

The Movies

Ape and Exorcistence

by Judith Crist

KING KONG is 38 feet 6 inches taller and Mrs. Norman Maine has become Esther Hoffman Howard—and that tells you the kind of progress we and our movies have made in the past 45 years: quantitative, not qualitative, with lip service to social change (if women's lib is to be included therein).

It doesn't, as the old cartoon had it, take much to collect a crowd in New York: getting a crowd of 30,000 citizens to function as unpaid extras massed around a 40-foot Styrofoam dummy prostrate in the plaza of the World Trade Center's twin towers is easy. To make the whole thing look as if it were done with cheap-jack miniatures on a badly painted studio set is the final accomplishment in Dino De Laurentiis's \$25 million remake of *King Kong*. Along the way the story has been "updated," with the original moviemaking expedition changed to a corporate oil-exploration project; the prehistoric environment of Kong reduced to a silly little encounter with a peculiar hybrid snake; Fay Wray's Depression-career-girl heroine transmuted to Jessica Lange's Monroeish starlet; Bruce Cabot's virile first mate epicened into Jeff Bridges's Princeton paleontologist; Robert Armstrong's tough promoter turned into Charles Grodin's Madison Avenue buffoon. As to Kong himself, the one and original lovable monster is lost amid all the hydraulic manipulations in what now emerges as the story of a dumb blonde who falls for a huge plastic finger.

For those who have not seen the original film, the new version can be a foolish entertainment, made that way because of a total lack of viewpoint on the part of De Laurentiis (the kind of producer who makes mention of his director, John Guillermin, and screenwriter, Lorenzo Semple, Jr., literally academic). To cater to cynics, he starts out with one-liners and cheap self-mockery, totally vitiating, for anyone above the age of eight, the emotional and sentimental impact he so openly demands in the second half of the movie.

What comes clear—and he has made no secret of it—is that this is a moneymaking project, with the big sell pointed to surpassing the \$100 million *Jaws* has amassed. Not that the first *King Kong* wasn't massively promoted in its day; a long campaign warning of Kong's coming reached its climax with a dual premiere at the Roxy and Radio City Music Hall. Dino's Kong opened simultaneously in 2,200 theaters around the world. And to commemorate the occasion, 400 lucky members of the movie community received 20-inch statues of Kong, with brass plaques on the pedestals, immortalizing ape and producer. The statue is plastic. It's enough to start the old nostalgia burning—at worst with its reminder that 20 years ago Joseph E. Levine publicized his *Hercules* with 18-

inch statues made of solid chocolate. Now *there* was a movie mogul with an awareness of where posterity lies.

POSTERITY for Esther Blodgett—the emergent screen queen of *A Star Is Born*—has, for 40 years, lain in her curtain line: "Hello, everybody—this is Mrs. Norman Maine." It was first said in 1937 by Janet Gaynor, who comes to Hollywood "to be somebody" and does it with the help of Norman Maine, an established star, whose career collapses with their marriage, his alcoholism, and her continuing rise as Vicki Lester. Maine, played by Fredric March, realizing that he is a blight on her career, commits suicide, and on her next public appearance she pays tribute to her beloved. The adolescents of my generation dissolved in floods of tears. A generation later, in 1954, Judy Garland and James Mason triumphed in a remake that reflected a maturing of both filmmakers and public, although the original story, which won an Oscar in 1937 for director William Wellman and scenarist Robert Carson, was little changed in plot. Esther was now a band singer, convinced by Norman Maine that she had movie potential. Maine had become a more complex man,

Jessica Lange—"A dumb blonde who falls for a huge plastic finger."





Barbra Streisand—"A tough cookie—matzo ball would be more apt."

a vulnerable ego and a touch of nastiness fortifying his self-destructive drunkenness, while Charles Bickford and Jack Carson, succeeding Adolphe Menjou and Lionel Stander as prototype studio head and press agent, gave increased substance to the "inside" view of Hollywood. But the bitter-sweet story of the conjunction of rising and falling stars, of the price one pays for success, and of the vulnerability of the gifted remained unharmed.

Those of us who were in thrall to Fredric March's walk into the sea and sunset (to hell with cheap music, Noel—it's the suicides that get us moviegoers) swallowed our skepticism after confronting the obvious superiorities of the first remake. That lesson learned, even die-hard Garlandites could look forward to a second and now have one—with Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson—updated to cover the true stardom of the 1970s, no longer Hollywood's but that of the rock-music world.

