

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS

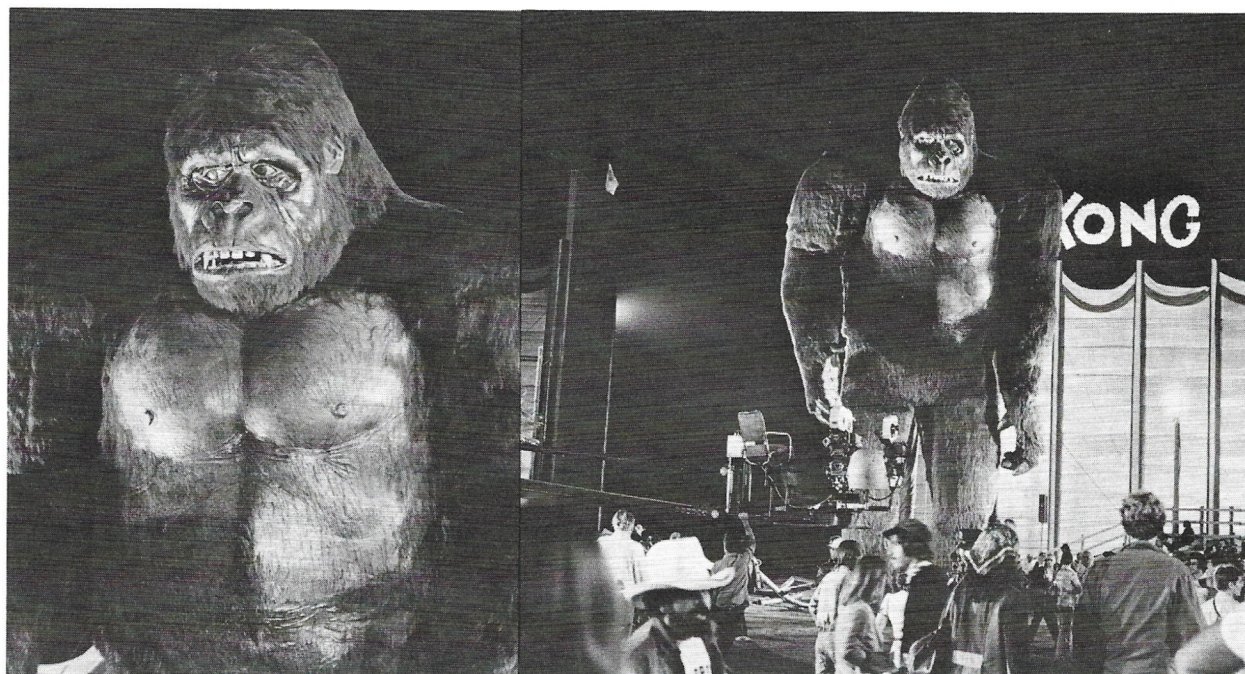
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Scenes from **KING KONG**, currently in release from Paramount. 1) A close look at the 40 foot model built for the film at a cost of millions, mostly for publicity ballyhoo, used in the finished film for only a few seconds. 2) Filming the large model at MGM in Hollywood. (Photos by Robert Villard) 3) Shooting Jessica Lange in the grip of a full-sized mechanical arm. 4) William Shephard as Kong attacks an "L" car. Shephard plays Kong in an ape suit throughout the film. Rick Baker donned the suit and makeup for closeups and facial expressions.



KING KONG

KING KONG A Paramount Release. 12/76. In Panavision and Metrocolor. 134 minutes. Produced by Dino De Laurentiis. Directed by John Guillermin. Screenplay by Lorenzo Semple Jr. Executive producers, Federico De Laurentiis and Christian Ferry. Director of photography, Richard H. Kline, ASC. In charge of production, Jack Grossberg. Music composed and conducted by John Barry. Film editor, Ralph Winters, ACE. Production designed by Mario Chiari and Dale Henessy. Production manager, Terry Carr. Unit managers, Brian Frankish (Hawaii), George Goodman (New York). Art directors, David Constable, Archie J. Bacon, Bob Gundlach. Set designers, Dianne Wager, Carleton Reynolds, William Cruz. Illustrators, Mentor Huebner, David Negron. Miniature designer, Aldo Puccini. King Kong technical advisors, Rick Baker, William Shephard. King Kong creators: designer, Carlo Rambaldi. Special effects, Glen Robinson. Hair design, Michaeldino. Makeup, John Truwe. Molding, Don Chandler. Supervisor of photographic effects, Frank Van Der Veer.

