

FILMS ILLUSTRATED

THE MAGAZINE THAT LOVES MOVIES

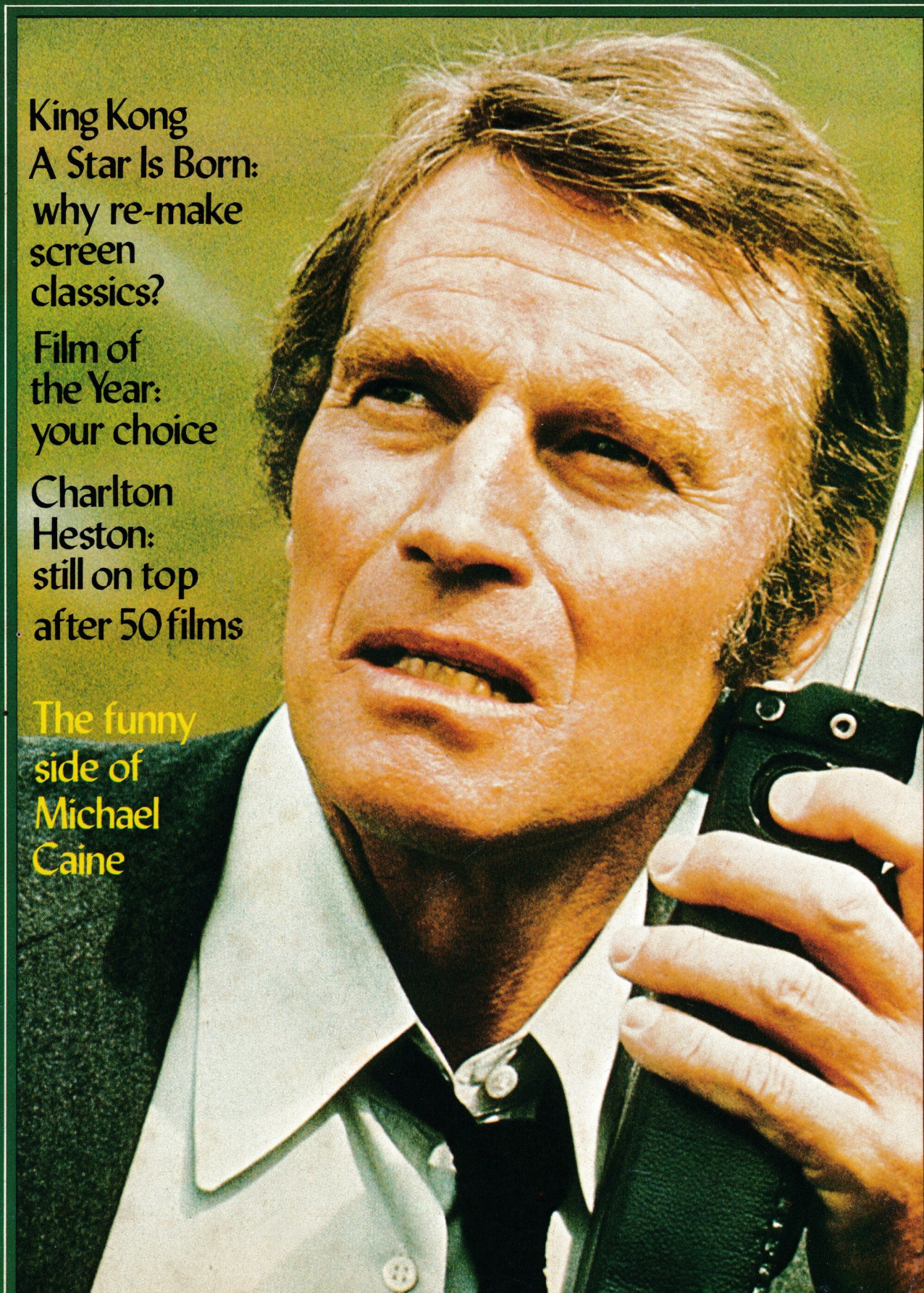
VOL 6 NO 66 FEBRUARY 1977 35p

King Kong
A Star Is Born:
why re-make
screen
classics?

Film of
the Year:
your choice

Charlton
Heston:
still on top
after 50 films

The funny
side of
Michael
Caine





Return of the urban gorilla

The two Kongs: a comparative review by Kenneth Thompson

I — *King Kong* (1933, Radio Pictures) with Fay Wray, Robert Armstrong, Bruce Cabot.

