



Carl Denham presents

KING KONG



THE BIRTH OF KONG

by Ray Morton

King Kong was the brainchild of filmmaker Merian C. Cooper, one of the pioneers of the “Natural Drama” – movies created by traveling to exotic lands, shooting documentary footage of the native people and events, and then, through creative editing (and by occasionally staging events for the camera), shaping that footage into a dramatic narrative that had all of the thrills and excitement of a fictional adventure film. A former merchant seaman, newspaper reporter and military aviator, Cooper and his partner, former combat cinematographer Ernest B. Schoedsack, traveled to Persia and Thailand to produce two classic Natural Dramas – *Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life* (1925) and *Chang* (1927) -- and used their talents to create unique location footage for Paramount’s 1929 African-set adventure *The Four Feathers*. Cooper then retired from filmmaking and moved to New York to work in the commercial aviation business. He soon became bored, however, and, to amuse himself, began thinking up ideas for new films.

Gorillas had fascinated Cooper since he was six years old, when he was given a copy of the book EXPLORATIONS AND ADVENTURES IN EQUATORIAL AFRICA (1862) by French explorer Paul du Chiallu. The book contained a story about a tribe of ferocious gorillas that attacked a native village and carried a female villager off into the jungle. Recalling the tale, Cooper decided to make a Natural Drama about a gorilla that kidnaps a woman. Soon after, Cooper read a book



written by explorer and naturalist W. Douglas Burden called THE DRAGON LIZARDS OF KOMODO. In 1926, Burden led an expedition to the Dutch East Indian island of Komodo, home of the famed Komodo Dragons, a species of large, vicious lizards thought to have been extinct since prehistoric times until the living specimens were discovered in 1912.

Borrowing the idea of an expedition to a remote island for his story, Cooper also decided that the Dragons would make ideal antagonists for his ape and began dreaming up scenes in which the creatures would fight --scenes he planned to realize by filming the animals separately in their natural habitats and then intercutting the footage. Learning that Burden had captured two Dragons, brought them to New York, and exhibited them at the Bronx Zoo until they died, Cooper decided to do the same thing with his gorilla. Burden’s Dragons had fallen into poor health and expired, but Cooper, ever the showman, wanted to find a more spectacular way of killing his protagonist and decided to have the ape escape and wreak havoc before finally being killed.

Cooper pitched his idea to Paramount, but feeling that it would be too expensive to finance expeditions to Africa and Komodo, the studio passed. A short time later, Cooper accepted a job as Executive Assistant to David O. Selznick, the new head of production at RKO-Radio Pictures. Cooper’s job was to evaluate the studio’s

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pending projects to determine which should be salvaged and which should be shelved. One of the first projects he reviewed was *Creation* -- a fantasy about a group of travelers shipwrecked on an island populated by living dinosaurs. Cooper didn't think much of the film, but was impressed with its special effects, which were being created by Willis H. O'Brien, an innovator in the field of stop-motion animation -- a process in which a three-dimensional model is moved in tiny increments and photographed one frame at a time. When the film is projected, it appears as if the model has come to life and is moving around on the screen. O'Brien had honed his skills on the 1925 screen adaptation of *The Lost World* -- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novel about explorers that discover dinosaurs in the Amazon. Cooper became convinced that he could use O'Brien's techniques to bring his gorilla story to the screen in an economical manner -- using animation, the film could be made completely in the studio, with no need for long and costly location

trips. To help sell the project to the studio, O'Brien painted a picture of a woman being attacked by a gorilla. To increase the dramatic impact of the painting, O'Brien made the ape appear a little bit larger than life -- about ten feet tall. Soon after, Cooper decided it would be much more dramatic to have the gorilla fight *Creation's* dinosaurs instead of the comparatively puny Komodo Dragons. To accommodate this change, Cooper increased the size of his ape to eighteen feet. Since this also increased possibilities for mayhem the creature could create at the climax of the movie, Cooper



Fay Wray in Kong

began envisioning scenes in which the Giant Terror Gorilla (as Cooper had taken to calling his protagonist) would run amok in Manhattan, overthrowing cars and stepping on people. Knowing that all of this excitement would require an equally exciting capper, Cooper decided to have the ape climb to the top of the tallest building in the world -- a title that had just been claimed by the newly opened Empire State Building -- and battle a squadron of airplanes before being shot down. In a memo to Selznick written in December 1931, Cooper proposed canceling *Creation*, retaining O'Brien and his crew, and using them to produce the Giant Terror Gorilla story instead. Selznick liked Cooper's idea and, after a bit of wrangling with the RKO board, put the film into production.

