

35 years since
I first saw
the original,
15 months

since we started the shoot,
nine weeks since I had any
sleep, it's finally time to...

Pete

ADDITIONAL REPORTING: JENNY COONEY, SCOTT ORLIN

UNLEASH THE BEAST

WORDS MATT MUELLER

November 2004: *Total Film* is standing on Skull Island. Not the nice, green, jungly bit where you'd expect to bump into the cast of *Lost* or, perhaps, a couple of *Vastatosaurus-rexes* (voracious descendants of the T-rex) out trying to pull attractive blondes (into their gaping jaws). No, the nasty, black, desolate bit where about 100 or so twitchy, dark-skinned natives eke out a grim existence, terrified to venture beyond their craggy walls to the emerald paradise on the other side in case they end up as dinner for one of the resident monsters – including a towering gorilla named Kong. These chanting, bone-wearing primitives could invite him into their parlor through their very big gates, but instead they fear and worship Kong as a hairy, 25-foot-tall deity, sacrificing their women to him on a frequent enough basis that Skull Island crummet is in short supply.

Today, however, the locals have made themselves scarce in their corpse-littered, crypt-filled home – a stunningly atmospheric and macabre creation that's been constructed on the Miramar peninsula in suburban Wellington, New Zealand. After kidnapping and serving up prize lady specimen Ann Darrow (Naomi Watts) to Kong in a cream-coloured negligee, she's since been rescued by the crew of the *SS Venture*. And now all hell is breaking loose. >>

KING KONG

Tug of war: Jack Driscoll (Adrien Brody) and Ann Darrow (Naomi Watts) enter, then succumb to, the perils of Skull Island.

Tiny, happy people: long shots of the *Venture* crew in Skull Island's primordial jungles were created with miniature sets and digital doubles for the actors.



A man with a megaphone bellows, "Kong is breaking through the gates! He's roaring! He makes eye contact with Ann!"

"What are you doing?" a panicky Watts shrieks as Captain Englehorn (Thomas Kretschmann) orders his men to chuck a few chloroform canisters Kong's way. "Are you out of your mind?" Adrien Brody's Jack Driscoll chimes in. "Kong!"

"The net is dropped on him," resumes megaphone man. "He's trying to break free, you can't control him." Brody dashes up to Watts, dragging her away from the gates, while Jack Black, wearing the demented expression of a man who won't be denied, shouts at his crew, "Gas him! I need him alive!" Megaphone man: "Kong's choking! He's trying to push himself up! He's breaking free!" "It's over, you lunatic!" Brody bellows hoarsely at Black. "Everybody run!"

With three cameras capturing the action, Peter Jackson shoots five takes of this star-powered panic. But, of course, there's no Kong being gassed or grappling with nets. Watts, Brody, Black and the *Venture* crewmen gaze up into the air at nothing, pretending it's something big,

scary and angry, conveying the full gamut of fear and anxiety Jackson wants for the scene. And we haven't even seen Andy Serkis in his gorilla costume yet.

ANIMAL INSTINCT

If Peter Jackson has the Freddie Mercury-David Bowie duet 'Under Pressure' churning through his brain on a constant loop, we wouldn't be surprised. And who could blame him? Straight off the biggest trilogy of all time, with a pod of Oscars squatting in his Wellington mansion and enough cash to have bribed Sauron to forget about that damn ring, the newly slimline Kiwi only plunges straight into making the biggest ape movie the world has ever seen — a remake of the 1933 beauty-and-the-beast classic — and absorbing all the attendant

'All I want is for the people who respect the original to think we did okay' PETER JACKSON

pressure that comes with it. Pressure from Universal to spend their couple-hundred million dollars wisely; pressure from moviegoers fatigued by Hollywood spectacles showing off their digital seams like cheap back-alley tarts; and pressure to keep his entire country's nascent film industry off the unemployment line. "Sure, there's pressure," shrugs the *Rings*-master-turned-ape-wrangler. "But it doesn't worry me too much. The pressure is that I want people who respect the original film to think we did okay. And I just want to make a good film. That's not easy."

Indeed, with great power comes great expectations, and the weight now resting on Jackson's shoulders would bring Atlas to his knees. Sure, he's got \$207 million to play with (a chunk of change that dwarfs the original's \$670,000 budget), which helps buy a lot of great stuff. But Jackson's making no concessions to fashion, hewing rigidly to the original's storyline about a megalomaniacal filmmaker-explorer Carl Denham (Black) leading a crew to an uncharted island near Sumatra to investigate an incredible legend, where a colossal gorilla falls in love with a beautiful woman. The 44-year-old filmmaker's also clinging onto version number one's Depression-era setting ("The last age in which there could be blank spots on the atlas," Jackson explains), Kong's many dinosaur enemies on Skull Island, and the tragic finale atop the Empire State Building, where Cutter Hell-Fire biplanes take the big ape down. "That's the main reason I set it in 1933," he says. "I wanted to have our climax up on the Empire State Building, with Kong fighting the biplanes. If you put Kong in a modern context, he'd have no chance, fighting against jet planes. It just doesn't work."