II — *King Kong* (1976, De Laurentiis) with Jessica Lange, Jeff Bridges, Charles Grodin.

BY DEFINITION, *I* is the classic original, *II* the imitative upstart. But though a tremendous roter for *I* I can't (as some of my friends and colleagues tended to expect) get hot under the collar about the presence of *II*. The situation seems to me analagous to jazzed-up renditions of Bach which tend to give considerable if ephemeral pleasure without in the least disturbing the Bach originals which remain steadfastly unaffected. Without quite being able to share the enthusiasm of one or two Films Illustrated colleagues, I do feel that *II* is far from being the dire disaster that some fans of *I* were confidently predicting.

The tripartite structure of *I* is faithfully followed by *II*: (a) the introduction and build-up; (b) the island sequences; (c) the New York sequences.

A fundamental difference in the two films is that *II* dispenses entirely with the original characters. Otherwise they are furthest apart in (a), to such an extent that *II* has almost nothing in common with its predecessor, offering an entirely new story line. The two share a slow opening and leisurely build-up, but *II* is more lethargic, not merely because the film has been made at a considerably greater length, so that it's something like fifty minutes before Kong makes his debut, but equally because it lacks the mystery and cumulative effect of *I*. An oil company's expedition to investigate possible oil deposits off a fog-shrouded island is an ineffective substitute for an expedition headed by a fearless and intrepid film-maker of the "bring 'em back

alive" school searching in unknown waters to photograph nobody knows what.

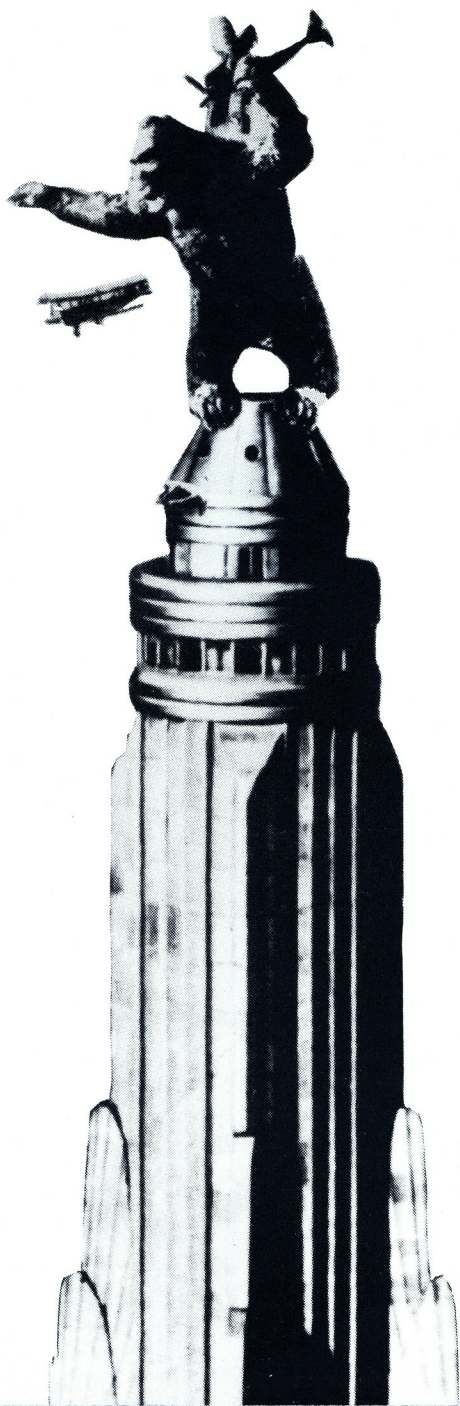
The first real point of contact between the two films comes with the arrival at Skull Island, which in *I* is imaginative but phoney, in *II* naturalistic and beautiful (superbly photographed, too). The landing and first encounter with the Kong-worshipping natives is most effectively done in *II*, which duplicates the conception of the enormous wall with its gigantic gate but recreates it on a bigger and more effective scale — though surprisingly eschewing the big gong, replacing it with a disappointing pair of wooden trumpets which apparently don't work. The preparation of the bride for Kong is a more picturesque affair in *II*; but the abduction of the heroine, somewhat simply ac-

complished in *I*, becomes ridiculously easy in *II*.

