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With the release of the big-budget, monster-filled (but charm-lacking) CLASH OF THE TITANS 3-D remake upon us (see our review here), I thought it would be fun to reflect on the *oeuvre* of the original film's FX pioneer, the legendary Ray Harryhausen.

Harryhausen's stop-motion epics from the 1950s to the 1980s had a profound impact on today's FX wizards, from ILM chiefs like multiple Oscar-winner Dennis Muren to the animated wizards over at Pixar to directors Tim Burton and Peter Jackson. His films—20 MILLION MILES TO EARTH, 7TH VOYAGE OF SINBAD, JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS, to name a few—also helped ignite my own interest in monsters and fantasy. He imbued his creatures with pathos and personality in the painstaking model animation process that brought his articulated foam-and-metal puppets to life—emotions that have yet to be convincingly replicated in the $200-million CGI FX extravaganzas of today.

Harryhausen, who turns 90 this June and lives in England with his wife of 47 years, is probably one of the first "men behind the movies" figures I ever learned about. I read about these greats—and other magicians like Universal monster makeup man Jack Pierce and sci-fi producer George Pal (original WAR OF THE WORLDS and THE TIME MACHINE)—in the pages of *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and eagerly sought out their movies. In Harryhausen's case, I could still see his first-run movies on the big screen as a kid growing up, like THE GOLDEN VOYAGE OF SINBAD (1974), SINBAD AND THE EYE OF THE TIGER (1977) and CLASH OF THE TITANS (1981), or catch his earlier efforts on New York's long-gone 4:30 Movie, such as MYSTERIOUS ISLAND (1961), FIRST MEN IN THE MOON (1964) and his—and my—favorite of his films, the near-perfect JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS (1963).

As a major monster nut, I flipped over Harryhausen's movies—THE BEAST FROM 20,000

FATHOMS (1953), IT CAME FROM BENEATH THE SEA (1955), EARTH VS. THE FLYING SAUCERS (1956) and 20 MILLION MILES TO EARTH (1957)—even though they were not horror pictures *per se*. Heck, as a tyke, I cried when the Rhedosaurus got burned to death in Coney Island at the end of BEAST. I still think about that lonely dinosaur every time I ride the still-operating Cyclone. (Harryhausen's prehistoric beasts could take on JURASSIC PARK's computer-generated dinos anytime!) While other kids got their fantasy fix from WIZARD OF OZ and old Disney cartoons, Harryhausen's movies fed my genre passion during those formative years.

Of course, I always wanted to experience Harryhausen's larger-than-life wonders on the big screen, as opposed to our family's console TV. Fortunately, living in a big city like New York afforded me that opportunity as a teenager. Following the surprise success of GOLDEN VOYAGE OF SINBAD in 1974, Columbia reissued 1958's 7TH VOYAGE shortly thereafter. I was blown away as soon as music maestro Bernard Herrmann's robust score came blasting out of the speakers of the old single-screen (anyone remember those?) Trylon Theater in Forest Hills. Two years later, I caught SINBAD AND THE EYE OF THE TIGER at the same place. It was the summer of STAR WARS and cracks were starting to show in the Harryhausen foundation, as a new generation of fantasy filmmakers and FX artists—inspired by the master artist as youths—were beginning to make their mark in Tinseltown. Harryhausen and producing partner Charles Schneer's movies were beginning to look quaint and juvenile to a new audience being weaned on the latest breed of sci-fi and fantasy spectaculars.

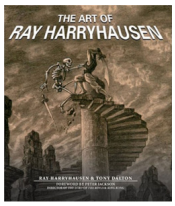
As a young teen, I ventured into the skyscraper caverns of New York City to catch more of Harryhausen's earlier classics. In the spring of 1981, the Museum of Modern Art paid tribute with a retrospective of his work that included an appearance by the man himself, along with an incredible display of his tiny models, props, sketches and paintings. Back then, Harryhausen would spend a year or more animating his films from his own home studio in London; he didn't get out much, so to see the artist in person, talking about his craft, was an eye-opening experience. Today, the octogenarian is a frequent fixture at festivals, conventions, career retrospectives and the like; in 1981, it was a big deal!

Anyway, I met Harryhausen for the first time at one of those MOMA screenings. He was gracious and humble and came across as a big uncle. Well, towering over 6 feet tall, he did not have to try too hard. A few weeks later, Harryhausen's magnum opus, the ancient epic CLASH OF THE TITANS, opened on June 12. Despite the presence of Sir Laurence Olivier as Zeus,

the gods could not save CLASH from critical brickbats (one reviewer dubbed it a "Greek Miss") and the unfortunate timing of arriving on the same day as Spielberg's RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK. CLASH still grossed a respectable $41 million during its theatrical run and later became a perennial ratings hit on Ted Turner's cable channels.

Still, I too had been seduced by the Lucas-and-Spielberg-style event movies of the day; Harryhausen's episodic CLASH seemed dated and childish (remember Bubo?), nor could it compete with the modern era of genre filmmaking. On the other hand, the original JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS has not aged a *day*; it still ranks as one of the greatest fantasy films of all time, right up there with 1933's KING KONG and even the LORD OF THE RINGS trilogy (Peter Jackson's movies bleed hero Harryhausen's influence).

Not long after CLASH's release, I met Harryhausen for the second time, at a New York Creation convention circa 1983. Fans were heartbroken with the news that the FX builder had announced his retirement. Harryhausen himself still nursed his own heartache; he told me personally how much CLASH's negative reviews had stung, and I wondered if that, besides the rapid changes in technology that had surpassed his methods, had also led him to throw in the towel. The workload had also gotten to him, not to mention the joylessness in having to hustle to get movies financed for a youth culture that was a-changin'.



In recent years, Harryhausen has been enjoying his senior time, basking in countless accolades and career awards (among them an honorary Oscar in 1992 and a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame). He does the occasional movie cameo (I just learned that he will play "a distinguished member of the Royal College of Surgeons" in John Landis' upcoming BURKE & HARE), and moviemakers continue to honor him (a restaurant and a piano are named after him in MONSTERS, INC. and CORPSE BRIDE, respectively). Harryhausen has also become a pro at lavish coffee-table books, including RAY HARRYHAUSEN: AN ANIMATED LIFE and THE ART OF RAY HARRYHAUSEN (both written with Tony Dalton).

I finally got to formally interview Harryhausen in spring 2006 in Long Beach, CA, at the home of Arnold Kunert, his producing partner and longtime friend. Harryhausen had agreed to an on-camera discussion with the FANGORIA TV crew and me, for our web series SCREAMOGRAPHY. As we sat down in the living room to begin our chat, right away he said,

"You know, I never made a horror film." Sure, we all realized that. But we still wanted to get the man on the Fango record, talking about creating some of the greatest movie monsters and creatures of all time. I also had some hard-hitting questions to lob his way, rumors of a rift with Schneer, difficult actors, CGI vs. stop-motion, etc. But the guy did not want to dredge up any dirt. For the most part, he has lead a storybook life in the Hollywood system, making his dreams come true his way, literally with his own two hands.

If I asked him about those cheesy TV remakes of his masterworks, or even the new CLASH OF THE TITANS, he would probably have similarly demurred. Why should he trash them? Harryhausen's own cinematic legacy is available for all to discover, champion and be inspired by.

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