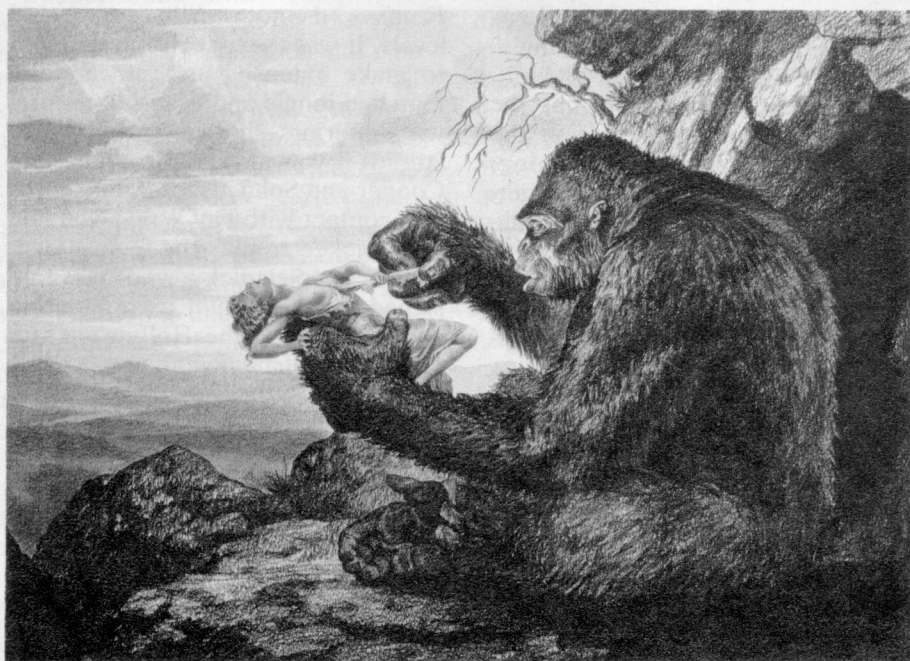


The set used again for a palace gate in *She* (1935), a Cooper film.



As part of *Atlanta*, the wall (center) is burned down in *Gone With the Wind* (1939).

An original sketch for Kong by Mario Larrinaga. This controversial scene was cut for the film's 1938 reissue and not restored until 1969.



hood image of the ape carrying the screaming woman into the jungle, and he began making inquiries into the existence of these giant apes, learning that the largest apes were down in West Africa. *The Four Feathers* was finished just as the sound era boomed into Hollywood, and the picture was not the success the two men hoped it would be. Cooper washed his hands of filmmaking and turned to his other main interest, airplanes. He invested heavily in the young civil aviation industry, becoming one of the founding stockholders of both Western Airlines and Pan American Airways. In his spare time, he wrote an 85,000-word treatise on baboons, but it went unpublished. A cleaning woman accidentally threw it out.

Since settling in New York, Cooper had become close friends with Douglas Burden, an explorer

and naturalist, and was fascinated by Burden's account of the prehistoric island of Komodo in what was then the Dutch East Indies and the dragon lizards that inhabited it. One phrase in Burden's published account of his travels stuck in Cooper's memory: "I would like to bring my whole family here and be King of Komodo." Cooper liked the sound of the words and, in several conversations with Burden during the winter of 1929-1930, outlined an idea he had for a movie about a giant gorilla. Cooper thought that one of these gorillas

could be trapped in Spanish West Africa and transported to Komodo Island. His first idea was to have one of these big gorillas fight a real twelve-foot dragon lizard and enlarge them by a variation of the Magnascope process. Over a period of some weeks, he developed a story which involved making the gorilla fifty to a hundred feet tall. Cooper came up with the name "Kong" for his giant gorilla, telling Burden that the sound of it reminded him of the sound made by a gong: deep, reverberating, dramatic, and mysterious.

Cooper, in his small New York apartment, spent the winter writing the first treatment of "Kong," but was unsatisfied. It was only after writing the "Old Arabian Proverb," which opens the story, that he knew a real (and magnified) gorilla was out of the question. He realized that he had

to have a subtle, poetic quality to Kong himself, and no real gorilla would do, nor would a man in an ape suit. Cooper also realized that the story, as it was constructed up to that point, lacked a particular scene that the audience would always remember. Then late one afternoon in February 1930 as he was leaving his office in midtown Manhattan, he heard the sound of an airplane motor. He reflexively looked up just as the sun glinted off the wings of a plane flying extremely close to the tallest building in the city, the New York Life Insurance Building. Without any conscious effort of thought, he realized that if he placed the giant gorilla on top of the tallest building in the world and had him shot down by the most modern of weapons, the armed airplane, he would have a story of the primitive doomed by modern civilization.

