



Long Live the King!

By Jan Lisa Huttner

SOMETHING OLD: *King Kong* (1933)
SOMETHING NEW: *King Kong* (2005)

When you're a professional film critic, you see tons of movies. This may sound like fun, but think about it: I've seen lots of really bad and "just OK" movies in the past year. At a certain point, watching becomes purely physical; my body literally tells me if I'm engaged or bored. So when I see a new film that absolutely takes my breath away, I want everyone to know.

I'll admit that my expectations were relatively low when I went to see Peter Jackson's new remake of *King Kong*. I'd seen the original *King Kong* as a kid, and while I certainly enjoyed it, I never became a *King Kong* fanatic. I found the theatrical versions of Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy tedious, long on battle scenes and short on character development. (I much prefer the extended DVD versions of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Twin Towers*, and *The Return of the King*.)

But the new *King Kong* completely overwhelmed me. The drama held me captive for three full hours. It felt far shorter than several 90-minute turkeys I could name, and I left the theater on a high.



Most of the people fascinated by the original *King Kong* focus on its revolutionary "stop-motion" animation and visual design. As a tie-in to the release of the new *King Kong*, Warner Video has just released a new two-disc "Collector's Edition" of the original, with a wonderful documentary on the second disc called *RKO Production 601: The Making of Kong, Eighth Wonder of the World*. But here's a curious fact: barely, in passing, do any of the "talking heads" even bother to mention that the person who actually wrote the original screenplay was a woman!

Merian C. Cooper, the man most responsible for the original *King Kong*, was a WWI hero who formed a partnership with fellow veteran and Hollywood filmmaker Ernest Schoedsack in the early 1920s. Together Cooper and Schoedsack made several popular documentary adventure films in exotic places like Iran and Thailand. By the time Cooper began planning *King Kong*, Schoedsack was married to Ruth Rose, a writer who had accompanied Cooper and Schoedsack on many of their trips.



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Cooper hired famous British author Edgar Wallace to write a screenplay but he died unexpectedly, so his treatment was passed along to screenwriter James Creelman. When the script still fell short, Cooper made an appeal to Rose, even though she'd never written a screenplay before. "Give it the spirit of a real Cooper-Schoedsack expedition," he told her, and when she was done, he said: "I don't think another human being in the world could have given me the simple direct fairy tale dialogue that she did. It was just what I wanted."

Skip ahead seventy years, and the remake also shows the woman's touch. In addition to Jackson, the new *King Kong's* authors are Fran Walsh (Jackson's wife) and Philippa Boyens (their long-time writing partner). I'll let you guess who probably wrote the brontosaurus stampede scenes and who probably wrote the more intimate scenes between heroine Ann Darrow (Naomi Watts) and her two primary co-stars. In a recent interview, Boyens said she and Walsh were always delving into character motivation as they worked: "We found the key moments in the storytelling... We literally watched hours and hours of gorilla footage. Then you understand that gorillas do communicate. They do have a language."

In other words, men may argue about the intelligence of non-verbal animals, but women, who are used to nurturing babies and pets, know there are other ways to "speak." So while the men in *King Kong* are primarily interested in forcing a powerful "beast" into submission, Ann admires his strength and sees both his pride and his vulnerability.



Despite what some reviewers have told you, I don't think Ann and Kong ever "fall in love." Ann's in love with Jack Driscoll (played by Adrien Brody), who makes a heroic transformation of his own in the course the film. What Ann and Kong share is empathic understanding; they look into each other's eyes and see the souls within. Cooper was always clear about his goal. "I'll have women crying over Kong before I'm through," he said, and believe me, I cried plenty.

Final words: *King Kong* (2005) is a film that you really should see on the big screen, so you can surrender yourself to the richness of its images and sound design, and also participate fully in the audience experience. Just remember: bring your tissues!



Jan Lisa Huttner is the Managing Editor of *FILMS FOR TWO: The Online Guide for Busy Couples*. A complete archive of Jan's reviews for the *Woman's Newspapers™* can be found in the "Treasures" section of www.films42.com.