When composer Howard Shore, who scored the *Rings* trilogy, was nudged aside in favour of James Newton Howard (*Batman Begins*) seven weeks before *Kong's* due date, and Universal declared a week later that they'd given their blessing to roll out Jackson's three-hour version (although >>

NAOMI WATTS PORTRAIT: BEN WATTS; CORBIS OUTLINE

A photograph of Naomi Watts with blonde hair, wearing a black and white checkered sleeveless top. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. Two large, black, furry hands are resting on her shoulders, one on each side. The background is a bright, outdoor setting with a building visible on the right.

NAOMI WATTS

Poked by giant fingers. Berated by Fay Wray. Meet the new Ann Darrow...

Were you prepared for the demands of acting against greenscreen?

I had no idea what I was in for [laughs]. It was intense. I'm sporty and athletic, but I was getting beat up a lot because they had men in Lycra blue suits posing as a thumb or a finger or a piece of a dinosaur and they were always pushing and pulling and poking things at me. I was getting injured almost every week. I can tell you now, I won't be running out to do an action movie any time soon. It nearly killed me!

How does working with Peter Jackson compare with the other directors you've worked with?

How his mind can hold so much is beyond me. He's a genius. The labour that goes into his films is extraordinary and it all starts with him. And even though he's got all these fantastic people working for him, he sees everything, every step of the way. His passion was monumental and it was great to be around that.

How has the new Kong changed from the original?

Peter wanted to tell it in a modern way, with new ideas, but honouring that period and what was going on at that time – how people survived in desperate times. And they really

pumped up Ann. She's no longer the damsel in distress, she's more of a feisty survivor with a sharp wit.

You met Fay Wray before the shoot. What were your impressions of meeting her?

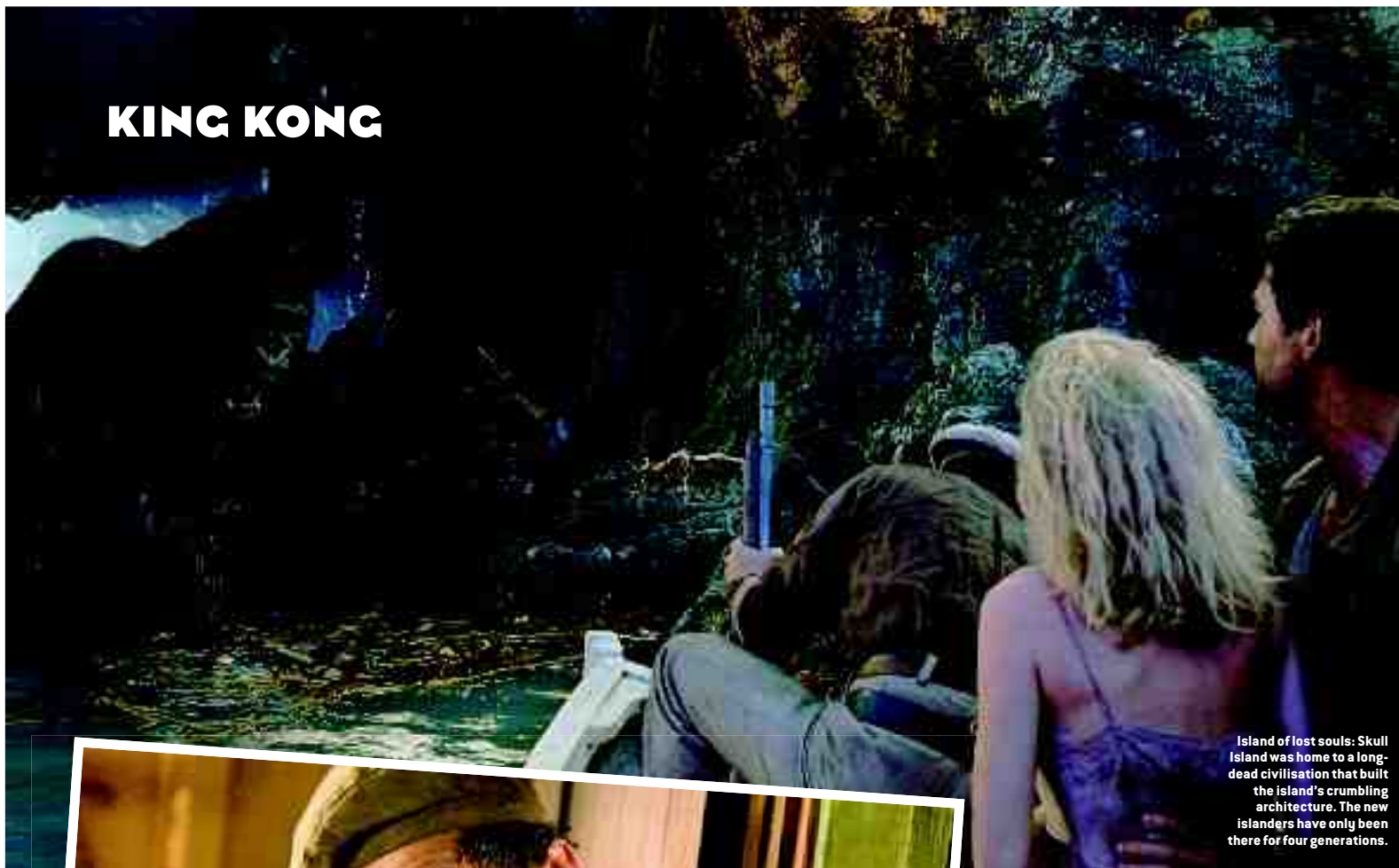
It was great, an historical night. We went and had dinner uptown. She was very lucid – she had moments of being very quiet and seemed quite fragile, and then she'd pipe up and show you she hadn't missed a beat. She cracked a few jokes and was saying to me, "You're not Ann Darrow. I'm Ann Darrow!" I was thinking, "Oh no, she doesn't want me to play the part..." but at the end of the night, she gave me her blessing and said that I was the perfect Ann.

