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WHICH KONG IS KING?



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WHICH KONG IS KING?

TONY ROSE compares the old, original *King Kong* with the new version that is now playing at leading cinemas throughout Britain.

FOR PEOPLE of my generation the question is, of course, largely rhetorical.

We grew up with the screams of Fay Wray echoing in our nightmares and the image of a defiant Kong snatching aeroplanes from the sky as he straddled the Empire State Building is forever embedded deep in our collective subconscious. No latter-day remake, however skilled, can replace the thrills that chilled us in our impressionable youth.

Having said all that, however, let me be the first to admit that the new *Kong* is a lot better than I expected it to be. Indeed once I'd recovered from my initial revulsion at the basic idea of rehashing one of the cinema's imperishable masterpieces, I began to notice that Dino de Laurentiis and his team had tackled the job rather well.

For a start, they have grasped the all-important point that Kong's pre-eminence among screen monsters does not rest on special effects alone. The trick work in the original was, of course, outstanding in 1932 but after forty-five years of technical progress, some of the effects inevitably look a little crude. The animation, in particular, has been surpassed in smoothness by Ray Harryhausen in films like *One Million Years B.C.*, but while his monsters move well, they are totally lacking in the personality and pathos of the great ape.

When the old Kong broke the dinosaur's neck and then, with a puzzled mien, twice lifted its head and let it fall, we sensed that somewhere in that massive frame there was a dim but noble mind, trying to grapple with the mystery of life and death. From this scene onwards, while continuing to inspire terror, he also begins to inspire sympathy and by the last reel we can believe that his tender feelings for Miss Wray have driven him to his own destruction. In Robert Armstrong's famous summing up: "It wasn't the airplanes; it was beauty killed the beast."



Given all the advantages of travelling matte and other modern laboratory techniques, the new production does not lean on them too heavily. Instead, it concentrates on giving Kong character and 'humanity'. Director John Guillermin's efforts in this direction are helped by the fact that all the facial close-ups, and many of the action shots too, are played by a man in an ape suit and a beautifully made mask. The melting eyes of a real human, staring out of those savage features, make for a persuasive kind of rapport between ape and girl (Jessica Lange).

One of the best scenes that was not in the original shows Kong dunking Jessica in a river and then drying her off by blowing on her through pursed lips.

Another good decision by Laurentiis was not to court too close a comparison with the 1932 version by trying to emulate its period charm. While preserving the basic story line, the script writers (Lorenzo Semple, James Creelman and Ruth Rose) have hauled it right up into the seventies by making the explorers who find Kong oil prospectors, and by furnishing them with slick, modern dialogue – including a joky reference to *Deep Throat*.

I have to say that I still prefer the innocent naivety of the old film but fake naivety would have been unbearable.

The basic production methods used were also quite different. When the original Kong was seen full-length, he was nearly always an eighteen inch-high model and he moved around by

The face of Kong as seen in the 1932 original and (right) in the 1976 reincarnation.

means of single-frame animation. (Perhaps the one exception was the long shot of him scaling the Empire State Building which looks like a man in an ape suit.) Only the hand that grasped Fay Wray and the head, when scrutinised in close-up, were built full scale.

The new Kong is sometimes a full-scale (40 foot-high) model, operated by hydraulics, and very often, the man in the ape suit. According to a newly published paperback (*The Creation of Dino de Laurentiis' King Kong* by Bruce Bahrenburg) the decision to dispense with animation completely was made by Laurentiis because he believed modern audiences would not accept the jerky movement. I suspect, however, that the need to complete the film on a reasonably tight schedule had quite a lot to do with it.

Certainly the results are technically impeccable as far as they go and you'd have to watch the film a great many times before you could begin to spot the instants when the man takes over from the outsize model. (The presence of Jessica Lange in frame is no clue because she is sometimes brought down to scale by miniature back projection or split screen.)

However, the absence of animated models has imposed at least one severe handicap: the prehistoric monsters that featured so excitingly



Two frame enlargements from the original film: Kong's face at the hotel bedroom window and Kong atop the Empire State Building.



Fay Wray in Kong's grip (1932) and (right) Jessica Lange in the same fix (1976).

in the original island sequence are nowhere to be seen. And understandably of course when you consider that building one 40 foot monster must have been expensive enough, while the idea of a main in a dinosaur suit is too absurd to contemplate. Guillermin has done his best to cover up the deficiency by having Kong fight a giant snake but quick cutting and loud music only serve to emphasise that it's no contest.

Finally, I have to mention a Laurentiis decision that may have been good from a box-office point of view but which fatally lowers the voltage of the closing sequences: in order to avoid an X certificate and bring in the family audience, Kong's character has not only been humanised but sentimentalised. No longer does he snatch up fleeing natives and bite off their heads for sport; no longer is there any real danger that he will crush the girl to death between his fingers on a sudden impulse. Fay Wray was terrified right up to the last scene, but long before the end Jessica Lange is snuggling up in Kong's fist as if it were home from home.

The old monster was made of sterner stuff than the new one but even so I recommend a visit to the remake; there is much in it to enjoy.