Dwan Jessica Lange
Prescott Jeff Bridges
Wilson Charles Grodin
Captain Ross John Randolph
Bagley Rene Auberjonois
Carnahan Ed Lauter
Timmons Mario Gallo
Garcia Jorge Moreno
Perko Jack O'Halloran
Boan Julius Harris
New York D.A. John Agar

It's like something out of **THE STING**, but on an undreamed-of scale. A bigtime con artist conspires to pull off the ultimate scam: remake the world's most famous

Bill Kelley lives in Morris Plains, New Jersey. His Peter Cushing career article and interview will appear in a future issue.

by Bill Kelley

monster movie, bilk the public into believing that most of the purported \$24 million budget is being spent on revolutionary, groundbreaking special effects, update the plot to please everyone from impressionable kids to nostalgic adults, promote the film as an instant classic which cannot help but unseat **JAWS** as the all-time box office champ--then sit back and wait for the bucks to roll in.

There's just one hitch. Dino De Laurentiis' **KING KONG**, for all the hype, the ballyhoo, the baloney, is a spectacular disaster, a complete misfire in which absolutely nothing works from beginning to end. The acting is pathetic, the script and direction reflect neither thought nor feeling, and the much-touted visual effects--well, they give the impression that one is seeing an American remake of **KING KONG VS. GODZILLA**--without **Godzilla**.

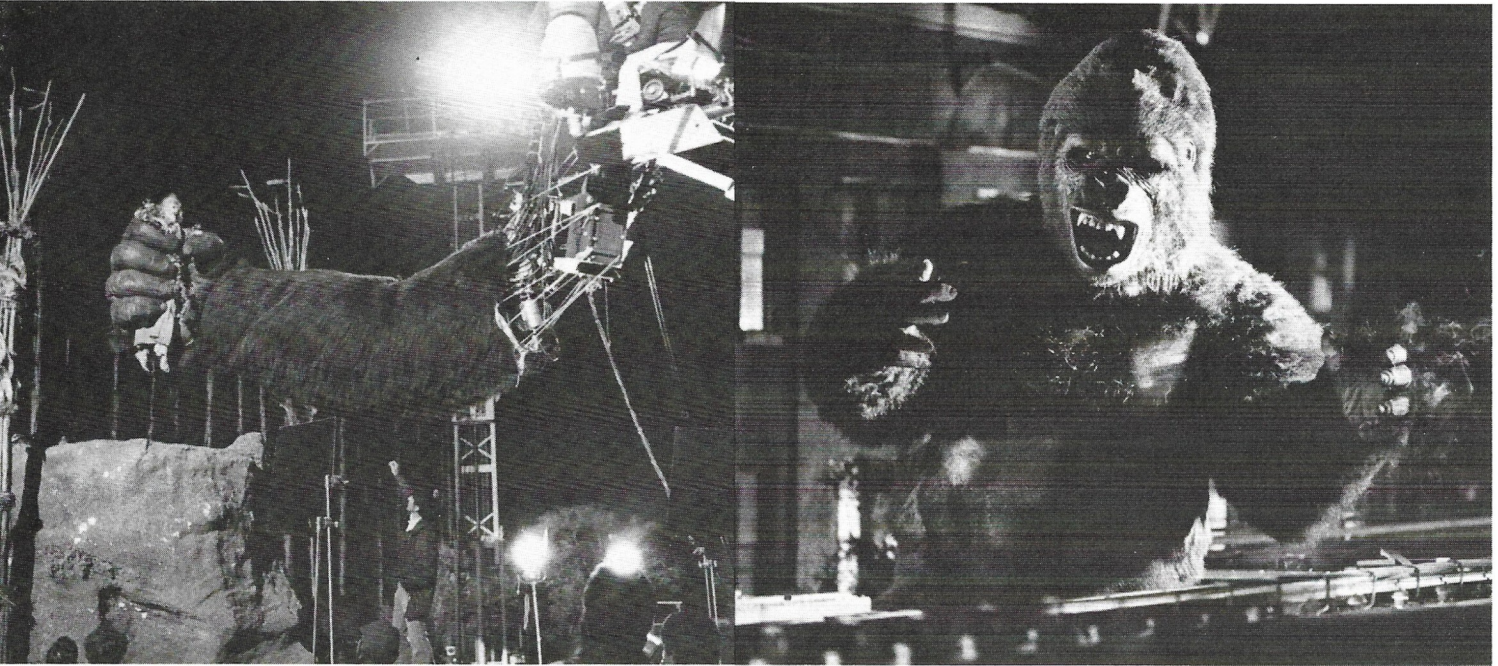
Let's face it, though. For more than a year now, this has been an easy movie to knock. Everybody seems to have a barb to hurl at De Laurentiis, as if remaking **KING KONG** with a man in a gorilla suit constituted a cardinal sin. True, his approach to the project, from the outset, has reeked of crass opportunism, and his references to the original **KING KONG** have usually been anything but respectful (he apparently abhors its supposedly "jerky" animation and narrative simplicity). Nevertheless, as the lights dimmed in the theatre for the first showing on opening day, I felt a twinge of excitement over what the most expensive monster movie in history might look like. Twenty-four million bucks, I figured, ought to buy a pretty good gorilla suit.