It all looks very intense. Any light-hearted moments during the shoot, apart from seeing Andy Serkis running around in the monkey suit?

When he was running around doing his stuff, we had to get the scale right as there's not much difference in size between him and I. So when I was looking at him he was up on a scissor lift, which is a metal contraption, and when he was looking at me, he would be holding a Barbie doll [laughs]. We had that over and over again.

Dennis Brabham

KING KONG



Island of lost souls: Skull Island was home to a long-dead civilisation that built the island's crumbling architecture. The new islanders have only been there for four generations.



Venture adventurers: Andy Serkis as the ship's cook, Lumpy, and (below) Jamie Bell as Jimmy. Spot the in-joke from Jackson's *Braindead* behind him....

'A lot of characters die horribly, so we take time to get to know them first' PETER JACKSON

Hollywood studio system. Merian C Cooper, the loud, flashy producer who dreamed up the idea, was an adventurer, filmmaker and decorated World War One bombardier; Kong's effects mastermind Willis Harold O'Brien was a booze-bashing Irishman. Together they concocted a fantasy epic that smashed box-office records (a \$90,000 opening weekend!), saved a studio (RKO) and stimulated Peter Jackson to follow his filmmaker's destiny, from early puppet splatterfests (*Bad Taste*, *Braindead*, *Meet The Feebles*) through to the marathon Tolkien trilogy.

Cooper's own inspiration came from real-life explorer W Douglas Burden's trek to find the notorious Komodo dragon and he originally wanted to shoot Kong on location using a real gorilla. Fortunately he met O'Brien, who had been working on his own dinosaur epic, *Creation*, and was swayed by the effects wizard's scheme to bring Kong, Skull Island and long-extinct reptiles to life using an 18-inch-high rabbit-fur-covered puppet, wee sets and wire-framed, Plasticine models. Creaky by today's standards? Sure. But for something in its 70s, it's still got a sprightly ability to thrill and chill – and get the tears streaming for the hirsute blighter's bullet-riddled demise. (How much does Jackson love the original? He directed and edited a recreation of the missing six-minute "spider" sequence, which Cooper snipped for pacing reasons and which was then lost, while he was directing the remake. The scene, where a dinosaur chases crew members onto a log, with Kong then shaking them off into a pit where they're eaten by spiders and crabs, will appear on the Region One DVD release.) >>

not before laundering most of the extra cash out of PJ's own pockets), there was the slightest inkling that the film might be falling off its meticulously laid tracks. For one thing, where's all that extra substance coming from? The original only runs at 100 minutes.

Well, it now takes an hour to get from Depression-era New York to Skull Island, the Kong-Darrow-Driscoll ménage à trois receives healthy expansion and a few more characters get air time. "We developed a lot of new characters because we wanted to humanise the ship's crew," says Jackson. "It's always a good idea to do that when you're going to kill them off. A lot of these people get eaten and die horrible deaths so it's always more powerful if you get to know somebody before you bump them off."

THE WILD ONE

A brief lesson on the still-masterful and iconic 1933 version that Jackson's redecorating with 21st century bells and whistles: it was also made by mavericks who lived and worked outside the



KING KONG

Kong makers: In the weeks leading up to release, Weta had a 500-strong team on site to get all of Kong's scenes finished in time.