The new tag line is "Ladies and gentlemen, Esther Hoffman Howard"—Streisand's feminist salute to herself and the precede to an endless two-song, ten-minute finale to what has been a two-hour-and-twenty-minute wallow in the ultimate vanity production. Somewhere along the line, Kristofferson—a rock star already on the decline, croaking insults at his audience and boozing with beer and bourbon—has met her in a seedy nightclub, taken her home for some antiseptic, asexual,

semi-nude romping in bed and bathtub, pushed her in front of a screaming audience, and single-handedly built an adobe house in mid-desert while she was cavorting around him. Finally, he drives off into the desert, beer can in hand, for a completely incredible off-camera car crash, in order to let Barbra emote endlessly over a corpse. And he has done these things seemingly coated in plastic, without even the stop motion or hydraulic animation of either generation of Kongs.

It is Barbra all the way, not only as star, executive producer, lyricist, and composer for several numbers (not to mention supplier of "musical concepts," her own clothes, and much of the interior furnishings), but also, unofficially, as editor of the film for six months. That Kristofferson



survived at all is, perhaps, a tribute to her humanism (or contractual obligations). The Wellman-Carson story still gets credit, with John Gregory Dunne, Joan Didion, and director Frank Pierson listed as screenplay writers, but Esther Blodgett is dead and buried, along with her innocence, her vulnerability, her naïveté, and her sweet compassion. In her place is Esther Hoffman, a tough cookie—matzo ball would be more apt—making her shrewd, wisecracking way in a seedy world. Where she comes from or where she's going is never suggested; she's a superstar moving from one shooting location to another while a plot and a variety of characters float in and around the shots of Barbra, Barbra, Barbra, billed as Esther. No name-changes for her, she tells the press, no nothin' from nobody for this gal, who reacts to her beloved's suicide with a tirade against him for deserting her. The sentiment is as cheap as the final cut of the film, which uses the same stage and audience over and over for Kristofferson's and her performances, together, apart, before and after her alleged rise.

Nowhere are we given insights into the rock world, although Paul Mazursky wanders around as their manager, Gary Busey feeds Kristofferson cocaine as their road manager, and M. G. Kelly is given a couple of nasty lines as a disc jockey, apparently the evolution of the press-agent character. Certainly one would hope that the stars would bring some of their personal experiences to bear on their performances, if not on the plotting, but insight or ambience is so lacking that the whole affair seems to take place within a week from a story standpoint. From an audience standpoint it is closer to an eternity.

For Streisand admirers—and that we have been, with high regard for her acting as well as her singing—it is bitter to watch self-indulgence rampant. Rock 'n' roll is not her best milieu, and though a song or two (particularly a specialty bit, "Queen Bee," and her solo debut hit, "The Woman in the Moon") are true Streisand numbers, most emerge as bad imitations of Mick Jagger, serving at best to interrupt the pure boredom the film generates. Pierson, who also directed *The Looking Glass War*, but is better known as a scriptwriter (with *Dog Day Afternoon* to his Oscar-winning credit), reported recently the remark of a Warner's executive that, regardless of its quality, the movie would make \$60 million if Streisand sang six songs. She sings eight. No threat to *Jaws*'s moneymaking record there—but vanity, after all, is its own reward. ©

Music to My Ears

A Last for Shostakovich, a First for James Conlon

by Irving Kolodin

SLOWLY the terminal works of Dimitri Shostakovich are falling into place, bringing closer the time when a total appraisal of this erratic, consequential but non-sequential career can be undertaken. First there was the last symphony (No. 15), then the last quartet (No. 14, heard here on a recording, but not yet in the concert hall), and finally the very last major work of all, a sonata for viola and piano. The latter, composed in the mid months of 1975, was performed last year in Moscow after Shostakovich's death and heard for the first time in this country at a concert of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in Alice Tully Hall.

