

## ICON OF THE MONTH

*Six foot six he stood on the ground,  
He weighed 235 pounds,  
But I saw that giant of a man  
Brought down to his knees by love.*

Size isn't everything, it's true, but there's something about the image of a 'big, hairy ape' being humbled that appeals to us all. As Johnny Cash said: 'Nothing's ever been found that's stronger than love.'

The ultimate big, hairy ape crashed into the public imagination in 1933. Like Frankenstein's monster two years earlier, Kong was terrifying, stirring dark fears that lurked below the surface of the civilised Western mind; but like him he was also deeply affecting.

In his own habitat, on an island lost in the Indian Ocean, the 18-foot primate is seen by the 'savages' as 'a king and a god'. Once he is freighted to New York, 'the eighth wonder of the world' is reduced to a freak and in the end – like many a zoo specimen since – despatched as a menace.

Despite the crudity of its stop-frame animation and its moral – 'It was Beauty killed the Beast' – the film showed considerable subtlety. Though Fay Wray does nothing but scream, we can see (from the safety of the stalls) that Kong is much more than a brute, the ultimate predatory male who takes the idea of picking up girls too far.

No doubt he was meant to deliver a frisson of racial and sexual anxiety, but the happy opportunism that led his creators to pitch him against a T. rex put his monstrosity into perspective. Kong is warm-blooded and soft-skinned and there is intelligence in his eyes as he gazes bewildered at the woman in his fist or plays with the broken dinosaur.

The most memorable images of him exude not danger but pathos – most of all, his hopeless, uncomprehending defiance of the USAF from the top of the Empire State Building.

In 1976, the greatest of apes was resurrected by Dino De Laurentiis. Not surprisingly, the old black-and-white magic went missing. The treasure his kidnappers come looking for is oil, and Kong's interest in Jessica Lange is more



## Icon of the Month

### No 77: King Kong

obviously sexual than his infatuation with Wray. The most significant new twist is that Lange reciprocates some of the 'hunky monkey's' feelings. Their relationship may have a kinky feel, but it's a relationship nonetheless. Kong tries to protect her from harm, and this time it is not only the audience that weeps to see his (now grisly) wounds.

Discounting an excursion into TV and an encounter with Godzilla, Kong

had his third coming last year. This time he is mightier than ever, taking on not one T. rex but three; but he is also unmistakably lonelier. Even in his own world he is a misfit: the last of his line, marooned among saw-toothed reptiles and slimy invertebrates. What he wants – and gets – from Naomi Watts is not carnal knowledge but companionship.

Once again in this version the story ends with the trite judgement, 'It was beauty killed the beast.' It is a weakness in the film, perhaps, that we don't want to smack the guy who says it quite as hard as we should. A creature beyond compare has been destroyed and all he can offer is a vacuous soundbite.

And bestial is as bestial does. Today, thanks to Dian Fossey and David Attenborough, we know that past perceptions of gorillas as savage brutes could not have been more wrong. They are gentle vegetarians, and the males' ferocious displays are designed only to prevent conflict. And, contrary to Victorian fantasies, they have no interest in human females, white or otherwise. The real beast – rapacious, remorseless and out of control – is Man.

In 62 years, Kong has matured into an icon of the non-human creation: awe-inspiring, dangerous if we treat it stupidly but essentially innocent, the injured party, not the threat. In him we catch a hint of that ancient, mystical passage in Romans that pictures Creation longing to be liberated from bondage by the children of God.

This modern myth tells us how we, though we claim to be God's children, are anything but agents of liberation. If love is going to triumph, if beauty is going to tame the beast, it had better do it soon. **Huw Spinner**