Black rain: Jack Black is showman Carl Denham.

Tampering with classics is always a risky, and usually thankless, proposition. Fortunately, Jackson's got the brains, balls and visionary talent for mixing the epic with the intimate to succeed where many before have failed — starting with the 1933 film's dismal sequel *Son Of Kong* and leading up to the woeful 1976 version (turn to *Lounge Archive* on page 130 for the full story behind Dino De Laurentiis' rehash). "The 1976 version has dated far worse than the 1933 film," groans Jackson. "It's so '70s, it's unbelievable."

But Jackson also surrounds himself with talented collaborators, including Weta overlord Richard Taylor (special effects), Philippa Boyens (co-screenwriter; motion-capture director) and Fran Walsh (ditto; also producer and Jackson's good wife), the latter two bringing a healthy dose of scepticism to temper Jackson's occasionally off-the-chart fanboy enthusiasm, especially when it came to beefing up the characters. "*King Kong* changed my life," he says. "It didn't change Fran or Philippa's life. They aren't coming at it with the degree of respect and awe that I have."

Together, the trio stockpiled a stellar cast that includes an Oscar-winner (Brody), an Oscar-winner's son (Colin Hanks), a critically saluted Aussie (Watts), Hollywood's sturdiest funnyman (Black), Billy Elliot (Jamie Bell) and Gollum (Serkis). "We cast the film with actors who can play reality," shrugs Jackson of his arresting lineup, although clearly great depth of thought went into every choice the casting triumvirate made. "The better the actor, the more you believe in these people." When he's talking about actors who have to convincingly flee non-existent dinosaurs and react to a 25-foot-tall, log-shaking, cart-tossing, bone-crushing simian as he manoeuvres, first, through Skull Island's primordial

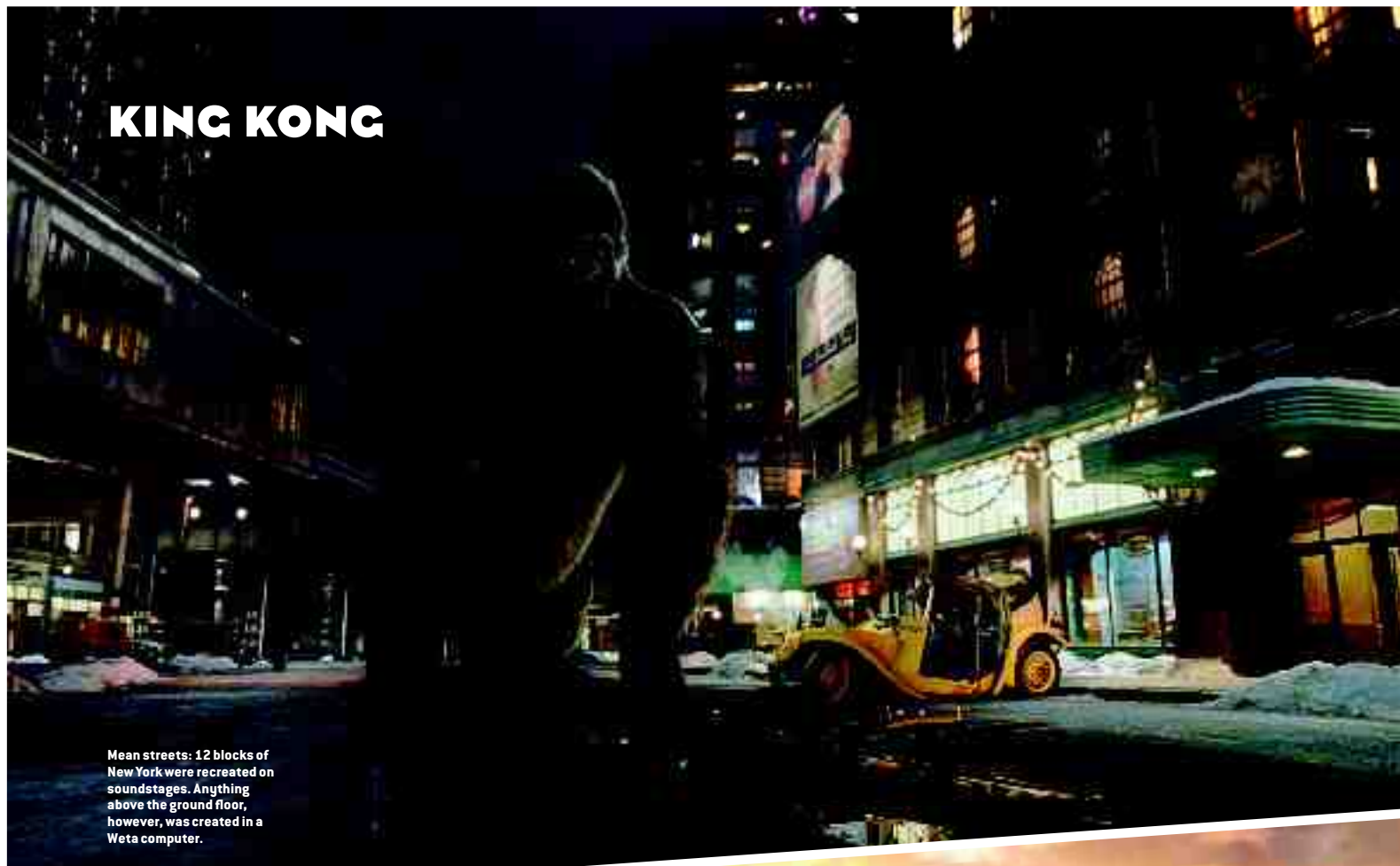
'I would imagine I was being chased by a shark and a tiger combined...' JACK BLACK

