The Most Exciting, Original Motion Picture Event of All Time: The Making of Dino De Laurentiis's *King Kong*

By Ray Morton

In the early 1970s, King Kong was a genuine pop culture sensation. The 1933 RKO film was hailed as a classic by critics and film historians and was a consistently popular attraction on television and in revival theaters. The character of Kong was also featured in four additional productions – *King Kong Versus Godzilla* (1963); a 1966 animated show called *The King Kong Show*; its live action spin-off *King Kong Escapes* (1967); and a 1972 VW commercial featuring animation by David Allen – all of which ran frequently on television and attracted large audiences. Intellectuals wrote impassioned think pieces about the symbolism and themes of Kong and his story (with an emphasis on racial and sexual interpretations that puzzled and annoyed the great ape's creator, Merian C. Cooper). The giant ape was frequently referenced in movies, TV shows, songs, editorial cartoons, and comedy routines. Kong merchandise – books, models, comics, and posters – sold briskly.

Given Kong's popularity, it was only a matter of time before someone got the idea to remake the original movie. There had already been several attempts: Merian Cooper himself had initiated a Cinerama redo in the 1950s, but the complications of filming animation in the three-camera process put the kibosh on the project. Hammer Films tried twice – in 1966 and 1970 -- and approached Ray Harryhausen to do the animation. However, the British studio was unable to secure the rights and so both attempts stalled. In 1974, animator Jim Danforth and his producing partner Steve Barkett approached

RKO about obtaining remake rights, but were refused. Researching the matter, they discovered that, while RKO owned the rights to the movie, the copyright to a novelization of the film's script that Cooper had commissioned in 1932 had lapsed, which made them suspect that the story itself was now in the public domain. Danforth and Barkett decided to go ahead with their project, but RKO threatened legal action and since the two men didn't have sufficient funds to defend themselves in court, they dropped the idea. Despite all of these attempts, it took a burning skyscraper to finally get a remake underway.

Near the end of 1974, legendary film producer Dino De Laurentiis met with Paramount Pictures Chairman/CEO Barry Diller to discuss potential collaborations. Inspired by the smash success of the recently released *The Towering Inferno*, both men were keen to make a disaster film. Looking for a fresh angle on the genre, they decided to do a giant monster movie, feeling that a massive creature destroying cities could provide the same level of special effects-filled excitement that disaster films offered, but with a novel twist. During this first discussion, they did not have a specific oversized creature in mind, but before long they set their sights on cinema's greatest giant beast – King Kong.

There are several explanations as to how they chose Kong. De Laurentiis said he got the idea from seeing a Kong poster on his daughter's bedroom wall. Paramount production head Michael Eisner claimed he came up with the idea after watching the original movie on TV (although he also claimed it was after seeing Bette Midler perform a Kong routine in one of her stage shows). Director John Landis – then a struggling screenwriter -- thinks

the seed was planted when he met with Dino to discuss scripting the project and told De Laurentiis that *King Kong* was the archetype for all giant monster movies. However the idea came about, by early 1975, Dino had definitely decided to remake *King Kong*.

The first step was to obtain the remake rights from RKO. In 1955, the studio had been purchased by General Teleradio, a broadcasting company that acquired RKO for its film library so it would have something to show on its TV stations. In 1957, the renamed RKO-General ceased making movies and concentrated solely on broadcasting. The film library was sold to United Artists, however, RKO-General retained the remake, sequel, and merchandising rights to its pictures. De Laurentiis called his friend Thomas O'Neil, the head of RKO-General's parent company, the General Tire and Rubber Company, and told him he was interested in redoing *Kong*. O'Neil put Dino in touch with Daniel T. O'Shea, a former RKO president who negotiated licensing deals on behalf of RKO-General. However, while O'Shea negotiated the deals, he could not confirm them or sign contracts. That power rested solely with O'Neil.

In the spring of 1975, De Laurentiis began negotiating with O'Shea. He wasn't the only one – O'Shea was already working on a deal with Universal Studios. Thinking along the same lines as Dino and Diller, Universal heads Lew Wasserman and Sidney Sheinberg had also decided to ride the disaster movie wave by making a giant monster movie, which they planned to present in their patented Sensurround process, and had also set their sights on Kong. Wasserman and Sheinberg assigned Universal staff attorney Arnold Shane to negotiate with O'Shea. These negotiations were at an advanced stage when De

Laurentiis approached O'Shea. O'Shea informed each party that he was talking to another, although he kept the identities of both confidential.

In a formal contract presented to O'Shea by Shane on April 15, 1975, Universal offered RKO-General $200,000 plus five percent of the net profits of its proposed film. Although O'Shea couldn't sign the contract, Shane would later claim that O'Shea assured him they had a deal. Although O'Shea insisted he never said any such thing, Shane left with the impression that Thomas O'Neil was going to sign Universal's contract. However, De Laurentiis made a better offer – he agreed to pay RKO-General $200,000 plus three percent of his gross profits. O'Neil accepted and on May 6, 1975, Dino De Laurentiis signed a contract with RKO-General granting him the rights to remake *King Kong*.

When Wasserman, Sheinberg, and Shane found out, they were furious. Although Universal didn't have a signed written contract, they insisted that O'Shea's alleged comment that they had a deal constituted a binding verbal contract. In June 1975, Universal -- seeking $25 million in damages -- filed suit against RKO-General for breach of contract and fraud and against De Laurentiis for "intentional interference with advantageous business relations" and "unfair competition." While Dino was surprised by Universal's claim, he did not consider it valid, since he was the one with the signed contract. Confident that he was in the right, De Laurentiis pressed on. He made a deal with Paramount, which agreed to put up half of the film's proposed $12 million budget in return for the rights to distribute the film in the U.S. and Canada. De Laurentiis then began making deals with foreign distributors in order to raise the rest of the necessary

production funds. As these deals were being negotiated, Dino hired screenwriter Lorenzo Semple, Jr. (*Three Days of the Condor)* to pen the screenplay.

Seeking to avoid the wrath of film purists sure to be outraged that they would dare to remake a beloved classic, Semple and De Laurentiis decided to make their *Kong* as different from the original as possible. After toying with a number of different story notions, Semple finally crafted a script that updated the story to the 1970s.

