

## *The Return of Kong*

By Ray Morton

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On March 2, 1933 an unusual new movie opened at Radio City Music Hall to sold out houses and near unanimous critical acclaim. Co-produced and co-directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, two acclaimed directors of Natural Dramas -- films featuring primitive people and wild animals made on real locations in exotic lands that used documentary techniques to tell fictional stories -- *King Kong* told the story of Carl Denham, a director of natural dramas who obtains a map to an uncharted island located somewhere in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Suspecting that the island is home to a legendary Malay god named Kong, Cooper decides to go there, learn just who or what Kong is, and make a movie about him. Needing a woman to star in his film (because his exhibitors demand a love interest), Denham plucks out-of-work actress Ann Darrow from the streets of Depression-era New York. The next morning, they board the SS *Venture* and set sail. During the voyage, Ann falls in love with Jack Driscoll, the *Venture*'s hard-boiled first mate. Arriving at the island, the expedition comes upon a tribe of primitive natives preparing to sacrifice a native maiden to their mysterious god. Angry with the outsiders for interrupting their ceremony, the natives kidnap Ann and tie her to a sacrificial altar as the native chief sounds a gong. Kong, a twenty-foot tall gorilla, emerges from the jungle, plucks Ann from the altar and carries her off. Jack leads a search party in hot pursuit. After the rest of the search party is killed, Jack follows Kong to his mountaintop lair and rescues Ann. A furious Kong chases the lovers back to the native village, where Denham captures him. Denham brings Kong back to New York and puts him on display in a Broadway theater. During the show, Kong escapes, recaptures Ann and carries her to the top of the Empire State Building, where he makes a valiant last stand against a squadron of navy biplanes firing machine guns. Mortally wounded, Kong caresses Ann one last time and then plunges one hundred two stories to his death.

The film was a smash hit and eventually came to be regarded as a film classic. It was remade in 1976 by producer Dino De Laurentiis in a widescreen color version that featured a modernized story and a revised cast of characters and now, as 2005 comes to a close, Kong returns to the screen once more in another remake, this one directed by the Academy Award-winning helmer of *The Lord of the Rings*, Peter Jackson.

Remaking *Kong* has been a lifelong dream of Jackson's, who first saw the original film when he was nine years old and was so impressed that he credits it with inspiring him to become a filmmaker. Jackson's first attempt at reviving Kong was in 1996, when he and his partner (in both life and work) Fran Walsh wrote a script for Universal Pictures while in post-production on *The Frighteners*, a horror-comedy the pair was currently making for the studio. Walsh and Jackson's script set the story once again in the 1930s, but greatly changed the basic characters and situations. Following the disappointing box office performance of *The Frighteners* and the announcement of two other high-profile giant monster movies (Sony's 1998 Americanized version of *Godzilla*

and Disney's remake of *Mighty Joe Young*), Universal pulled the plug on *Kong '96* not long after the film had entered pre-production. Disappointed, Jackson turned his attention to another one of his pet projects – a cinematic adaptation of novelist J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy classic *The Lord of the Rings*. The incredible success of that trilogy inspired Universal to reapproach Jackson about reviving the Eighth Wonder of the World. After signing on to the project, Jackson decided that he did not want to proceed with the 1996 script but instead wanted to begin anew. To help them reimagine Merian Cooper's creation for a new generation of moviegoers, Walsh and Jackson invited Philippa Boyens, their collaborator on the screenplays for the *Rings* trilogy, to work on the script with them.

A native of New Zealand, Boyens began her career in the theater, where she worked as a playwright, teacher, producer, and editor. Following a stint of a museum director, Boyens became a screenwriter after reading an initial treatment of *Lord of the Rings* written by Walsh and Jackson. A fan of the trilogy and Tolkien aficionado, Boyens offered comments and suggestions that so impressed Walsh and Jackson that they asked her to write the screenplays with them. The trio went on to win both an Oscar and a BAFTA for their work and when Walsh and Jackson invited her to continue the collaboration on *Kong*, Boyens enthusiastically agreed. As the film entered its final weeks of post-production, Boyens, who is also a co-producer on the film, spoke to *scr(i)pt* about her work on the film:

*scr(i)pt*: How much of a Kong fan were you before this film came along?

*PB*: Honestly, (I) didn't know much about *Kong* beyond that it was a passion of Peter's and one of his favorite films. I actually didn't see the original until I watched it with him. The very first time I ever saw it was when...we were still in the middle of *The Lord of the Rings*. (Peter) had been approached by Universal and he was just thinking about the possibility of doing *Kong* and he put it on in his home theater and we all watched it.

*scr(i)pt*: What did you think of it when you first saw it?