environment and, after his capture and escape, through the imposing structures and sinewy ravines of New York City, you can understand why they were so picky.

"It was very important for Peter, Fran and Philippa that there was some chemistry between me and Naomi," says Brody of his hiring as romantic lead Jack Driscoll, the New York playwright who bonds with Watts' Darrow on the way to Skull Island. "There is a strange love triangle between King Kong, Ann and myself. I have to understand this incredible creature is competing for the same girl and that he suffers tremendously for that, while also wanting him out of the picture."

Watts is the biggest beneficiary of Walsh and Boyens' character improvement scheme, Ann >>

KING KONG



Mean streets: 12 blocks of New York were recreated on soundstages. Anything above the ground floor, however, was created in a Weta computer.

'If you put Kong in modern times, he'd have no chance fighting jets' PETER JACKSON

granted an ample backstory plus extra grit and spikiness compared to Fay Wray's original blonde screamer. "She's a street kid and a survivor," says Watts. As for Black, he's an unusual but brave choice to play Denham, who the trio envisioned, says Jackson, "as Orson Welles circa Mercury Theatre/*War Of The Worlds*. He's an obsessive-compulsive filmmaker who's a genius on some levels but makes mistakes and bad decisions – just like Orson Welles did."

"I never thought of Denham as reprehensible," Black insists. "I thought of him as a guy who just wanted to capture something so astonishing that audiences would never forget it... I couldn't think of him as a bad guy."

Make no mistake, Jackson's players are taking their jobs very seriously indeed – both when *Total Film* meets them on set in New Zealand and later, when we catch up with them in LA and New York. Their awe for their director, and what he's attempting to achieve, is expressed with earnest, furrow-browed wonder, even though this is, essentially, a giant celluloid theme-park ride. Tears at the end, however, are hoped for by everyone, including Watts, who spends much of *Kong* sprinting, scrambling and screaming. Which isn't to diminish her role – if we don't buy her emotional meltdown for Kong, the film will fail. "These two beings connect," sighs Watts. "They're like kindred spirits – they've both existed alone for so long and have a negative outlook on life, a feeling of doom. Yet they find a way to exist together and take care of each other."

Still, when you're having to spend most of your scenes reacting to a monstrous creature that



Airborne assault: the Cutter Hell-Fires sent to shoot Kong down had to be fashioned from photographs, as none are left in existence.

either isn't there or is being represented by a man in a fake monkey costume (more on this later), was it ever difficult keeping a straight face?

"Never difficult to keep a straight face," quoth Black, deadpan as you like. "For the most part, I had to pull it in. Because I have a tendency to go a little cartoony. Let the clown eyes go." As for looking petrified while fleeing his fantasy foes, he had a trick up his sleeve. "In my head, I would imagine a shark and a tiger combined..." A shiger, *Napoleon Dynamite* fans. "It would be chasing me, but it'd have the mouth of a shark instead of a tiger. That would get my blood curdling."

THE RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE

March 2005: *Total Film*'s back in Wellington, this time in an old warehouse where Jackson, who's now shed 13 kilograms from his *Lord Of The Rings* fighting weight ("I got tired of being overweight

and unfit so I changed my diet from hamburgers to yoghurt") but still retains his distinctive dishevelled look (today's attire? Mustard orange shirt and green trousers), is filming Ann's barefoot flight through the jungle, weaving in and out of polystyrene trees, rubber plants and styrofoam rocks. A cameraman follows in handheld pursuit, capturing her movements. Suddenly she lurches to a stop at the edge of a cliff. Her face is flushed, her breathing fitful, her eyes locked on a figure perched on the other side of the gorge... Kong!