By now Cooper had written three treatments of the story, sketching in the characters of Carl Denham, the motion picture director who was to be a composite of himself and Douglas Burden; Ann Darrow, described as a "blue-eyed beauty with long blonde hair, soft and vulnerable, but plucky"; and young first mate Jack Driscoll, who was patterned after Schoedsack. Cooper also went over all the special effects processes then in use by the industry and concluded that, with intelligent use of the best of them, "Kong" was not only feasible but practical. He made notations on how the scenes could be achieved, which combinations of special effects work would be necessary, and how certain spectacular effects could be accomplished. He made notes on the way the film should look: "For skies and jungle on island, see Doré illus. *Paradise Lost*," giving appropriate page numbers. For scenes involving real actors and the giant ape, Cooper devised what he termed "miniature projection," that is, previously filmed action projected in miniature on the scaled sets of the jungle and the New York finale.

But he still needed a studio setup that would allow him to fully work out his ideas. All his efforts proved fruitless until, through a series of circumstances, David O. Selznick was made production head of RKO, partly by Cooper's recommendation through a friend. Selznick, not know-

ing of Cooper's involvement, then invited him to become his executive assistant at the West Coast studio.

His duties involved evaluating both current and future production projects, giving his views and recommendations on the commercial prospects of each. Among the in-work projects was an oddity called "Creation" on which a half reel of tests had been shot and a script written. According to Cooper: "It wasn't worth a damn, dramatically or commercially." What was worth a damn, as far as Cooper was concerned, was Willis O'Brien, the man responsible for creating the effects in "Creation."

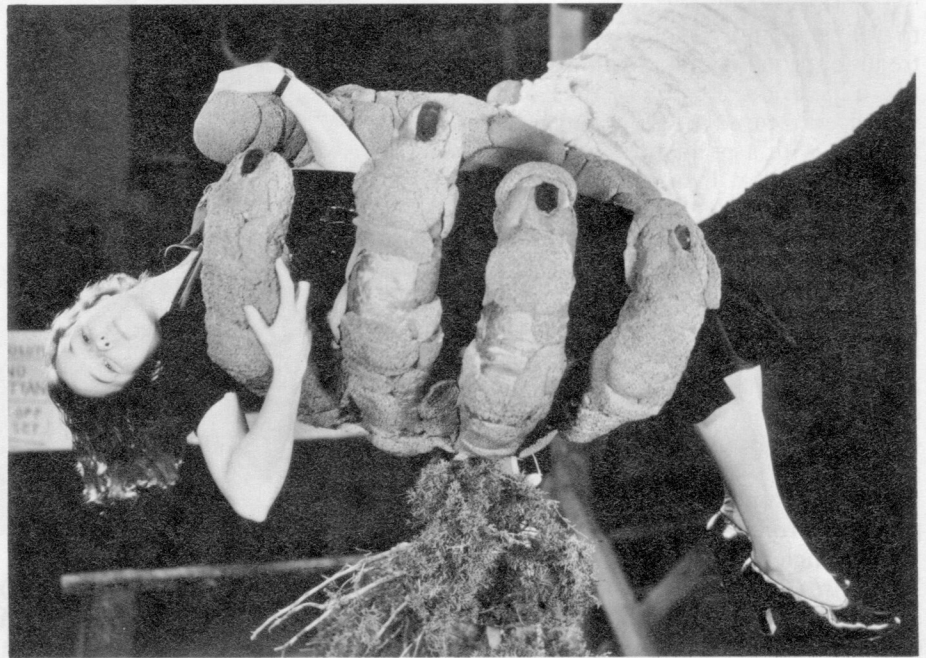
A man without much of a formal education, O'Brien was a brilliant cartoonist and illustrator and had evolved and perfected the technique of "stop-motion animation," wherein small, inanimate figures were made to move by photographing successive stages of their movement a frame at a time. He had used this technique in several films, most notably in the 1925 version of *The Lost World*, where his creation and manipulation of the huge prehistoric beasts created a sensation. "Creation" was to have been somewhat of a follow-up to this success; O'Bie, as he was known, had been working on the project for several years, and had surrounded himself with a talented crew of young artists, sculptors, and modelmakers. The cancellation of "Creation" came as a surprise to him and his co-workers. Cooper was very impressed with O'Brien's work and techniques. After seeing the handiwork of his co-workers, especially that of Marcel Delgado, the modelmaker, and Mario Larrinaga and Byron Crabbe, who were doing the background effects for the jungle scenes of "Creation," Cooper realized that here, ready-made, was the perfect technical crew which would enable him to do "Kong" exactly as he originally envisioned it.