*PB*: I found it really moving and I began to understand why Peter was so in love with it, but I also found it really funny because it was part of the times—I remember finding Bruce Cabot really funny because (he wore) his trousers up around his waist. Once you get over that and you start becoming immersed in the story, it began to work its magic. I remember loving Fay Wray right from the word go. I thought, "Wow, this is a real movie star."

*scr(i)pt*: She really glowed in that film.

*PB*: She did.

*scr(i)pt*: Fran Walsh and Peter Jackson had written a *King Kong* script in 1996 when they were first planning to do the film, but when the project was revived in 2003, Peter

Jackson decided that he didn't want to use it. Can you recall the reasons why that script gave way to the new one?

*PB:* Well, it was eight years on (and) you know—you grow, you learn. There were certain things—design features for example, because a lot of wonderful work had already gone on—certain design aspects (that Peter) wanted to keep. But in terms of characters...they wanted to start again, to start fresh. There were some parts of that script that, when I read it, I loved and I said “You’ve got to keep this...I want to see this sequence...I want to watch this movie right now!”

*scr(i)pt:* Do you remember what some of those elements were?

*PB:* Yeah, sure. There’s a wonderful sequence with a herd of Brontosaurus that’s quite extraordinary and that Peter pulled off brilliantly...that you have to kind of see to believe.

*scr(i)pt:* How closely does the plotline of your script follow that of the original film?

*PB:* The landmarks are the same. You know, you have a filmmaker who is in New York and loses his leading lady and needs to find another one urgently and goes off on this adventure to find this island. All of those sort of landmarks are still in there but they play quite differently (as) we make the story our own.

*scr(i)pt:* Were there any elements of the original film that you felt you had to retain or any that you felt you absolutely wanted to change?

*PB:* I think there were certain iconic moments (from the original film) that resonated for Peter. He really did want it to be (set) in 1933 for a variety of reasons, one of which was that...the 1930s were the blossoming of technology and man’s ability to destroy things and here they were in these winged sort of planes that were dangerous to fly. I think that, for (Peter), that moment on top of the Empire State Building... these biplanes coming up against this extraordinary force of nature...was really important to him. So it came down to that. That moment was really important. And then, other things that I felt for myself that I wanted to see differently, and Fran and Peter did too, were the motivations of some of the characters. (We wanted to) give them a little more depth, especially the character of Carl Denham and the character of Jack Driscoll.

*scr(i)pt:* Jack’s not a sailor in this one ...

*PB:* He’s a screenwriter. That came about because we thought it would be more interesting than to have your macho hero go up against Kong, which then just becomes about two alpha males fighting, which was not the story that Peter wanted to tell. (We wanted to) have someone who was a fish out of water. The last person you expect to see in the middle of this jungle is a guy who is this intellectual playwright from New York who had no idea that he was ever going to have to be in this situation. (To see) how he copes and what he does was more interesting, I guess, for us.

*scr(i)pt:* In the original film, Denham is something of a P.T. Barnum character—a big showman who happens to make movies. I understand that in your script he’s more of an Orson Welles–type character—more of a pure filmmaker.

*PB:* He’s a funny mix, this Denham, I think. We did want to keep some of the original Denham in there. He is a showman, but...there’s a bit of Orson Welles in there, there’s a bit of Peter Jackson in there. There’s a true passion for filmmaking. Denham comes into possession of this map and, understanding that there’s a chance that there’s this island out there, he’s very obsessed with finding it...of being the one to bring it to the world. You’re not really sure how much he knows about how dangerous this is. He’s really quite reckless—that’s the Orson Welles touch. He’s reckless and a genius and also willful—you know he’s gonna get what he wants.

*scr(i)pt:* Is Ann pretty much the same character? I imagine she’s less naïve in this version.

*PB:* Yes, very much less naïve. She’s a girl from New York (who has) come up through the depression, so she’s someone who can cope (and who) actually saves herself in a way. We definitely wanted to add all that to the character. (But) the most interesting thing, I think, certainly for Fran and Peter, was the relationship between Kong and Ann.

*scr(i)pt:* Can you describe that relationship? In the original film he regards her as something of a plaything, while other interpretations of it have been more directly romantic or sexual.

