

The 7th Voyage of Sinbad

By Tony Dalton

Ray Harryhausen was always very proud of what has now become a landmark film, as indeed was Charles Schneer, the film's producer. It was this movie that saw an end (much to Ray's delight) to a series of black and white monster movies and sent model stop-motion animation in a new direction. Ray had wanted to show what his style of visual effects could really achieve other than depicting dinosaurs and other creatures taking cities apart in the US and Europe. He always felt that there were other, more exciting avenues to explore and that legends and mythology were the way to go.



Princess Parisa (Kathryn Grant) and Sinbad (Kerwin Mathews) in the palace of the caliph. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

The project all started with the idea of animating a 'living' skeleton. That had been a dream of his since he began stop-motion model animation. It was inspired by Disney's "Skeleton Dance" (1928-29) which Ray saw at a picture house when only 9 years old. Like Willis O'Brien's "The Lost World" (1925) it made a huge impression on him. What if he animated a 'living' skeleton to fight a human actor? Now that would be dramatic.

So it was that in the late 1940s, after the war and before he began on "Mighty Joe Young" (1949), Ray put together the genesis of what would become known as "The 7th Voyage of Sinbad." He began by writing a two-page outline entitled "Sinbad the Sailor" and from that drew a set of key drawings (each depicting a sequence featuring creatures) that included Sinbad fighting a dragon, the batmen (not used in the final film), a Cyclops and a giant snake attacking sailors in a tree (also not used), two Cyclops fighting (again not used), a baby Roc being pulled from its shell, a Cyclops roasting a sailor and of course, the iconic 'living' skeleton dueling with Sinbad on a spiral staircase. He hiked the outline drawings around Hollywood producers but nobody was interested. Ray was told that costume adventures, especially Sinbad, were out of fashion. And so the project languished.

It wasn't until 1955 that Ray mentioned the project to Charles. They had by that time made three critically and commercially successful movies but Ray wanted to show what model stop-motion was really capable of and had always felt that the Sinbad project would illustrate the potential of using the medium in fantasy subjects. Ray showed Charles the

outline and drawings and Charles immediately saw the potential and commissioned several screenwriters to 'flesh out' Ray's outline and in 1957 Kenneth Kolb produced a screenplay that Ray and Charles approved of.

Now Ray had to produce what he had promised and this time in colour. He had always seen the picture in black in white but Charles insisted it had to be colour. Although he had experimented in colour as an amateur his last five features had all been black and white. Tests were made and after some time Ray felt he could produce what was required in colour. Production began and he travelled to the various locations to oversee and choreograph the action and then he returned to Los Angeles to begin animation. Ray spent the best part of a year on effects and animation. The rest is history.

"The 7th Voyage of Sinbad" was the first film that saw the use of the word Dynamation. This was an invention of Charles Schneer but it became the word that everyone used to describe Ray's particular form of animation of combining models with live action footage. It came about when Charles was sitting in his car in L.A. traffic and he noticed the word Dynaflo on his dashboard and thought that Dynamation was a great term to use for Ray's special kind of effects animation.

Until the end of 2014 a great many items from the film still survived, at least in part, and these included the dragon's head (the body was reused for the alligator in "The 3 Worlds of Gulliver" (1959) and

again later in a dinosaur), the adult and baby Roc's heads, the skeleton (it was reused in "Jason and the Argonauts" (1963) and the crossbow and arrow. Ray was careful about preserving elements of the films, not for museums but in case he wanted it for a subsequent picture. Later in life however, he realised just what he had in his collection and began then to treat them with more care.

Ray would always say that none of his projects were a one man effort but a combination of everyone's input. On all his films he would give credit where credit was due and "7th Voyage of Sinbad" was no exception. He would usually mention Charles, Kenneth Kolb, the director Nathan 'Jerry' Juran, Kerwin Mathews (Sinbad), George Lofgren (who built a lot of the miniature sets), Torin Thatcher (Sokurah) and Wilkie Cooper (cinematographer) when discussing the production in interviews. Although today his films are generally known as Ray Harryhausen films, he would always say they were a combined effort.

The film was a perfect blend of talent and imagination. Everything about it was new. Previous Sinbad movies had talked about creatures but Ray's imagination and unique animation meant they were seen for the first time and in colour. Wilkie Cooper photographed the film the way Ray had planned it in his storyboards and the actors brought a realism to the fantasy. It was a perfect combination.

It was amongst Ray's favourite films and was very dear to his heart in that it allowed him to escape the monster cycle and he was always proud of his characterisation and animation of the Cyclops, one of the key elements that impressed so many young film makers.

The effect of the film was huge. Not only was it a box office smash in 1958 but it has continued to make money throughout the intervening years. Perhaps more importantly it was been enormously influential to young film makers since that time. Many of today's fantasy film makers acknowledge the film as being a major influence including John Landis, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Rick Baker, Nick Park, Peter Jackson and James Cameron. As Ray would have said, 'there is no greater accolade than that.'

Although I worked with Ray for over 40 years my first encounter with his work wasn't "The 7th Voyage of Sinbad" but "Mysterious Island" (1960). It was probably a good job I didn't see "7th Voyage" when it was released in the UK as the British censor cut the skeleton fight, which today is seen as one of the film's major sequences. It was reinstated in the late 1960s when I saw it for the first time and my impression then was that it was a picture that was still exciting, colourful and awe inspiring. My opinion hasn't changed. Ray and I would often sit in the evenings after supper and discuss many of his favourite classic movies but inevitably we would often discuss his films and "7th Voyage" was often discussed in depth. He told me many stories, some of which were not to be passed on, but some which went into the five books we published together. I think his favourite story was that Wilkie Cooper always laughed to see Ray charging up and down the Spanish beach with his 'monster stick' showing the actors and technicians where the creature would be and what it would be doing. That's an image that a lot of the surviving actors still talk about today.

It has to be remembered that Ray didn't just complete the animation and visual effects, he usually wrote the outline, worked with the screenwriters on the script, planned the Dynamation sequences in minute detail, designed the creatures and sets, choreographed the action, animated the models and created the effects and always helped to promote the picture.

He was a multi-talented genius and "The 7th Voyage of Sinbad" stands as a tribute to his imagination and unique talents.

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

Tony Dalton has lectured on film history for the British Universities Film and Video Council, British Academy of Film & Television Arts, Shepperton Studios, Pinewood Studios, National Film Theatre and others. His books include "An Animated Life" about Ray Harryhausen, "The Art of Ray Harryhausen," "A Century of Model Animation," "Ray Harryhausen: A Life in Pictures" and "Ray Harryhausen: Fantasy Scrapbook." He also co-produced the documentary "Ray Harryhausen: Special Effects Titan."