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THE MAKING OF



KING KONG

Following his critical look at Dino de Laurentiis' remake last issue, effects expert **John Brosnan** now takes us back 34 years to the Golden Age of Horror (with apologies to Denis Gifford) for the inside story on the making of the original **KING KONG**.

The early 1930s were great years for film monsters. 1930 saw the arrival of Dracula, 1931 was the year that Frankenstein's creature lurched across the screen, and in 1933 King Kong erupted out of the jungles of Skull Island and almost destroyed New York. Not bad going for a monster who was really only about eighteen inches high!

The story of **King Kong** began when Merian C. Cooper, an American producer and director who had made several documentaries in Africa, decided in 1929 to make a film about a giant ape going on a rampage through New York. His original idea was to use a live gorilla but due to financial problems the project was temporarily shelved. Then, in 1931, when Cooper was working at the RKO Studios he came across the work of special effects wizard Willis H. O'Brien, and quickly decided that it

would be cheaper to utilize O'Brien's techniques for his giant ape film rather than use a real one. And thus the film **King Kong** was born.

Willis H. O'Brien had perfected the art of stopmotion photography—the technique whereby a model, photographed one frame at a time, and adjusted by hand between each exposure to a new position, can be made to appear to be moving on its own.

STOP-MOTION PHOTOGRAPHY

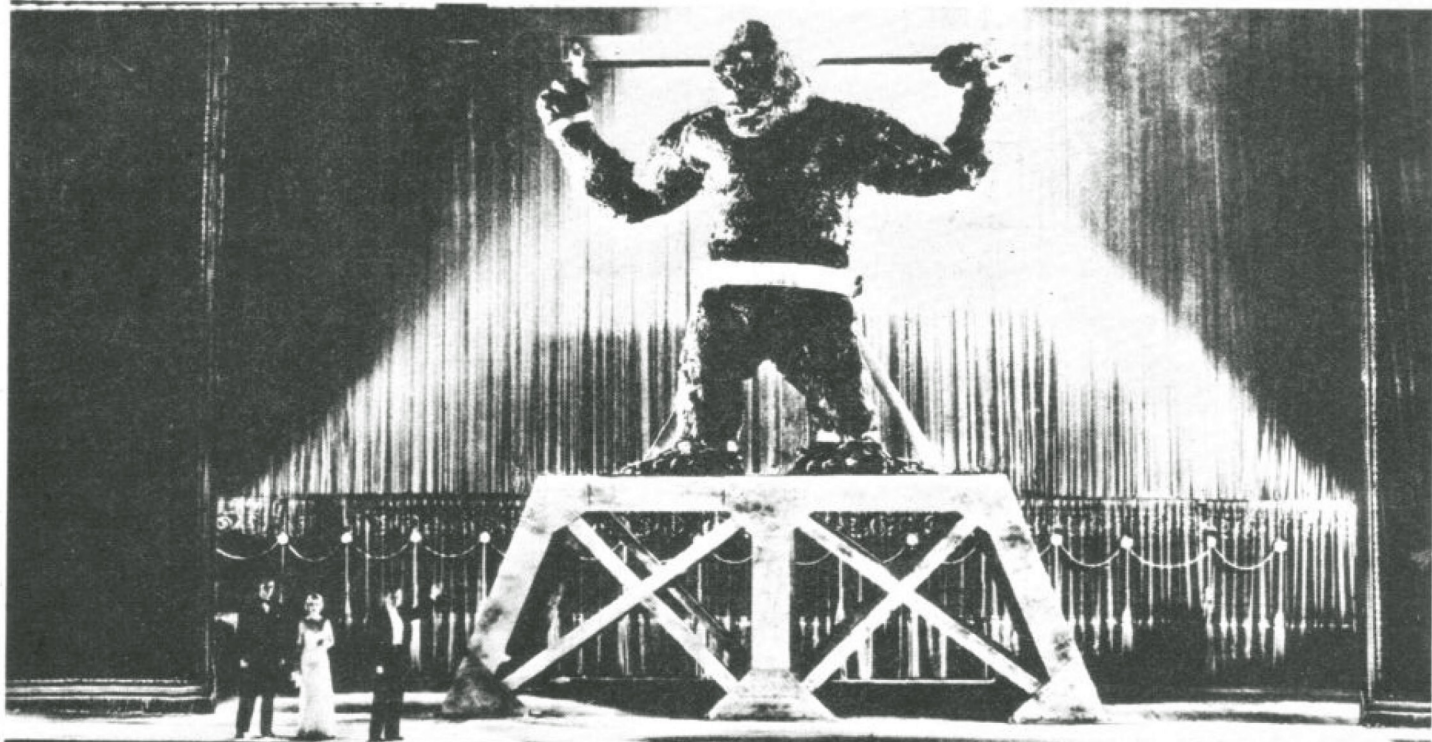
O'Brien began his career as a marble cutter but then became interested in sculpture and cartoon animation. One day, for his own amusement, he began experimenting with stop-motion photography and filmed two small boxers which he had made out of clay. Intrigued with the result he became more ambitious and

