

OBSERVER



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KING KONG STARS AGAIN
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King Kong returns

by John Walker

KING KONG is bigger than both films he has starred in – the first flickering black and white version in 1933, still perhaps the best of horror films, and now an updated, costly and colourful remake that opens in London on 27 December.

Along with Chaplin's little tramp and Tati's M. Hulot, Kong has taken on a life of his own. On his debut, 43 years ago, he was no more than several sixteen-inch-high rubber models, covered in lambskin, and a huge disembodied head and hands used for close-ups.

In the more lavish new version, producer Dino de Laurentiis – the Italian film tycoon who recently moved to Hollywood – commissioned a 40ft tall mechanical model, weighing six-and-a-half tons, hydraulically controlled by a team of six, and covered in horsehair. Even so, the figure came apart and most of its acting was done in little bits – a couple of hands here, a head or a leg there. And there was also an actor dressed in a monkey suit.

Yet Kong lives. In a London play last year he was used as a symbol of the revolutionary working class. The new film suggests that he represents the Third World fighting against colonial exploitation. But his enduring popular appeal is as the lovable heavy in a cunning reworking of the Beauty and the Beast fairy-tale.

The 1933 film began with what was claimed as an old Arabian proverb, written in the style of pure biblical Hollywood: 'And the Beast looked

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Beauty and the Beast. Heroine Jessica Lange is held in the 40ft tall mechanical ape's hand. Producer de Laurentiis wanted the 'romance' between King Kong and the girl to be more explicit in his film.



upon the face of Beauty and lo! his hand was stayed from killing and from that day forward he was as one dead'.

The new version sets King Kong in the present day. Heroine Jessica Lange, a former model in her first film, is more liberated than the original's Fay Wray and even calls Kong a 'goddamn chauvinist pig ape'. But the theme – ape meets girl, ape gets girl, ape loses girl – remains the same. 'There is a relationship between Beauty and the Beast,' says de Laurentiis, who approved a scene in which Kong's finger removes most of the girl's clothing.

The film's director, John Guillermin, 50, was born in London, so preserving a British link with the ape – the original story was partly written by Edgar Wallace. Guillermin made the immensely successful disaster film 'Towering Inferno', described by one director who turned down the chore as 'the kind of film where you can never remember the director's name'.

It is likely to be the same with 'King Kong'. The name most associated with the new version is producer de Laurentiis, 57, flamboyant son of a Neapolitan pasta maker whose idea of style used to be hiring Christopher Fry to write the script of his epic 'The Bible', but who also backed Fellini and Visconti.

De Laurentiis says the inspiration for the film came from seeing a poster for the original in his daughter's bedroom. He spent £12 million on the film and says, and no doubt hopes, that 'it is a film for all the family'. But whatever fortune awaits the great ape in 1977, one fact is certain – King Kong will survive unscathed.



1976 poster: King Kong, on the World Trade Centre, fights jets.



1933 film still: King Kong, on top of the Empire State Building, fights biplanes.



The end: Jessica Lange weeps by the dead ape, seen here in a non-mechanical, styrofoam version.



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