Christening his creation Kong (allegedly after the Congo, where he had originally planned to shoot. Selznick later added the *King*) Cooper worked with four different screenwriters (novelist Edgar Wallace, James A. Creelman, Horace McCoy, and Ernest B. Schoedsack's wife Ruth Rose) to develop his story. He then co-directed the film with Schoedsack, supervised the editing, paid for the film's innovative score (by Max Steiner) out of his own pocket, and even played one of the fighter pilots who shoots Kong down (Schoedsack played the other). The result, which was released on March 2, 1933 to tremendous critical and financial success, was not only a classic film, but also a tribute to one man's incredible creative vision. ■

Glendale resident Ray Morton is the author of KING KONG: THE HISTORY OF A MOVIE ICON FROM FAY WRAY TO PETER JACKSON (Applause Theatre and Film Books, 2005). This is Ray's first contribution to the VOT.

After an early career as an illustrator and sculptor, Willis O'Brien was hired by the Edison Company in 1915 to produce a series of animated shorts. O'Brien employed the "stop frame" technique of moving jointed clay models a fraction of an inch between film exposures, creating, when projected, the illusion of movement. One of these shorts, *The Ghost of Slumber Mountain* (1918) was a big hit for Edison and O'Brien's work eventually landed him the position of animating the dinosaurs for First National's *The Lost World* (1925). Knowing from past experience that the clay and wood models he had used for the shorts would not be up to the much more ambitious

demands of a theatrical feature, O'Brien began working with sculptor Marcel Delgado, developing complicated aluminum armatures covered with cotton batting and latex skin. This made his stop-frame models much more stable, flexible and durable, which in turn allowed for more expressive and articulated animation.

O'Brien's next project was *Creation* which was scrapped by RKO early in production. However, producer Merian C. Cooper was very impressed with the animation that had been done and convinced David Selznick that O'Brien was the right fellow to create the visuals for his giant gorilla project. The result was one of the seminal films in motion picture history. For the first time, a stop-frame character had a real personality that audiences responded to with fear, fascination and finally pathos. Nothing like it had ever been seen before. To capitalize



on "Kong's" success, O'Brien was rushed through a much lesser effort, *Son of Kong*, released the same year. He and Delgado would continue developing their processes, working again for Cooper on *Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) and culminating in the very first visual effects Oscar, 1949's *Mighty Joe Young*, collaborating on that film with his young protégé, Ray Harryhausen.

Obie, as he was affectionately called, was working on some very complex animation for the hook-and-ladder climax of *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963) when, at 76, he suffered a fatal heart attack. He had tried, throughout his career, to get several projects started, though he nearly always came up against less than inspired, and sometimes even insolent studio reaction. Nevertheless, in the face of many personal and professional catastrophes, he managed to keep a kind of boyish enthusiasm and today, Willis O'Brien is revered as a member of the pantheon of visual effects innovators for his imagination, talent,

perseverance and dedication to the art and technology of the craft. ■





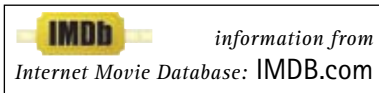
Black & White – 1933 – 100 minutes
 An RKO Radio Picture
 Print Courtesy of Warner Brothers Classics

Cast

Fay Wray.....Ann Darrow
 Robert ArmstrongCarl Denham
 Bruce Cabot.....John 'Jack' Driscoll
 Frank Reicher.....Capt. Englehorn
 Sam Hardy.....Charles Weston
 Noble Johnson.....Skull Island Nation Leader
 Steve Clemento.....Witch King
 James Flavin.....Second Mate Briggs
 Merian C. CooperPilot Of Plane That Kills Kong*
 Ernest B. Schoedsack ...Gunner On Plane That Kills Kong*

Directed By.....Merian C. Cooper
 & Ernest B. Schoedsack
 Idea And Story ByMerian C. Cooper & Edgar Wallace
 Screenplay ByJames Creelman & Ruth Rose
 Executive ProducerDavid O. Selznick
 Produced By.....Merian C. Coope
 & Ernest B. Schoedsack
 Original Music ByMax Steiner
 Cinematography ByEddie Linden, J.O. Taylor,
 Vernon Walker & Kenneth Peach*
 Edited By.....Ted Cheesman
 Art Directors.....Carroll Clark & Al Herman
 Art Technicians.....Byron L. Crabbe & Mario Larrinaga
 Sound Recordist.....Earl A. Wolcott
 Sound Effects.....Murray Spivack
 Chief Technician.....Willis H. O'Brien
 Technicians.....Marcel Delgado, E.b. Gibson,
 Orville Goldner, Fred Reese
 & Carroll Shepphird
 Production Assistants..Walter Daniels & Archie F. Marshek

