

## “BEAST WISHES” (DVD Review)

Written by Jack Bennett

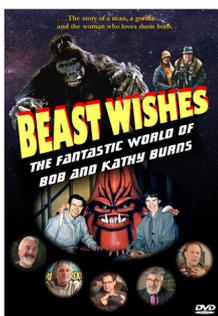
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BEAST WISHES, an utterly charming documentary about Bob and Kathy Burns, is about 60 minutes long, but it’s still going to take you hours to watch the DVD. Barely a scene goes by that won’t have fans grabbing for the remote, freeze-framing the image and gasping, “Is that [iconic prop/model/costume/creature]?”

The answer is yes, it is, and it’s probably the exact one you saw in your favorite movie. Bob and Kathy are, as John Landis succinctly describes, “a lovely couple who live in Burbank, California, and share a passion for monsters and fantasy.” They also just happen to own an utterly jaw-dropping collection of authentic, screen-used items from decades of genre cinema—everything from an authentic, posable armature from the original KING KONG to the full-sized Time Machine from George Pal’s classic to a life-sized, four-legged lycanthrope from AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON to chestbursters, facehuggers and xenomorphs from throughout the ALIEN series...and those examples just scratch the surface.



Not that the Burnses came by such a collection randomly. Bob Burns has been a fixture of film fandom since the '50s, a ground-floor participant in the kind of San Fernando Valley B-filmmaking in which Republic Pictures and Roger Corman thrived. Bob went on to be a beloved gorilla-suit performer, most notably as Tracy in the '70s live-action TV series THE GHOST BUSTERS. That Bob met his future bride Kathy prior to his success, and that their relationship survived a first date in which Bob practically caused an in-theater panic for the sake of a joke about 3D, is portrayed by BEAST WISHES as the kind of romance movie nerds pray for. Several of the interview subjects make the point that Kathy “loves this stuff as much

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as Bob,” if not more. Their riches of preserved cinematic ephemera came first from a shared desire to save said items from the studio trash bins.

BEAST WISHES (available for purchase at [www.beastwishes.com](http://www.beastwishes.com) , and screening on a double bill with the documentary MEN IN SUITS at Sacramento, CA’s Crest Theatre this Saturday, January 12) handily convinces us that those items could find no better home than the Burns household. That conviction is delivered by directors Frank Dietz and Trish Geiger via a dizzying variety of energetic on-camera interviews. Good-humored wits such as Landis, Joe Dante and writer/comedian Dana Gould are joined by a Who’s Who of the best FX artists in the film business, including Rick Baker, Dennis Muren, Greg Nicotero, Chris Walas, Steve Wang and ADI’s Tom Woodruff Jr. and Alec Gillis. Each offers genuine warmth and wonder at Bob and Kathy’s uncommonly decent nature, and the expansive breadth of their cinematic treasures. Baker has an especially personal connection with Bob, a kindred spirit who is credited with mentoring the makeup wizard as a teenager (“Then Dick Smith found him,” Bob says with a touch of bittersweet pride).

Writer David J. Schow offers the notion that Bob and Kathy have the only really functional Hollywood Museum, in spite of their lack of vested fiscal interest in sustaining it. Gould, a genre historian in his own right considering some of the thoroughly researched passages of his exceptional podcast, dubs Bob and Kathy “archivists of an entire generation of practical effects,” a “cultural heritage” that CGI is in danger of phasing out. Muren tellingly considers that he would have grown entirely cynical about the film industry had he not met Bob and Kathy.

Such affection might have become maudlin if the documentary wasn’t so lively and entertaining. The interview subjects are engaging speakers without exception, applying genuine wit and insight to love of movies, love between geeks and the special subculture of film-fandom in Burbank. BEAST WISHES also continues to reveal amazing stuff as it continues, providing as close to a tour of Bob and Kathy’s basement as is possible without physically being there. The most unexpected treat comes late in the film, with the coverage of Bob and Kathy’s “Halloween shows,” a series of annual productions featuring different themes and industry-standard FX. Old footage reveals a flying saucer that has convincingly crashed into the Burns home, a flawlessly costumed Gill-Man and Thing from Another World, an EXORCIST-themed show complete with thrashing Regan and levitating bed, an ALIEN-themed presentation in which the victim is a uniformed Walter Koenig (!)...each one solely to entertain the neighbors. The Halloween footage in particular brings forth both glee and the melancholy frustration that you weren’t there to see it live.

That these shows were orchestrated with the volunteer help of film professionals and the most

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prestigious FX artists in the business speaks to the loyalty and dedication the Burnses effortlessly inspire in their friends and collaborators. Nicotero bemusedly suggests that if everything ran with the efficiency of the crews who work for Bob and Kathy’s Halloween extravaganzas, the world would be a utopia.

Though briskly paced and consistently enjoyable, BEAST WISHES is possibly guilty of being too cute in places; the filmmakers’ love for Bob and Kathy is so palpable throughout that the tribute could mystify some audiences. These theoretical viewers would also have to remain unmoved by all the monsters, aliens, dinosaurs and gorillas you could imagine, plus a sweet couple who fashioned a delightful life together from their mutual love of the movies. BEAST WISHES is essential viewing for genre fans, who will be touched and inspired by a real-life, idealized version of themselves in Bob and Kathy Burns.

