

King Kong

By Michael Price

“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!”

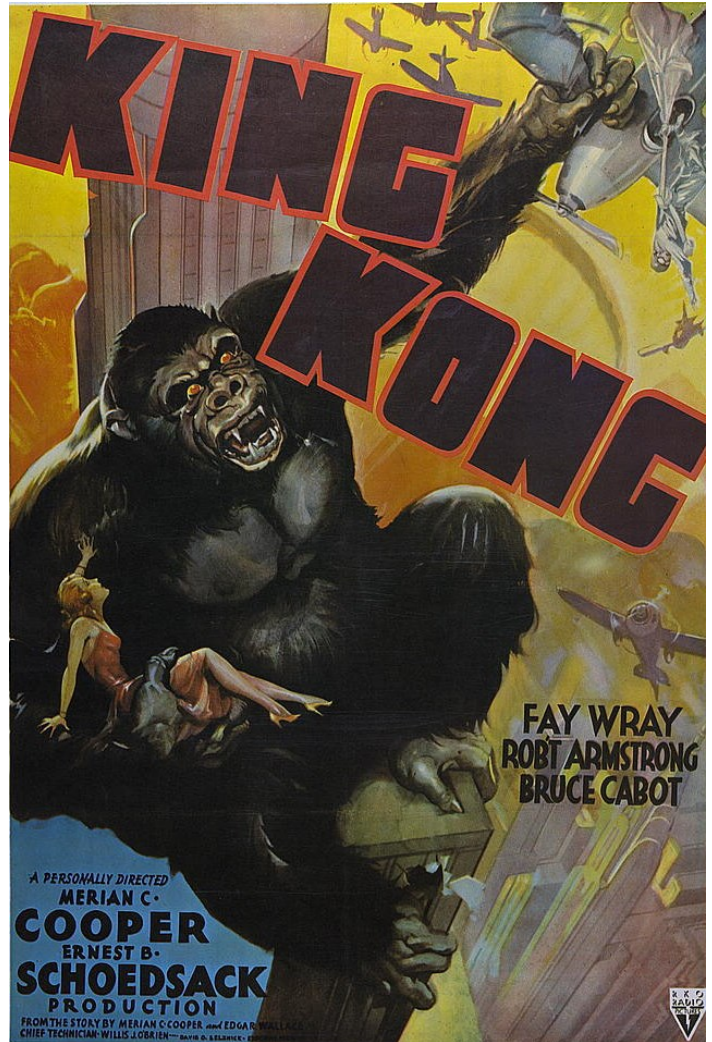
The vision had originated with Merian C. Cooper, who had been a newspaper reporter, a wartime aviator, an explorer of jungles and deserts, and a movie producer. Cooper fulfilled his idea with the help of Ernest B. Schoedsack, a cinematographer and combat cameraman. The artists worked under this slogan: “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.

In 1930, O’Brien and Harry Hoyt (of “The Lost World”) began another dinosaur epic, “Creation,” at RKO—Radio. Delgado built the animals. Merian Cooper joined RKO, summoned by production boss David O. Selznick. Cooper called for the addition of a gigantic gorilla to the “Creation” concept.



Original release poster. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.

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

was rewritten in fragments during 55 weeks of production by Ruth Rose, wife of Schoedsack.

The story has filmmaker Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong) leading an expedition to an island that harbors a god, Kong. The natives kidnap actress Ann Darrow (Fay Wray) as “the bride of Kong” and summon the beast. Denham and Ann’s lover, sailor Jack Driscoll (Bruce Cabot), follow with crewmen. Dinosaurs attack. Denham and Driscoll survive. Driscoll rescues Ann. Kong wrecks the village. Denham fells him with a gas bomb. Kong, taken to New York, breaks free and recaptures Ann. He climbs atop the Empire State Building, where he is killed by Navy planes. A policeman comments, “Those airplanes really got ’im.” Denham: “Oh, no. It wasn’t the airplanes. It was *Beauty* killed the Beast.”

A lightning pace and an underlying realism strengthen the fantasy. The clincher is the performance of Kong: Audiences identify with the rampaging, indignant beast.

Ruth Rose Schoedsack had been an actress who, idled by a strike, moved into scientific exploration. Ruth put much of herself into the feminine lead of “Kong.” Ann Darrow is an out-of-work actress who joins a bold adventure and finds love at sea. Ruth gave traits of Cooper and Schoedsack to the daredevil producer and the tough sailor.

Twin 18-inch models of Kong appear in the jungle sets—same scale for dinosaurs. Breath was supplied by animation of football bladders within the ribcages. A cantaloupe-sized Brontosaurus head was animated for close-ups. A mechanical swimming Brontosaurus was made in an inch-and-a-half scale. A 24-inch Kong was used in the Manhattan scenes, giving the ape a varying immensity to heighten the terrors.

O’Brien manipulated Kong and most of the other models. Twenty-four increments of movement produced one second of action: Only 15 to 20 feet of animation could be completed in a 10-hour day.

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 headaches.

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 mechanized beast a personality to rival that of any flesh-and-blood movie star. The unique charm of “King Kong” is beyond words.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Michael Price is lead author of the longest-running film-study franchise in commercial publishing—the 10-volume “Forgotten Horrors” encyclopedia, in continuous print since 1980. Price trained as a film critic/historian under the guidance of “American Cinematographer” magazine’s George E. Turner (1925-1999) and assisted with research and editing on Turner’s “The Making of King Kong” (Cranbury, N.J.: A.S. Barnes & Co.; 1975). Price produced an expanded edition of that volume in 2002.