The overall narrative remained the same – explorers travel to a remote, uncharted island, where they discover a tribe of primitive people that worships a giant gorilla named Kong. The natives kidnap a female member of the expedition and sacrifice her to the great ape. Pursued by a rescue party from the expedition, Kong takes the girl to his mountaintop lair, pausing along the way to battle a menagerie of prehistoric creatures. The woman's lover rescues her from Kong and the giant ape pursues them back to the native village, where he is captured. Kong is taken to New York and put on display. He escapes, recaptures the woman, and climbs to the top of the Empire State Building, where he is shot down by a squadron of aircraft. However, instead of a movie company going on location to film a documentary, Kong would now be discovered by an oil company expedition that travels to Skull Island in search of a vast, untapped petroleum reserve (a timely notion for the age of the Energy Crisis). Rather than an adventurous movie director, the leader of the expedition was now a venal oil company executive. The romantic lead – a sailor in the original – became an anthropology professor from Princeton obsessed with the legend of Kong who stows away aboard the oil company

ship hoping to discover the mythic beast. Kong's love – an unemployed actress named Ann Darrow in the original – remained an unemployed actress in Semple's script, but instead of being discovered stealing apples, the new movie's Dwan literally drifts into the story in a rubber raft after surviving a shipwreck. Reflecting the character's status as a beloved cultural icon, the new Kong was a more sympathetic creature than the original – no longer a terrifying monster, the giant ape is now a ferocious but noble beast with a romantic heart. At De Laurentiis's request, Semple made the relationship between Dwan and Kong deeper and more complex. In the original film, Ann is terrified by Kong from the first moment she sees him until the final fade out. In Semple's script, Dwan is initially frightened by Kong, but eventually comes to love him (especially after he saves her from being killed by a giant snake) and in the end she weeps for him. To make room for this expanded relationship, the number of dinosaur encounters in the narrative was reduced from five to two. In keeping with the sexual interpretations of the Kong story that were popular at the time, Semple emphasized the erotic undertones of the tale to a much greater extent that the original movie did. Worried that modern audiences might find the story silly, Semple also infused the screenplay with a self-aware sense of humor (reflected in lines such as "Here's to the big one!") that would allow the audience to laugh with the tale rather than at it. Despite all of these changes, Semple's first draft ended in the same way that the 1933 version did: with Kong climbing to the top of the Empire State Building, where he meets his doom -- this time from bullets fired from a fleet of helicopters rather than a squadron of biplanes.

As Semple wrote De Laurentiis went looking for a director. After a brief flirtation with Roman Polanski, De Laurentiis turned to *The Towering Inferno* helmer John Guillermin. A mercurial filmmaker with a reputation for heavy action pictures, Guillermin had always wanted to direct a romantic fantasy and so signed on in August 1975.

At that point, production was tentatively scheduled to begin in the late spring or early summer of 1976. But then, in September 1975, the Superior Court of Los Angeles dismissed Universal's suit, calling its claim of having a verbal contract with RKO "tissue paper thin." Not about to give up, Universal took a different tact. The studio had engaged Jim Danforth as a special effects designer and consultant for its Kong project and the animator told Sheinberg and Wasserman about the lapsed copyright on the 1932 novelization. Seizing on this information, Universal now claimed that its film was not a remake of the film *King Kong*, but a new production based on the novelization. In late October, Universal filed a new lawsuit in Federal District Court. Differentiating the "old material" of the novelization from the "new material" of the film's screenplay, Universal asked the court to issue a summary judgment affirming that the "old" material was now in the public domain and that therefore a film based solely on that material would not constitute an infringement of RKO's copyright. The court denied the request for an immediate decision, but did agree to consider the claim. Confident it would prevail, Universal announced it was going to go ahead with its *King Kong*. Hunt Stromberg, Jr. was hired to produce, Bo Goldman (*Melvin and Howard*) began writing a script, and Joseph Sargent (*The Taking of Pelham 123*) came in to direct. Universal announced that shooting would begin in the spring of 1976. De Laurentiis responded by saying that he

would begin casting in December and start shooting in April of 1976. It was not clear if the title *King Kong* was covered by RKO's copyright or not, so as part of their suit, Universal asked the court to determine if it could use it, but in the meantime changed the name of its movie to *The Legend of King Kong* just to be safe. Soon after, De Laurentiis announced that he was going to call his film *King Kong: The Legend Reborn*.

Preproduction on *The Legend Reborn* began in October 1975. De Laurentiis's 21-year-old son Federico came aboard as executive producer, a position he shared with Guillermin's associate Christian Ferry. Woody Allen vet Jack Grossberg would line produce and hired Terry Carr as production manager. De Laurentiis brought art director Mario Chiari, a friend and frequent collaborator, over from Italy to design the production. Richard H. Kline (*Camelot*) was engaged to serve as the film's cinematographer and Moss Mabry and Anthea Sylbert came in to design the costumes. Guillermin hired veteran production illustrator Mentor Huebner to storyboard the film and William Kronick, who was Guillermin's second unit director on *The Bridge at Remagan*, to serve in the same capacity on *Kong*. The production was headquartered on the MGM lot in Culver City. The film's sets would be built there, as well as at the nearby Culver Studios (where much of the original *King Kong* was filmed). The remote Na Pali coast of the Hawaiian island of Kauai would stand in for Kong's island home. Scenes would also be filmed on location in New York City, where the production began negotiating to film at the Empire State Building. As pre-production progressed, John Guillermin decided he didn't like Mario Chiari's designs, so Chiari was replaced by American production

designer Dale Hennesy (*Fantastic Voyage*). Chiari was reassigned to supervise the film's most important task – creating Kong.

