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FILMS

*in
Review*

SOVIET CINEMA IN '20s

1976's TEN BEST

EDITH WHARTON AND FILMS

MGM's SWEETHEARTS



FILM REVIEWS

KING KONG

It must be virtually impossible for anyone who has admired the original *King Kong* ever since its original appearance in '33 to be totally objective and unbiased when approaching this remake. In all fairness though, it is a *lot* better than we had a right to expect. The original property is treated with reverence, and there's a non-campy approach to the updating, some of which is quite intelligent. The arrival on the island is particularly well done, and the best sequence of all is original in this version: Kong going on the rampage in his ship-hold prison, and being calmed by the girl. This relatively unspectacular sequence also has some of the film's best art direction. And Jessica Lange, as the girl, is a delight — an unlikely but most winning combination of Marilyn Monroe and Grace Kelly, and giving a surprisingly relaxed performance for her first time out as an actress.

There, unfortunately, the purely plus factors end. Kong's first appearance to wrest the girl from the altar — a stunning sequence in the original — is a tip-off to the film's *modus operandi*. Economically, it is shot *largely* from Kong's viewpoint, and the whole sequence is a conglomerate of the various techniques utilised throughout. It doesn't convince, certainly

doesn't shock, and the main interest in this sequence is actually the rather fascinating "documentary" detail about the maintenance of the great wall and the operation of its gate. The sequence, typical of the rest of the film, gives the *minimum* it can get away with — given the film's great advance publicity — whereas the original always gave the *maximum* it could conjure up, later being forced to sacrifice some outstanding sequences to the benefit of overall rhythm and length. The special effects in the new *Kong* are mechanically very efficient, but at best they represent a 100% improvement on the standard *Godzilla* techniques. Not once do they duplicate the astonishing realism of Willis O'Brien's work, though they begin to approach it in the sequence most painstakingly copied from the original — the attack on the elevated subway.

What hurts the new version most is its aggressively 1976 characters, motivations and dialogue. They tie it irrevocably into this period: in five years it'll be out of date, and in ten forgotten. The original — both in dialogue and especially in its fairy-tale-like visual design — was absolutely timeless, as fairy-stories should be — and need have no worry about being toppled from its throne by this pretender. Moreover, the original had so many

artistic adjuncts — the incredibly complex visual design, Steiner's score, the tight editing style, the sheer magic of O'Brien's technical wizardry, the artless charm of the performers — that rewarded study and provided enjoyment in endless repeat visits. The new *Kong* contains nothing to inspire a second visit unless it is — much later in her career — the opportunity to study Miss Lange in her first film.

There's no doubt about it, if the original *Kong* didn't exist, this would be a well-above-average adventure yarn. But it does exist, and the best of the new *Kong*, including its score, owes its qualities to that original. Much has been made incidentally of the more sympathetic and tragic quality that Kong (referred to in very contemporary parlance as a "turned-on ape") achieves in this version. To me, and I'm sure many others, the original Kong, anti-social rascal that he was, had all of those qualities too. The old Kong was the ape world's own James Cagney; the new one is merely its Elliot Gould.

WILLIAM K. EVERSON