As it turns out, the problems with the remake have to do with a lot more than its trick photography. When Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack made the first **KING KONG**, they devised a premise which extended into the realm of fantasy various speculations they had entertained during their filmmaking safaris of the 1920s. The world was "smaller" then, less was known of its more primitive, exotic corners, and audiences were more inclined to suspend disbelief and join in the kind of "what if"

theorizing that hinged the **KING KONG** plot together. And while, faithful to the tradition of a grown-up schoolboy's fantasy, the story was a model of simplicity, it was not simpleminded. Plausible ironies and ambiguities gave shading and depth to the character relationships. But if the human interaction was rooted in plausibility, the story was in every other sense larger than life. Appropriately, nearly all the island exteriors were devised within the confines of the studio (with intricate matte work complementing most of the limited, actual outdoor photography), since no existing locale could ever resemble the fantastic, primeval terrain the imagination demanded for the tale. This was perfect early-Thirties entertainment: adventurous people whom audiences could relate to, imperiled in a world of danger and excitement that everybody wanted to believe could exist... somewhere.

The De Laurentiis version also tries to blend fantasy and reality, but the chemistry is all wrong. De Laurentiis took his cameras to Hawaii for his island footage, dispensed with dinosaurs altogether, and staged his island night sequences on flat, dull Hollywood sets that would have looked unimpressive in a **Jungle Jim B**-movie. And De Laurentiis updated everything, confronting his Kong with issues like feminism and ecology which only succeeds in making the giant ape seem pitifully anachronistic. Part of the reason why the aborted Universal remake seems so much more palatable now is that it kept the 1930s setting. Kong is a part of American movie folklore, and he is only effective in the more innocent era with which he has been associated for over 40 years. What on earth does a 40-foot ape have to do with the energy crisis, anyway?

De Laurentiis, et. al., must have realized the folly of seriously updating **KING KONG** since the majority of their stabs at contemporary relevance are satirical or broadly melodramatic. Which only makes matters worse. Charles Grodin inhabits what is left of the Robert Armstrong/Carl Denham role, but the reckless filmmaker has become a stock heavy, a ruthless lackey for an oil conglomerate; when Kong finally



...the technical effects are just plain bad...

turns on him, our response is relief, not sympathy. Jessica Lange is no Fay Wray (her knockout looks only cloud her basic lack of acting charm), but then, Miss Wray didn't have to deliver the line in which Kong is referred to as a "goddamn chauvinist pig-ape!" As if this isn't horrendous enough, Jeff Bridges, as the hero, recites dialogue that would make a statue wince. Predictably, most of this takes the form of homilies about how Grodin and his crew are corrupting nature.

Which brings us to the screenwriter who is responsible for all these bad lines and witless characterizations. Lorenzo Semple Jr. may be a cult hero because of his script for *PRETTY POISON* (1969), but he also wrote the *BATMAN* television series, and we all remember that travesty. Semple cops out of *KING KONG* in the same vulgar way he dealt with *BATMAN*. Rather than risk having people laugh at him for taking such a dumb old story seriously, he sends it up. He probably can't believe that there are people in the audience who would like to see the story unfold in a straightforward manner, without pratfalls, coarse gags and eye-rolling villains cluttering it up. It's a classic example of a writer who is befuddled by his subject matter.

