

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of King Kong's face, showing his fur, eye, and hand near his mouth.

The official novelization
of the Universal Pictures movie event!

KING KONG

A Novelization by Christopher Golden
Screenplay by Fran Walsh & Philippa Boyens & Peter Jackson
Based on a Story by Merian C. Cooper and Edgar Wallace

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IN THE MIDST OF the Central Park Menagerie, a scrawny, dirty monkey sat scratching itself and gazed listlessly from within its cage, but there was little to see. It was so used to being alone that it was past the point of being troubled by the fact. In the midst of the Great Depression, the wonder and joy of the zoo had been all but forgotten by the people of New York, as though it belonged to another age.

On this unseasonably warm fall day, the city was a steaming jungle. The park had once been a vision of beauty and grandeur, but now it was a locus of squalor, strewn with rubbish and dotted with shantytowns set up by victims of the Depression, shed by the city. Homeless and jobless, they had fallen away from civilization and into a primitive state where each day began and ended with thoughts only of survival. Hungry, dirty, and ragged, these men, women, and children had slipped through the cracks in the crumbling economy of the 1930s, and no amount of willingness to work, no burning ambition, would be enough to bring most of them back to the world.

From the core of that filth and despair, from the

ramshackle shelters hastily erected in Central Park, each and every one of them could see the new skyscrapers being built in Manhattan. When they allowed themselves to dwell upon their circumstances, their eyes invariably turned to those new constructions, and their thoughts to the irony that such extraordinary investment in the world of tomorrow was being made during a time when so many had so little. And though it had been erected several years before, no building was more a testament to this disparity than the Empire State Building, the tallest and greatest structure in the world.

High above the city, in the lofty heights of its upper floors, the future was in the making. But for those the Depression had defeated, there would be no future at all. Only more of the same.

Or worse.

The city still bustled with life, but beneath it was a current of misery and hopelessness. Long lines snaked from the doors of unemployment offices, along sidewalks, around corners. Apple sellers and other vendors roamed the streets of New York, scraping for every penny, grateful to have whatever they could manage, which was so much more than those who slept above steaming vents and in garbage-strewn gutters. A man stood at the mouth of an alley, hat in hand, singing "I'm Sitting On Top of the World" in his best Al Jolson.

The song was all he had to offer.

And it was a lie.

* * *

Cymbals crashed and horns blew in the Lyric Theatre, but curtains and walls muffled the sound for those back in the dressing room. The smell of sweat and greasepaint was thick here, but to Ann Darrow it smelled like home. Her pulse raced and her skin tingled not with fear or anxiety, but with exhilaration. This was the moment, the chaos before she took the stage, the time when she could forget the world and everything in it. This was what she lived for.

Vaudeville.

Ann Darrow was part of a grand tradition, a parade of entertainers going back two hundred years. The stage was in her blood. Her mother had been a vaudeville girl and Ann had never known her father—had the impression Mom hadn't known him either—but she'd been on her own since the age of thirteen and somehow convinced herself she wasn't bothered by that. Vaudeville was her family. The theater people. The troupe. All the way back to Tony Pastor and Ben Keith, and through every performer from the Barrison Sisters and Ching Ling Foo to the greats, the ones who'd made it big. Benny and Brice, Cohan and Fields, Burns and Allen, and dozens of others. Distant cousins all.

Vaudeville had been all she'd ever needed. When her mother took off south after a song-and-dance man, the stage had been waiting. And when Fred Burliss had broken her heart, the audience had made it soar again.

So tonight, while she'd watched the jugglers and the trained dogs from the wings, she'd tried to ignore how quiet the theater had been, tried not to think about a

venue that could hold five hundred but had pulled in an audience no more than a tenth of that number. Radio had struck the first cruel blow, and now, slowly but surely, the movies were killing vaudeville. Once the cinema started showing "talkies," that was the beginning of the end.

They didn't talk about it, of course; the performers.

They just went on.

Ann struggled into the baggy pants of her costume and pulled up the suspenders, and she felt the familiar prickle of her skin. It was hot as blazes back there in the dressing room, but she barely felt it as the growing anticipation to get out there and bring the house down came alive. A thin smile touched her lips as she tugged on the oversized man's jacket to match the pants and then snatched the top hat off her dressing table. She'd been practicing the balancing of that hat for years until she had as much facility with it as the jugglers did with their pins.

