

AEROSMITH: THE JOE PERRY INTERVIEW

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WEEKS

CIRCUS

EVERY
TWO
WEEKS

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King Kong

The New Version Might Be The Greatest Horror Film Of All Time.

by George Nobbe

In Hollywood, the great *King Kong* guessing game has become all the rage.

Will Italian film impresario Dino De Laurentiis finish his gargantuan ape show by Christmas, in time to meet an estimated \$20 million worth of advance bookings?

Or will the cast and production crew of the special effects extravaganza go bananas in the cutting room as they hack away at miles of film accumulated since last January on locations from New York to Hollywood?

For that matter, will the towering 40-foot, six-and-a-half ton gorilla—perhaps the biggest mechanical toy ever constructed by the motion picture industry—fall flat on its hairy electronic face when it finally gets around to walking through its scenes?

This is the sort of weighty thing that Hollywood people love to worry about when they aren't churning inwardly about astronomical production costs, which come to an incomprehensible \$22 million in the case of the legendary *King Kong*.

The whole trouble with the De Laurentiis remake of the 40-year-old horror classic might be blamed on a protracted legal hassle with Universal over who owned the rights to the picture.

By the time that was resolved, the film was already hopelessly behind schedule, and reportedly still is if the producer and Paramount hope to get it into the theaters by the end of the year.

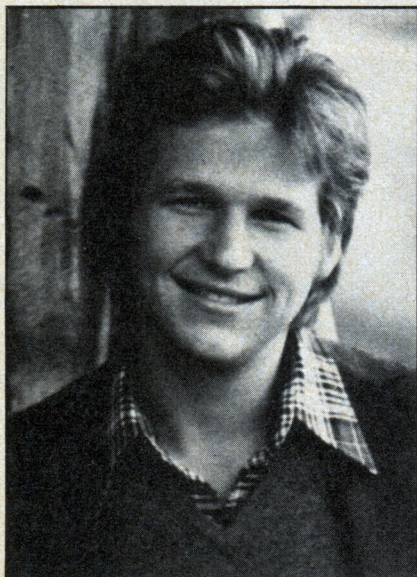
Of such stuff are nightmares made and De Laurentiis can be forgiven his because he's the man who has to sign the checks in the feverish

attempt to make up for lost time.

KING OF THE APES: If it's any consolation to him, the courts have made him in effect the undisputed king of American gorilla epics for the foreseeable future. Universal, by judicial decree, can't get into the ape movie business for 18 months after Paramount releases its entry.

And since Dino already has his mechanical gorilla built, and presumably operable, he should have ample time to get *King Kong, Part II* out before that. No sense letting a perfectly good gorilla sit around on his laurels collecting royalties when he could be making money for you, is there?

The electronic ape is the handiwork of Carlo Rambaldi and a crew of 100. He cost far more than De Laurentiis will spend on a cast that includes two-time Academy Award nominee Jeff



Jeff Bridges as an anthropologist competes unsuccessfully with Kong for the girl.



Producer Dino De Laurentis spent an estimated \$22 million on his monster film.



Charles Grodin plays the avaricious promoter of the gorilla.





Bruce Cabot and Fay Wray in the original 'Kong'.

Bridges; high fashion model Jessica Lange who, for better or worse, has never appeared in pictures; and, Charles Grodin, Broadway actor, whose film credits include *Rosemary's Baby*, *Catch-22* and the recently completed *Thieves*.

There are dozens of other people whom even the most hardened movie fan is going to have a tough time placing and the net result is that Rambaldi's mechanical monster obviously is going to steal the picture.

The basic plot hasn't been changed much from the original concoction brewed up in the 1930s by Merian Cooper and Edgar Wallace. Purists will be relieved to learn that it will still be your basic ape-meets-girl story, followed in descending and predictable order by the same improbable events.

Ape loves girl. Unscrupulous promoter takes ape back to civilization. Ape rebels at commercialism involved in his new prosperity, rejects success, abducts girl, and commits murder and mayhem as he and his beloved flee, seeking sanctuary atop the towers of the World Trade Center in New York. There, in titanic battle, ape loses girl and life.

It's *Beauty and the Beast* all over again and it should make De Laurentiis and friends even richer than they already are. Bridges plays an anthropologist who vies unsuccessfully with the indomitable gorilla for the hand of the girl, played by Lange. Grodin is the avaricious promoter.

