

January 1977

Reader's Digest

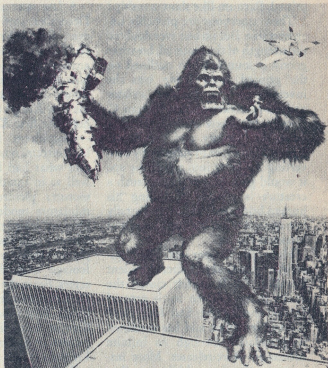
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KING KONG— ON THE RAMPAGE AGAIN

Condensed from
TIME



The 1976 version of the movie classic is basically the same "Beauty and the Beast" story. But the newly created special effects are sheer magic

ON THE FACE OF IT, nothing could be more preposterous than the story of a love affair between the oddest couple in popular culture: a beautiful blonde and an ape who is 40 feet tall, fierce of mien and manner, yet at heart just a big adolescent, bumbling spectacularly through his first crush.

But somehow it worked, back when the first *King Kong* movie was produced 43 years ago. And darned if it does not seem that it is going to work again, in this supposedly more sophisticated age, in the new \$24-million film version released simultaneously in an unprecedented 1000 theaters on December

17. Is it the ultimate triumph of special effects over common sense? A weird sexual charge, heavy in portent, reassuringly innocent in presentation? Or is it just an act of primal, Barnum-like showmanship?

Those questions are probably unanswerable. But no one ever doubted the strength of the material, however goony it sounds when outlined on the printed page. *Kong* was the invention of a pioneer aviator and moviemaker named Merian C. Cooper. He knew instinctively that what the "Beauty and the Beast" legend might lose in subtlety by converting the beast into a gigantic ape it would gain in raw power: such a creature is capable of killing his human bride, should he accidentally lose control of his basically good and innocent nature.

How right Cooper was. The original *Kong* opened just after President Franklin D. Roosevelt closed the banks in 1933. Even so, it grossed \$90,000 during the first four days' run in New York and has sustained its popularity through an infinite succession of re-releases. More important, the house-high ape has become a pop-culture staple in everything from cartoons to ad campaigns.

Special effects, of course, lie at the heart of the movie's appeal. Indeed, it is fair to say that if there is something like a common denominator in the big movies that gross millions—films as diverse as *The Exorcist*, *Earthquake* and *Jaws*—it is their special effects, the sheer movie magic they feature. From the start

of the new *Kong*, it was generally and, to some degree, falsely understood that the movie would stand or fall on how realistic the big ape would seem on screen.

A late start and the self-imposed December 1976 release date, however, forced British director John Guillermin to start shooting before anyone had a clear conception of how *Kong* should look and how he should be made to work. Though the new *Kong's* technicians correctly hold the first *Kong's* special effects—magnificent for their time—in high esteem, no one wanted to duplicate what had been done then (as well as in hundreds of inexpensive monster pictures since): build a miniature model of the ape, place him in scaled-down sets, animate him through the use of stop-motion photography, and then blend this footage with that employing live actors. From the first, producer Dino De Laurentiis leaned toward the colossal. When he was talking Guillermin into signing on for the project, he had cried, "For you, John, I make 100-foot monster."

Well, almost. On Stage 17 at Metro, there rests a creature 40 feet tall when fully assembled, supported by a 3½-ton aluminum frame, his flesh made of latex and covered by 1012 pounds of horsetail hair, every hank of which was sewn into place individually. His innards consist of 3700 feet of hydraulic hose and 4500 feet of electrical wiring. He is animated by a team of 20 operators, each working a lever that controls

a single movement. The cost: \$1.7 million. Though this mighty construction was used extensively in only one sequence, he was worth every penny. It is impossible to tell in the finished product where his work ends and that of more mobile and manageable representations of Kong take over.

Most of the action sequences, in which audiences see Kong rampaging around his jungle habitat or tearing around New York, were done by a man in a monkey suit. He is Rick Baker, 25, a makeup man "slightly dippy about gorillas," who began making great-ape costumes as a kind of hobby long before he signed on to create Kong's face and form for De Laurentiis. Baker slipped into one of his own creations and began playing Kong on sets scaled so that the medium-height Baker would look like a 40-foot ape against them. His intensive study of these creatures paid off. Says Guillermin: "I spent long weeks at various zoos studying gorillas, especially how they move. I was stunned when Rick put on that suit. He was a gorilla in every move and gesture."