His biggest problem now lay in convincing the RKO management to let him spend the kind of money necessary to do the film, which he estimated might go as high as a half-million dollars. He knew RKO would be reticent about spending that sum on something as untested as "Kong." Selznick was all for it, so Cooper, knowing that words would never convince the money-men in New York,

had O'Brien and his crew prepare four detailed sketches of some of the more spectacular scenes from his treatment.

The first sketch was the most important; it showed Kong being attacked on top of the Empire State Building by airplanes as he held a screaming woman in his paw. (Kong had been moved progressively from the top of the N.Y. Life Building to the top of the Chrysler Building, finally making his last stand from atop the newly constructed Empire State Building.) The second showed Kong

Zoe Porter, Cooper's secretary, volunteered to test Kong's full-size hand. She said it was one of her most exciting experiences.



shaking the men off a log into a jungle chasm. The third sketch had him curiously picking the clothes off the captured heroine, and the fourth showed him running amuck in New York, throwing automobiles and crushing people underfoot. Cooper also proposed that he be given enough money to prepare a test reel, consisting of several sequences from his treatment, showing the feasibility of the project.

At this point, Schoedsack and his wife returned from location on Paramount's aborted "Lives of a Bengal Lancer," and Cooper enthusiastically filled them in on the status of what they had always called "the big gorilla picture." While they were waiting for approval from New York for the tests of "Kong," the two men began production on what would be the fourth Cooper-Schoedsack pro-

duction, an adaption of Richard Connell's classic short story, "The Most Dangerous Game." Schoedsack would direct and Cooper produce, from a script by James Creelman about man hunting man on a remote island jungle. Production was about to get underway on a specially constructed jungle set, when word came through that the RKO board had authorized the spending of \$5,000 on the test reel of "Kong." Cooper's budget had called for \$10,000, but rather than argue, he put up the balance himself and work began.

He asked O'Brien and his crew to construct a model of Kong, instructing them to make him as human as possible. However, they took him too literally and the resulting eighteen-inch figure was an unrealistic hybrid of man and ape. Cooper wired the Museum of Natural History in New

York for the dimensions and skeletal structure of a full-grown male gorilla. From these details, O'Brien had Marcel Delgado construct three eighteen-inch miniature gorillas, each weighing ten pounds. They were constructed with an articulated steel skeleton, over which was fashioned latex rubber muscles, which stretched and flexed realistically. The skeleton was then stuffed with cotton which was shaped into the basic form of the animal, covered with liquid latex, giving the form shape and detail. After drying, the miniature was covered with bear fur.

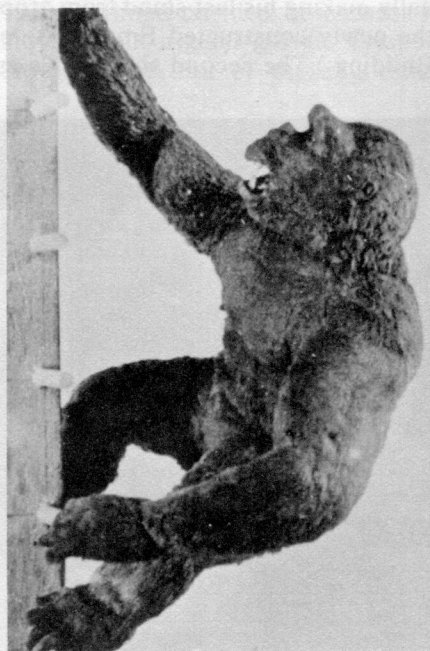
For the test reel, Cooper decided to utilize an entire sequence from his treatment, opening in the jungle with the expedition in pursuit of Kong, who has captured the girl. It included a battle with a prehistoric stegosaurus, which the men kill; the lake crossing in which they are attacked by a dinosaur; Kong shaking the men off a log into the jungle ravine; and Kong's fight with the tyrannosaur. To keep costs down, Cooper wanted to be sure that the footage would be usable in the final film; he knew that once the executives saw the ten-minute segment and the additional sketches showing the rest of the story, they would wholeheartedly approve the project.