MAMMOTH MACHINE: The ape is 40 feet of aluminum skeleton inside of which Bruce Bahrenburg, the unit publicist, swears there are 3,100 feet of hydraulic hose and 4,500 more of electronic cable, all needed to make the monster move.

Five heads were built to simulate five different expressions. There are two sets of arms, one for distance filming, the other for close-up work

and what you won't see in the movie is that the whole contraption is braced by cranes and shafts hidden from view behind the gorilla's bulk.

The opening scenes, shot in Hawaii, show the mighty King Kong raging through the jungle, petulantly uprooting trees and tossing aside anything in his path on his South Pacific island, covering 15 feet in a single stride. The footage is purportedly a testament to the genius of Glen Robinson, whose special effects' work bailed out *Earthquake* and *The Hindenberg*; gorilla builders Rambaldi and crew; miniature designer Aldo Puccini; and, photographic director Richard Kline, as well as designer Mario Chiari.

The sad truth that gorillas don't live on islands in the South Pacific probably won't bother audiences any more than it bothered the people who put together the picture.

Small details like that seem to have plagued the whole production. For instance, Rona Barrett, normally a painstaking rumor monger, is blamed for the unfounded report that the two crews who built the King Kong model, one Italian and the other American, became confused about meters and feet and wound up with the wrong number of right arms. Not so sniff De Laurentiis' people.

Then, last April, when the grim truth leaked out that the producer was going to use the World Trade Center instead of the Empire State Building for the climactic scene, there was more trouble, most of it doubtless the work of a dyspeptic press agent.

PROTEST MARCH: Six employees of the Empire State building, clad fetchingly in gorilla suits, marched in protest of the change, claiming that their building was the spiritual home of the legendary King Kong and anyway, the World Trade Center hadn't even been built when the crazed movie gorilla first went on his destructive rampage in midtown Manhattan.

Then, something went technically amiss inside the world's greatest gorilla and shooting had to be suspended for three weeks in May.

That development gave rise to the rumor that Miss Lange was so tightly squeezed by one of the mechanical ape's mighty electronic hands that she had to have medical treatment.

Untrue, said a studio spokesman. "She was simply gripped a little too hard and got very nervous," he explained. "The mechanism has been corrected."

It was June instead of late spring when De Laurentiis finally began shooting the final scenes as normally blase New Yorkers watched, if they weren't being paid as extras, agog at the foot of the huge twin towers of the World Trade Center where Kong meets his maker.

The publicity produced by the arrival of the crew was tremendous, especially since the electronic gorilla was trucked into the city for the occasion, disassembled for the journey on a flatbed trailer.

The net result however was that by July, when the scenes actually involving the gorilla were starting to be filmed, there was a sense among those involved with the picture that the whole titanic enterprise was teetering on the edge of disaster.

At Paramount, whimsical operators still answered the phone with a musical chime-like "Kingg, Kongg," but more and more these days you hear them saying things like, "Well, they didn't finish *Towering Inferno* until October 9 and they got that one out in time."

Director John Guillermin knows what such pressure is all about. He was the director of *Inferno*.

To speed things up, the entire movie is being edited and scored as it goes along instead of at the end of the shooting schedule which is now expected to take up to 160 days in all.

In the case of a movie like *King*



In the 1933 classic, King Kong, the monster meets his death on the top of the Empire State Building. In the 1976 version the ape has his downfall on top of Manhattan's World Trade Center.

Kong, this is doubly difficult because the scenes that actually involve the gorilla require the use of replicas and miniaturization, with complicated cutting back and forth to make it all look real.

Quite aside from the very real possibility that the huge electronic ape may fall over when he's finally made to walk, Guillermin reportedly has made his gorilla look real by using night photography, aided and abetted by stop-motion camera work and clever editing.

IN THE BEGINNING: The whole project began more than a year ago when De Laurentiis began assembling the craftsmen, acquiring the vast MGM sound stages, overseeing set construction and picking likely locations, much less casting the picture.

Jeff Bridges and Charles Grodin were available for the principal male roles, but finding the right actress to play Dwan (colloquial), King Kong's beloved, was another matter. Jessica Lange won out over dozens of candidates including, purportedly, Barbra Streisand, who had a prior commitment.

Jessica, on two hours' notice, flew to Hollywood last Christmas to do a screen test for the part, which she won despite the fact that she has never acted before. Her abilities to date extended only into the fashion world, as a model for Wilhelmina in New York.