Early on, Charles Grodin as oilman expedition-leader Fred Wilson, and Jeff Bridges as stowaway zoologist Jack Prescott, were hazy but at any rate discernible counterparts to Robert Armstrong as film maker Carl Denham and Bruce Cabot as mariner right-hand man. But though the characters are important and well-defined throughout (a), they take a back seat after Kong has entered into the proceedings. Not so the heroine Dwan. Though Kong upstages everyone else, Dwan (as played by Jessica Lange) is far from eclipsed. She is a pole apart from Ann Darrow (as played by Fay Wray). Whereas Ann was demure, unglamorous and unsophisticated, Dwan is the reverse. Whereas Ann, following her abduction by Kong, was consistently scared and gave vent to her fright in the succession of screams which won such renown and acclaim for Miss Wray as to immortalise her in film history, Dwan lets loose only a casual scream or two, quickly becomes reconciled to the situation and even counter-attacks with aggressive diatribe ("You goddam chauvinist pig ape!").

In *I*, Kong disturbingly kept changing in size and mien, and his locomotion was distinctly on the jerky side. The gorilla in *II* is intrinsically superior in every respect, his size remains constant, he does not have startling changes of countenance, and he moves with fluent ease. But this state of affairs is as unsurprising as it was predictable. Dash it all, some appreciable advance must have been made in forty-three years of special effects. Kong *II* is magnificent even if he can't displace Kong *I* in the affections of those who have enjoyed Willis O'Brien's creation over the years.

Much of the island sequences in *II* are impressive, but one misses the sundry encounters with stegosaurus, brontosaurus and petrodactyl, particularly the use by Kong *I* of boxing tactics and his jaw-breaking victory over tyrannosaurus rex. Kong *I* was presented with more than a dash of humour, and moreover had a chest-thumping pride in his own prowess.



Opposite: the 1976 Kong roars into sight, to the qualified astonishment of adventurers Jeff Bridges and Jessica Lange (above)