Well, it's a five-foot-eight Englishman, actually – Andy Serkis. There he is, in his skintight blue Lycra jumpsuit, elevated high above the soundstage floor on a scissor lift. Darrow is attempting to communicate with Kong, utilising the international language of ocular expression since – typical English-speaker – she doesn't speak gorilla. "It's really a beautiful moment because we're these two lost souls in this wild place and >>

KING KONG

ANDY SERKIS

Stomping, roaring, crying. The King has entered the building...

Was it hard to put on all that muscle? On set last year, you looked like that ad for skinny guys who don't want to get sand kicked in their face...

[Laughs] It was doing the gorilla movement that forces you to become that shape. I did work out, of course, but it's all leaning forward on the knuckles so all the weight is taken on the forearms. And I was wearing heavy weights doing the motion capture so I was pretty fit. When the job finished, I just fell apart! It was the most gruelling job I've ever done. I'm one for a challenge but it was just so much tougher than Gollum, I couldn't believe it...

How "human" has Kong ended up?

He's a very idiosyncratic gorilla. From my observations of gorillas, they're all different. But it wasn't 'til later on in motion capture that we really found who Kong was. What he's ended up being is a 'true natured', gut-response, fairly innocent creature. He's a beaten-up, lonely, haunted character. He's like an old boxer, really.

How was it being Kong for the other actors on set?

It was crucial, particularly for Naomi. I spent months being Kong for her off-camera. I wore gorilla dentures and a gorilla muscle suit with arm extensions. When I moved around, it took me into the role. But at the end of the day, it's just two actors improvising and making it work in the moment.

Were there scenes that you particularly enjoyed playing?

Yeah, there's a great scene where Kong and Ann first start to play off each other. And the stuff in his lair is quite tender. You see the bones of his predecessors, and you get to know from whence he came and why he was there on Skull Island.

Is your Kong voice going to be used in the final film?

Yes, I'm going back to do the final vocalisations. It'll be treated because of the size of the character, unlike Gollum which wasn't treated at all. I've completely thrashed my voice!

How did your kids react to seeing their father playing a giant gorilla?

They did come down to motion-capture and watch Dad monkeying around. I don't know how deeply scarred they're going to be for the rest of their lives, but I'm sure I'll find out [laughs]. I can't tell my youngest boy to calm down any more because he's seen me raging like a 25-foot gorilla!

Is it at all frustrating to do all this work, and yet when it ends up on screen it isn't really 'you'?

Not really. I genuinely mean that. What I love about acting is getting inside a role, and whether it's manifested digitally or I'm wearing make-up or a costume, it's the thought processes and the chance to work on something that's going to challenge me – that's the reward.

Did you get any ribbing on the set?

Lots of, "Are you going nuts, Andy?" "Enough apeing around, Andy!" And there were a lot of banana jokes...

Matt Mueller

IN THE GREEN ROOM



Clockwise from top: Naomi Watts sits pretty in Kong's giant fingers after the pair meet up again in New York, where the large ape has escaped after being captured and brought to the city; Jackson wrestles with the tongue of a downed V-rex, for a scene where the toothy reptile becomes dino-meat in Kong's hands; Carl Denham (Jack Black) films the crew's initial arrival onto Skull Island, with his assistant (Colin Hanks) by his side.

we both share this need to come together," Watts explains later, referring to a practice that's still illegal in most countries. "He's the last of his species, so he has this unbelievably powerful urge to mate," is Serkis' blunter take on the mutual attraction. But Watts sees the bigger picture. "Kong is the ultimate man," she smiles. "He might be lacking in social graces but he's loving and protective and that's why she chooses him. He makes her feel safe."

But while emoting her newfound fascination, her onscreen companion is still locked in a Weta computer. When Jackson asks Watts to jump from the cliff into her admirer's sweaty palm, she leaps off her perch to a mattress a few feet below, where an additional group of Lycra-clad stunt men pretend to be Kong's waiting fingers.

Rendering the awesome ape in all his digital glory has been a strange and occasionally bumpy journey (the first teaser trailer met with grumbles from the web brigade). "It took us another couple of weeks after that teaser to really lock him down," says visual effects supervisor Joe Letteri, whose team were instructed by Jackson to make Kong look older, reduce his snaggle tooth and narrow his face. "I wanted Kong to look old because he's been around for a while," says Jackson. "I wanted him to look battle-scarred, where dinosaurs have raked their claws into him; I wanted him to be frightening. When you start with the most terrifying, unpredictable, vicious-looking gorilla you can imagine and then you peel the layers away and start to see his soul and his heart — that's the interesting approach. To see Kong's soul through

'Kong is a beaten-up, haunted character. He's like an old boxer, really' ANDY SERKIS

his eyes is the most important thing in the film. Everything depends on us achieving that."