At 23, she's fluent in French, reads Dorothy Parker and Stendhal, listens to Schubert, and is by her own admission highly romantic. She's also unmarried. Aside from two years studying mime in Paris, her personal life reads like a road map of Minnesota and she says of her youth, "We moved so often, we lived in every small town in the state."

If playing the role Fay Wray made famous disturbs her she doesn't show

it, though she is well aware that the part stereotyped her predecessor, who was forever known as the girl in the gorilla's hairy palm.

If the whole picture doesn't seem realistic, it won't be because De Laurentiis didn't try. The first scenes were shot in Los Angeles' San Pedro harbor, with Guillermin utilizing a second unit for open seas coverage.

Three weeks on Kauai in the Hawaiian Islands were devoted to Kong's jungle rampage, much of it filmed in terrain so rugged that cast, crew and equipment had to be flown in by helicopter.

All last winter and spring was spent at the MGM studios, which were the biggest available on the West Coast and the only ones that could handle the towering sets and the scaffolding necessary from which to film the action.

As if all that brouhaha weren't enough, De Laurentiis took full page newspaper ads announcing the production last fall and offering a free full-color poster. The response was staggering. Hundreds of thousands of letters started pouring in and extra secretaries had to be hired to cope with the avalanche of mail.

And Dino discovered an interesting thing: Sixty-five per cent of the mail came from teenagers whose fathers hadn't been born when the original movie was released. Most of them wanted to know if a real gorilla was going to be used or if it would be a giant mechanical model.

The answer quickly became the worst kept secret in Hollywood, but you won't be able to tell when the picture comes out.

In one scene, when the legendary King Kong smashes through a wall, what you will be seeing is the destruction of a set that actually stands 47 feet high, cost more than \$800,000 and took three months to build. How's

that for realism?

Insiders claim that the picture will not be as high camp as you might expect. "It's an adventure story with a lot more humor and pathos in it than you'd think. It's also much less violent than the original, which was pretty bloody for its time," said one member of the crew.

DISCREPANCY: Quite how that squares with what De Laurentiis told one reporter—"It will be the all time spectacle. No horror shall be spared"—remains something of a mystery.

Dino believes that, "The public can no longer be fooled, so you must make them sit up—King Kong will do that—frighten them into a new reality."

The producer has become a specialist in fear on film and his conversation is sprinkled with a cross between the fear of the old-fashioned war movie and the fear inspired by the classic horror movies.

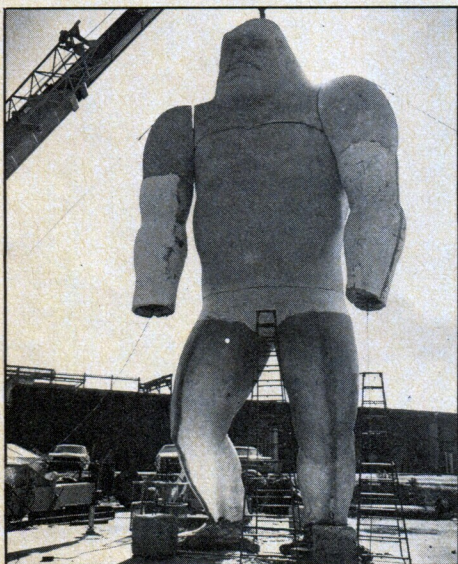
"In the war, people could see the enemy," he said "but he was no bigger than they were. One could defeat him. Kong is too powerful," he added.

"King Kong is a primitive animal brought into a society that seeks to exploit him," he said. "In a sense, we are all caught in the web of greater forces . . . therefore, Kong's struggle becomes our struggle."

De Laurentiis' struggle, of course, is to get the picture out in time to meet his advance booking commitments. He's not worried about success, dismissing the merest suggestion that the picture could lay an egg. "It will be a bigger success than the World Trade Center," he says confidently, shrugging off his multi-million dollar gamble on the world's most infamous gorilla.

Anyway, says producer Richard Zanuck of Dino, "He's a born gambler."

Zanuck, you may remember, made *Jaws*.



Forty-seven foot 3,000 pound monster-in-the-making is held up by a crane. At right, workman makes adjustments to the enormous head of the new King Kong. This is one of the five different heads constructed to show different expressions.