produced a one-minute film of a caveman and a dinosaur. The choice of subject was significant because most of O'Brien's later projects were concerned with prehistoric monsters of one kind or another. The caveman and dinosaur were crude, having been constructed out of clay around wooden frames, but one film producer was sufficiently impressed to advance O'Brien the sum of 5,000 dollars to make a more elaborate version of the same subject. It took O'Brien two months to make it and the film only ran five minutes on the screen but the Edison Company of New York bought it and released it in 1914.

When the picture, called **The Dinosaur and the Missing Link**, proved a success O'Brien made a number of similar films for the Edison Company but, unfortunately, none of them have survived. His reputation boosted by these,



Above left: A classic fight scene between ape and pterodactyl—sadly missing from the remake. Above right: Kong surveys his prize, the terrified Fay Wray. While below the crucified Kong is exhibited to a stunned world after his capture and journey to New York.



O'Brien had sufficient backing to make, in 1919, a much more elaborate film called **The Ghost of Slumber Mountain** which was a big success and grossed over 100,000 dollars (it had only cost 3,000 to make). Encouraged by this, O'Brien began planning an even bigger project—a whole full-length feature film. This turned out to be **The Lost World**, based on Arthur Conan Doyle's novel about an area in South America where dinosaurs have survived to the present day. This film was released in 1925.

The Lost World marked a great step forward in model-animation techniques. Instead of clay models, O'Brien used models made of rubber, a big advantage as these could be put under hot lights without fear of them melting, and also a more realistic appearance could be achieved. More than forty models of various

types of prehistoric monsters, quite complicated in construction with articulated wooden frames and wire frames, were used in the film. O'Brien's assistant was Marcel Delgado—a former art student who O'Brien had persuaded to take up a career in special effects (Delgado's speciality was the actual sculpting of the models).

CREATION INTO KONG

The Lost World was another big success for O'Brien so he was able to persuade the RKO Studio to finance an even bigger animation project. Called **Creation**, the film was going to show the beginning and development of life on Earth. O'Brien did a large amount of work on **Creation** which included the construction of several monsters and the painting

of prehistoric scenery on large sheets of glass, as well as countless illustrations of what would take place in the film (called a storyboard).

But then RKO was hit by financial problems and the project had to be abandoned. Then Merian C. Cooper became involved with the studio, was deeply impressed with O'Brien's unfinished work on **Creation** and made the decision to revive his own abandoned project, about the giant ape, making use of O'Brien's special effects (several of the models, and some of the scenery, from **Creation** appeared in **King Kong**).

Some people are still under the impression that **King Kong** was the creation of the famous thriller writer Edgar Wallace but though his name appears as script writer in the film's credits he didn't really have anything to do with it. The Executive Producer, David O.