* (Uncredited)



Including Short Subjects

TERROR ON THE MIDWAY
Hearst News Parade of 1933

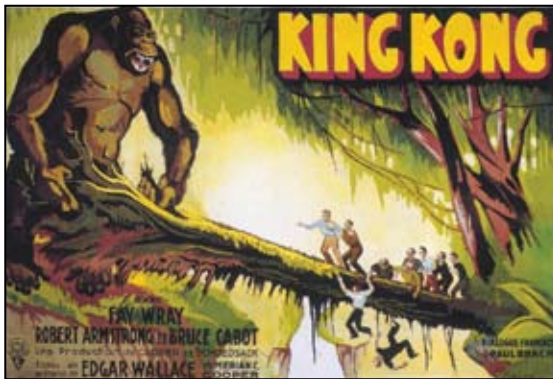
Fleischer Studios/Paramount, Technicolor – 1942 – 8 minutes

Terror on the Midway was the 9th entry in the Fleischer Studios groundbreaking and highly influential "Superman" series. The film, reminiscent of King Kong, was, like all of the Superman cartoons that preceded it, a genuine step forward in visual style, using realistic animation, sophisticated composition, atmospheric lighting, advanced design and special effects to help propel the story.



Directed by..... Dave Fleischer
 Written by..... Dan Gordon, Jay Morton
 Characters by..... Joe Shuster, Jerry Siegel
 Produced by..... Max Fleischer*
 Animation by Orestes Calpini, James Davis
 Voices Joan Alexander* (Lois), Bud Collyer* (Clark),
 Jack Mercer* (Barker), Julian Noa* (Narrator)
 Original Music by Winston Sharples* & Sammy Timberg*
 Arranged by Sammy Timberg

* (uncredited)



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KING KONG

(IMPRINT SPACE)

FAY WRAY ROBERT ARMSTRONG
 BRUCE CABOT

RKO RADIO PICTURE



"When I'm in New York I look at the Empire State Building and feel as though it belongs to me... or is it vice versa?"

Fay Wray



Fay Wray had leading roles in nearly 75 motion pictures between 1923 and 1958 – 11 alone in 1933, including *King Kong*. But none would so define her career as that classic tale about unrequited love between a virginal beauty and a giant ape.

Born Vina Fay Wray on Sept. 15, 1907, her family left Canada for Arizona in a stagecoach, no less,



when she was three years old. "I felt like we had left an enchanted land," she later said of the move. She eventually ended-up in Los Angeles accompanied by a guardian. While a teenager, she was an extra in two and four-reel Westerns and Hal Roach comedies.

After graduating from Hollywood High School, she was the ingénue in a half-dozen silent westerns and played the bride in Erich von Stroheim's 1928 silent classic *The Wedding March*. The celebrated director said he did not even bother to test Wray for the part, alluding to her enormous sex appeal. He cast himself as a prince and her as the bride.

And then along came Kong. Initially, Ms. Wray thought of Cary Grant or Gary Cooper when co-director Merian C. Cooper gave the actress a teasing description of her co-star as the "tallest, darkest leading man in Hollywood." She soon discovered her tantalizing co-star was an 18-inch model made of metal, rubber, cotton and rabbit fur designed by animation expert Willis O'Brien. To film-goers, Kong appeared 40 feet tall through such techniques as rear-screen projection and stop-motion photography that O'Brien had pioneered on the set of *The Lost World* (1925).

The most hazardous part of filming *King Kong*, Wray recalled, was the tendency of the giant gorilla



hand to loosen its grip while she was suspended high above the set. When she felt she was about to fall, she implored the director to have her lowered to the stage floor to rest a few minutes before being secured once again in the hand and sent aloft. For close-ups, Wray was cupped in a six-foot-long mechanical device that doubled as Kong's arm and hand.

She spent an entire day recording additional screams, variously shrill and plaintive, that an editor later inserted in the soundtrack – too often, she later emphasized. Asked how she was able to muster such animated cries, she replied, "I made myself believe that the nearest possible hope of rescue was at least a mile away."

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VOICE OF SUPERMAN



Modeling wardrobe from Columbia's *Murder in Greenwich Village* (1937).

The huge success of *King Kong* led to others roles for Wray in 1930's films in which her life or her virtue, or both, were imperiled – hence her being dubbed, “The Queen of Scream.”

Wray went on to make movies until the 1950's and appeared in a variety of television shows including *Wagon Train* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Her last appearance was in *Gideon Trumpet* (1980), a TV movie with



Out of retirement in 1955 to star in Columbia's *Queen Bee* with Joan Crawford.

