“King Kong” is the product of a remarkable group of daredevils, artists, and craftsmen. Imagination and skill gave a Depression-crushed world an entertainment that RKO–Radio Pictures called “the stuff for which movies were made!”

The vision had originated with Merian C. Cooper, who had been a newspaper reporter, a wartime aviator, an explorer of jungles and deserts, and a movie producer. Cooper fulfilled his idea with the help of Ernest B. Schoedsack, a cinematographer and combat cameraman. The artists worked under this slogan: “Distant, Difficult, and Dangerous.” Their exploits yielded such naturalistic films as “Grass” (1925; from the mountains of Persia), Chang” (1927; from the jungles of Siam), and “The Four Feathers” (1929; an African adventure). Many genuine Cooper & Schoedsack exploits would be exaggerated for “King Kong.”

Cooper’s friend, zoologist W. Douglas Burden, had found on Komodo Island (Dutch East Indies) a gigantic species of lizard, once believed extinct. Cooper also had a fascination with gorillas. Considering Burden’s interest in the Komodo Dragons, Cooper imagined the capture of a massive ape. Burden also had included his wife in the expedition—an inspiration to Cooper.

Cooper imagined a gigantic gorilla in conflict with prehistoric reptiles. He envisioned the ape brought to America, escaping, and making a stand atop the Empire State Building.

Cooper enlisted Willis H. O’Brien, developer of dimensional animation, who had made dinosaurs appear to move. O’Brien photographed figures in subtle changes of position, one frame at a time. His short-film novelties had led to the production of “The Lost World” (1925) from Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel about dinosaurs. O’Brien’s protégé, sculptor Marcel Delgado, constructed 49 dinosaurs with rubber flesh over metallic skeletons.


Delgado fashioned an 18-inch model gorilla. Cooper and O’Brien staged a test reel in which Robert Armstrong, Bruce Cabot, and several extras fled various creatures. Kong, a gorilla 18 feet tall, toppled the men into a pit, then turned to rescue Fay Wray from a dinosaur.

Kong had a jointed skeleton under rubber and fur. The players were combined with beasts from “Creation” by full-scale background projection (to enlarge the filmed animals), O’Brien’s invention of miniature projection (to place actors within small-scale settings), and composites. The test was a success. Schoedsack joined as co-producer/director to handle the actors; Cooper supervised animation.

Novelist Edgar Wallace drafted a scenario. Wallace died unexpectedly, and James Ashmore Creelman completed a script. Cooper and Schoedsack wanted romance to strengthen the fantasy. The screenplay
The miniature airplanes were intercut with Navy aircraft—which Schoedsack filmed as they buzzed the real-world Empire State Building. (On screen, Cooper appears as a pilot, and Schoedsack as a gunner.)

The producers were appalled when, upon viewing the rushes, they realized Kong’s fur was rippling—caused by the fingerprints of the animators. But one executive was delighted, “Kong is mad! Look at him bristle!”

A huge mechanical bust of Kong held three men to control facial expressions. Two full-scale hands and arms were made. One holds Fay Wray and, elsewhere, drops a woman (Sandra Shaw) from a high vantage. A flying lizard’s full-scale lower body and legs seize Fay Wray.

Edwin Linden supervised photography. Much of the merging of miniature and full-scale elements was accomplished by Linwood G. Dunn’s crew of optical technicians. “O’Brien was a genius…,” Dunn said in 1976, “but so much a loner that he … wasn’t too aware of our work.” (Rumors persist that a man in an ape-suit impersonated Kong. The producers and artisans debunked this notion repeatedly.)

Cost-conscious executives had ordered the use of music from other pictures, but with Cooper’s connivance Max Steiner composed a thunderous score for a 46-piece orchestra. Sound-effects technician Murray Spivack attuned roars and screams to the music—sparing millions of moviegoers from head-aches.

Cooper pegged “Kong”’s final cost at $430,000. Studio overhead and the $177,633 spent on “Creation” brought the sum to $672,254.75. The box-office returns boosted RKO out of equity receivership, into which the studio had been placed by a trust company. The bankable appeal can only stem from many enjoyable qualities on many levels.

The quality that defies explanation is the performance of Kong himself. Associate producer Archie Marshek said the ape “could assume more expressions than many of our actors.” Others saw mannerisms of Cooper and O’Brien in Kong. Through some strange alchemy, the creators gave their mecha-


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