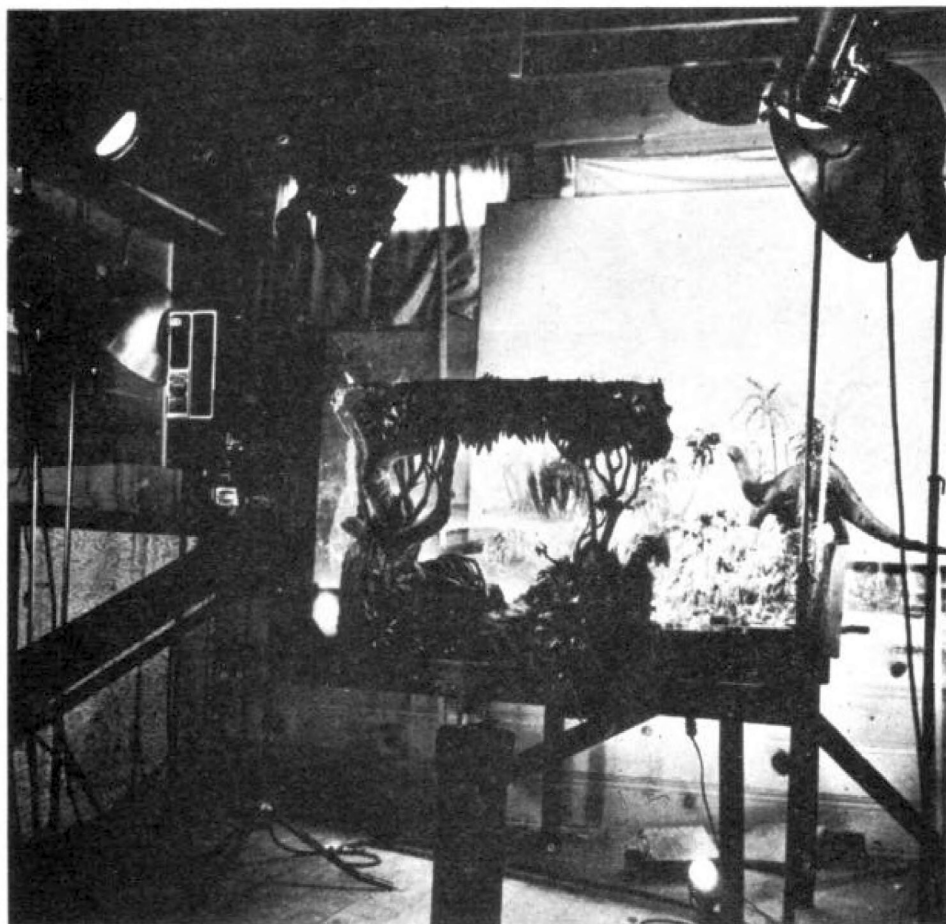
Above: The new Kong breaks loose. Above right: The new Fay Wray (Jessica Lange) faints before the sight of the forty foot ape.



Heroic Bruce Cabot, bedragled Fay Wray and a cast of dozens await the coming of the Great Ape.



Above: Dino's pride and joy. The full-size mechanical hands (with sixteen fully-automated movements) try out position number twelve on the lovely Ms Lange.



A rare shot of the Willis O'Brien studios in 1932. Note the fixed camera (centre left), "layers" of jungle, and brontosaurus (centre right).

Selznick, had brought the British writer to Hollywood to work on the film but before he could begin he died of pneumonia. Most of the script was written by Cooper and his partner Ernest B. Schoedsack, but, of course, O'Brien himself was responsible for much of the story of **King Kong**. His story-board of the animation sequences provided the basis for the script writers to work on.

The models in **King Kong** were the most sophisticated that had ever been built. During the planning stages O'Brien drew several sketches of Kong from which Marcel Delgado sculpted a dozen trial models of the ape. For the film itself six eighteen-inch models of Kong were constructed so that two or three different special effects sequences could be filmed at the same time. The models in Kong were the first to utilise metal skeletons, with ball and socket joints, which allowed them to be moved into various positions that were anatomically correct. Kong's flesh was made of rubber and covered with rabbit's fur.

Apart from the models the composite Kong also consisted of several full-scale sections, including a twenty foot high bust of his head and shoulders which was actually a complicated piece of engineering—the eyes swivelled and the mouth could open and close. In the film it was used for close-ups of Kong's face and for shots of people struggling in his jaws (most of which were later cut by the censor). The bust was constructed of wood and metal, and covered with bear hides. Other full-scale sections included a giant foot and a giant mechanical hand. The latter was used for the close-ups of the actress Fay Wray in the grip of Kong.

'MY FEAR WAS REAL . . .'

Years later she described what it was like filming such scenes: "The hand and the arm were about eight feet long and inside the furry arm there was a steel bar. The whole contraption, with me in the hand, could be raised and lowered like a crane. The fingers would be pressed around my waist while I was in a standing position. I would then be raised about ten feet into the air in the ape's hand, but then his fingers would gradually loosen and begin to open. My fear was real as I grabbed onto his wrist, his thumb, wherever I could, to keep from slipping out of that paw! When I could sense that the moment of minimum safety had arrived I would call imploringly to the director and ask to be lowered to the ground. I would have a few minutes rest, be re-secured in the paw and then the ordeal would begin all over again."