The jungle scenes used the sets for *The Most Dangerous Game*; Schoedsack would shoot *Game* during the day, and Cooper and his crew use them at night for "Kong." Cooper had cast Robert Armstrong as Carl Denham, the intrepid moviemaker, Cooper dressing Armstrong much as he himself dressed, down to the ever-present pipe. A young Canadian actor named Bruce Cabot was assigned the role of Jack Driscoll, who falls in love with and saves the girl from Kong's clutches. Cabot had very little acting experience, but Cooper, liking his looks and his manliness, decided to take a chance on him.

While the test reel was being filmed, Cooper turned his attention to the completion of a full shooting script from his original treatment. He began working with James Creelman, who constructed a screenplay from Cooper's outline, but who quit over differences. Selznick then asked Cooper to work with Edgar Wallace, the noted English mystery writer, who had just been signed by RKO.

Wallace died just as shooting was commencing on the film; and although there was little of his work in the finished film, he received coauthor credit because Cooper realized the value of his name.

In talking over the script problem with the Schoedsacks, Cooper found that Ruth Rose, Schoedsack's wife, had a knack for storytelling. Even though she had never before written a



A miniature Kong climbs a model of the Empire State Building for the film's showdown.

script, Cooper asked her if she would go over the Creelman script and his own treatment and see what she could come up with. Since the structure was so well set, her main changes were in the dialogue, which she completely rewrote, giving Cooper the kind of simple fairy-tale approach he wanted. O'Brien and his men, meanwhile, were busily constructing the other prehistoric animals and creating the jungle, Skull Island, and Manhattan on two large tables in a closed stage. To give what Cooper and O'Brien termed "aerial perspective" to the jungle sets, they turned to Cooper's beloved Doré, copying his drawings from *Paradise Lost*. They devised a series of receding glass panes on which were painted, by Mario Larrinaga and Byron Crabbe, a tropical jungle. The use of live, three-dimensional minia-

ture foreground foliage and the glass paintings, one behind the other, gave the jungle scenes an effect of depth and mystery far beyond anything that had ever been done previously.

Cooper got the go-ahead for the project on a budget of \$500,000 but managed to get more from Selznick through squeezing budgets on other pictures. After a long search for his female lead, Cooper simply put a blond wig on Fay Wray and cast her as Ann Darrow.

It soon became evident that they would need three full-size sections of Kong for use in close-up scenes. Marcel Delgado and his brother Victor constructed a full-size bust and head of Kong with eyes that rolled, a mouth that snarled and eyebrows that moved. They also built a full-size leg and foot, together with an all-important full-size hand, which would clutch Fay Wray in close-up throughout most of the film.

The brothers tested the half-completed arm, which could be lifted by crane twenty feet off the ground, using Cooper's young secretary, Zoe Porter. She sat in the hand with no idea of what was going to happen. Suddenly the fingers closed around her, and the sound stage floor disappeared from sight. At a signal from Cooper, an operator opened the fingers, and the terrified young girl began to slip from the hand. Clutching frantically at the hand, she felt the fingers close around her and slowly lower her to the ground. It was the most exciting thing that ever happened to her in pictures, she said.

Cooper and O'Brien worked in close collaboration on the model work. Cooper dreamed up ideas and effects he wanted to get while O'Brien scrambled around town hiring engineers, mechanics, and opticians to build the devices. One of the few differences of opinion they ever had was over the character of Kong. Cooper saw him as a brute killer, a king in his own violent world. Both O'Brien and Schoedsack felt that Cooper was going overboard on Kong's violence—in his graphic destruction of the natives by stomping and chewing and in a fearful scene in the New York sequence where he plucks a woman out of a hotel room thinking it's Ann, and, realizing it isn't, flings her to the street twenty stories below. Cooper, however, kept

insisting to O'Brien that no matter what the conflict, no matter how extreme the terror, there had to be touches of humanity about Kong, and offbeat bits of humor. This was a bit difficult for the animators to accomplish, so Cooper would go down to the closed set and act out in slow motion every single motion and action of Kong for O'Brien and his crew. He insisted that they follow his example in every detail and made them redo it when he felt they had not captured the quality he wanted.