In fact, this whole film has been concocted by a group of people who are completely out of touch with the genre in which they are operating. Every time De Laurentiis or director John Guillermin spout off to the press about some new element they've brought to their remake, it turns out to be something the original had already. They brag about their great accomplishment in making the new Kong a sympathetic character--but in all their research, and in all the times they presumably screened the Cooper/Schoedsack version, didn't they ever grasp the human qualities that made the original Kong such a sympathetic, indeed tragic, figure? And wasn't there anybody on the crew of this movie who had access to *THE GOLDEN VOYAGE OF SINBAD*, or some other, recent Ray Harryhausen film, which could have been shown to De Laurentiis to demonstrate that animation isn't

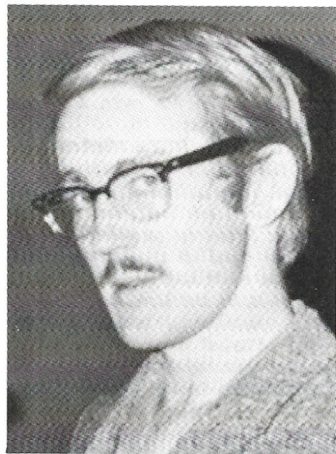
"jerky" anymore? Dino could still have built his life-size ape head and hand (another apparatus incidentally, which the mogul claims to have pioneered, while every movie buff knows the 1933 version used the same type of device)--but I can't believe, especially considering the success he has attained, that if De Laurentiis knew anything at all about animation, he would have settled for the laughable monster illusions the new *KING KONG* showcases--because the technical effects, taken on their own merits, with no comparison to any other film, are just plain bad. You can see through the edges of a lot of the process photography; Kong always looks like a man in a suit, and his movements, particularly the changes of facial expression, are too slow and deliberate to seem natural; the miniatures look tacky and have no density to them; the overall photography is thoroughly bland and lacking in any visual texture whatever. And, as most of us know by now, the 40-foot mock-up only makes about a three-second appearance, and looks about as lively as a cigar store indian on roller skates.

But what the hell, if De Laurentiis isn't enlightened enough to know that model animation has progressed beyond the days when audiences could see Willis O'Brien's fingerprints on Kong's shoulder, then let him blow \$24 million on a movie that could cost less than half that figure if he knew what he was doing.

There is an obvious rebuttal to all of this, of course: *KING KONG* is a smash hit. It is already high on *Variety's* list of the top ten moneymakers of all time, so somebody must like it? Agreed. The film does appear to be especially popular among the kiddies, and Jessica Lange's semi-nudity and the sexual symbolism of the native dancing is apparently intended to keep the rest of us awake until Kong shows up. But the issue is not simply how many people have been sucked-in by the largest movie advertising campaign in history, or how much filthy lucre will finally come to rest in Dino's hot little hands. The question is, is the film any good? It is not.

THE

\$25,000,000



Jim Danforth

On February 8th, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced that the Academy Board of Governors had voted to give Special Achievement Awards (Oscars) for visual effects to both KING KONG and LOGAN'S RUN, to be handed out at the Oscar ceremonies March 28th.

The following week, Jim Danforth announced his resignation from the Academy and returned his own Oscar nomination plaques for work on SEVEN FACES OF DR. LAO and WHEN DINOSAURS RULED THE EARTH. The move was an act of conscience prompted by the fact that the Board of Governor's unprecedented award to KING KONG was made without the recommendation of the Academy's special effects nominating committee, of which Danforth was a member.

In this interview, Danforth reveals more fully the reasons behind his Academy resignation and speaks-out on the travesty of awarding KING KONG an Oscar for its special effects. In his view, the award is being made not on the merits of the effects themselves but on the notoriety they have received from mostly false publicity. In Hollywood, money talks, and Dino De Laurentiis spent \$25,000,000 to make KING KONG in Hollywood. That kind of success the Academy understands.

Jim Danforth on KING KONG

CFQ: Why did you resign from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences?

DANFORTH: For four reasons, primarily. 1) Even if KING KONG had been what I consider worthy, I would have thought it somewhat amiss for the Board of Governors to have awarded an Oscar without regard to the recommendation of the effects nominating committee. It's their right or prerogative to do so if they choose according to the bylaws of the Academy, but it makes the function of the special effects nominating committee superfluous, or just a joke. That's one aspect that has nothing to do with the content of the film in question, but I think their action is suspect simply because they have never done this before.