Chiari began by drawing a series of sketches to determine the creature's appearance. Since Dino wanted to focus the movie on the love story between the beauty and the beast, he wanted Kong to look as human as possible. With this in mind, Chiari drew Kong as a human/ape hybrid with the body proportions of a man and a face that resembled an Australopithecus more than it did a gorilla. The next step was to physically realize the creature. In the original film Kong was primarily portrayed by a collection of puppets brought to life via stop motion animation. De Laurentiis did ask Jim Danforth (prior to his involvement with Universal's *Kong*) to animate a sequence in which a dinosaur attacks the oil company search party (Danforth refused because he did not care for Semple's screenplay. The sequence was dropped and so the film only featured one encounter with a prehistoric creature – Kong's battle with a giant snake), but in general he wanted to eschew stop motion for several reasons: he did not like the herky-jerky movement associated with the technique; animation on the elaborate scale and with the detailed quality that Willis O'Brien employed it in the 1933 film would take too long and be too expensive; and faster, cheaper approaches to the technique had become the hallmark of cheesy, low budget productions, a comparison De Laurentiis was eager to avoid. So early on, the creative team decided to use a man in a costume. Wanting the creature to be expressive, they decided not to use a mask, but to instead use appliance make-up similar to that utilized in the *Planet of the Apes* films – which is applied directly to an actor's face, allowing for a full range of expression -- ;to create Kong's visage.

Looking around for someone to create the Kong costume, Federico De Laurentiis was told to contact Rick Baker, a 25-year-old make-up man whose hobby was creating realistic gorilla suits. Rick Baker got his start as an apprentice to make-up legend Dick Smith (*The Exorcist*) and had recently won (with fellow make up artist Stan Winston) an Emmy for transforming 41-year-old Cicely Tyson into a 100-year-old woman in the T.V. movie *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Baker came in to meet with Federico and Jack Grossberg and brought along some of his gorilla masks and sculptures to show what he could do. He immediately tried to talk them out of using appliance make-up, arguing that the *Apes* movies and TV series had exhausted that approach. When Federico and Grossberg expressed concern that a mask would not convey the emotion they wanted, Baker assured them that he could incorporate mechanisms into the mask to give it the proper expressiveness. Impressed, Federico and Grossberg invited Baker to work on *Kong*. Baker was interested, but had a previous commitment that would prevent him from starting work for a month. This was fine with Federico and Grossberg, so Baker accepted the job.

John Guillermin also wanted a full-size representation of Kong, so the decision was made to build a full-size Kong mannequin capable of making some limited head and arm movements for use in certain shots. To design and build the mannequin, Dino De Laurentiis brought Carlo Rambaldi over from Italy. A renowned fine artist and sculptor, Rambaldi also worked in the Italian film industry as a specialty prop maker and earned a reputation as an expert creator of mechanized articulated creatures. His proudest

achievement was a life-size wooden Pinocchio that he created for an Italian television special. Dino thought Rambaldi was a genius and used him whenever he could. Upon arriving in America, Rambaldi began designing the Kong mannequin -- which he envisioned as a giant marionette – in accordance with Chiari's ape-man concept.

However, as *The Legend Reborn* was coming together, *Jaws* was released and became a sensation. Much was written about the remarkable, hydraulically operated mechanical shark that Joe Alves and Robert Mattey had created for that movie. Intrigued, Dino wondered if his team could create a similarly mechanical Kong. Carlo Rambaldi confidently assured De Laurentiis that he could create a working full-size robot that could perform all of the actions required by the script, including walking and picking up Dwan. While most members of the production team doubted that Rambaldi could create something with such an enormous range of capabilities, Dino believed in Carlo and told him to go ahead.

Meanwhile, Universal began preparing *The Legend of King Kong*. Although Jim Danforth was going to create some animation for the film, Universal – as De Laurentiis had -- decided its Kong was also going to be (primarily) a man in a costume. Popular gorilla suit performer Bob Burns was called in to film some tests wearing the Bionic Bigfoot costume from the *Six Million Dollar Man* TV series (during the test, Burns was asked to make jerky movements in order to simulate stop motion animation). Some consideration was also given to using a little person in an ape suit, on the theory it would allow the production to use smaller (and therefore cheaper) sets.

On November 20, RKO-General filed a countersuit against Universal in Federal District Court claiming that *The Legend of King Kong* was an infringement on RKO's copyright. RKO-General asked the court to issue an injunction preventing Universal from continuing with "announcements, representations, and statements" about its proposed film and for $5 million in damages. On December 4, De Laurentiis filed his own suit against Universal, asking for $90 million in damages caused by copyright infringement and unfair competition. He also sought an injunction against Universal to prevent it from making its film. Universal responded by announcing it was moving its start date up to January 5, 1976. Although Dino suspected Universal was bluffing, it would be a big problem if it weren't. It was highly unlikely the marketplace would support two new versions of *Kong*, because there was only going to be so much audience interest in the subject to go around and releasing two Kong films as the same time would dilute the audience pool. Given how expensive both films would be, this had the potential to be financially ruinous for both sides. Realistically, there could only be one remake of *King Kong*. The question was --which remake would it? The film that started shooting first was going to be the winner, because the second place production was sure to be cancelled. De Laurentiis and Universal were now in a race – a race Dino was determined to win.

With this in mind, De Laurentiis asked the members of his production team to determine the earliest possible date that they could begin filming. Although the major sets and special effects would not be ready for months and it would take that long to prepare the

New York and Hawaii shoots, Terry Carr thought it was possible to prepare the opening segment of the movie -- in which the Petrox Explorer (the oil company ship) sets sail from Surabaya, Indonesia and voyages to Kong's island -- to shoot by mid-January. Carr proposed they spend three weeks shooting this segment (so they could honestly claim production had begun) and then shut down for three more weeks, during which time they would work around the clock to prepare the rest of the picture. Dino knew that hastily moving production up in this way was going to increase the budget significantly, but he was willing to risk it.

As soon as De Laurentiis announced he would start filming in January, Universal approached him about settling their lawsuits. The two sides briefly discussed teaming up to jointly produce a single film, but Universal insisted on using its script and controlling the merchandising and sequel rights. Feeling these demands were outrageous, Dino broke off talks and proceeded with his plans and his lawsuit. Looking to gain a p.r. advantage over Universal, Dino and Paramount decided to take out a spectacular ad in the *New York Times* announcing their production. Working with the ad agency Diener-Hauser, Paramount's head of publicity Gordon Armstrong hired noted science fiction illustrator John Berkey to illustrate the ad. Berkey was initially asked to present some sketches of Kong battling helicopters atop the Empire State Building, but then he was also asked to do some drawings showing Kong atop the newly completed World Trade Center. It's not clear who on the ad team came up with the idea, but the intention was clearly to signal this was going to be an all new, super-modern Kong. When Berkey submitted his sketches, Dino and Paramount were both taken with one showing Kong straddling the

twin towers holding Dwan in one hand and a jet plane in the other. At that point, the decision was made to shift the climax of the film from the Empire State Building to the World Trade Center. Semple immediately began revising his script, devising an inspired bit in which Kong jumps from one twin tower to the other.

