

King Kong Was A Ten Pound Weakling

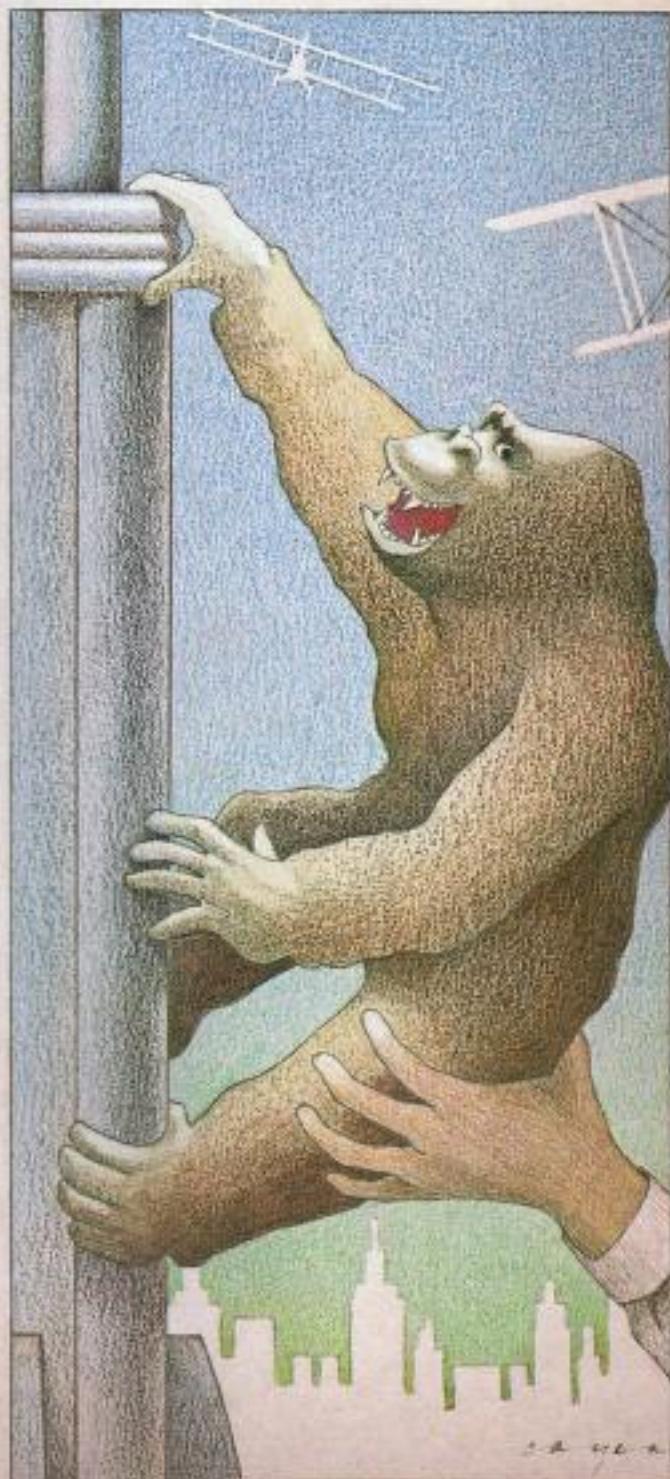
(And Other Depressing Facts You Should Know)

The Scene: New York City.

The Action: King Kong, a giant gorilla, the "Eighth Wonder of the World," is climbing to the top of the Empire State Building. Clutched in one huge paw is the lovely Ann Darrow, played by Fay Wray. She is screaming her head off. Who can blame her? On the streets below, crowds of horrified citizens watch helplessly as Kong advances to his goal. At the top, he puts Fay Wray down. Then he beats his huge chest and thunders a roar of rage and defiance.

The scene is, of course, from King Kong—a movie that's as popular now as it was 40 years ago when it was made.

There has never been a movie monster like Kong. Not even Godzilla comes close. So it may be a shock to learn that Kong is not exactly the towering beast he seems to be on the screen. In fact, he's far from it. Would you believe he's only 18 inches tall, and weighs in at a skimpy 10 pounds? The monster it took a squadron of fighter planes to blast off his perch is actually a shrimp—he's just a small model. (Better not tell this to your little brother or sister. They might be too young for the hard truth.) Making this model seem so enormously real was one of the first and greatest uses of special effects in the movies. Special effects are what the movies use to convince us that what we are seeing on the screen is real. Violent storms, fires, volcanoes, Superman soaring through the air, monsters causing lots of trouble—you name it, special effects can make it happen.



How do they do it? A lot of it involves using models or small versions of big things: skyscrapers, ocean liners, rocket ships, and in the case of King Kong, a small version of a super-sized ape.

