

**KING KONG**  
THE OLD VS. THE NEW  
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# KING KONG

PRE-PRODUCTION DRAWING PREPARED BY  
MARIO LARRINAGA  
FOR THE ORIGINAL 1933 RKO FILM



# BATTLE OF THE TITANS!

Two New Kongs Challenge the King







The new incarnations of Kong are competing with a visual masterpiece. The special-effects work shown here reveals the great attention paid both to realism and to artistic composition. Kong attacks the villagers . . . Kong lifts a bridge . . .

by GARY GIRANI

In one of the most talked about legal hassles in the movie industry's history, both Paramount and Universal have simultaneously claimed remake rights to Merian C. Cooper's immortal *King Kong*, and, at press time, plans for two separate incarnations are underway.

Following the seemingly endless run of "disaster" movies, what better vehicle for way-out escapism can there be than the tale of a 50-foot-tall Beast tearing asunder the greatest city in the world in search of his Beauty? While many conservative film aficionados may flinch at the prospects of an updated *Kong*, the time is commercially right for this sort of wild venture. So it is not terribly surprising that the idea occurred to two major studios at roughly the same time. The surprises emerged when it became imperative to decide who has the right to do what.

Ironically, RKO Pictures (the original film's distributor) never officially renewed their copyright for *Kong*, but after interest was expressed in a remake, a renewal of sorts was mysteriously "uncovered" by the Library of Congress. Adding to the confusion, the novel on which the

movie was based is in the public domain.

Yet despite Universal's seemingly clear field, RKO filed a suit against the studio for copyright infringement and asked for an injunction to keep their movie from being made.

Universal, meanwhile, sued RKO and Paramount's producer, Dino De Laurentiis—who, in turn, filed a \$90 million countersuit against Universal and attacked the latter studio with a second injunction.

What the eventual outcome of these court cases will be is still far from certain, but there is at least one bottom line to the battling: it was recently determined that Universal's right to the *Kong* property was derived from a verbal agreement with an RKO representative, whereas Paramount and De Laurentiis possess the far more persuasive argument of the written contract. So with little more than righteous indignation behind them, the Universal folk have reluctantly agreed to delay production and release of their version until 18 months after Paramount has hit American audiences with theirs.

Already talk of Universal's "throwing in the towel" is seeping through the film fan grapevine. If





this should happen, it would be a great shame. For based on all information received thus far about the two super-productions, it seems likely that the Universal *Kong* would be the superior product.

### THE UNIVERSAL KONG

Perhaps the single most important contribution to *Kong's* lasting success was the incredible visual magic provided by the late Willis O'Brien. O'Brien astounded 1933 audiences with the most effective technique yet devised for depicting gargantuan creatures: a procedure called stop-motion animation. This process is almost identical in principle to cartoon animation, except that a three-dimensional miniature is employed rather than a series of drawings. With numerous moveable joints, the miniature is moved a fraction of an inch and then shot with a single frame. The procedure is repeated until the frames, run in succession, create the illusion of the model's fluid movement.

O'Brien pioneered this process with his silent version of Doyle's *The Lost World*, brought it to full dramatic force in *King Kong*, then applied it in lesser productions like

*Son of Kong*, *Mighty Joe Young*, *The Giant Behemoth* and *The Black Scorpion*, films noted primarily for their special effects.

Pupil to O'Brien and an accomplished animator in his own right is Ray Harryhausen, who developed his own variation of the stop-motion technique ("Dynamation") for use in *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, *First Men in the Moon*, *Jason and the Argonauts* and a host of other well-received fantasy films. Harryhausen has long expressed interest in handling the effects of a *Kong* remake; curiously enough, although considered top man in his field, he'll never even get near the project.

To develop the creative visual illusions of Universal's projected *Kong*, a lesser known artist named Jim Danforth was recruited. Danforth, like Harryhausen, is a great fan of Willis O'Brien and an expert in the field of stop-motion photography. At age 35, he has received two Academy Award nominations (Harryhausen, in the business since the mid-forties, has yet to receive one) and is responsible for the effects, in part or whole, of the following major films: *The Time Machine*, *Jack the Giant Killer*, *Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm*, *Seven Faces of Dr.*



Kong saves Ann from a pterodactyl . . . Kong is puzzled by Ann's terror . . . While the original story of *Kong* is in public domain, the prehistoric beasts used in the RKO 1933 original are covered by copyright. There'll be new beasts in the new films.







