

“Farewell To A Friend”

By Ray Morton

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I lost a friend last week. Not a friend of flesh and blood, but a friend nonetheless. Like many of the relationships in my life, it was born of the movies.

Back in the 1970s, when I was a kid growing up in the suburbs of New York, my favorite film was the original 1933 King Kong. I first saw the film when I was about eight and it totally captivated me. Back then, in the days before video, DVD and twenty-four hour a day classic movie channels on cable, Kong was only shown once a year in the New York area, on Thanksgiving Day on WOR, our local channel 9. Each and every turkey day I would plop myself down in the living room and sit spellbound from the RKO logo to the closing credits. My mother — then as now an amazingly patient and understanding woman — was generous enough to let her movie geek son be himself and would make sure to time the bird so that dinner would be served only after the mighty Kong had toppled from the cupola of the Empire State Building and come to rest sprawled across the whole of Fifth Avenue. With my deep love of the doomed lord of Skull Island, you can imagine my excitement late in 1975 when I heard the news that Dino De Laurentiis was planning to produce a big budget remake of Kong’s story, to debut the following year. A big fuss was made of the fact that this time Kong would make his last stand atop New York’s newest landmark skyscraper, the (*at the time*) world’s tallest building — The World Trade Center.

I was immediately intrigued. At this point in time the World Trade Center was practically brand new (*Tower 1 opened in 1971 and Tower 2 in 1973*) and to me very much an unknown quantity. Desperately wanting to check out Kong’s new stomping grounds for myself, I begged my Dad to take me to the Trade Center. Busy converting our attic into bedrooms to house our ever expanding family, I’m sure the last thing my paterfamilias needed was to take time out for a sightseeing trip to the future final resting place of a fictitious giant ape, but he agreed. The original plan was to go and see the filming of Kong’s death scene when the movie company came to town in the summer of 1976. That didn’t work out, but an alternate date did and when the day arrived my dad took a large helping of my eight brothers and sisters and me into New York City by train, then led us down beneath the surface and onto a garishly graffitied subway car. For the next fifteen minutes we shook, rattled and rolled our way through the tunnels beneath Manhattan until the train finally pulled into a narrow downtown station. The doors opened with a hiss and I bolted from the car. Leaving the rest of my family in the dust, I pushed through the turnstile, vaulted up the stairs, sprung out onto the sidewalk and then stopped dead in my tracks.

There before me stood the most incredible thing I had ever seen!

This was not a universally shared opinion. When the World Trade Center was first erected, it was not universally beloved. In fact, most New Yorkers hated it. The Center was roundly criticized as being too big, too cold, too stark, too impersonal, too modern and just plain ugly (*the joke was that the Twin Towers were the boxes the Empire State Building came in*). I didn't agree. I loved the place. In fact, I was in awe.

The main plaza was immense – the size of a football field (*or so it seemed to little old four foot tall me*). The Twin Towers themselves were sleek, metallic and futuristic-looking. They were attractive (*the Trade Center was that rare skyscraper that looked better up close than it did from afar. From the harbor the Towers could seem boxy and impersonal, but as you stood in the plaza you could not help but be struck by the intricate delicacy of the steel latticework that adorned the facades of both buildings. Those of you not from New York will recognize this latticework – a piece of it was the only thing left standing in the wake of the attack and became the signature image of the destruction on magazine covers, in newspapers and on the evening news*). They were also immense. From bases the size of ocean liners, the towers shot up from the pavement and soared higher and higher and higher into the sky until they appeared to pierce the floor of heaven itself. To a young boy with an active imagination, the entire complex seemed like a fantastic wonderland that had been beamed back from some incredible future where giants roamed the earth and outrageously outsized dreams could be made real. In a word, it was neat.

