

# DVD REVIEW

By Pete Roche

## RAY HARRYHAUSEN SPECIAL EFFECTS TITAN

Today's filmmakers have little trouble envisioning our wildest dreams and nightmares on the big screen, thanks to rapid advances in digital technology.

Alien invasion? Check (*Independence Day*, *Super 8*, *Battleship*). A flash-frozen New York, twister-ravaged Midwest, and earthquake-shaken California? Got it (*The Day After Tomorrow*, *Into the Storm*, *San Andreas*). Robot-ruled dystopias and monster madness? You bet (*Chappie*, *Real Steel*, *The Mist*). Just hire a gaggle of computer technicians to pixelate the scenes to life. But there was a time, not so long ago (in a galaxy not so far away), when cinema special effects truly were *special*. An era when it required hours, weeks—even months—of intensive labor to render just a few precious seconds of usable celluloid and an inordinate amount of patience and hands-on skill to translate a writer's insane visions into a two-dimensional reality convincing enough to get moviegoers to suspend disbelief and enjoy the ride.

No one was more aware of the repercussions of the so-called evolution from practical magic to digital sorcery than Ray Harryhausen, who wrecked the Washington Monument long before Roland Emmerich (*2012*, *White House Down*) got around to it.

Harryhausen—whose homemade monsters and hand-manipulated miniature beasts terrified audiences (and fascinated youngsters) in the '50s, '60s and '70s—may no longer be with us (he died in 2013), but the impact of his work continues to ripple through the film industry decades later.

Now Arrow Films honors the FX guru's legacy by recounting his prolific and deliriously inspirational career behind (and between) the camera. Shot over the course of ten years by documentarian director Gilles Penso, *Ray Harryhausen: Special Effects Titan* walks diehard film aficionados and newbie movie fans through the monster master's entire catalog—from test footage assembled in his teen years to his dénouement on the set of the original *Clash of the Titans* (1981) and subsequent retirement.

Originally produced in 2011 by Frenetic Arts, *Harryhausen* is a rare documentary about a notable filmmaker made by movie fans for movie fans, a tribute boasting interview clips and commentary by some of today's top directors, producers, and FX supervisors that not only celebrates Harryhausen, but puts his work into historic and cultural context. Penso rightly approaches his subject as an *artist* as well as entertainer—a talented and groundbreaking craftsman who overcame technological barriers with willpower and elbow grease not merely to approach the desired results, but achieve them, frame by frame...by frame.

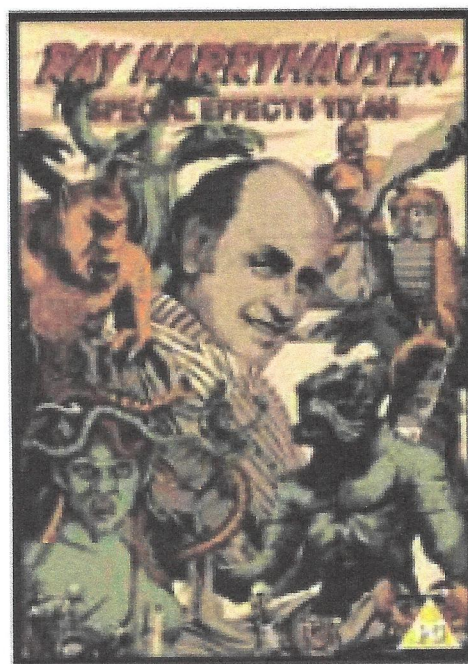
The film surveys Harryhausen's output in the aggregate before undertaking an in-depth study of each phase (and film entry) of his career in relative chronologic order. We learn how 13-year old Ray's obsession with *King Kong* (1933) compelled him to locate Willis O'Brien, the man responsible for creating and articulating its pint-sized gorilla prop and integrating it into real-world shots with live actors.

Using armatures machined by his father and fabrics stitched by his mother, Harryhausen experimented with his own dinosaur models in *Evolution*, studied film at USC night school, and landed a paying job with George Pal's *Puppetoons*. Moving from static wooden characters to flexible puppets with joints, Harryhausen reimagined fairy tale favorites like Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, and King Midas—then used the knowledge gained from his research to create Kong knockoff *Mighty Joe Young* (1949).

"No one else could make them," says Harryhausen of his latex creations. "So I made them myself."

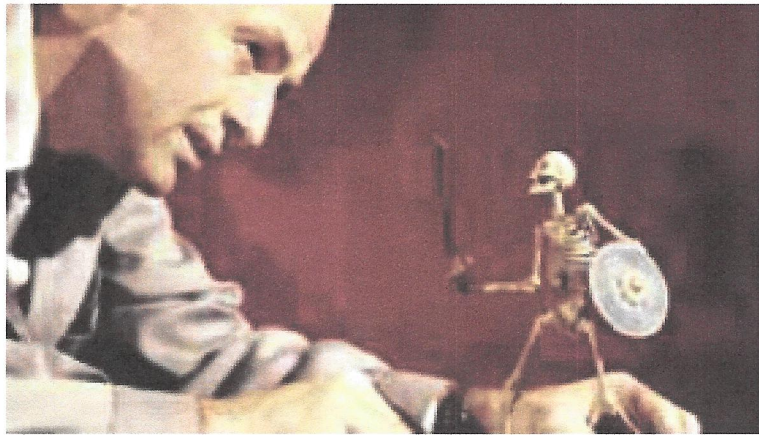
That independent spirit would become the backbone of Harryhausen's one-man operation in London and became a point of admiration for actors and assistants on-set. We hear from several of Ray's former colleagues, who explain how they had to act with and react to the movements of animals and monsters they couldn't see.