Berkey transformed his World Trade Center sketch into a detailed drawing (a revised and more detailed version of which would later be used on the film's release poster) and the ad ran on Sunday, November 30, 1975. The text read: "There still is only one King Kong. One year from today, Paramount Pictures and Dino De Laurentiis will bring you the most exciting, original, motion picture event of all time." A coupon was included allowing readers to order a color copy of the ad. In the following week, sixty- thousand coupons were received. Although the ad was a smash, it put the production team under even more pressure, because it locked them in to a Christmas 1976 release date – they now had only thirteen months to complete an incredibly ambitious and complicated project that under normal circumstances should have taken no less than eighteen.

Rick Baker reported for work on *Kong* at the end of November. When he learned that Carlo Rambaldi planned to build a full-size robot that would do most of the acting in the picture, he was incredulous. "I said, 'It's impossible,'" Baker recalled. "'He (Rambaldi) can't do it.' But they assured me he (Rambaldi) was a genius who could pull it off." The producers told Baker they still wanted him to build the Kong suit, but only as a back up. Because Rambaldi was now in charge of creature creation, Baker was asked to work with him to make the costume. He agreed, but both men had very different ideas as to how to

craft the suit, so the producers decided to give each of them six weeks to create a prototype. The results would then be compared and the best approach chosen. Determined to win the competition, Baker got to work. The first thing he did was toss out Chiari's ape-man designs, which he thought were ridiculous. Baker felt Kong should be a gorilla and set out to make him one. "I was going to save them from themselves," he recalled with a laugh.

Casting began in December 1975. After considering Chris Sarandon, Dino offered the part of primate paleontologist Jack Prescott to Jeff Bridges, who had recently been nominated for an Academy Award for his work in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974). The role of Fred Wilson – the oil company executive who leads the expedition to Kong's island -- went to Charles Grodin, who had just won a Tony award for his performance in the Broadway hit *Same Time Next Year*. Other cast members included Rene Auberjonois, John Randolph, Ed Lauter, Julius Harris, Jack O'Halloran, Jorge Moreno, Mario Gallo, Dennis Fimple, Ray Buktenica, and future *The Last Emperor* star John Lone. Fifties sci-fi star John Agar was booked for a cameo appearance as the mayor of New York City.

The big question, of course, was who would play Dwan? Elaine Joyce, Barbara Streisand, Valerie Perrine, and Cher were mentioned in the press, but De Laurentiis -- hoping to introduce a new star -- was committed to discovering an unknown. Dozens of young women were screen-tested with no success (one of the hopefuls was a young Meryl Streep. Dino rejected her because he didn't think she was attractive, an opinion he conveyed to his son in Italian, thinking Ms. Streep did not speak the language.

Unfortunately, she did and was very hurt). With the start of production rapidly approaching, De Laurentiis decided to forget about star making and was about to offer the part to established actress Deborah Raffin when he received a request from Charles Bludhorn, the chairman of the Gulf & Western Corporation (Paramount's parent company) to screen test a young fashion model that he met at an event in New York. Although De Laurentiis didn't think much would come of it, as a courtesy to Bludhorn he agreed. The model's name was Jessica Lange.

William Kronick directed Lange's screen test and was impressed. As Kronick recalls: "She moved and performed in a quirky, refreshing manner that instantly told me she could bring color and life to the role." Guillermin and Dino were both called to the set and were also impressed, but Dino wanted to see what Lange looked like on film before making a final decision. Fortunately, she looked wonderful -- one production associate described Lange's on screen appearance as "luminous." Guillermin became so excited watching the test he literally ripped the leather cover off the back of the screening room seat in front of him as he exclaimed "I've found my Fay Wray!" De Laurentiis signed Lange to an exclusive seven-year contract and she began working with an acting coach to prepare for the challenge ahead.

Meanwhile, Barry Diller began pressing Dino to settle his differences with Universal. Paramount and Universal were joint owners of Cinema International Corporation, a European film distributer, and Diller was reluctant to be party to a lawsuit against his partner. De Laurentiis refused – he felt that he was in the right and wanted to prove it in

court. Just before Christmas, Diller gave Dino an ultimatum – settle with Universal or Paramount would pull out of the film. With no time left to find another distributor, Dino had no choice and so he and Universal began discussing terms. January 5, 1976 came and went without *The Legend of King Kong* going before the cameras, although Universal – probably to keep the pressure on De Laurentiis – announced that it had, even though no sets had been built and no actors cast.

On January 14, 1976, De Laurentiis held a press conference on the Paramount lot to announce the official start of his production and to introduce Jessica Lange. And then, on January 15, 1976, *King Kong: The Legend Reborn* began filming on the San Pedro docks. The first shot filmed was the first shot of the movie – an establishing view of the Petrox Explorer (played by the U.S.S. Melville, a U.S. Navy research ship rented from the Scripps Institute of Oceanography) preparing to leave Surabaya. The film was officially underway. De Laurentiis had won the battle. It remained to be seen if he had won the war.

In the weeks that followed, the company shot scenes chronicling the Explorer's journey to Kong's island in the channel between Los Angeles and Catalina Island. To film the scene in which Dwan is rescued, Lange spent hours floating in a rubber raft in the freezing cold, drenched to the bone and wearing only a slinky black dress. Although she was unaware of it, there were sharks circling the raft the entire time.