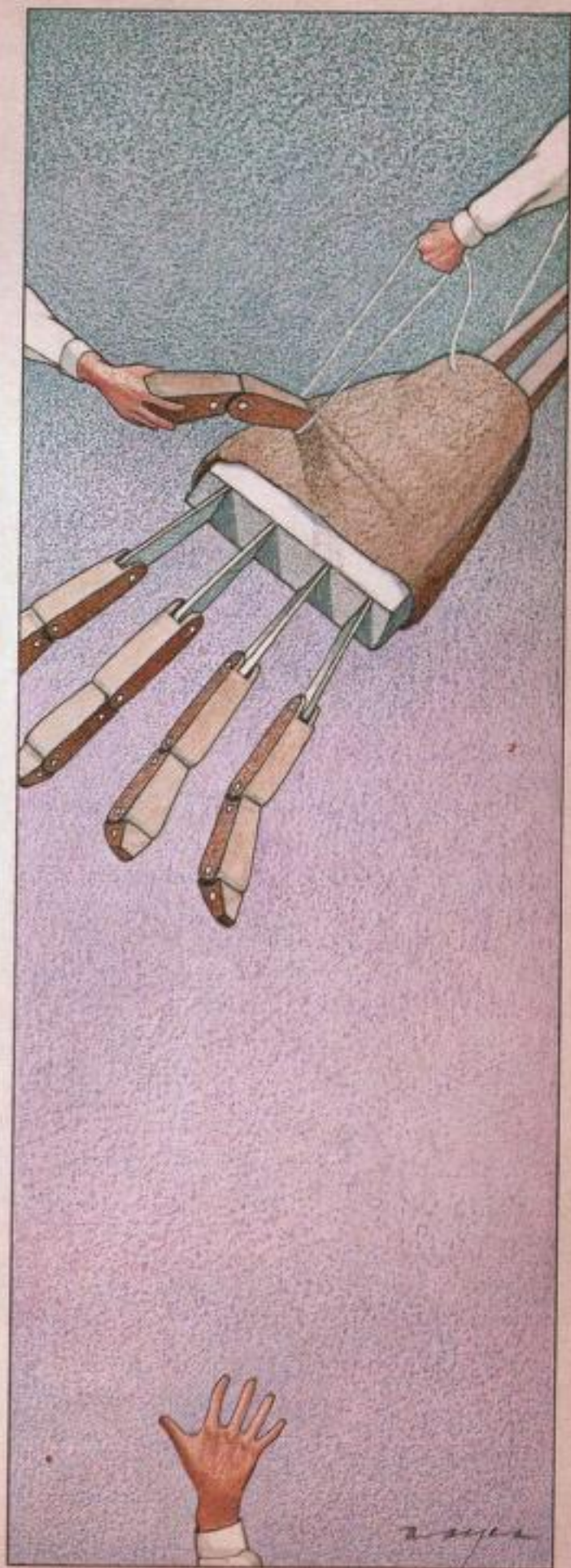
But Kong was no ordinary hobby store model. He was an artistic creation designed by Willis O'Brien, a special effects genius. Kong's steel skeleton was covered with solid rubber muscles. On top of this was a rabbit-fur covering. He could move and his face made several interesting expressions. In his model size, he'd make a nice pet.

The movie also required other models. These included prehistoric animals like a brontosaurus, a tyrannosaurus, and several weird birds, which all lived on remote Skull Island where Kong was captured.

Once the models were built, the movie was ready for the first step of filming. This meant putting the models into action in realistic settings and backgrounds appropriate for spooky Skull Island. The action of the models was filmed. Then this movie was projected on a big screen while the human actors did their work in front of the screen. This was also filmed. The results look as if the huge beasts and frightened people are actually in the same place, instead of being in two separate movies.

Not all the models were animals. There was also a miniature version of Fay Wray. When we see Fay in Kong's paw, it is really the miniature Miss Wray he is holding. Usually, she has fainted from terror—which is convenient, since the model couldn't move. For close-ups, which required more action from her, the special effects team built a really giant-sized Kong paw. The real Fay Wray would climb into this paw. Settled in, she would kick and scream as if she were really being clutched by a monster.

Along with the Kong-sized paw, O'Brien and his staff also built an enormous Kong foot—and also a head and shoulders. The head and shoulders piece was so big it took six men inside to work the controls to move it. Forty bearskins were needed to cover it. The giant head was used for closeups.





Creating Kong and getting him to work with live actors was just part of the problem faced by O'Brien and his staff. They also had to create some realistic sounds for him. No one had ever made a sound movie about a huge ape, so the special effects team had to find something that sounded like Kong. For his roar, they decided to use a record of a lion's roar played backwards and at slower speed. For the chest beating, a microphone was placed on a man's back while a padded drumstick was tapped against his chest. The sound was linked to the image of the ape and the rest is history.

Special effects people will go to almost any length to get the look they want. Cecil B. DeMille, one of Hollywood's greatest directors, was once making a movie about a ship burning at sea. He got a model of the ship and a large tank of water. But he needed to show frantic people running around on the decks. Finally, someone in special effects thought of using June bugs with paper figures of people pasted on their backs. Somehow, they managed to get the figures pasted on the June bugs. The boat was set on fire, and the June bugs let loose on the decks. Naturally the bugs ran around like mad, the cameras rolled, and DeMille had his scene—not to mention a lot of scorched bugs.

Not all special effects are as far out as detailed models or June bugs. Sometimes they can be as ordinary as cornflakes. This is Hollywood's version of snow. Ground up and blown through a machine, cornflakes make a nice screen substitute for a blizzard. They don't melt—but they do crunch—and that's a problem for the sound department.

Recent movies are going in for special effects in a big way. The Poseidon Adventure is about a sinking ship which is flipped upside down. So upside down sets were built. Earthquake will bring special effects off the screen and right into the theater itself. Along with floods, crumbling buildings, caved-in streets, and other disastrous spectacles, this movie will make use of something called Sensurround. This will cause the theater seats to actually vibrate so that the audience can really enjoy the earthquake.

Special effects are magic work. They give us pictures that can scare, excite, move, or thrill us. It doesn't really matter that special effects are just a lot of tricks. Knowing that Kong is a model doesn't change the way we feel about him. So what if he's a little short in real life? It's the screen image that counts—and this is where Kong will always be King, thanks to special effects.