We see how Harryhausen (whose love of sci-fi drove him to produce alien test footage for



H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*) parlayed his affection for dinosaurs into the UFO craze of the '50s with *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955), and *20 Million Miles to Earth* and are reintroduced to the pictures' respective creatures—including the Rhedosaurus, giant octopus (with only six legs), and Venusian lizard-humanoid hybrid Ymir. We're also shown how Harryhausen painstakingly manipulated the creatures' movements, using his rear projection technique to seamlessly (for the time) meld the shots onscreen with real-life cityscapes.

We learn how the success of these fright flicks directly influenced the "giant monster rampage" titles that soon followed, including the Japanese-made *Godzilla / Gajira*, prompting Harryhausen to turn his attention to period pictures and fantasy films like *The 7<sup>th</sup> Voyage of Sinbad* (1958) and *The 3 Worlds of Gulliver* (1960), *Mysterious Island* (1961), *One Million Years B.C.* (1966), and *The Valley of Gwangi* (1969). Special emphasis is given fan-favorite *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), whose seven-skeleton swordfight inspired the robotic endoskeleton of *The Terminator* (and countless other clones).



We're given testimony from today's stop-motion animators like Nick Park (Wallace and Gromit) and Peter Lord (Chicken Run, Shaun the Sheep), look back at Ray's work with blockbuster directors John Lasseter (*Toy Story*), Stephen Spielberg (*Jurassic Park*), John Landis (*An American Werewolf in London*), Joe Dante (*Gremlins*), Guillermo

del Toro (*Hellboy*), and Tim Burton (*Nightmare Before Christmas*), and peek into Harryhausen's genius with FX greats Phil Tippet (*The Empire Strikes Back*), Gregg Broadmore (*District 9*), Dennis Muren (*Terminator 2*), and Randy Cook (*Lord of the Rings*).

*Spider-Man 2* whiz Steve Johnson relates how Harryhausen's tentacled terrors inspired his design approach to supervillain Doc Oc's mechanical arms. *Hobbit* director Peter Jackson dusts off his student picture *The Valley*, whose cloven-hooved monster was a copycat of Sinbad's cyclops. James Cameron (*Avatar*) expounds on how Ray's efforts presaged bluescreen, green-screen, and motion-capture computer technology, and concurs with his peers that anyone working in action movies today owes a debt to Harryhausen.

"He did all himself," marvels Cameron. "He didn't know there'd ever be anything different."

In many ways, the DVD is the "greatest hits" montage we've always craved: All Harryhausen's coolest creations are profiled in the 97-minute running time, from prehistoric menaces to Sinbad serpents, snake-women, centaurs, minotaurs, and harpies to enormous Jules Verne homages (bees, wasps, crabs), and other mythological menaces (the bronze Talos, seven-headed hydra, a centaur, gryphon, etc.).

The parallels with modern-day characters becomes gob-smackingly obvious after a while: There's no way *Star Wars* FX people weren't thinking of Harryhausen's six-armed Kali when they architected *Revenge of the Sith*'s four-limbed baddie, General Grievous—and we're shown proof, side-by-side, of new drawing on the old.

After a romp through Harryhausen's magnum opus *Clash of the Titans* (1981, featuring his Pegasus, Medusa, and Kraken designs) we meet his daughter, cheer him on as he's given an Academy Award, a BAFTA, and a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Bonus features allow us to accompany film historian, Tony Dalton, as he unearths a "Treasure Trove" of movie artifacts lovingly preserved (in boxes, plastic, and packing pellets) in the Harryhausen garage and breathlessly unwraps them—like a kid on Christmas morning—for the first time since going into storage.

Perhaps the DVD's greatest triumph lies in Penso's determination to establish Harryhausen's genius so laypersons and newcomers might appreciate it. Ray is rightfully likened to a sculptor, balancing intuition and intellect whilst molding the clay like a god—albeit with a child's sense of wonder. One movie tech theorizes that while some of Harryhausen's stop-motion may look cheesy to today's theatergoers, it was precisely that small gap between illusion and reality that drew viewers in and involved them in the story. "You'd watch and think, 'I know this isn't real, but it sure looks real!'" posits one commentator. "I wonder how he *did* that."

Whereas today's crowds are subjected to multiple explosions in short order...and grow increasingly numb to the mayhem. "They look at it and think, 'Bah! It's just CGI,'" says Cameron.

*Harryhausen: Special Effects Titan* is available on Blu-Ray and DVD.