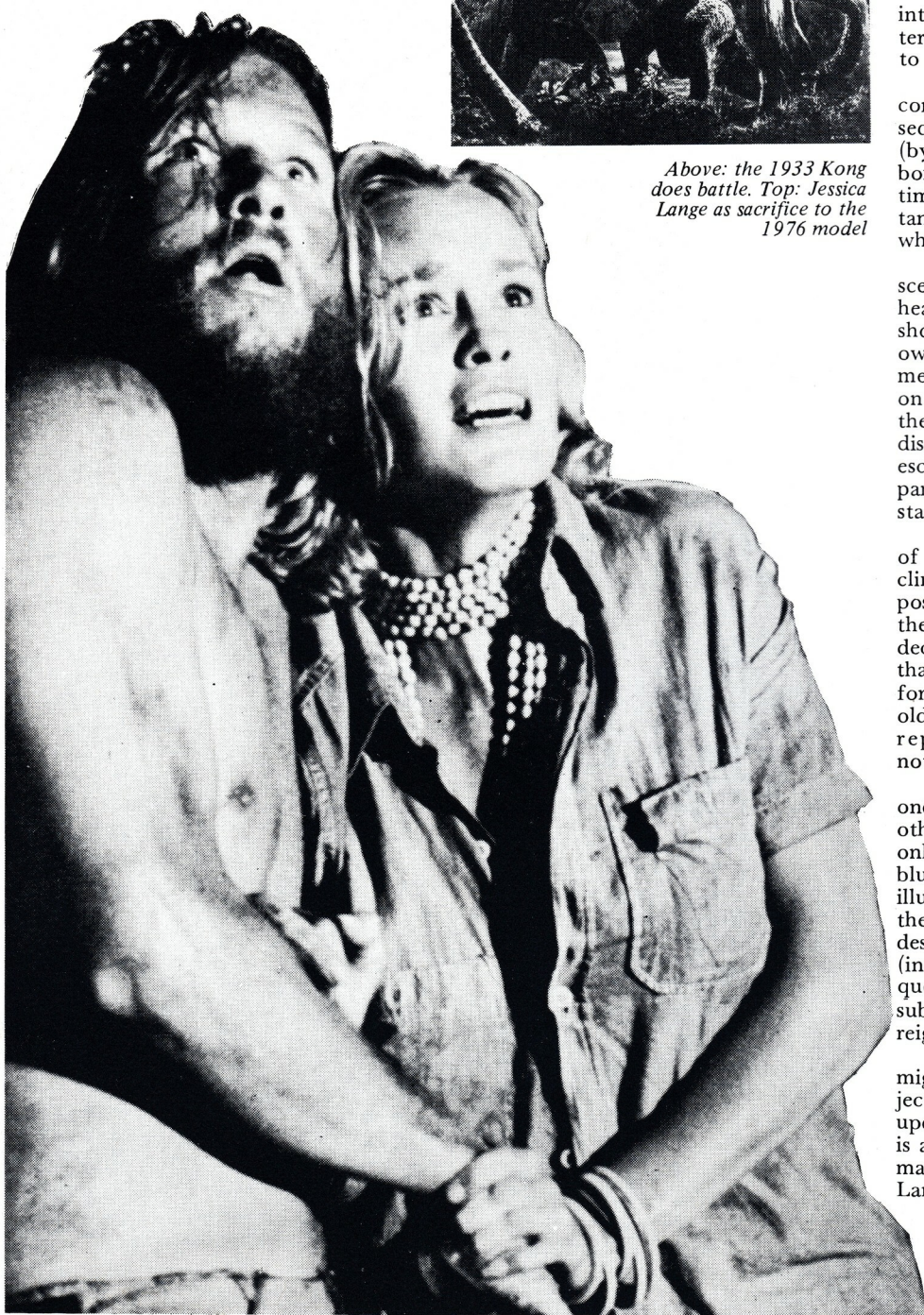


Left: the 1933 Kong's Empire State antics provoked more full-blooded amazement from Fay Wray and Bruce Cabot (above)

'Kong II is magnificent even if he can't displace Kong I in the affections...'



Above: the 1933 Kong does battle. Top: Jessica Lange as sacrifice to the 1976 model



Kong *II*, for all his magnificence, is a much more taciturn and intense fellow. And the going is easy: he is not called upon to combat a succession of diverse dinosaurs, having only an encounter with a giant slithery snake. This encounter is basically copied from *I* and the log-rolling sequence is quite an exact copy.

It is possible to dislike the way *II* owes much of its inspiration and ideas to *I* yet at the same time makes fun of it. Dwan's "chauvinist pig ape" remark is one instance. There are others. Dwan mentions her horoscope as predicting that she will cross the water "to meet the biggest person in my life." Again, when the searchers are pursuing Kong across the island, somebody remarks, "Who the hell do you think went through there — some guy in an ape suit?" This element of ridicule seems rather cheap, the more so because in its later phases *II* tends to take itself very seriously.

The even more spectacular recreations by *II* of *I*'s big set-pieces in the island sequences are topped by the scene in which Kong breaks through the wall-door into the native village. This scene was terrific in *I*, breathtaking in *II* where it is, to my mind, the highlight of the film.

Unlike *I* there is a bridge passage in *II* connecting the island with the New York sequences. After Kong has been overcome (by chloroform, instead of Denham's gas bombs), *II* has an additional and sometimes quite bizarre sequence set on the tanker which is transporting the giant ape which is confined to a hold.

With the possible exception of the scene in which Kong busts up the overhead railway (which *II* copies practically shot for shot and then adds a bit of its own), the New York scenes in *II* seem to me a disappointment. In *I*, Kong is placed on exhibition on the vast stage of a large theatre, in *II* he is much less effectively displayed at a circus in a park. Kong's escape from his fetters and the crowd panic which ensues are less effectively staged than in the original film.

But perhaps the real disappointment of *II* is the mess it makes of the famous climactic sequence. The now-familiar poster for *II* has falsely prepared us for the new version's finale (in fact it's decidedly a cheat). For though we know that the World Trade Centre substitutes for the Empire State Building, and that old biplanes have understandably been replaced by contemporary aircraft, nothing else is as per poster prediction.

Kong does *not* stand with left leg on one of the twin towers, right leg on the other; no fighters take part in the attack, only helicopters; and, worst of all, the blue sky and sunshine is but an optical illusion. For some unaccountable reason, the producers' confidence seems to have deserted them, and in fact the finale (indeed, most of the New York sequences) takes place at night. Decidedly, I submit, the Empire State and the biplanes reign supreme.

One can now only speculate what might have happened had Universal's projected re-make in more faithful, un-updated style materialised. Meantime, *II* is a version for the '70s with some visual magnificence and the most attractive Miss Lange to commend it.

Opposite: Bruce Cabot, Fay Wray and Robert Armstrong in the 1933 King Kong. Left: Jeff Bridges and Jessica Lange in the 1976 King Kong

