

Tony Timpone's Elegies: Dino & Me

Written by Tony Timpone

Tuesday, 16 November 2010 10:53



I'm just back from Santa Monica, CA's [American Film Market](#), where I screened over two dozen new and distribution-seeking genre films, and my eyes are so glassy that more than one person thought I'd been doing drugs the whole week. But before I dive into my annual review roundup of this trade event, I wanted to briefly comment on the death of legendary Italian producer Dino De Laurentiis (see news

[here](#)

) at age 91 and share with you my own personal De Laurentiis anecdote.

Genre filmgoers in the '70s and '80s could not escape old-school showman De Laurentiis. I first ran across the Italian producer's name in 1975 as a 12-year-old boy working in the corner candy store. There I was, in the back room, assembling the gargantuan Sunday *New York Times*. Taking a break to peruse the much-loved Arts & Leisure section, I spied a full-page ad for a movie not coming out for another year: Dino's big-budget (at \$24 million, a drop in the bucket today) remake of KING KONG. Of course, this kid got excited: in that dramatic, wonderful black-and-white artwork stood a ferocious Kong, straddling each of the new Twin Towers, holding a fighter plane in one hand. Who wouldn't get excited? In the months that followed, Dino fed the hype machine with reams of ballyhoo, how his KONG would gross more than JAWS (the #1 box office champ at the time) and how audiences would bawl like babies at the end when his big gorilla took that fatal tumble.



I certainly didn't cry for Dino's KING KONG—well, maybe for the money I wasted and the supreme disappointment I felt after seeing it on opening day, December 17, 1976, at Queens, New York's Elmhurst Theater with some grammar-school buddies.

"Kong's a man in a suit?! No friggin' dinosaurs? Zodiac jokes? Sheesh!" We even, incredibly, sat through Dino's KONG a second time to double-check that, yes, the film was as bad as we'd thought. This was my first major lesson in not believing pre-release hype and lavish magazine coverage (including the covers of *Time* and *People*) of upcoming movies. After everything Dino said in the press at the time, knocking the original 1933 KONG and everything, I felt royally

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cheated that his version turned out so lame, with FX not much better than an average Godzilla flick.

Over the next three decades, Dino did win my sympathy back via a few of his genre efforts. The guy's name was all over the place (from the lowbrow CONAN THE BARBARIAN to the highbrow RAGTIME), and he courted some of the field's leading lights, from David Lynch (DUNE, BLUE VELVET) to Sam Raimi (EVIL DEAD II and ARMY OF DARKNESS). He introduced the world to Thomas Harris' Hannibal Lecter in the Michael Mann film MANHUNTER (and remade the film just 16 years later!). He produced one classic Stephen King movie (David Cronenberg's elegiac THE DEAD ZONE), a middling one (CAT'S EYE) and three really bad ones (FIRESTARTER, SILVER BULLET and MAXIMUM OVERDRIVE), and also milked the HALLOWEEN and AMITYVILLE franchises for a brief spell. Though Dino's films rarely turned a profit (a string of flops sunk his own studio, DEG, in the late 1980s), he kept making movies, over 160 during his long career. I admired the man's tenacity and productivity.



Anyway, so here's my Dino anecdote. While in high school, Molloy's Sci-Fi Club and I took a field trip to big bad New York City on December 5, 1980 to see Dino's FLASH GORDON on opening night at 49th Street's Rivoli Theater (now a chain restaurant and a stone's throw from Fango's current digs). Dino's lavish, campy remake, backed by an ill-suited score by Queen, tried to jump on the George Lucas-fueled space-opera bandwagon—and failed miserably. After the film, the gang and I headed into the lobby to debate FLASH GORDON's merits—or lack thereof—as film geeks usually do.

“Before Lucas made STAR WARS, he wanted to do FLASH GORDON,” Tom Jackson, our imperious ringleader, said. “Wonder what that would have been like?”

“It would have been a good movie,” I quipped.

This debate went on for a good 15 minutes or so, and all the while, I noticed a little old man

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eavesdropping on our conversation. I recognized him immediately; it was Dino De Laurentiis! In person! And here we were, trashing his pride and joy (well, most of us anyway; a minority in the group did like FLASH GORDON).

"Hey, guys," I whispered, "you are not gonna believe me, but that's Dino De Laurentiis standing over there."

"You're right, Tony, we're not gonna believe you," scoffed year-older Kevin Cook, who made a habit of picking on me.

I grabbed one of the guys' FLASH GORDON programs, turned to the page with Dino's bio and picture on it and declared, "See, that's Dino De Laurentiis!!"

"Yes, Tony, *that's* Dino De Laurentiis," said Tom Powers, pointing to the page, "but *that*"—motioning to the old man—"is not Dino De Laurentiis!!!"

Finally, to end the debate once and for all, I mustered up enough courage and turned to the guy.

"Excuse me, sir," I asked, "aren't you Dino De Laurentiis?"

"Yes, I am," he said in broken English, vindicating me in front of my fellow awestruck Queens buddies. "What did you think of my movie?"

"Um, um," I stammered, unable to answer with anything positive to say about FLASH GORDON. After a pause and embarrassed about the hatchet job he must have already just overheard from our club, I nervously replied, "Well, I liked ORCA..."

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