2) Since they have never done this before, why should they do it now for a film which certainly can't be considered as good or as difficult as some of the films they have passed over? I think of films like THE BIRDS or SHIP OF FOOLS or any of Ray Harryhausen's pictures--several of them were terrific and didn't get a nomination. Ray Harryhausen and Charles Schneer made a picture which also did very well at the boxoffice and which had five artificially animated creatures in it, and the whole picture, including the effects, was made for less money than Dino wasted on the robot that didn't work. Yet the Board of Governors didn't feel particularly moved to give a special award to THE GOLDEN VOYAGE OF SINBAD when it didn't get recommended for an award.

3) I didn't even feel that LOGAN'S RUN was worthy of an award, and I personally voted for "no award" this year. This is one of the options that is possible for voters on the committee, ever since they changed the rules and did away with picking nominations for the entire Academy to vote on. And I know of at least one or two other people who had voted this way. But the consensus was that LOGAN'S RUN should get an award. Since I felt the award was not justified, I listed a number of reasons for the Academy. If you saw the picture they were kind of obvious: the out-of-focus opening shot, really out-of-focus; the color mismatch on the matte paintings; the jiggly registration on some of the mattes; and the scale of the water in the miniatures, the fact that it had been shot at 24 frames instead of at 92. These defects were all technical in nature. I thought the design of the effects, and what they wanted to do, was good.

4) But the clincher was that the Academy would give this ex-

tra award to KING KONG for which, in my opinion, the effects are a joke, just absolutely terrible. In contrast to LOGAN'S RUN, some of the effects in KING KONG are fairly-well executed, but the conception, design and planning of the effects in general are just the worst they can be. When the Academy gives an Oscar for KING KONG, it just isn't worth being a part of it anymore.

I know that not all the members of the Board were in favor of the KING KONG award. I got a call from a member who had personally been unable to attend the meeting that evening because he was working on a film. Had he known that anyone was going to propose KING KONG for an award he would have dropped what he was doing and run right over there to put on a filibuster against it.

I wrote a letter to the Board to explain to them why I felt their actions were not justified. I went to great lengths to point out that Rick Baker was not in any way in my opinion to be considered a "special visual effect." No more than Bert Lahr could be considered a special effect when he played the Cowardly Lion in THE WIZARD OF OZ. Or no more than a real Gorilla would be considered a special effect if you

put that in front of a blue screen and made it look 50 feet tall. You certainly wouldn't claim the Gorilla was a special effect, only the optical part of it or the miniature part of it. If you follow that logic, then that eliminates the monkey suit from consideration and leaves only the full-size mechanical Kong or the separate hand, as far as the Kong effects were concerned, discounting for the moment the other effects like travelling mattes or matte paintings. And I told them the full-size Kong didn't work. It just plain didn't work. Anytime they saw Kong move or act or bend or do anything that resembled acting, that was Rick Baker.

CFQ: In defending the Academy's action, Linwood Dunn stated in *Variety* that KING KONG came in a "very close" second to LOGAN'S RUN in the balloting of the effects nominating committee.

DANFORTH: It didn't come in a close second. It only qualified in one category, which was Full-Size Mechanical Effects. They threw out Optical, Miniature and Matte Paintings as far as it was concerned. LOGAN'S RUN qualified in all four categories, but they have a ruling that they'll only give three awards to a single film, so they had to disqualify the fourth category, which was Optical, even though it got the requisite eight-plus point average in the balloting. So LOGAN'S RUN qualified for an Oscar in four categories, KING KONG in only one --I really don't think it's fair to

Jessica Lange in the grip of King Kong's full-size mechanical hand, an effect Jim Danforth terms as "pretty marvelous."



UNDERSTANDING

NEWSBREAK

say that KING KONG came in a close second!

CFQ: What specifically qualified KING KONG in the Full-Size Mechanical Effects category?

DANFORTH: Full-Size Mechanical effects covers anything that involves a rigging, explosions, wire work, constructions of any kind other than miniatures. The category involves a lot of the things that go on with miniatures, but the size and scale of what is being manipulated is the determining factor.

As far as what the committee considered in KING KONG to be worthy of an award in this category, I don't know. There's never any discussion about this. I don't know if they were voting for the full-size robot, or if they were voting for the mechanical hand, which I think was pretty marvelous, or whether in fact they were voting for Rick Baker in the monkey suit under the delusion that it was the robot!

CFQ: But wouldn't Baker's suit come under makeup rather than special effects?

DANFORTH: It was proposed that Rick Baker be qualified for a special Board of Governor's award for makeup which they've given in the past to films like SEVEN FACES OF DR. LAO and PLANET OF THE APES. Bill Taylor, one of the effects committee members, actually wrote a formal letter to the Board of Governors to officially propose that Baker get such an award and they turned it down.