The scenes inside the theater, where Kong breaks loose from his chains, were filmed in the Shrine Auditorium in downtown Los Angeles, and the native village sequences were filmed on the back lot of the RKO Pathé studio in Culver City, where Cooper had found some standing sets left over from DeMille's 1927 *King of Kings*, including a huge structure that had been used as the Temple of Jehovah. Several hundred dollars worth of reconstruction turned it into the massive wall and gate, behind which Kong ruled his domain.

Cooper and O'Brien had one other ongoing dispute, this in relation to Kong's height. Since Kong was eighteen inches high and was supposed to be eighteen feet high, O'Brien wanted to scale down everything else proportionately. Cooper was a great believer in using sleight of hand with Kong's height; sometimes he was eighteen feet tall, in other scenes he was sixty feet tall. As Cooper said: "This broke every rule that O'Bie and his animators had ever worked with. But I felt confident that if the scenes moved with excitement and beauty, the audience would accept any height that fit into the scene. If Kong had been eighteen feet high on top of the Empire State Building, he would have been lost, like a little bug. So I continually shifted his height to fit the settings and illusions. He was different in practically every shot. After all, who knows how tall a tree is?"

In one marathon session, Cooper worked Fay Wray twenty-four hours in the scene where she watches Kong fight the tyrannosaur. It was the first rear projection scene ever done at RKO, and technical delays caused retake after retake, while the weary actress took catnaps curled up in two directors chairs. Wray had to work overtime for two other scenes as well.



Cooper, Willis O'Brien, Fay Wray, and Ernest Schoedsack pose with extras in front of Kong's wall.

Ben Johnson (left) and John Wayne in She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, one of twelve films Cooper made with John Ford.

One was the hotel room scene where Kong reaches through the window and pulls her out. For this, the full-size arm and hand were mounted on a dolly outside the window, just out of camera range. Two men pushed the dolly so that the hand went through the window toward the girl on the bed, and there were five other men at the back end of the arm, each one controlling a lever which made the fingers and thumb open and close. The scene had to be done several times to get the fingers synchronized.

Even more complex was the scene of Kong's investigation of the girl in his cave. He sits down, holding her in his hand, and begins to examine her, tickling her to make her squirm, then slowly picking her clothes off and then smelling the female scent on his fingers. Again, the full-size arm and hand were used, with invisible strings

attached to portions of Wray's costume which was held together with single threads. A movieola off to one side had the previously filmed footage of the miniature Kong actually performing the action. As Kong on the movieola made the appropriate pulling gestures, Cooper, on the stage, would yell "Now!" and an off-scene stagehand would pull the strings, pulling away another piece of clothing from the actress clutched in the full-size paw. The two pieces of film were then combined in the optical printer. (This sequence, along with the scene of the woman hurled from her hotel room, and some shots of Kong chewing natives and grinding them underfoot were removed at the time of the 1938 reissue and were not restored until 1969.)

Schoedsack had gone to New York to film background footage of the air-

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planes attacking Kong on the top of the Empire State Building. This was matched by close-up material shot in the studio of the aviators gunning down Kong. When the time came to film the close-ups of the fliers, Cooper told Schoedsack, "Let's kill the sonofabitch ourselves," so, in the final print the aviators wildly gesticulating to each other and pumping the giant ape full of lead are none other than Cooper and Schoedsack.

As the film neared completion, after nearly fifty-five weeks of work, Selznick resigned in a dispute with the New York office over the interpretation of his authority, and Cooper was made head of the studio. He immediately had to fight a major battle with the sales department over the film's title. The picture had gone into production as "The Eighth Wonder," because Cooper didn't want any other studio getting wind of what he was doing and rushing out a cheap imitation with a man in an ape suit. The title of the film had been changed to "Kong," which it carried most of the production, but the sales force kept insisting that the public would think it was about a Chinese general.

