

Hollywood, Etc.: Harryhausen's animation created early Hollywood magic

by David L. Coddon

IRVINE, Calif. - Before Pixar, before LucasFilms, even before Claymation, Hollywood magic emanated from the mind and craftwork of Ray Harryhausen. The titles of the movies on the resume of this stop-motion-animation pioneer evoke childhood sensations of awe and amazement: "The 7th Voyage of Sinbad." "Jason and the Argonauts." "One Million Years B.C." "The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms." "It Came From Beneath the Sea."

MAN BEHIND STOP-MOTION - Ray Harryhausen was the stop-motion special effects genius behind many box-office sensations, including 'The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms.' CNS Photo. Remember the sword-wielding skeletons that battle Jason and his Argonauts? That's Harryhausen.

The mutant crab that terrorizes the castaways of "Mysterious Island," and the overgrown octopus that wipes out the Golden Gate Bridge in "It Came From Beneath the Sea"? More Harryhausen.

The fierce dinosaurs that fight to the death in "One Million Years B.C."? That's Harryhausen, too.

So are the flying saucers that attack Washington, D.C., in "Earth vs. the Flying Saucers," and the giant gorilla in "Mighty Joe Young."

"I think I'm most associated with skeletons - skeletons and dinosaurs," says the L.A.-born Harryhausen, now 87 and for years a resident of London.

A recipient of a lifetime achievement Oscar (in 1992), Harryhausen also has a much-deserved star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and recently was the recipient of the Art Directors Guild's Cinematic Imagery Award.

But as a moviemaker who toiled principally in the anonymity of low-budget B-movies (though some of his are considered classics today), Harryhausen is not about accolades and awards. He was never a Hollywood insider. His work was a journey of joy and discovery. The same joy fantasy books and films gave him as a child, and the discovery he made watching the original "King Kong" ("I knew it wasn't a man in a suit") that he'd found his calling.

Harryhausen remembers his family members crying when Kong topples to his death off the Empire State Building.

"We tried to give the monsters (in his films) pathos" as well. "The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms," adapted from Ray Bradbury's short story "The Fog Horn," comes to mind. There's something achingly poignant about Harryhausen's dinosaur, roused to life by man's atomic interfering, and ultimately killed against the backdrop of a Coney Island roller coaster.

"We always felt the story was most important," said the grandfatherly Harryhausen, seated comfortably in the Orange County, Calif., living room of his agent, Arnold Kunert. "They seem to forget the story today in favor of violent action."

It's fair to say that as talented an animator as Harryhausen was, he - and his longtime collaborator, producer Charles H. Schneer - struggled to get a foothold in the Hollywood of the '50s and early '60s.

"Fantasy wasn't that popular in those days," Harryhausen recalled. "They said 'costume pictures' were dead. More attention was paid to the stars then. They didn't want to be upstaged by special effects."

To make matters worse, not one studio had someone devoted to stop-motion, added Kunert. This

frame-by-frame animation technique was an unknown commodity. And budgets were tight for most science-fiction, horror and fantasy projects. "The 7th Voyage of Sinbad" was made for about \$650,000; "The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms," a paltry \$200,000.

"There were a lot of things we had to compromise on," said Harryhausen. "I wanted to make '7th Voyage' as lavish as 'The Thief of Baghdad,' but nobody would put up the money. ... I tried to make it look big and spectacular."

Harryhausen would not compromise on what mattered to him most. He clung to the advice of his friend, author Bradbury: "Don't let people talk you out of your ideas."

Harryhausen's creativity, over a 30-year career and 15 films, unfolded in phases.

"You don't just say 'Eureka! I've got an idea!'" he said. "It goes through stages. I usually make quite a few illustrations. Then, the writer puts them together in a logical screenplay."

Collaboration aside, Harryhausen admitted, "I liked to work alone. Every bit of animation was done by myself. I was very innocent. It took me years to learn that modesty was a dirty word in Hollywood."

Even so, Harryhausen worked with some of the greats in the biz: Schneer, George Pal, Irwin Allen, Willis O'Brien (creator of "King Kong," and Harryhausen's inspiration). Little wonder that he was revered - and is - by colleagues, even if the motion picture academy was late to recognize him (it did so 11 years after his last film, "Clash of the Titans").

For all the genius of his "kinetic sculpture," as he calls it, Harryhausen has done big-time destruction duty.

"I destroyed London," he quipped, with a twinkle in his eye. "I destroyed New York. I knocked down the Washington Monument."

As to modern-day special-effects making - digitalization and computer graphics and the like - Harryhausen calls it "a wonderful tool, but it's not the be-all and by-all."

New technology, however, has given Harryhausen an opportunity to reinvigorate the films he worked on for a potentially whole new audience. Under the auspices of Legend Films Inc., Harryhausen has been closely involved in the colorization of a number of them, including "She," "It Came From Beneath the Sea" and "Earth vs. the Flying Saucers."

"We would have shot in color," Harryhausen said, but the meager budgets for those films at the time precluded doing so. "I think it adds to them."

The process is an exacting one, and Harryhausen sat side-by-side with a technician. "I wasn't pushing buttons," he explained. "We looked at each cut and did one frame of color at a time, scene by scene."

For fans, the release of the colorized Harryhausens is a happy occasion.

No one's happier than Harryhausen himself.

"I'm grateful," he said, "that our films have something that make them last. We put a great deal of love into them."

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