And Serkis, hired by Jackson after breathing rasping life into Gollum, has been there every step of the way, doing his bit to help Kong stand tall. Acting in scenes with the other actors, wearing a sculpted black-foam gorilla suit, complete with ape-fist extensions and a mic that broadcast his gorilla growls around the soundstages (called the "Kongalyzer"), before spending a further 10 weeks in the motion capture studio after the main shoot wrapped. Here he spent days covered in light-reflecting markers for 70-plus cameras to capture his every movement and expression.

"Gorillas are deeply savage if attacked. If they're not intruded upon, they're incredibly peaceful," says Serkis. "It's that hair switch between the two that I wanted to bring to Kong. That's why it was so hard in motion capture. You were on set for the whole day on your own, for two months. There were moments where it wasn't going right for me and I just sank into this despair. Luckily Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens were brilliant at storytelling, so they knew how to trigger things from me. They really mined me. When I was down, they could get me enraged."

KONG FU FIGHTING

Nine creatures enter the ring. Only one can leave. Who will end up top dog?

KONG VS GODZILLA



Ding ding! Round One:

A classic battle re-staged as Skull Island's favourite son goes up against Tokyo's finest in the biggest scrap since these two formidable foes last met in 1962's classic clash.

Godzilla starts strong, singeing Kong's fur with a white-hot blast of laser breath. But canny Kong has already figured out the deathblow, slamming the reptile's gob shut with one mighty paw and delivering a quick blow to the scaly stomach.

And the winner is... Kong. Laser breath + no outlet = crispy-fried 'Zilla. That's some good eatin'.

KONG VS STRIPE



Ding ding! Round Two:

In what seems like a critical mismatch, Stripe from *Gremlins* somehow snuck his name onto tonight's fight card. But wait, he's got a surprise up his sleeve! Having hit the

pre-fight showers, he's rustled up 100 fellow Gremlins to help him take down the big man... sorry, ape. They're everywhere, pulling hair, hitting with saucepans and disturbingly shimmying around in Ann Darrow's dress. But even 100 Gremlins are no match for Kong, who's had enough of the pesky mini-beasts.

And the winner is... Kong. He shakes 'em off with a roar and adds to his stamp collection, leaving a trail of green and yellow slime in his monstrous wake.

KONG VS CAVE TROLL



Ding ding! Round Three:

The Moria Cave Troll from *The Fellowship Of The Ring* stumbles into the ring and starts swinging blindly at anyone and anything. Kong steps in, only to be stunned

by a lucky roundhouse to the ear. It's followed by an uppercut, a punch to the stomach! Kong's on the mat! He's in trouble! But what's this? He's up, bellowing and swinging as he lays into the Troll...

And the winner is... Kong, who punches the Moria monster into next week. You'll see him next Tuesday.

KONG VS CYCLOPS



Ding ding! Round Four:

The Cyclops is a tough customer, his leathery skin (think a mythical Simon Cowell) making him difficult to hurt, while his dirty tactics — punching, biting, horn-goring, club-bashing and, his speciality, the Cloven-Hoof Kick — cause Kong serious hurt. But then a pretty lady in the front row catches Cyclops' eye...

And the winner is... Kong, who uses the distraction to lunge and plunge, burying a finger into the Cyclops' gigantic, but sadly singular eye, right up to the hairy knuckle. Ouch: it sounds like a giant grape popping. >>

WORDS: JAMES WHITE

ANDY SERKIS PORTRAIT: ANDY FALLON; ALL STAR; MOVIE STORE

KING KONG

« KONG VS GIANT SQUID



Ding ding! Round Five:

It came from beneath the sea, it weighs in at a hefty gazillion tonnes and it answers to the name of Gerald. Slithering onto Skull Island, the octo-nuisance

wraps all six (!) tentacles around Kong's leg and drags him down towards the water. It figures that its best shot is to get the ape off his home territory. And it could just be right...

And the winner is... Kong. Wrapping the squid's arms into a twisted mass of knotty flesh, our ape hero hangs squid boy onto a nearby tree. He then proceeds to use him as a speedball, pummeling the living crap out of him.

KONG VS MR STA-PUFT



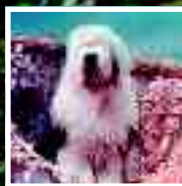
Ding ding! Round Six:

He might look like he belongs at a Village People convention, but the walking product placement packs a sweet punch with those flabby fists. Puft makes a grab for Kong's

coiled neck, smothering the gorilla with his spongy hands before flooring him and delivering a swift kick to the family jewels. Bad move: an enraged Kong tears Puft's head off and eats it in one colossal gulp.

And the winner is... Kong, though even he candidly admits to a sore belly after scoffing more sugary goodness than Marjorie Dawes on a night out.