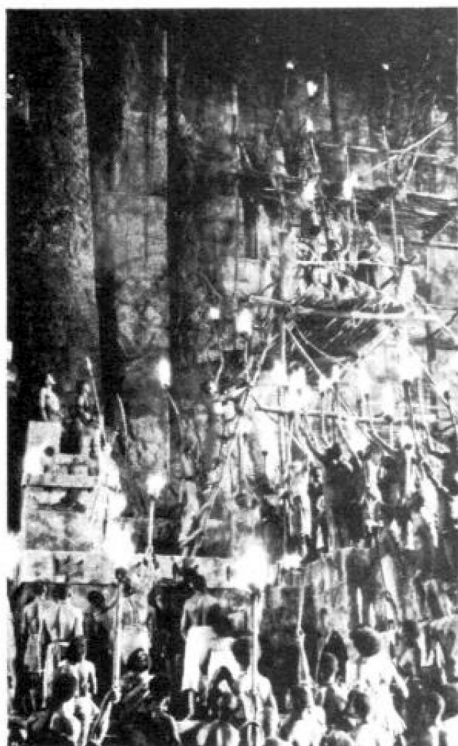
Apart from model animation **King Kong** also utilized practically every other special effects technique known to the film industry at that time, such as glass shots, travelling mattes, rear projection and optical printing (the latter was handled by Linwood Dunn, the man who invented the optical printer).

Many of O'Brien's methods were kept secret during the making of the film for fear of imitation but basically they were the same ones he had used in his earlier films, though much

improved upon and refined by the latest techniques in process photography. 'The first shot RKO ever made in rear process is in **Kong**,' said Cooper. 'It's where Fay is on top of the tree and the allosaurus comes for her. That shot took us three days because none of us knew how to do it.' Rear process is the system where an image is projected onto a screen from behind while the actors are photographed in front of it—with the result that the projected image, which is usually background scenery, and the actors are combined on one piece of film.

MINIATURE PROJECTION

Another first for **Kong** was the use of miniature projection. 'We invented it for **King Kong**,' said Cooper, 'but I didn't patent it . . . I was damn fool. Nobody patented it.' Miniature projection is really the reverse of rear projection—it involves a scaled set containing the models being set up in front of a small screen onto which footage of the *actors* is projected. As each frame of the live action appears on the screen the models are photographed and then re-positioned. The procedure is repeated over and over again until the necessary footage has been shot, thus creating the illusion that the actors and models are together in the same scene. One of the many examples of this in **Kong** is the famous scene where the giant ape plucks off Fay Wray's clothing (thanks to the censor this scene is missing from most prints of the film). 'A movie was first taken of Fay alone,' said Cooper, 'while invisible wires pulled off her clothes. Then the miniature Kong was placed on a set built on a waist-high platform, about twice the



Left: The great wall, separating Kong from the fearful, worshipping natives of Skull Island. Right: Another excellent effect. Kong prevents Bruce Cabot from rescuing his newly-offered plaything by pulling up the rope they were sliding down.



Above: An impressive shot utilising back projection (for the aerial scene of New York) with superimposed model bi-planes, as Cabot rescues Fay Wray atop the Empire State Building.



size of a dining-room table, on which miniature trees, ferns and plaster of paris rocks had been arranged. Back of this the movie of Fay Wray was projected and Kong's movements were made to correspond with it.'

Apart from Kong himself Fay Wray is the one most remembered from the film. As the giant ape's love object, Ms Wray didn't have much to do except scream, but she performed this task extremely well: 'I just imagined I was miles from help,' she said, 'and . . . well, you'd scream too if you just imagined that situation with that monster up there. And when the picture was finished they took me into the sound room and then I screamed for about five minutes—just steady screaming up and down the scale with a wide variety of inflections, and the studio chose the one that produced the most ice up and down the spine.'