Henry Fonda. In later years, she wrote plays that were produced in regional theaters.

Wray was married three times. She had a daughter with her first husband, and had two children with her second husband, film writer Robert Riskin. As the years passed, Wray acknowledged her identification with *King Kong* so complete that it eradicated any other vestige of her career from memory.

“Being in one of the most famous movies of all time is my greeting



card,” she told the *Toronto Star* in 1990. “I finally got to lunch with Larry Olivier a few years back. Wouldn't talk a bit about Shakespeare to me. Only wanted to know how we'd made Kong climb the Empire State Building.”

Fay Wray passed away on August 8, 2004, in her apartment in Manhattan, at age 96. After her death was announced, the lights on the Empire State Building were extinguished for 15 minutes in her memory. ■

AFS Board member Linda Harris is a frequent contributor to VOT.



Actor Bud Collyer was performing on every major radio network by the age of 32 and assumed his most famous radio role in 1940, the title character in “The Adventures of Superman.” He would continue as Superman until 1949, one year before the radio series ended, also playing the character in animated shorts by Max Fleischer.

Among the few radio personalities to successfully transition into television, Collyer became host of “Beat the Clock” (1950), which ran in prime time and daytime for the next 11 years. In late 1956, he also became the host of his biggest success, “To Tell the Truth” (1956). This lasted for 12 years and made his “Will the real [contestant's name] please stand up?” a part of the American lexicon.

His desire to take some time off from the Superman radio show led to the creation of part of Superman lore: his vulnerability to kryptonite. For episodes in which Collyer did not appear, Superman was said to be held prisoner under a trap door with a piece of the deadly metal. This later became part of the comic's continuity and an important part of all subsequent portrayals of the character. ■

Society News

VAUDEVILLE 08

By Brian Ellis



Hundreds of Vaudeville fans joined the Film Society on September 20th for our 9th annual Vaudeville Extravaganza. Six live acts (including Jack Kalvan with wife Jeri and son) energized the audience with comedy, music (headlined by Ian Whitcomb), magic and

laughs. The evening was capped off by a Charlie Chaplin short, *The Cure* and a Technicolor oddity, *The Royal Rodeo* from Warner Bros. From the late 1800's through the early 20th Century, Vaudeville was the common people's theatrical experience. Our audience shared the laughs and thrills much as their ancestors did 100 years ago. Join us next year on September 19, 2009 when Vaudeville will again appear on the Alex's fabled stage. ■

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08_07

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Saturday, November 29, 2008 at 2 and 8 pm ONLY!

11TH ANNUAL THREE STOOGES™ BIG SCREEN EVENT!

Stooges fans of all ages make AFS' popular "Stooge-Fest" part of their Thanksgiving tradition. This year's event, **PARDON MY AMNESIA**, is a brand new collection of bona-fide Stooges Classics that we have somehow forgotten in our past ten screenings. This is a great lineup of guaranteed laffs, presented on the Alex Theatre's Big Screen! The titles chosen by our blue ribbon panel for 2008 are: *IN THE SWEET PIE AND PIE* (1941); *THREE LITTLE BEERS* (1935); *PUNCH DRUNKS* (1934); *FRIGHT NIGHT* (1947); *DISORDER IN THE COURT* (1936).



We are excited that this year's bonus features include a very rarely seen 1974 **INTERVIEW WITH LARRY FINE**, provided to us by his family. Larry talks about his early career, the Stooges vaudeville years and how the trio developed their film personalities and wacky brand of knock-about comedy. As we have each year, we'll also present a clip from a "lost" Stooges short or feature film. **Fun? Soitenly!** Prints courtesy of Columbia Pictures. Running time approximately 2 hours. General admission \$15; \$12.50 kids/seniors; \$8 AFS members.

Saturday, February 14, 2009 at 8 pm only

Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant and James Stewart in

THE PHILADELPHIA STORY

A witty, sparkling adaptation of Philip Barry's Broadway hit, *The Philadelphia Story* was the comeback success for Katharine Hepburn who, just two years earlier, had been labeled box office poison by *Screenplay Magazine*. A classic romantic comedy/farce of love and marriage, class distinction and redemption, the film earned Jimmy Stewart his only Best Actor Oscar™ along with an award for screenplay and four other nominations including best picture. Director George Cukor received outstanding performances from Hepburn, Stewart, Cary Grant and Ruth Hussey. *The Philadelphia Story* is a perfect Valentine's Day treat for lovers.



VOICE of the THEATRE

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