From this awe-inspiring introduction, the day only got better. I remember racing to and fro across the plaza, trying to figure out the best place for Kong to land, pacing off 40-foot blocks to make sure he would fit properly without getting too cramped (*I'm certain that my parents much have considered hospitalization, but thankfully, they never followed through on it*). I remember waiting on line in a lobby that was five times as tall as my house and ten times as wide. I remember my ears popping as the high-speed elevator took us from ground level to the 110th floor observatory in just a few dozen seconds. I remember tearing around the observatory, running from panoramic window to panoramic window to take in the incredible views of the city, upstate New York, New Jersey and the Atlantic Ocean. And finally, I remember running out onto the rooftop deck and being buffeted by a wind so gloriously powerful that I felt like it was going to lift me up and carry me from the tip of Manhattan to the top of the clouds and beyond. On that day, the World Trade Center became one of my special places. A bond had been established that would last a lifetime. Or so I thought.

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The Dino De Laurentiis production of King Kong premiered on December 17, 1976 and needless to say, I was first in line to see it. I was not disappointed. As promised in John Berkey's striking illustration for the poster, the film made spectacular use of the World Trade Center as the stage for Kong's heroic last stand. After climbing to the top of the South Tower with Jessica Lange in paw, the great ape battled flame-thrower wielding Marines, made a might leap across the void from one building to the other and then perched himself on the parapet of the North Tower for his final showdown with machine

gun-laden helicopters. Kong gave as good as he got before being tragically defeated and then plunging 110 stories back down to the plaza below. “Twas beauty killed the beast” indeed.

For the rest of the 70’s, the Center was featured prominently in many of the era’s big films. Diana Ross and Michael Jackson followed the yellow brick road to the emeraldized central plaza in The Wiz; John Travolta gazed at the lights of the Center and dreamed of better things in Saturday Night Fever; Christopher Reeve soared majestically past the towers in Superman: The Movie. As the 70’s became the 80’s and the 80’s became the 90’s, the Center began to be featured less and less as a primary location and more and more as a component of establishing shots, background plates and opening credit sequences. The seeming reduction in billing was actually a promotion, as once hostile New Yorkers came to embrace the Twin Towers and afforded them iconic status as beloved hallmark symbols of their hometown.

My own relationship with the Trade Center continued throughout this time as well. I saw it in the movies, of course, but I also attended the film school at New York University, located in Greenwich Village, from which the Twin Towers were visible from every street and every window. In addition to providing a spectacular backdrop to college life, the Towers were also a source of personal comfort. Whenever I was feeling frazzled, in need of inspiration or simply looking for a break from the city, a trip to the top deck to take in those awesome views was just what the doctor ordered to clear my head, order my thoughts and restore my spirits. Our relationship continued after college when I would bring out of town friends to visit the Center and on one especially memorable occasion when a friend got married and all of us in the wedding party had our pictures taken in front of the observatory’s Vista Vision portals. After I moved to Los Angeles, a clip of the Center on TV or in the movies was always a welcome cure for homesickness and that first glimpse of the Towers from an airplane window on a trip home was always proof positive that the prodigal son had returned. While none of my subsequent encounters with the Center were quite as magical as the first, each one filled me with happiness, joy and a true sense of wonder.

All that came to an end last week.

On September 11, 2001, the World Trade Center emerged from the background and once again became a featured player on the screens of America, but what had once been a shining source of incredible dreams and optimism had now become a wellspring of unspeakable nightmares and despair. From my home in Los Angeles, I watch in helpless horror as my beloved Towers were reduced to rubble and thousands of people were brutally, senselessly murdered. I’ve had a hole in my heart for a week now and I have no idea if it’s ever going to heal. Or even if it should.

In the past few days I've spent a lot of time running and rerunning the last twenty minutes of Dino's Kong (*I picked it up years ago on VHS in a horrible pan and scan version that does the film no justice at all*). I'm searching, but for what exactly I'm not sure. An answer of some sort? Solace? Perhaps what I'm searching for is a time – a time when I believed that all things seemed possible, even the idea that dreams big enough to touch the sky would last forever.

Goodbye, old friend.

THE END

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