CFQ: One of your complaints, per items in Variety and the Los Angeles Times was "pressure" exerted on the Academy by the Dino De Laurentiis organization. What did you mean by this?

DANFORTH: I must say that I did not actually say that. Both Variety and The Times went out of their way to play up what was sort of a minor theme of mine, the major theme being that the Board of Governors were out of line, the minor theme being, isn't it curious that the only time this has happened was in the case of the most expensive film ever made in Hollywood, which was also one of the most highly publicized films of all time?

CFQ: Then you have no first-hand knowledge of pressure exerted on the Academy?

DANFORTH: I have first-hand knowledge that someone at the Dino De Laurentiis organization did send a letter to the Board of Governors after the effects committee had voted not to give them the award, saying in effect 'Aw c'mon, folks, let's reconsider this.' That is an absolute fact.

But the point is that pressure was put on, but not directly. It's simply the pressure of prejudicial publicity. The kind of pressure that in a criminal trial can be cause for a change of venue,

The 40-foot full-size mechanical Kong, an effect which "just didn't work," according to Jim Danforth. (Photo by Robert Villard)

when a court decides that it is impossible for someone to get a fair trial because of the publicity surrounding the crime. That's not to say that anyone's bribing the jury. That simply means that there has been a bias created by the reporting of the event. That is what I think we have in the case of KING KONG. We have so much publicity started by the De Laurentiis organization telling us what a great movie it is, that it has washed the brains of some of the top critics of this country like Charles Champlin, Arthur Knight, Richard Schickel, and others, and the Board of Governors read all of this. That's what I'm talking about. That is pressure.

It's the kind of thing that will make Richard Schickel write a glowing review for Time magazine of a film that he hasn't even seen. And the person who did see it for Time magazine didn't see it all, and yet they're able to say that the man-in-the-suit is so skillfully integrated with the full-size mechanical model that it's impossible to tell where the one stops and the other one begins! I know for an absolute fact from people who were there, such as Rick Baker, that the person from Time magazine saw no part of the film which contained the full-size mechanical model, and yet they feel no compunction about making the statement that it's so perfectly integrated that you can't tell the difference!

And why do they do that? Because Dino gives a big party or who knows what? I'm just supposing that. But this is how it happens. Press conferences are set up and food is served, and liquor is served, and everybody gets to see what a great guy this is, and what an event this is, and they go home and write something that has nothing to do with the motion picture at all.

One of the reviewers out here in California, for a local paper, said 'I would like to give my GREAT GATSBY award this year to all the reviewers who reviewed all the promotional material for KING KONG instead of the film.' And I think that absolutely sums up what the problem was. If KING KONG hadn't been the subject of an intensive publicity campaign centering on the visual effects, we would have passed it by just the way we passed by all those Japanese monster pictures that were released over here.

CFQ: Has anyone brought up the fact that your actions may be prompted by a "sour grapes" attitude over the fact that the Universal remake, for which you were to do the effects, was cancelled because the Dino De Lau-

"When the Academy gives an Oscar for KING KONG, it just isn't worth being part of it anymore."

rentiis film was made instead?

DANFORTH: No one has mentioned it but you.

CFQ: Would it be a valid criticism?

DANFORTH: No. First, because I made a lot of money "not working" on the Universal KING KONG. Because of a strange contractual arrangement I got paid for it anyway. Secondly, because I had the opportunity to work on the De Laurentiis KING KONG. Dino personally offered me the opportunity to work on his film. I sat six feet from him inside his office and he said, 'Here's the script. Take it home. You read the script. Kong fights one monster in this picture. We give you one whole sequence to do. You go 'way. Do it your way. Bring it back to us. You come back tomorrow. Tell me what you want to do. And we start you.' I could have worked on the picture, but I read the script and it was such a total piece of rubbish that I wanted nothing to do with it. So this is not "sour grapes" on my part.

But I am very disappointed and very annoyed that these people who are able in this industry to have the ability to cause a film like KING KONG to be remade, are the ones who have no comprehension of what the film was originally about and what made it a memorable film. So in that regard you might say I have a feeling of "sour grapes," that someone with integrity didn't remake it, if it was going to be remade. And I think Universal was a thousand miles closer to doing it right than Dino De Laurentiis ever was. I am pleased to have been involved that that project to the extent that I was.

CFQ

