



KING KONG

The Great Ape vs Peter Jackson. Total Film grabs a ringside seat for the rumble in the jungle...

ON THE DVD

ETA 26 DECEMBER

Director Peter Jackson
Starring Naomi Watts, Adrien Brody, Jack Black, Jamie Bell, Andy Serkis

Where do you start on a project that's the most keenly anticipated blockbuster since, well, *The Return Of The King*? For Peter Jackson, the answer was simple: screen the original 1933 version of *King Kong* for everybody who worked for him; share the electrifying movie magic, the compelling mix of heart-pinching emotion and staggering-for-their-time effects that first compelled a nine-year-old Jackson onto his destined career path.

"We got everyone to watch the film," says Richard Taylor, Jackson's special-effects field marshal for their jointly-owned Weta outfit, in the conference room of their unassuming bungalow offices in suburban Wellington. "And that included 16-year-olds who had never even heard of *King Kong*. Five minutes in, they're struggling with the corny dialogue, struggling with the black-and-white images and the goofy actors. Fifteen minutes in, they're captivated. An hour-and-a-half into it, there are tears in their eyes as a great movie hits them..."

Here, in a nutshell, is Jackson's mission: to update the Kong myth for a generation whose experience of the film, if any, is likely to be the shoddy, campified 1976 version starring Jeff

Bridges and Jessica Lange. The hefty challenge for he and Taylor is to get millions of people sucked into the story of a 25-foot-tall, chest-thumping gorilla in love with a blonde bombshell – and have them walk out with tears streaming down their faces. It's a lot to squeeze from a story that, on paper, looks lightweight. As Kong star Adrien Brody sums up nicely: "We're on the boat. We go through all this stuff. We're on the island, chaos ensues. We're back in New York, more chaos ensues." Yeah, it's a big ask... and that's before you consider that Jackson's following up the most successful film trilogy in movie history. The footsteps to fill are gorilla-sized – which is why the marketing juggernaut has already kicked off for *Kong*'s cinematic stomp in December.

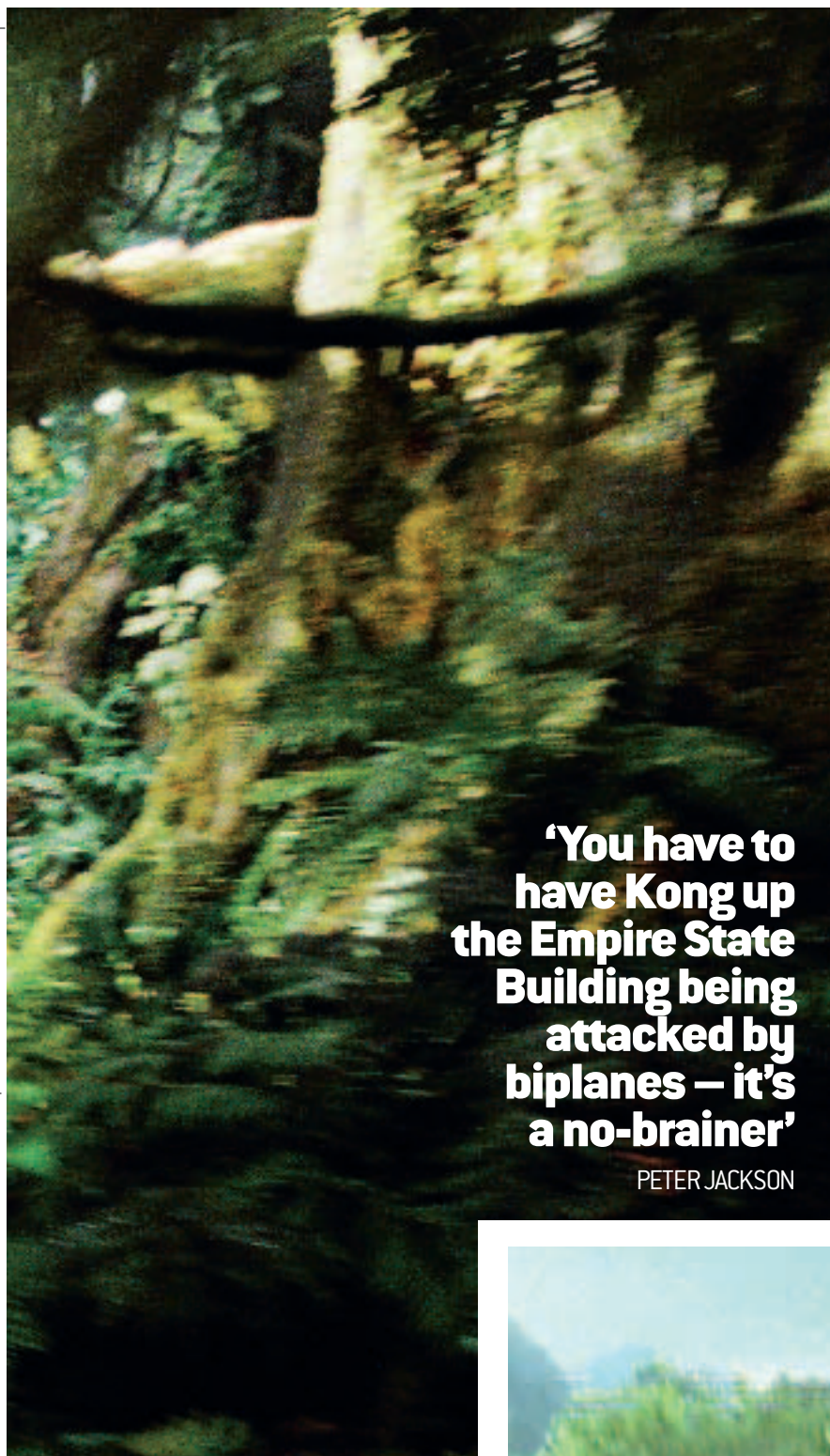
First up was the pumping trailer, which *Kong* studio Universal readied in time to swing across the globe with 17,000 prints of *War Of The Worlds*. It was a tantalising taster that suggested *Kong* has the potential to deliver on multiple levels – from *Jurassic Park*-style spectacle to plush period romance. As for Kong himself, he looks the (monkey) business, whether it's snatching a terrified Naomi Watts or bellowing ferociously in the face of a snapping T-rex. Jackson knows the credibility of the big ape is crucial – more important, even, than Gollum to *The Lord Of The Rings*.