Kong holds their lives by a thread . . . Kong on display — the dreaded beast suddenly sympathetic and an object of pity, while our heroes seem cruel, heartless.

*Lao, Master of the World, Flesh Gordon, When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth*, and the science fiction television series *Outer Limits*. Many fans consider Danforth's stop-motion techniques to be the finest developed.

Although production on Universal's *The Legend of King Kong* has indeed stopped, at least for the time being, Danforth is still on the studio payroll and is busy developing "alternate" prehistoric monsters for the giant gorilla to wrestle.

Incredibly enough, using the same type dinosaurs that appeared in the 1933 production would be an infringement of copyright, so in addition to substituting the reptiles, Danforth has also made plans to include a wide variety of worms, crabs and other original though no less awesome adversaries to pit against the King.

Like the marvelous special effects, other production credits for Universal's Kong are impressive. Handling the directing chores is Joseph Sargent (*The Taking of Pelham 1 2 3* and *Tribes*) from a script set in the 1930's, by Bo Goldman. The studio also plans to use the original film's music score composed by Max Steiner, and has reportedly hired

Fay Wray for a cameo appearance.

Casting is still somewhat up in the air, although Susan Blakely was approached during the filming of *Rich Man, Poor Man* and is a possible candidate for the role of Ann Darrow. An unsubstantiated report has the cigar-chomping Lt. Columbo, Peter Falk, playing the rousing role of Carl Denham, Kong's showman captor. The thrilling climax to the film, the airplane onslaught atop the Empire State building, is to be filmed in Sensurround, the Oscar-winning audio gimmick introduced in Universal's *Earthquake*.

### THE PARAMOUNT KONG

Across town at Paramount, Dino De Laurentiis' remake, *King Kong: The Legend Reborn*, has less going for it. Principal worry among film buffs is the odd choice of special effects. De Laurentiis threw out the idea of using stop-motion photography after considering the time-consuming aspects of this process, and instead whipped up a Kong-sized mock-up of the gorilla, computer controlled, at a cost of 2 million.

The 40-foot-tall robot (probably the largest studio monster pop ever





conceived) is to be placed atop the World Trade Center building for the obviously revised climax.

Eye-witnesses have claimed this "Mechani-Kong" looks "dumb." Rumors also persist that the studio is having trouble operating the thing, as the two *right* arms developed for it (apparently to save the cost of creating a separate mold for a left arm) are incapable of scaling buildings. Again, only rumors.

What isn't a rumor, however, is that producer De Laurentiis stirred up a racial hornet's nest when he asked black males to try out for the role of Kong by jumping around in a bent over position while wearing a monkey suit. De Laurentiis apparently hopes to supplement the robot's performance with the suits and black actors, provided he survives the lambasting from angered racial groups.

Elsewhere at Paramount, production credits are serviceable, though not particularly inspiring. Miscast are Jeff Bridges and Charles Grodin in the two male leads, and an unknown named Jennifer Lange has been signed to play Ann Darrow. Lorenzo Semple Jr.'s script, although based on the 1933 RKO film, is updated to a contemporary

setting (ergo the World Trade Center death scene).

To his credit De Laurentiis has publicized his upcoming *Kong* well. A full-page ad of the poster artwork (showing the ape crunching airplanes atop the Trade towers) appeared in the November 30th issue of *The New York Times*, and thousands responded to Paramount's offer of a free souvenir from the movie; an 8 x 10 black-and-white glossy of the poster artwork.

Announced for speedy release in the Fall of 1976 the Paramount/De Laurentiis film may surprise moviegoers with some satisfying new effects, although mock-ups of any kind so far always have proved inferior to animated miniatures, the latter technique affording a range of changing expressions and movements simply impossible to attain with life-sized dummies.

As commercial hopes for De Laurentiis increase, stronger odds against Universal's version being lensed at all are mounting. We have recently learned that representatives from Universal are negotiating for a percentage of the Paramount *Kong*, a sure sign that U's interest in doing their own monster movie has dissipated. ★



Top: Fay Wray, who was Ann in the original, shows the actual height of the Kong miniature, in a recent photo. Below: the spectacular and tragic end of *King Kong*.

Promotional art for the Paramount *Kong* shows the updated finale atop the World Trade Center Towers.