Rick enjoyed it, too—most of the time. "I guess disappearing into my gorilla suit and thumping my chest has something to do with a transference of power. You really do feel pretty powerful in there." Of course, it was not all mangoes and bananas for him. The temperature went over 100 degrees F. inside his latex and bearskin outfit, and he sweated off five pounds every working day.

Then, too, he was not responsible for his own facial expressions. He had five different masks to wear, depending on Kong's basic mood in the shot. The masks could be made to change expression—but not by Baker. Hydraulic facial "muscles," all controlled by a technician, tug the features into smiles, frowns and full-scale rage.

Possibly the most remarkable piece of Kongcraft, however, is the giant pair of arms employed mainly to pick up and caress Jessica Lange, 27, the fashion-model-turned-actress who plays his inamorata. The hands are six feet across, and the arms weigh 1650 pounds each. They were designed and built separately from the complete Kong body, and suspended from a crane in order to lift Lange 30 or 40 feet into the air.

Hydraulics were used to manipulate the huge fingers, and there was great concern that they might lack fine motor skills and accidentally crush Lange. She, however, had only a couple of bad times while caught in Kong's grip. Once the pursuing hand came down too hard on her, crushing her painfully against the jungle floor. In another sequence, when Kong is in a playfully amorous mood and is stroking Lange's face and shoulders, he is supposed to tap her lightly on the head. One of the technicians miscalculated and landed a blow that caused the actress to see stars. The effect of these sequences is as awesome as the trouble they caused, especially in the fussy business of seamlessly melding

ape and human footage—essentially by employing sophisticated double-exposure techniques.

Unlike Fay Wray in the original *Kong*, who was mostly called upon to scream and faint, Lange plays a hip movie starlet who drifts into the picture as a castaway from a wrecked yacht. Once she gets over the shock of Kong's first spectacular pickup, she treats him like all the apeline movie moguls she has had to fend off. She tries helplessness ("I can't stand heights"), anger ("Chauvinist-pig ape!"), some impromptu analysis after striking out at her captor ("It's a sign of insecurity, like when you knock over trees"), even guileful seduction ("I'm a Libra, what are you?"). Eventually she and Kong actually begin to build a . . . well, a relationship, something that was never made explicit between Wray and her big boy. Considering that Lange played most of these big scenes with a thing, not an actor,

and that sometimes she worked to no more than a mark on the wall where the ape would be in the finished picture, her accomplishment is considerable.

Kong, too, has greater charm than he did 43 years ago. He no longer gnaws distractedly on human beings as he did when he got anxious in the original. One of his best moments occurs when Lange, trying to escape him, falls in a mud puddle. Tenderly he picks her up and trots her off to a waterfall for a shower, dunks her in the pool below for a rinse and then, still cupping her in his paws, blows her dry with several mighty breaths.

It is the innocence of Kong that involves the viewer in his strangely touching fate, his last stand atop—this time—the World Trade Center. "I got here a great adventure, a great love story," De Laurentiis said recently. "No one cry when Jaws die. When the monkey die, people gonna cry."

Wouldn't You Know!

WORKMEN HAD TO REPLACE a sign warning motorists of strong winds between Reno and Carson City. The old one blew down. —UPI

ENCHANTED VILLAGE, an amusement park in Buena Park, Calif., canceled one attraction—a 40-foot trailer shaped like an ark and containing several pairs of animals—because of heavy rains. —R. J. Evers in *The National Observer*

AN ATLANTA RESIDENT received this letter from a local store: "Dear Customer No. 104068, your name is important to us . . ."

—Hugh Park in *Atlanta Journal*

THE LINCOLN HEIGHTS, Calif., branch of Bank of America bounced a \$3 check drawn on an already overdrawn account—even though the payee was "Future Millionaires Club."

—*The BankAmericana*