Running scared: Naomi Watts' Ann Darrow will have more backbone than Fay Wray's original.



Orc calling Orson: Jack Black plays a Welles-like filmmaker in Jackson's *Rings* follow-up.



‘You have to have Kong up the Empire State Building being attacked by biplanes – it’s a no-brainer’

PETER JACKSON

It’s extraordinary, the subtlety Andy brings. If you’re going for the heart and soul, it’s all about tiny gestures.”

The newly slimline Jackson, for whom a combination of laser eye surgery and diet have helped shed his Hobbit-like appearance, first tried to remake *King Kong* aged 12. “I had this grand vision,” he says. “I built a cardboard model of the Empire State Building. I built a little King Kong, which I actually still have. But at some point I realised that remaking *King Kong* as a 12-year-old was a little ambitious.”

Twenty-three years later, in 1996, Jackson’s dream came true. In the wake of his underperforming ghost story *The Frighteners*, which at least proved this talented Kiwi was capable of handling an effects-laden production, Jackson was handed the precious keys to one of Universal’s most treasured monster franchises. Elation at Jackson’s New Zealand base camp swiftly turned to disappointment, however, when – spooked by monster flops *Mighty Joe Young* and *Godzilla* – Universal pulled the *Kong* plug.

“We were all heartbroken at the time because we thought we had lost the greatest opportunity of our careers,” Taylor recalls with misty eyes. “But today we appreciate that it was a blessing in disguise. First of all, I question whether we were well enough equipped to do justice to the story in 1996. And secondly, *Rings* may never have been made if we’d done *Kong* then.”

Heaven forbid. Crucially, Jackson feels he, Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens were