On January 28, 1976 -- De Laurentiis and Universal announced they had come to terms. In return, for a percentage (alternately reported as either 8% or 11%) of De Laurentiis' profits, certain merchandising rights and profits, and veto power over any proposed sequel, Universal agreed to cancel *The Legend of King Kong*, although it did retain the right to produce a Kong film sometime in the future, as long as production didn't start any sooner than eighteen months after the release of Dino's *Kong*. At the time, this stipulation had no practical payoff, because if De Laurentiis's film was a hit the market would be sated and if it was a flop there would be no interest in another Kong anytime soon. It did, however, pay off twenty-nine years later when it allowed Universal to produce Peter Jackson's version of the story. While De Laurentiis was not pleased with all these terms, he was now free to make his own movie in his own way. Moving on, he dropped his subtitle and *The Legend Reborn* once again became known simply as *King Kong*.

During the first week of February, interior scenes set on the Petrox Explorer were filmed on the MGM soundstages and the main unit then spent several nights at Zuma Beach shooting a scene in which the Explorer crew comes ashore to rescue Dwan from the natives. Production then shut down following these scenes and remained shuttered until February 17. During the layoff, Kong began to take shape.

Busy designing his giant robot, Carlo Rambaldi did not have time to work on his prototype Kong costume. Rick Baker did and at then end of the allotted six weeks he donned his suit and did his best giant ape impersonation for De Laurentiis, Guillermin,

Chiari, and other key members of the production team. Because Baker had created a gorilla rather than an ape-man, the initial reaction to his suit was extremely negative -- had Rambaldi's suit been finished, Baker feels he would have been dismissed on the spot -- but, because they had to get started on camera, miniature, and special effects tests, the team decided to use Baker's suit to shoot the tests until Rambaldi's costume was ready. Because Baker had built his suit to fit himself, he played Kong in the tests.

When Rambaldi finished his design for the big Kong, they turned out to be extremely complicated and impractical. The aircraft manufacturing company that had been contracted to build Rambaldi's electromechanically-driven creature estimated that it would take at least eighteen months to construct, with no guarantee it would perform as promised. De Laurentiis was disappointed, but didn't want to give up on the idea of a mechanical Kong, so the film's special effects supervisor Glen Robinson – who once ran a company that designed and built theme park attractions – came up with a plan for a monster operated by hydraulics in the same way that amusement park rides were. Robinson's Kong was less ambitious than Rambaldi's, but it was much more practical and would take a lot less time to build. With time running short, De Laurentiis put Robinson in charge of building the big Kong (as well as a pair of hydraulically operated Kong hands to hold and caress Dwan, an additional pair of legs, and a giant snake for Kong to fight). Rambaldi was not happy about this and, although he continued to work on a design for Kong's exterior, there was considerable tension between him and Robinson from that point on.

Robinson began constructing the big Kong on Feb 28, 1976. The initial plan had been to build a 30-foot tall creature, but when it was determined that a larger hand would look better holding Dwan, Kong's height was increased to 42 feet. The creature's skeleton was made out of dural aluminum and his many joints were equipped with hydraulic cylinders operated from a control panel manned by six members of Robinson's team. The entire construct was supported by a large crane. To fabricate Kong's exterior, patterns were made from a six foot tall plaster Kong sculpted by Don Chandler based on Rambaldi's designs. These patterns were then scaled up to giant size, and used as a guide to sculpt Kong's various body parts. Molds were made of the sculptures, from which fiberglass and resin pieces were cast and then attached to the aluminum frame. Wig-maker Michael Dino created Kong's hide using 4,000 pounds of horsehair imported from Argentina. The hair was dyed and woven into netting that was glued onto latex panels, which were then attached to Kong.

Even with Robinson and his team working as quickly as possible, it was clear the big Kong was going to take a lot longer to finish than originally anticipated. Although the initial plan to use the robot for most of the filming had been scaled back when the production team realized that Robinson's design would not have the elaborate capabilities Rambaldi claimed his would have, they still wanted to use the robot for key shots in each major Kong sequence. However, it soon became apparent the robot wouldn't be ready until the end of the schedule and that most of the Kong scenes would have to be realized using the man in the Kong suit. At that point, there wasn't much of a practical reason to continue building the big Kong. However, Dino -- enjoying the favorable publicity the

robot was generating -- wanted Kong finished. As long as it appeared in at least one scene in the movie, all of the publicity could be justified. It was decided that the robot would be featured in the scene in which Kong is presented to the public in Shea Stadium. Originally scheduled to be shot in the middle of production, the scene was pushed back to the end to await the completion of Dino's "Big Monkey."

With Robinson building the big Kong, Carlo Rambaldi finished his prototype costume. Based on Chiari's original ape-man designs and crudely fashioned, it did not look very good or work very well. A disappointed John Guillermin proclaimed it to be a "$200,000 disaster" and decided that he no longer liked the ape-man concept at all. He wanted to go with Baker's design, which he felt was more impressive and powerful looking. The rest of the team agreed, so the ape-man concept was dropped. Kong was now going to be a gorilla, albeit it one with human qualities. Rambaldi's suit was put aside and no tests were ever shot with it.

Since he won the competition, Baker expected to be put in charge of making the final Kong costume, but De Laurentiis was not ready to give up on his friend and asked Baker to collaborate with Rambaldi on the final suit. The collaboration did not go smoothly. Before construction on the suit could begin, a sculpture showing what the final product would look like needed to be created. Since this sculpture would define Kong's on-screen appearance, both men naturally wanted to be the one to create it. To resolve the impasse, another contest was arranged. This time, Baker and Rambaldi would both sculpt a face for Kong. The creative team would choose the one it liked the best and the winner would

sculpt the rest of the body. Baker fashioned a free-form face, while Rambaldi sculpted one based on a photo Federico had taken of a gorilla from the San Diego zoo named Bum. A blind judging was held and the creative team chose Baker's sculpture.