KONG VS DIGBY (THE BIGGEST DOG IN THE WORLD)



Ding ding! Round Seven:

Digby [aka The Biggest Dog In The World] plays his ace by softening his big brown eyes and giving the full beam treatment to the malleable ape. The lovable 60ft sheep

dog is all happy panting... until he turns into a howling, teeth-gnashing ball of canine death and plants his front paws on Kong's chest to knock him off balance. He's got the King on the floor, about to gnash his throat out when Kong lobs a tree trunk... into a massive ravine.

And the winner is... Kong, as Digby can't resist playing 'Fetch' and falls to his death.

KONG VS KONG



Ding ding! Round Eight:

Kong 2005 squares up to his ultimate opponent... himself, circa 1933. Classic Kong makes a twitchy grab for Ann Darrow, moving across the ring in jerky movements.

Digi-Kong pounds his chest and sweeps forward to meet him. A messy tug of war ensues with the unfortunate lady. Finally, both apes stare at the streak of grue that lies between them. Red mist descends on both sides. This is gonna be a fight to the bitter end...

And the winner is... Kong 2005! Charging his creaky limbed ancestor, New Kong hits him so hard that his stop-motion skeleton is knocked out of its skin. That's gotta hurt...

THE KING IS DEAD! LONG LIVE THE KONG!



Farewell my ugly: Ann Darrow (Naomi Watts) and Kong share a few final moments atop the Empire State Building...

'Kong's the last of his species so he has this powerful urge to mate...'

ANDY SERKIS

"As soon as Andy was in that suit he was a fucking gorilla," says Jamie Bell, who plays the *SS Venture's* youngest crew member. "He's scratching his arse like a gorilla, playing with things as a gorilla would. He took acting to the next level."

Jack Black claims he was literally terror-struck by Serkis in one scene, in which Kong breaks free of his chains and starts ripping apart the Manhattan theatre where Denham's put him on display as the Eighth Wonder of the World. "Looking into his eyes, there was no Andy there, just this animal rage," shivers Black. On the flip-side, he also had to suppress his laughter the first time he saw Serkis arrive on set in his foam ape suit. "As brilliant as Andy is, he did look pretty ridiculous."

BRINGING OUT THE CHIMP

"The pressure's definitely on the ape!" hoots Black. "That's what everyone wants to see!" If the 14 astonishing minutes of footage *Total Film* was shown recently are anything to go by – a literally jaw-on-floor sequence where Kong battles to save Ann from three marauding V-rexes, taking two of them over a cliff and through intertwining vines – Kong's charisma is going to be a marvel to behold, and will enthrall a new generation just as Jackson always dreamed.

And Jackson's adding depth charges throughout the film. We know he'll treat Kong with the utmost respect, but he wants the giant gorilla's weary last stand atop the Empire State Building to pack a bigger emotional wallop than the dying moments of *The Return Of The King*. "The lesson we took from *Lord Of The Rings* is that fantasy is best told in a very realistic way," says Jackson. "The best experience is one in which you utterly believe in what's happening and in which the characters believe in what's

happening. And the relationship between Ann and Kong is told to be as believable as possible."

Shore's exit was an undeniable hiccup, but if Jackson's feeling like he's got a monkey on his back, he's not showing it: "Howard and I had differing aspirations for the score, but rather than waste time arguing with a friend and trying to unify our points of view, we decided amicably to let another composer score the film."

If someone could bottle and sell the unflappable air of serenity Jackson possesses at all times, they'd make a mint. Didn't he ever roar in gorilla-like rage when a Weta computer boffin failed to execute the perfect Kong muscle ripple or hair billow? "I never saw him being grumpy the entire time I was there," marvels Brody. "It was unbelievable." "I also never felt any stress from him," echoes Black. "I never saw him lose his temper. He's very even-keel."

Remaking *Kong* has been his dream since he was skipping through Wellington with an apple in his lunchbox... and now it's become a reality, *Kong* looks likely to be a globe-stomping behemoth that everyone and their granny will go to see (that '30s setting a canny nod to nostalgia).

A week before he chatted to *Total Film*, and a few days before his birthday, Jackson sat down to watch the 1933 original again. Warner Bros, who are releasing the digitally restored Region One DVD (with Jackson's spider pit sequence), had sent a copy over, and despite being in full swing on the exhausting, bone-aching plunge to get *Kong* finished, he couldn't resist sitting down with it again. "It was absolutely amazing," he says. "I'd never seen it looking so pristine – I saw it in a way that I've never seen it before. It was like watching a whole new movie. I get into a groove whenever I watch it so I was able to experience it without really thinking about my own version. I've lived with the original for 30-odd years and I relate more to the nine-year-old who was inspired to make films when I watch it than I do as somebody remaking it now. That connection hasn't cemented in my mind yet..." **TF**

King Kong opens on 15 December and is reviewed in the next issue of *Total Film*.

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