Unlike the last symphony, which airs some autobiographical humors without sharing the secret of their purpose with the listener, or the final quartet, which, for me, lacks creative energy, the beautiful performance of the sonata by Walter Trampler and Richard Goode made us a true partner to Shostakovich's mind in the months when strength ebbed and the vista of life, though uncertain, was short rather than long. Not unlike the late sonatas of Brahms (which can be performed on the viola or the clarinet, with piano), the mood of the opening is, to say the least, autumnal. But it gathers strength as it progresses. The allegretto that follows is, if not humorous, at least *humorously*, a wry reminder of some musical capers for which Shostakovich is famous.

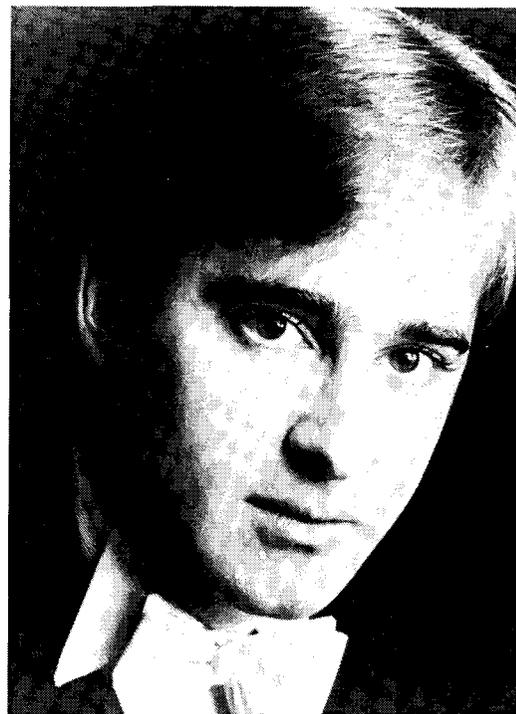
But it is in the insidiously insinuating adagio with which the work (and so far as we know, Shostakovich's career) ends that we hear him, as this long day's labor of love, and some hate, draws to a close, contemplating what had preceded and concluding that the part of it that was love was not so hateful. At least this is the overtone of a movement whose melancholia is transmuted into eloquence. Some moments in which an insistent rhythmic pattern moves over an ostinato bass suggest the first movement of Beethoven's C-sharp Minor Sonata ("Moonlight"). This is not

to suggest any cross-purpose; it is merely to identify the kind of material from which the work is made. It was greatly to the credit of Trampler and Goode that the performance made clear so much about the work: scores were not available.

NEW YORK-BORN in 1950 and thus twenty-seven years young, James Conlon made an impressive Metropolitan Opera debut as conductor of this season's revival of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. Conlon gave evidence not only of knowing as much as can be taught about conducting but, more importantly, of having a sense of the many things that cannot. Among the latter are balance between stage and pit, the interrelation of voices and instruments, and the give-and-take that should prevail between them.

Not everything was smooth-flowing and tightly controlled in the first performance, which found Colette Boky, with whom Conlon had not rehearsed, replacing Rita Shane as Queen of the Night only hours before the performance and Sheila Nadler as a Third Lady new to the theater. But Conlon's Mozartian bent was altogether evident in his shaping of an ensemble from such American singers as Benita Valente (Pamina), Donald Gramm (Papageno), John Macurdy (Sarastro), Ellen Shade (First Lady), and Jean Kraft (Second Lady). Ragnar Ulfung, the excellent Swedish character artist, made something of a star part of Monostatos, and Stuart Burrows looked well and sang stylistically as Tamino. Age has enhanced the imaginative splendors of Marc Chagall's decor, which makes attendance at this *Zauberflöte* akin to spending four hours simultaneously at New York's two Metropolitans (Opera and Art).

A DOUBLE merit of a memorable pre-holiday program directed by Leonard Bernstein with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the Westminster Chorus in Avery Fisher Hall was the sing-



James Conlon—"An impressive Metropolitan Opera debut."

ing of soprano Judith Blegen. It earned ultimate praise in this listener's lexicon by being worthy of a paragon of yesterday named Maria Stader. The comparison went to two points: equality of excellent musicianship and vocal *multum* in bodily *parvo*. The Swiss-born Stader of the floating, fluty tones has been known to stand on a box beside the conductor to maintain some degree of visual communication. Blegen is perhaps an inch or two taller, and her artistic altitude matches her ability to produce solid tones in ranges most sopranos regretfully decline.

This pertained less to the register and

Judith Blegen—"Vocal multum in bodily parvo."