Baker and Rambaldi continued to clash over every step of the suit's construction, with Baker usually wanting to use cutting edge materials and techniques and Rambaldi – who was not as up to date as Baker -- pushing for the older elements and methods with which he was more familiar and comfortable. They would take their disagreements to De Laurentiis, who would usually side with Rambaldi. Their biggest argument was over Kong's fur. Baker wanted to ventilate the suit – hand tie individual shafts of synthetic hair one at a time to a piece of flexible fabric – but Rambaldi wanted to use real animal fur. Baker didn't like this – he thought real fur would be too hot and heavy, wouldn't stretch, and wasn't adaptable – but he was overruled. Rambaldi bought nine full bear hides and had studio tailors sew them together into a single suit. When the finished skin was draped over the padded undersuit that defined Kong's form, the fur -- designed by nature to fit a completely different shape -- stood straight up, making Kong look like a big puffball. To fix the problem, Rambaldi clipped off the guide hairs – the long lustrous hairs on the top of a bear's coat -- leaving behind only the fuzzy down beneath it. Making matters worse, the color of the different hides didn't match and the seams where they were sewn together were quite visible. To hide the seams and blend the colors, Rambaldi sprayed the suit with an aerosol hair color called Streaks 'N Tips, a process that needed to be repeated before every shot. Baker was extremely disappointed in the final suit, which he felt wasn't at all convincing. He gives all of the credit for its passable appearance in

the film to cinematographer Richard Kline. “Dick saved it…hid it all with his lighting. He made it look as good as it could possibly look.”

Things went much more smoothly when it came to Kong’s head. Baker created a mask out of foam latex. His originally intended to use a self-contained, jaw-operated mechanism to create the great ape’s facial expressions, but Rambaldi instead developed a series of devices that pushed and pulled the mask in the directions necessary to create Kong’s expressions. These mechanisms were controlled by a series of thin bicycle brake cables that ran out the back of the mask and were attached to a bank of control levers located out of camera range. For all of their differences, Baker was impressed by Rambaldi’s devices and gave him full marks for creating the amazing expressions that Kong displays in the movie. (Many associated with the production attribute Rambaldi’s problems on the movie with his ego-driven decision to operate outside of his areas of expertise. As *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* showed, Rambaldi was a genius when it came to sculpting and articulating artificial creatures. He just wasn’t as good when it came to fashioning ape suits and giant, electromechanical robots).

There were actually five Kong masks. Because latex can only stretch so far without tearing, there were limitations to what a single unit could do, so Baker sculpted three different faces for Kong, each with a basic look that could then be accentuated by Rambaldi’s mechanisms. The first – called the “generic” head – had a neutral look that could be extended to create all normal expressions. The second – called the “angry” head – began with a frown that could be extended to the beginning of a roar. The third – called the “roar” head – could be extended into a full roar with a wide-open mouth and fully

exposed teeth. A fourth mask with pursed lips and balloons installed in the cheeks was created for the scene in which Kong blows Dwan dry after washing her off in a waterfall. There was also a "stunt" head that was sculpted with a fierce look and contained no mechanics. This mask was used for long shots and for action scenes in which it would be impractical to have Kong hooked up to a bunch of cables. None of the masks had eyes -- Kong's lids and pupils were those of the performer. To mask the performer's humanity, gorilla pupils were painted on a pair of scleral contact lenses (that covered the entire eyeball) for the performer to wear.

An actor was needed to wear the suit. During his initial interview, Rick Baker told Federico and Jack Grossberg he could play Kong, but they wanted a skilled mime and so hired an actor with extensive training in playing animals named Hampton Fancher (who would later co-write the screenplay for 1982's *Blade Runner*). However, Mario Chiari then decided that Kong should be played by an African American. His very un-p.c. reasoning was that African Americans had muscular physiques and could play the part without padding. A casting call went out to agencies representing black talent, creating a tidal wave of controversy. Albert Popwell, an actor most famous for his role as the "punk" to whom Clint Eastwood delivers his "Do you feel lucky?" speech in the original *Dirty Harry* (1971) was chosen. Rambaldi's test suit was built to fit Popwell, who wore it during its disastrous debut. But when John Guillermin saw the way Baker played Kong in the test footage, he decided the wanted Rick to play the part after all.

For Baker, wearing the suit was an ordeal. As he predicted, the bearskin was incredibly hot and the intense studio lights only made matters worse. Baker would sweat intensely, often losing up to five pounds of water weight a day. He also had problems with the

scleral contact lenses, which rubbed against his cornea and his upper and lower eyelids. They were hard to see out of and, when combined with the mask's overhanging brow and extended cheekbones, Baker was practically blind when he was in costume. He also had trouble breathing -- the masks were closed and cramped and it was very difficult to get any air in or out. A tube was inserted in the mask's muzzle to help Baker get some fresh air between takes, but most of the time he was left to breathe his own carbon dioxide. The problem was exacerbated when a fresh batch of Spray 'N Tips was sprayed onto the suit before each take – often directly into Baker's face**.** Because of the physical strain, Baker requested a back- up. The relief performer needed to be the same size and shape as Baker so he could fit into the suit and masks. Neither Fancher nor Popwell were, so they were let go and Will Shephard, an experimental theater actor and writer, was hired. A separate suit was created for Shephard (along with two backup costumes), although both men shared the masks.

Production resumed on February 17 on Kauai, where scenes of the Petrox team exploring Kong's island were filmed. The company stayed on Kauai's south shore, but the locations were all on the remote north shore. There were no roads leading to the north, so cast and crew flew in and out every day via helicopter. The beach scenes were filmed on Honopu Beach, nicknamed "Cathedral Beach" because it was divided by an enormous rock through which the waves had worn an enormous, spectacular-looking arch. Other locations included Waimea Canyon, also known as "The Grand Canyon of Hawaii," the Kalalau Valley – a volcanic crater alleged to be the wettest spot on earth, and Hanalei Bay, which was filled with artificial fog for the sequence in which the landing party

travels through the mysterious cloud that surrounds Kong's abode. Shooting wrapped in Hawaii on March 10 and the unit returned to California.

From March 15 to March 17, scenes involving Kong's journey to America were filmed aboard the Susanne Onstad, an oil supertanker leased from the Onstad Shipping Company of Oslo, Norway. Following another brief shutdown, filming began on sequences set before the massive wall the natives use to protect themselves from Kong. The Great Wall was erected on MGM's Lot 2, a backlot facility across the road from the main studio. To create the apparently wooden structure, telephone poles were sunk into the ground, secured with concrete, and connected with sheets of vacuform plastic shaped and painted to look like wooden panels. 8,157 eucalyptus trees were then lashed to the poles, which were. The final construct was 47 feet tall and 170 yards long.