The door was open. From down the corridor she heard the stage manager urgently whisper, "Where are they? They're on!"

Now any trace of a smile disappeared. Time to get down to business. Show time. They were never ready to go on stage early—it was bad luck. It was the adrenaline rush that made the performance great, the drum-roll of the heart as they cut it close. Always close.

Ann hurried out of her dressing room, doing the button of her jacket with one hand even as she set the top hat onto her head with the other. The pants legs gave a hushed rasp as they rubbed against each other.

Like the sounds and the smells and the quickening of her heart, it was all familiar, all wonderful.

And it was all she knew.

Manny came out right after her, heading into the wings, into a sea of curtains and ropes. He was getting up there in years, but he still made it ahead of Harry, who had managed to stuff his rotund form into a dress and dolled himself up as the ugliest woman the world had ever seen. A smattering of polite applause could be heard from the meager audience and then the singers were coming off the stage. Ann, Manny, and Harry slid past them, waiting for the music cue to start their act.

"Ann!" Manny called in an urgent whisper.

She turned to find him already reaching for her. The seconds were ticking by. The stage was empty and it was ready for them. When she saw what Manny was doing, Ann held still. Quickly, he stuck a large, droopy black mustache to her top lip, holding it in place a moment for the glue to stick.

Her costume was complete.

In the seconds that she moved from wings to stage, Ann altered herself completely. Her gait became an odd cross between strut and saunter, her persona that of a slightly drunken Victorian gentleman. Scattered applause met her arrival and she smiled at the audience even as she launched into a song, the catchy tune matching the rhythm of her heart. Manny then joined her, whistling along with the melody. Harry began to hurry around the stage waving around a feather duster, the perfect picture of a fussy matron cleaning house.

When Ann reached the bridge of the song, she slid a

hip flask from her pocket. Manny continued to whistle beautifully, but Harry's mad dusting grew more frantic and Manny paused in his whistling to unleash a sneeze that rocked his body.

Ann's cue for a pratfall, as though the force of the sneeze or the startling noise had knocked her down.

And so the routine built. Ann sang, Harry dusted, Manny whistled and then sneezed, causing Ann's drunken gent to fall, again and again. How many times had they done this bit? A hundred? Five hundred? Once upon a time it had had them rolling in the aisles. Now there were only faint smiles, save for one man at the back who was laughing hysterically.

Ann should have appreciated the fellow, knowing that there was at least one person to whom the act was playing the way it was supposed to, but he was so over the top it was distracting. She forced herself to focus on the act, sweat beading on her face, throwing everything into her performance, not caring if she was bruised by her falls.

When it was over, there was a sprinkling of polite clapping. She told herself that it wasn't about the crowd, that the thrill of the performance was enough, but it sounded hollow even in her mind.

Afterward, Ann, Manny, and Harry retired to the dressing room and she forced away all thoughts of the nearly empty theater, letting herself be carried along by the energy and noise of the rest of the performers. Magicians and musicians, acrobats and dancers. They filled the place, all in various stages of undress, and the chatter of their voices, their excite-

ment, worked its way into Ann until she began to realize that it really wasn't about the audience. It was about the *now*, right here, surrounded by people she thought of as her family, even though a few of them were strangers.

As Ann changed out of her costume, she glanced at Harry. He looked ridiculous in his wig, but with it off there was something so ordinary about him, so human.

"That's three nights in a row. Did you see him?" she said.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

Ann smiled. "Laughing boy. I think he might be sweet on you."

"Really?" Harry asked, feigning excitement before making a sour face. "Uggghhh!"

Beyond him, Manny had a thoughtful look on his face. Then the older man screwed up his features and fired off a loud, comical sneeze. All business, he looked around at Harry and Ann.

"That's a funny one. Isn't that funnier?"