Cooper replied, in a hotly worded telegram: "If 'Kong' is properly advertised, and people see a picture of a giant gorilla dominating the Empire State Building, holding a woman in his hand, I'll be damned if they'll think he's a Chinese general." The title continued to be a bone of contention until, on one of Selznick's last days at the studio, he called Cooper into his office. Selznick told him that he had the title for his picture. Cooper looked wary. "Oh yeah?" Selznick paused. Cooper waited. "Why don't you call it...*King Kong*?" Selznick said.

The last battle to be fought was over the scoring for the film. Having looked at a rough cut of the film, several of the New York executives thought it terrible. Cooper was forbidden to spend any more of the studio's money on it, and was told to use existing music tracks if he wanted music. Cooper not only wanted music, he knew exactly what kind he wanted and where he wanted it. If the studio wouldn't give him the money, he'd pay for the costs himself. He called in Max Steiner, who was head of the music department, and showed him the film several times, explaining

just how he felt that music should be used in the film. Steiner was ready, willing, and able to do just exactly what Cooper wanted, and more. He wrote a score for an eighty-five-piece orchestra that heaves, rumbles, and shrieks its way through the film, underlining emotions, adding suspense, terror, and a kind of epic aural accompaniment. A grunt from an animal was immediately picked up with a corresponding growl from the orchestra, while Wray's screams were echoed and intensified constantly by the strings. Nobody had ever heard music like this before in a film, or so much of it. Steiner's music for *King Kong* was, and is, a landmark in film scoring.

The film was previewed in San Bernardino in late January 1933. The picture played exactly as Cooper knew it would, with one exception. As Kong shook the men off the log and they fell into the ravine below, they were set upon by huge, slimy insects and snakes and were eaten alive. The screaming on screen was matched by the screaming from the audience, a great many of whom left, and those who stayed kept up a buzz of conversation for the next few minutes, making it difficult to keep up with the continuing story. "It stopped the picture cold," said Cooper, "so the next day back at the studio, I took it out myself. O'Bie was heartbroken; he thought it was the best work he'd done, and it was, but it worked against the picture so out it came."

King Kong opened in New York City on March 2, 1933, at the vast new RKO Roxy and Radio City Music Hall theaters, which had a combined seating capacity of 10,000. Helped by a massive preopening publicity campaign, including the first use of radio spots to plug a film, the picture played to more than 50,000 people on the first day. The Hollywood premiere took place on March 23 at Grauman's Chinese Theatre where guests were confronted in the forecourt by the looming, full-size bust of Kong, peering at them from behind the vegetation surrounding the theater. For that night only, special souvenir programs had been designed and printed by RKO and given

"to Ladies Only." Printed on embossed copper pages, these programs were the work of a young graphic designer named Keye Luke, who later went on to greater notice as the actor who played Charlie Chan's number-one son.

After the success of *King Kong*, Cooper and Schoedsack made several other films including the inevitable sequel *Son of Kong*, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, and *Mighty Joe Young*. Cooper produced *Flying Down to Rio*, in which he teamed Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers for the first time. He also was among the first to see the possibilities of the new Technicolor three-component process, persuading John Hay Whitney to invest in the idea, and forming a company exclusively for the production of Technicolor films. He became one of the founders of David Selznick's new company, and convinced Selznick to use Technicolor in his *Gone With the Wind*. With John Ford, Cooper formed Argosy Productions, making such films as *The Long Voyage Home*, *Three Godfathers*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *Wagonmaster*, *Fort Apache*, and *The Quiet Man*.

During World War II, Cooper returned to active duty in the air force and added to his astonishing record of decorations and commendations, rising to the rank of brigadier general. In 1952, with Lowell Thomas, he co-produced and codirected *This Is Cinerama*, the first film in the new three-strip technique. And the same year he was honored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for "his many innovations and contributions to the art of the motion picture." He died at his home in Coronado, California on April 21, 1973.

In the seventies few places in the world remain uncharted, rockets have replaced airplanes as symbols of adventure, the Trade Center is the tallest building in the world. But to anyone who loves movies, adventure, and romance, especially to anyone who has watched the giant ape pulling airplanes down from the sky, Cooper's imagination still startles and entertains audiences by turning an eighteen-inch toy gorilla into the world's most popular monster. ★

Ron Haver is the director of film programs for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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