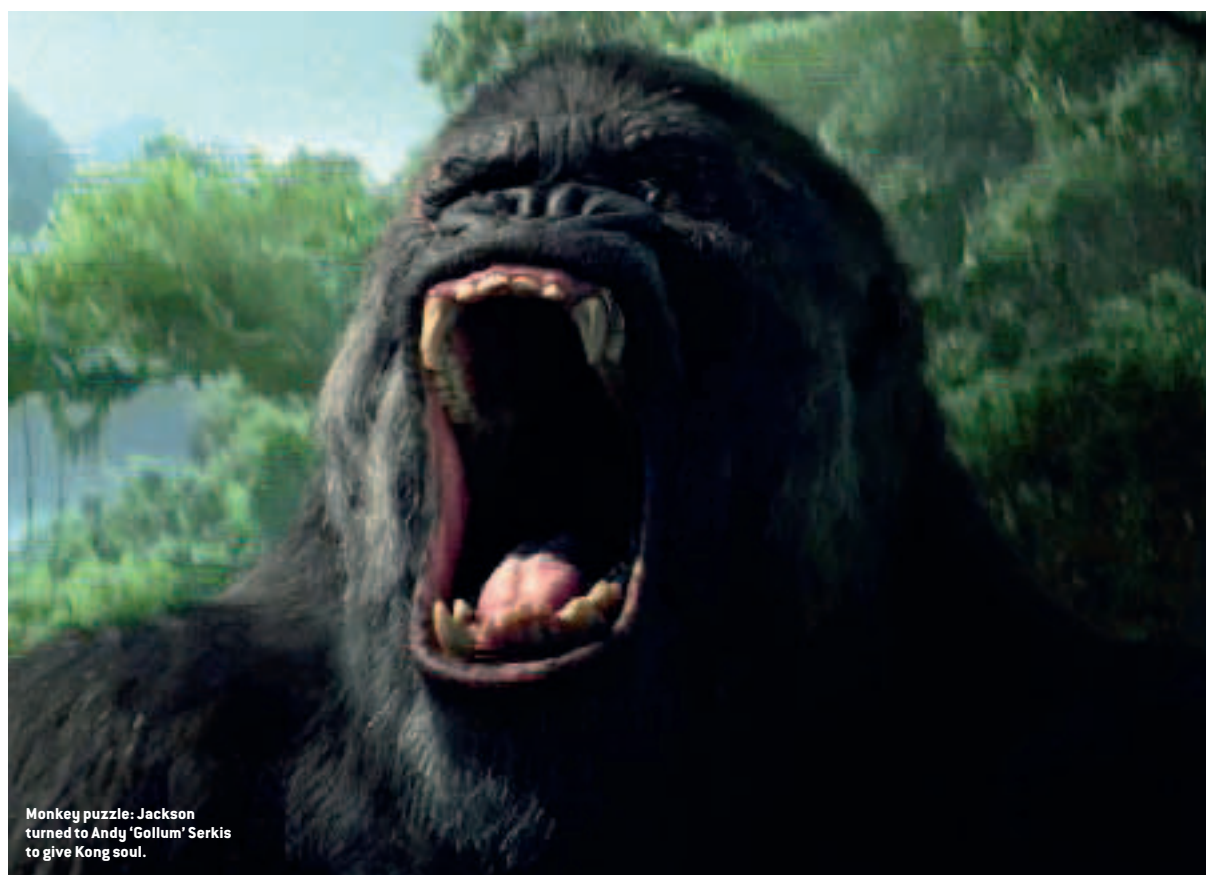
able to apply lessons learned on the *Rings* trilogy to upgrade their 1996 script, which deviated substantially from the original. In their second-chance saloon, the screenwriters returned to the 1933 film and brainstormed a rewrite that restored faith in Jackson’s first love. “We learned it all from *The Lord Of The Rings*,” says the 43-year-old filmmaker. “We just didn’t like the old script. It was lightweight and flippant and trying desperately hard to be a cool, Indiana Jones-style movie.”

The new script was more faithful and, by refusing to update the period setting from the ’30s, it allowed Jackson to keep the iconic scene that gave *Kong* its titanic power. “More than anything,” he says, “I wanted to have Kong up the Empire State Building being attacked by biplanes. How could you remake *Kong* and not have that scene? For me, it was a no-brainer.” Changes Jackson and co did make to the original story are referred to as “enhancements”. Take Carl Denham, for instance, the bull-headed filmmaker who leads the expedition to Kong’s prehistoric island. In 1933, he was a fat bloke in his 50s. But Jackson decided to style him after a young Orson Welles and instantly thought of Jack Black. “Denham’s a Frankenstein of many different characters,” says Black. “He’s got the ambition of Orson Welles, but not necessarily the talent.”

As for Brody’s Jack Driscoll, he’s no longer the rugged, square-jawed he-man of the original. Instead, he’s an Arthur Miller-style playwright who Denham cajoles into writing his screenplay. “That >>

“If Gollum wasn’t believable, it would’ve damaged *Lord Of The Rings*,” he muses, scratching at his straggly beard. “With *King Kong*, the situation’s more potent. People expect to see the most realistic gorilla they’ve ever seen on film. And we’re on our way towards that.”

Early passes at a CG Kong by Weta’s finest have already resulted in a few digital tweaks: his face has been made smaller and his head bigger. What hasn’t changed is they’re still relying heavily on Andy Serkis, in his Lycra motion-capture suit, to breathe as much life into the great beast as he did into the skulking Gollum (Serkis is also playing the ship’s cook, Lumpy). “We’ve done some incredible tests where we’ve got Andy’s face with all these marking dots on it and we have Kong’s face next door on a computer screen,” marvels Jackson. “As Andy moves his face, the gorilla’s face moves.