*PB:* Yeah—Beauty and the Beast. I think (that) is the most common (interpretation). (For us), it was about trying to make that real. I mean Peter loves to do that—it’s one of the things that he wanted to do with *The Lord of the Rings*. Here’s this huge fantasy world, yet he always wanted it to feel real and truthful and so when you’re looking at the relationship between Kong and Ann, that was something I think everyone involved tried to do—to make it feel real, to make it as truthful as possible. He’s a gorilla...a gorilla who has had no family, has not been part of a family unit for a very, very long time (and) is alone. (He) has always been this dominant male on the island, has never had a connection to any living creature before. That’s the change in his world—he suddenly forms a connection to another creature, to another living being, and that changes his world completely. And (it’s) the same thing for Ann in a funny kind of way. There’s a similarity because she’s come from a pretty tough background herself. We have it that she’s a vaudevillian...at the time that vaudeville is dying (and) it’s really tough in New York—tough to survive. She’s been alone, never really had any sort of family herself, (although) she’s not a grim character—she’s got a lot of humor, she’s not feeling sorry for herself. (And then) in these extraordinary circumstances, this connection happens and I think you need to see stories like *Gorillas in the Mist* and things like that to understand that that does happen between humans and animals.

*scr(i)pt:* So it’s about two isolated souls who connect in the course of the story?

*PB:* Yeah, I think there's a genuine connection that happens. This huge, giant creature changes her in a way. So it is different than the original.

*scr(i)pt:* It sounds more complex...

*PB:* Well, hopefully not overly complex. Hopefully it plays out simply, but I think the weird thing is that one of the places that relationship came from is from Fay Wray—not from the character of Ann Darrow that she played, but from, retrospectively, her own relationship and fondness for Kong.

*scr(i)pt:* She had said in interviews that she initially didn't understand the fascination with Kong and perhaps even resented her connection with him and what she saw as the negative impact that connection had on her career, but then, as the years went on, she came to really love it.

*PB:* If you read Fay Wray's autobiography, she speaks about Kong with such affection. And when she spoke about being held in that hand, you do get that sense—and I think Naomi's captured that—that the girl that sits in the hand is completely protected. (So) in a way, Fay's relationship with Kong was more interesting than Ann Darrow's relationship with Kong.

*scr(i)pt:* I understand that the film Denham is making in the story includes a scene in which you include some of the dialogue from the original film.

*PB:* Yeah, there's a little moment that plays like that. Some of that dialogue is priceless. I love the moment in the original film (in which Bruce Cabot says to Fay Wray) "I guess I love ya..." He's forced to admit...he's gone all "sappy" on her. We didn't actually use (that scene). (Our scene) is more of a homage.

*scr(i)pt:* I wanted to ask you about the natives on Kong's island. In previous versions of the story, they're been portrayed as stock Hollywood natives, but from what I've seen, in your film they seem to be much more formidable, serious and scary.

*PB:* Yes, definitely. Peter wanted to make them much more real...instead of some Hollywood concept of the South Seas island or this terrible geographic mix they came up with in the original, (where) they had a sort of Pacific Island feel in the middle of the Indian Ocean. But, again, he (Peter Jackson) wanted them to feel real and to give them some real power. They're very dangerous...truthfully dangerous. It's not about the great white filmmaker who comes (marching) in. They (Denham and his crew) are in extreme danger.

(Another) one of the things we wanted to do, Fran and myself, was (to show that) the people that pay the price (in this culture) are the women—they're the ones who are sacrificed. There's always that moment—they did this in the 1976 version—where (the natives say) "We'll give you six of our brides for your white woman because she's got blonde hair and we've never seen blonde hair before..." and we didn't want that to be the

case because it feels so wrong. So that was one of the things we wanted to change, so we made this more matriarchal society. The person who confronts her (Ann) is a *shawoman*, not a *shaman*. And that's not political correctness, it's actually about the truth of the thing. A lot of these cultures were matriarchal, especially ones that had to cling to life on bits of rock. They lived by the women...so we've got that in here.

*scr(i)pt*: I wanted to ask you a little bit about the writing process. How do three people collaborate on a script?

*PB*: (laughs) Well, there's no one way. "All hands on deck" is the best way to describe it.

*scr(i)pt*: Did you do any significant re-writing during production?

*PB*: Yeah always. One day we're gonna write a script and not have to rewrite it during production. I don't know when that's going to happen, but yeah... (laughs). Actually, it was very similar to what happened on *The Lord of the Rings*, where the film was suddenly green-lit and it was a case of having to go into production with a script that wasn't really ready to go. And a lot of the actors understood and knew that part of the process was going to have to be rewriting.

*scr(i)pt*: Did they participate in that process enthusiastically?

*PB*: Yeah, they were all fantastic to work with. I actually enjoy writing for specific characters knowing who the person is who is going to play it.

*scr(i)pt*: The 1996 script had kind of a light, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* kind of feel to it, but more recently Peter Jackson has been quoted as saying that he wanted it to be more real, more serious, more frightening. What sort of a movie is *King Kong* going to be?

*PB*: I was watching chunks of the film on the mix stage yesterday and... I was thinking that it's really hard to your finger on it. Is it a drama? A monster movie? It's actually...it's full of so many things. It's just huge. It's massive. Like Kong himself, y'know?

**THE END**

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