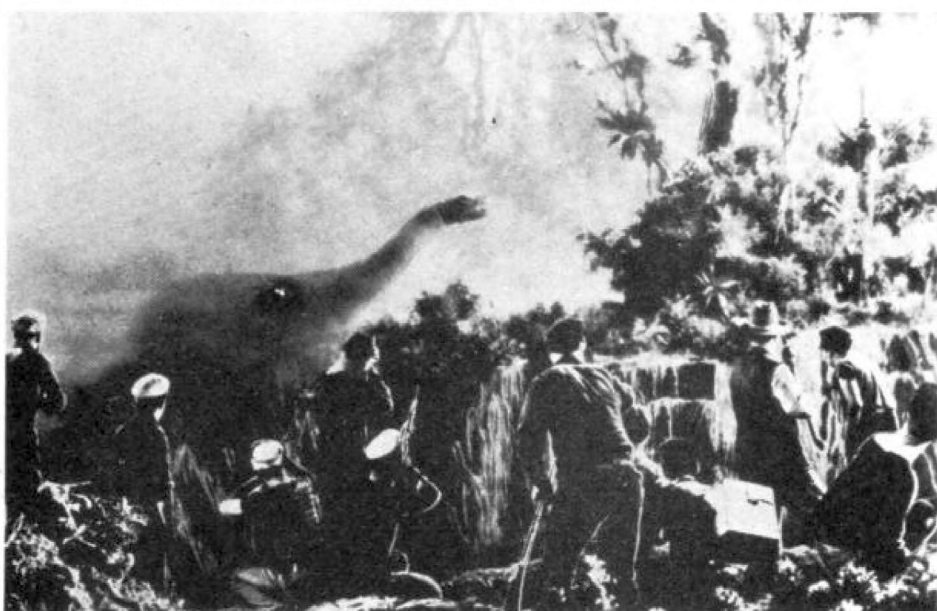
THE TALLEST LEADING MAN

Describing how she had become involved with **King Kong**, Ms Wray said: 'I knew the producers and admired their previous work, so when Mr Cooper said to me that he had a film in mind for me I was very interested. But the only thing he'd tell me was that it was going to have the tallest leading man in Hollywood. Well, naturally I thought of Clark Gable but when the script came I was *absolutely appalled*! I thought it was a practical joke. I really didn't have much appetite for doing it except that I did admire these two producers and I realized that the film did have, at least, scope . . .'

Whatever happened to King Kong? The models of him, that is, as we all know that the real Kong fell to his death from the top of the Empire State Building. It's been a question that's perplexed many people over the years.



Above: A (needless-to-say) posed publicity shot of Wray and Cabot.



Above: The final footage of the effect illustrated on page 43.



Above: The police want to kill the escaped Kong. Cabot, flanked by Armstrong, argues against it, saying that the ape holds Fay Wray his prisoner as he climbs the Empire State Building.

In 1970, at a cinema exhibition held at the Round House in London, a foot-high model of an ape was displayed—and described by the exhibition organisers as one of the original Kong models. But Ray Harryhausen, a protégé of O'Brien's and the film industry's top animator today, told me what it really was: 'Actually it was one of the models from **Mighty Joe Young** (a film made by O'Brien and Harryhausen in 1949 which, like **Kong**, was about a giant ape captured in some exotic locale and brought back to America) that I had designed for the picture. It was rather tatty because someone had removed the fur. It was one of six models we built for the film. Four were about one foot high and the other two were slightly smaller. The actual models of Kong were bigger (at least 18 inches high). They were, I believe, destroyed and converted for use in **Son of Kong**, the sequel to **Kong** that was made the same year (1933).'

Mighty Joe Young was one of the few successes that Willis H. O'Brien had after **King Kong**. Most of his projects had to be abandoned through lack of finance, such as **The War Eagle**—about giant eagles attacking New York—**Gwangi**—about a group of cowboys who discover prehistoric monsters in Texas (later made by Harryhausen under the title of **Valley of Gwangi**) and **El Toro Estrella**—about a boy, a bull and a dinosaur. Harryhausen told me why things went so badly for O'Brien: 'The success of **King Kong** did stimulate a certain interest and enthusiasm but little was known about the process of

KONG—A GIANT ROBOT?

dimensional animation. I remember reading all sorts of misleading stories about a giant mechanical robot being constructed for the film. Then again, many of O'Brien's best ideas required a substantial budget to carry them out properly. The major studios were really not equipped to produce his kind of film. It would have required a really interested independent producer.

'The difference between his films and mine,' said Harryhausen, 'is that we design them in a different way. In **Kong** and **Mighty Joe Young** most of the scenery was painted on large glasses. It was necessary to have a large staff of artists to keep these paintings progressively ready to shoot on and it became quite a costly proposition. You can get a wonderful mood with this effect but it's just too expensive and time-consuming. We use real scenery and matte our models into it.'

But what was King Kong's creator like as a person? 'He had quite a lot of tragedy and disappointment in his life,' said Harryhausen, (apart from the fluctuations in O'Brien's film career he had also suffered in his personal life—in 1933, just before the release of **King Kong**, his estranged wife shot and killed their two sons) 'but he was a very happy man and a very wonderful person. He had a great sense of humour. When I was in my teens he and his work were a great inspiration to me. It was certainly a fine experience to work with him and to know him.'