Monkey puzzle: Jackson turned to Andy ‘Gollum’ Serkis to give Kong soul.

WINTER PREVIEW



'I don't think I'll be screaming quite so much... Ann Darrow's a bit tougher now'

NAOMI WATTS

Tyrannosaurus hex: the dinosaurs of Skull Island have hunted Kong's family for generations.



The write stuff: Oscar-winner Adrien Brody plays Jack Driscoll – an Arthur Miller-esque playwright.

first guy was pretty much a lug," says Brody. "He didn't really have much depth. Now he's changed for the better and there are elements of sensitivity that make him less of a stereotypical kind of hero."

Also shifting from stereotype is leading lady Ann Darrow. In 1933 Fay Wray shrieked for America; in 1976, a sexy Jessica Lange writhed like a bitch

in heat as Kong's fetid breath blew her dry. In 2005, she'll boast a backbone and a backstory. Watts smiles, white teeth flashing through the grime incurred by a day's worth of tussles. A CG-gorilla or not, it's a physical shoot. "Who is Ann, why can she survive in the jungle, and what makes her so alluring?" asks Watts. "Those things have really dated in the first two films." One thing that definitely

won't be changing, though, is Ann's high-pitched screaming. There'll just be less of it. "We all know how good the scream is but I forgot just how much there is! I don't think I'll be screaming quite so much. Ann is a bit tougher now."

Back to King Kong himself. Like his svelte lady love, he gets a backstory, too. The last in a long line of giant apes who have been killed off by Skull Island's

rampaging, hungry dinosaurs – hence the heavily scarred face – he cuts a sad and lonely figure (there's even a scene where he strokes his dead father's bones). But aside from that, Jackson says, he won't be too different in mood from the first film – apart from the fact, of course, that he'll move around on all fours like a real-life gorilla, rather than standing upright like a man wearing a tatty monkey suit.

"We're not radically redefining him. He's a bull gorilla, very ugly, very scary, very ancient. We're trying to make him as scary as possible. He reveals his heart and his soul throughout the movie but when you see him, he's absolutely terrifying. It's more interesting to peel the layers of the brute away."

With his 800-pound gorilla ready to rumble to life in three months and hundreds of visual effects shots still to be finalised, Jackson isn't worried by the fanboy grumbling there has been. "It ain't the eighth wonder of the world," sniped one poster on Aint-It-Cool-News, insisting the trailer's CG footage appeared unfinished. That's because it is.

"They are inevitably the first passes and they'll get redone," shrugs Jackson of the early reveals. "But I'm happy with how things are looking and have no excuses. I'm feeling good about the movie: it's got a lot to offer beyond a few shots of dinosaurs."

GREG WILLIAMS



Q&A NAOMI WATTS

**“Peter lets you suggest ideas. Sometimes they can be shit, but...”
Kong’s lady-friend gets to grips with loving the simian.**

Any second thoughts about taking on such an iconic role? Fay Wray claimed she suffered from typecasting for the rest of her career.

I always have second thoughts about everything I do. Hopefully the difference this time is that I’ve already done a lot of different work before *King Kong*, so I won’t just be this girl forever. Hopefully my work in the film will stand up.

Ann Darrow is a struggling actress who grabs what she hopes is her ticket to stardom. Did your own career struggles help your performance?

Yeah, sure, I know what it is to struggle. I mean, the struggle Ann Darrow goes

through, in this version particularly, is way beyond my tiny little bit. You know, it was a 10-year upward-hill battle for me. Those things do inform you – the rejection, being broke – but hers is much more extreme than mine ever was.

Ann essentially falls in love with Kong. What the hell does she see in the brute?

He’s the ultimate man! Don’t you think? I mean, perhaps he’s lacking in social graces but so much of their relationship is like any other relationship. He’s ferocious and angry but he’s also loving and protective. There’s a point in the story where she chooses him. She says, “Take me” because she’s in this

environment that’s completely wild and dangerous. It’s not opportunistic or manipulative, it’s, “I feel safe with you.” That’s when their relationship changes.

How have you found working with Peter Jackson?

He’s incredibly strong, but he’s not intimidating or overpowering like a lot of directors. He’s very welcoming; you feel safe to expose your ideas – which sometimes can be really shit, but you want to voice them anyway in case he thinks they’re good. The greatest thing a director can do is to empower you. Peter helps you trust your instincts.

Matt Mueller