

Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

SUBJECT - Movie Recommendation: **King Kong (2005)** - Filmmaker Peter Jackson brings us a terrific new version of a classic film - February 2006

It's funny how quickly things can change sometimes. In one of my early Thoughts For The Month columns I talked about how I rarely use this space to recommend or criticize movies. As regular readers of my column have seen however, over the past couple years I've begun writing more movie reviews and recommendations. This is partly because I'm such a big fan of movies, and talking about them is often just too hard to resist. Having a website makes it especially hard to resist. Another contributing factor to my writing more reviews has been because over the last five years or so more and more horror movies have been remade. As I've mentioned previously, I generally have mixed feelings regarding this trend, not wanting to see classic (and sometimes not-so-classic) Hollywood horror films be tarnished with a bad remake. Fortunately (and surprisingly) some of the more recent remakes have been better than expected. This brings me to the topic for this month's column.

I have to admit that when I first heard filmmaker Peter Jackson was planning to remake **King Kong** I wasn't very excited. Although I've been a huge Peter Jackson fan for a long time now, well before his incredible success with the **Lord of the Rings** trilogy of films, **King Kong** was just never one of my favorite movies. When it comes to classic monsters, the continuing adventures of the mighty **Godzilla** have always appealed to me more, although admittedly **King Kong vs. Godzilla** still remains a standout **Godzilla** picture in my book. Naturally though I knew I'd be going to see the new **King Kong**, and after coming out of the theater I was reminded once again what an incredibly talented filmmaker Peter Jackson is.

The story in this latest version of **King Kong** is similar to that of the earlier film versions. In 1930's depression-era New York City an unemployed vaudeville performer named

Ann Darrow is hired by Hollywood filmmaker Carl Denham to be the leading lady in his latest epic masterpiece. He also hires a playwright named Jack Driscoll to write the script, and along with other actors and production personnel they head off on a tramp steamer in search of the mysterious and uncharted Skull Island. Once there they discover the island is inhabited by not-so-friendly natives who provide sacrifices to the giant ape King Kong. Before long the natives have captured Ann Darrow as the next sacrifice and it's up to the crew and movie people aboard the ship to rescue her. Before that can happen however they must face all types of prehistoric dinosaurs and insects that inhabit the island, as well as King Kong himself. So goes the story for the first two-thirds of the movie, with the ending sequence being set in New York where the giant ape has been brought after being captured. It is there Carl Denham finally gets his long sought-after moment in the spotlight, and King Kong meets his tragic fate.

There are so many things to like about this new *King Kong* that it's hard to decide where to begin. First and foremost the entire cast is exceptional, especially the leads. Naomi Watts, who came to prominence in the American *Ring* movies, among other films, has both natural beauty and emotional depth that serve her well as famous damsel-in-distress Ann Darrow. Jack Black paints a vivid portrait of an obsessed filmmaker driven towards achieving success at any cost in a portrayal that is over-the-top but never crosses the line into camp or caricature. Although admittedly it is often humorous to watch as Denham holds onto his camera for dear life even in moments when he should be thinking more about saving his own life. And Adrien Brody provides solid support to these two in the role of Jack Driscoll, a man whose heart belongs to the theater but who winds up becoming a larger-than-life sort of hero trying to save Ann from the dangers around her. The supporting cast is also solid, including Thomas Kretschmann as ship Captain Englehorn, and, of course, Andy Serkis as King Kong. But more about that later...

This film also has great action sequences, cinematography and special effects. Following a long opening where we get to know the main characters well and follow them on their adventure at sea, things really heat up after the boat makes a rough landing at Skull Island. From here on in the film is full of hair-raising action and mayhem, from the filmmakers' grisly encounters with the natives (some of the scariest scenes in the film) and deadly dinosaurs that inhabit the island, to Kong's final battles with the combat planes attacking him in New York City. The dinosaur sequences in particular are nothing short of spectacular. The computer-created beasts are as striking and vivid as anything seen in previous dinosaur epics, and the scenes where they interact with the human actors are generally smooth and believable. One extended chase scene in particular involving Ann, Kong and several T-Rex dinosaurs was particularly riveting because of its sheer inventiveness. It also provides one of the most memorable shots in the film (although there were many) where Ann winds up standing in the middle of a face-off between Kong and a nasty and determined T-Rex. Add to this a scene where our intrepid rescuers battle a nightmare forest full of creepy-crawly worms and assorted bugs, and we have a film that should delight many fans of both action and giant monster epics.

I mentioned above that Andy Serkis was good in the role of King Kong. This was another, and perhaps the biggest, factor in the success of the film. From what I understand King Kong was brought to the screen through a combination of live action man-in-a-suit acting (Serkis) and CGI (computer generated imagery). While I can see how CGI would be needed for the impressive action sequences mentioned above, it's the quiet, tender

moments between Kong and Ann that really provide the core of this film and give the movie its soul. After the natives hoist Ann across a wide chasm and Kong appears and snatches her up she is brought deep into the forest to where the great ape lives. After her initial shock and horror at her situation, and some attempts to escape, Ann instinctively realizes she must use her wits to survive and therefore attempts to entertain the beast with some of her vaudeville routines. This works and seems to amaze the great ape and soon he begins to see himself as her protector, while at the same time she gradually begins to see him as something other than a scary monster. Naomi Watts is excellent in these scenes as her emotions range and move from frantic terror to caution to sympathetic understanding. However what is really amazing is how King Kong is also a full, rich character with an equally wide range of emotions. While at first appearing to be a wild, ferocious beast upon his arrival, we soon see the more gentle side of the creature. Not long after his run through the forest with Ann and some roaring and pounding on his chest, Kong sits down and appears quiet and contemplative. Watching him, I began to view him as a tortured soul who looked tired, worn out, and perhaps weary of playing the role of the terrifying monster the natives had thrust upon him. He also looked like someone who was very much alone in the world, which is why he showed delight at having a beautiful toy like Ann to play with. At the same time he was respectful of Ann when he initially left her, allowing her the freedom to leave. These scenes are the ones that remain vivid in my mind when thinking about this film, and they are probably the ones that separate this version the most from earlier versions of **King Kong**. Additionally, this relationship between Ann and Kong makes the inevitable end of the film particularly tragic and heart-wrenching.

With this new version of King Kong filmmaker Peter Jackson adds another impressive credential to his ever-expanding résumé, which includes other favorites of mine such as the gory cult horror gem **Dead Alive** and the intense **Heavenly Creatures**. His vision of the great ape epic is proof positive that a remake isn't always a bad thing.