The first scene shot at the Wall was the one in which the landing party first encounters the natives, who offer to buy Dwan. Next up was the scene in which Dwan is sacrificed to Kong. To light the nighttime spectacle, Richard Kline used 18 Brute arc lights mounted on nine 40-foot forklifts. Claude Thompson choreographed an elaborate native dance and over 300 extras were brought in to fill out the scene. One of the big hands --the first of Kong's many incarnations to be completed -- was used for the first time for the shot in which Kong picks Dwan up off the altar. Ingmar Berman visited the set while this scene was being shot and watched as the hand grabbed Jessica Lange and whisked her twenty feet into the air. The production then moved onto a soundstage to film the Glade sequence, in which Kong toys with Dwan before she falls into a mud puddle while trying

to escape. While this scene was being shot, a giant pit was dug in front of the Wall, after which the company returned to Lot 2 to film scenes of the Petrox crew capturing Kong.

Money was tight from the start. The race to beat Universal raised the initial $12 million budget to $16 million and the rush to meet the Christmas deadline drove it even higher. To raise additional funds, De Laurentiis went back to his distributors and asked them to increase the amount of their guarantees. To entice them to do so, he screened a cut of the all of the scenes filmed so far. Impressed by what they saw, the distributors all agreed.

In June, the production traveled to New York to shoot scenes of Kong's final rampage. Sequences were filmed at an Astoria subway station, on the Queensboro Bridge, in front of the 42nd Street library, and on Wall Street. The primary New York location was the World Trade Center, where three nights were spent filming Kong's death scene. The full-size Kong used in this sequence was not the robot, but a Styrofoam duplicate made from the same molds and covered with the same latex and horsehair. A huge crowd was required to fill the World Trade Center's enormous plaza (which was so big Richard Kline had to use every available arc light and generator in New York to illuminate it), so an ad was placed in local papers inviting the public to attend the filming. On the first night, 2 - 3,000 people showed up. The crowd was kept behind barricades until the moment came for them to surge forward towards Kong. A circle of paid extras was supposed to act as a second barrier to keep the crowd from getting too close, but when action was called, the crowd pushed right past the extras and Lange and swarmed over Kong, grabbing anything they could to take as souvenirs. The great ape lost large chunks

of his hair, a fingertip, and even a bowling ball-sized eye in the frenzy. As one crew member succinctly put it: "Kong got mugged." The next night, 30,000 people turned out. This was far more than anyone anticipated and there were serious concerns about how manageable such a large crowd would be. Additional police were called in and extras dressed as soldiers and police were drafted to assist with crowd control. Thankfully, the crowd was well-behaved and Lange and the patched-up Kong remained untouched. Even so, Port Authority officials became concerned that the weight of so many people would cause the plaza to collapse and shut down the filming. A few days later, the main unit returned sans crowd to film the final shots of Dwan as she stands crying in front of the fallen Kong.

The company returned to the West Coast. As production continued at MGM and local locations, the budget continued to rise. Having gotten all he could from his distributors, De Laurentiis began borrowing directly from his European bankers (and, as some rumors suggested, from a few less-than-legitimate sources as well).

From August 11 to August 20, the main unit filmed the production's last big live action sequence – the Presentation Scene. As originally written, Kong was to be introduced to New York in a gaudy extravaganza at Shea Stadium. When the sequence proved too costly to mount, the Great Wall was repurposed to shoot a scaled-down version of the scene, now set in a fictitious Queens park along the East River. Dale Hennesy refurbished the Wall by covering it with big panels of Mylar, draping the structure with red and white bunting, and erecting rows of bleachers in front of it. The centerpiece of the Presentation Scene was, of course, the big Kong, which had finally been completed. The final construct weighed six and a half tons, contained 3,100 feet of hydraulic hose, and 4,500

feet of electrical wiring. The robot's chest was 20 feet wide and both of its arms were 20 feet long. Run by a team of operators, it could turn its head, raise its arms, open its mouth, flex its chest, and move its fingers, eyes, and toes. It took four and a half months to build, at a cost of approximately $1.7 million.

As in New York, the public was invited to watch the filming of the Presentation scene and to serve as extras. On the first evening, approximately 3,000 people turned up. Although the Big Kong wasn't being used that evening, De Laurentiis knew that crowd would want to see him, so when the shooting was over, lights were trained onto the Wall and the gates were pulled open to reveal the giant robot. Unfortunately when he came into view, Kong's eyes were crossed and a wire in his neck had snapped, causing his head to plop forward onto his chest. De Laurentiis immediately ordered the lights shut off and the gates closed. A few nights later, Kong's big unveiling was filmed. This time, when the robot was revealed it was in full working order – his eyes rolled and his fingers and toes were wiggled as he lifted his head and opened his mouth to roar. Kong looked magnificent and the crowd applauded. It was a wonderful moment. Unfortunately, it didn't last long, because at the conclusion of the first shot, one of Kong's hydraulic lines sprung a leak and hydraulic fluid came spraying out of his crotch. John Guillermin was the first to notice. "He's peeing oil," the frustrated director cried. The following night, the giant robot was used again for a shot of Kong dropping pieces of his shattered cage. Unfortunately, the aluminum pieces were too heavy and put a great strain on Kong's hydraulic systems. After a few minutes, his arm broke and his jaw went slack.

In the end, the big Kong was a big disappointment – working no better than the articulated mannequin the producers originally planned to use. Unable to move quickly or smoothly enough to appear realistic, the mechanical monster was ultimately featured in just six shots in the finished film. He was, however, worth his weight in publicity.

Shooting on the miniature Kong scenes – those featuring the men in the ape suit -- began on April 26, 1976. The original plan had been for the second unit to film all of the miniature scenes at the same time the main unit shot the full-scale scenes. In practice, however, this didn't work out. William Kronick initially directed the miniature sequences, but Guillermin – perhaps realizing that, with the big Kong not working out, the man in the suit was going to be more central to the film than originally envisioned – eventually decided to direct the majority himself.

Directing the miniature Kong was a complicated process. First, Guillermin would tell Baker how he wanted him to move his body, head, and eyes. He would then tell Carlo Rambaldi's team of operators what facial expressions he wanted Kong to make. This wasn't easy because Guillermin didn't speak Italian and the operators didn't speak English, so instructions usually had to be given through an interpreter (often Federico). Richard Kline reports that the operators would "live" each scene by closing their eyes and enacting the expressions they were trying to create as they moved the appropriate levers to push and pull Kong's features into the correct position. "It was an amazing thing to watch." Baker then had to coordinate his movements with what the Italians were doing, a process made more complicated by the fact that he couldn't see or hear very well and also couldn't speak Italian.

At first, Baker and Shephard traded off shots – when Baker got tired, Shephard would take over. However, Guillermin was dissatisfied because he could tell the difference between the two men's performances. He preferred Baker's approach and insisted on using him in most of the shots. From then on, Baker worked primarily with Guillermin and the main unit, while Shephard, now acting more as a stunt double than a principal performer, worked on specific action scenes with Kronick and the second unit – primarily in the scenes in which Kong fights the giant snake, smashes through the wall, and climbs the World Trade Center.

The miniature island scenes were filmed on1/7 scale sets, which allowed an approximately six foot tall Kong to appear to be forty-two feet tall on screen. So that Kong would not be dwarfed by the towering skyscrapers of Manhattan, the New York miniatures were built in 1/10 scale to allow Kong to appear to be fifty-five feet tall in those scenes. The miniature work wrapped in October.

The full scale and miniature footage was composited primarily via the blue screen traveling matte process, supervised by optical effects supervisor Frank Van Der Veer. The film also employed a number of other optical effects techniques including matte paintings (by Hollywood veteran Lou Lichtenfield); split-screen; and miniature projection. The optical effects team worked right up to the last minute, finishing the final shot just hours before the film was locked for printing. The tight schedule caused some of

the shots to be rushed through at the end, resulting in some dodgy shots in the last quarter of the movie. On the whole, however, the visual effects in the film are superb.

King Kong was assembled by Academy Award-winning film editor Ralph E. Winters' (*Ben Hur*). Because the movie was shot largely in sequence, Winters was able to have a fine cut of most sequences completed just a few days after they had finished filming.

As Winters cut, John Barry composed and conducted the score. In keeping with the movie's *Beauty and the Beast* emphasis, De Laurentiis and Guillermin asked Barry to compose a romantic theme for the picture. Barry agreed, although he felt the theme should also have a sense of power and strength to balance out the sweetness. Once the theme was written, Barry used it to build a lush score that perfectly captured the spirit of romance and adventure the filmmakers were trying to achieve. Normally, a composer will wait until editing on a movie is finished before starting work so that he can create music that will perfectly match the rhythms, mood, and timing of the completed piece. However, because of *Kong's* sped-up schedule, Barry was forced to compose the score the film two reels at a time. As a result, the recording sessions, which normally take place in a few weeks at the end of a schedule, were spread out over an eight-month period. The first four took place between March 29 and April 12, 1976 on the MGM scoring stage and the last nine took place between July 22 and November 5, 1976 at the Burbank Studios.

The film was locked just a few short weeks before release at a running time of 135 minutes. At a final cost of $23 million, it was the most expensive movie ever made until that time.

Dino De Laurentiis's *King Kong* opened in 1,200 theaters in the United States and in another 1,000 theaters worldwide on Friday, December 17, 1976. At that time, it was the biggest simultaneous release in film history. The release was accompanied by a massive promotional and merchandising campaign, transforming a movie inspired by a pop culture phenomenon into a pop culture phenomenon all its own – one of the great pop culture events of the 1970s.

The critical reception was mostly positive. Reviews ranged from respectful to raves: Art Murphy of *Variety* opined that "The Dino De Laurentiis-John Guillermin version of *King Kong* is one of the most fabulously successful remakes in the brief history of motion pictures! This new version neatly balances superb special effects with solid dramatic credibility." Pauline Kael called it "a pop classic that can stand in our affections right next to the original version." Charles Champlin of the *Los Angeles Times* named it of the year's ten best and *Film Bulletin* stated that the movie was "…enjoyable enough on its own terms as well as highly respectful of the adventurous spirit and wonder of the original. Even buffs will have to admit that there's room for both." Even the negative reviewers had nice things to say (*Newsweek*'s Jack Kroll, who panned the film, still admitted that it "…does have a certain thunderous fun.") Most of the bad reviews did not

take issue with the specifics of the film itself, but instead simply dismissed it for not being the original.

King Kong was also a hit at the box office. It earned $6.9 million in its first 3 days of release and by March 1977 had earned $88 million. It ultimately grossed a bit more than $90 million, an incredible amount for the time. *King Kong* received two Academy Award nominations: Best Cinematography and Best Sound Recording. Carlo Rambaldi, Glen Robinson, and Frank Van Der Veer were also awarded a special Oscar for Special Achievement in Visual Effects. It received a BAFTA nomination for Best Production Design/Art Direction and Jessica Lange won a Golden Globe for Best Acting Debut in a Motion Picture -- Female.

Although the film was well received when it first came out, it's reputation has suffered over the years, due mostly to a group of hard core fantasy film fans who seem to resent the film for simply existing and who slag it every chance they get. Does this mean the movie is perfect? No, of course not. The movie definitely has its flaws – several of the effects are dodgy and some of the characters and attitudes haven't aged particularly well. But it's a very well made movie -- the script, direction, and editing are strong and the cinematography and score are outstanding. The big Kong was a disaster and the suit has its weak spots, but the masks are wonderfully expressive, the big hands work terrifically, and with a few exceptions, the composites are excellent. Bridge and Grodin are both strong, Jessica Lange is indeed luminous, and Rick Baker does a superb job as Kong. The film treats its central character with great affection and respect, the great ape's death is

extremely touching, and the final pull-back from Dwan and Kong as the crowd swarms around them is magnificent and everything a *King Kong* movie should be.

Is Dino's *Kong* a classic like? No, it's not. But it is, as Richard Schickel once described it, "a confidently conceived, exuberantly executed work of popular movie art."

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