Ann gave him a dotting smile and then slipped into a chair, focusing on her reflection in the mirror and the garish makeup that was necessary under the lights of the stage. It was the face the audience saw, but not her true face. With expert swiftness, she began to clean the makeup from her cheeks. A few moments later she was interrupted as someone moved into her light. She looked up as the young dancer Taps snatched up the book that had been lying open on the counter in front of Ann's mirror.

"What's this?" the kid asked.

She was about halfway through reading the book for the third time. *Isolation*, by Jack Driscoll.

"It's a play," she said.

"Annie dragged me to the theater once," Harry said as he pulled off his high heels. "Three hours long it was. And in the end everybody pegged it. I mean, who needs three hours to tell a story?"

"Shakespeare," Ann said dryly.

Harry shook his head. "Most depressing thing I ever seen."

"No. Twenty-four girls in feathers boas and fixed smiles prancing around like circus ponies—*that's* depressing." Ann dabbed at her makeup again.

The performers around them were starting to join in on the conversation. Maude, a gifted torch singer, lit up a cigarette and pointed it at Ann.

"I love a good chorus line," she said, not an argument but a fond declaration.

Manny nodded toward the book in Taps's hand. "Who wrote it, Annie?"

Taps was studying the jacket of the book. "Some guy, Driscoll. From the Federal Theatre."

Harry plopped heavily down in front of a mirror, his dress bunched up around his waist. "The Federal Theatre's nothing more than a haven for short-haired girls, long-haired boys, and weirdies of all kinds."

Maude blew out a plume of smoke. "Don't knock it, honey. At least they get an audience."

The comment seemed to still the air around them, a curtain of seriousness lowering.

"These things go in cycles. It'll pick up," Ann told them. "It always does."

But as they all went about their business, a bit more sober than before, she wondered why the cycle was taking so long to come round again this time, wondered if maybe the doomsayers were right, and *always* wasn't going to come to the rescue this time.

Then she put it out of her mind. It was too much to even think about.

Ann didn't have anything else.

When all the lights were down, the costumes hung, and their faces scrubbed of makeup, Ann and Manny left the dressing room through the door that let into the alley behind the theater. Manny still wore a studious look and from time to time would erupt with another sneeze. The truth was they all sounded pretty much alike to Ann, but the old fellow seemed to identify something unique in each.

As they stepped into the alley he let loose with a spluttering *achoo!*, a damp honk that did, indeed, sound a bit more ridiculous than the ones he'd been producing on stage.

"The trick is to start the build right at the back of your throat," he said. "Works well out through the nose, too."

Ann studied him. "Have you eaten today?"

Manny grew sheepish. "Oh, I'm not hungry. Don't worry about me."

"Hey, you're all I've got," she said, and slipped her

arm through his. "Come on, they'll still be giving out soup and biscuits on Third. Take me to dinner."

They walked down the alley arm in arm, and somehow, in spite of her circumstances, Ann felt content.

The following morning she found a needle and thread and mended a tear in the one dress that she felt still looked presentable. A life on the stage could lead to fame and fortune, but in Ann's experience that was rare as a lightning strike. Most performers were just getting by, and others not quite even that. Ann rarely had a decent meal, but she had been managing all right, so far.

On the other hand, times were lean and getting leaner, and the landlord was not the forgiving sort. At some point soon, she knew she would need a new dress, the fact that she could not afford one having no bearing on the impending necessity. Theater people by and large knew how to sew, and Ann was a passable seamstress—vaudeville had prepared her. But even if she sewed the dress herself, she could not afford the fabric. How she would find the money, she did not know, and did not like to think about, so while she sewed, she sang softly, under her breath.

When she was through she busied herself with her hair and makeup, and then at last slipped the dress on. Contented, she left the rooming house, pausing to exchange a pleasant word with the old man who ran the tailor shop on the corner.

For a time she wandered as though she had somewhere to go, but eventually she saw from the clock in

front of a bank that it was time to stop by the theater and begin preparing for the evening's performance. The theater manager was supposed to be responsible for many of the preparations, but all too often things were forgotten and the troupe had begun to take such duties upon themselves.

It was mid-afternoon by the time she turned the corner two blocks from the Lyric and strode toward the dilapidated marquee. Ann had gone half a dozen steps, her eyes drawn to the workmen up on ladders on the sidewalk, before she realized they were taking the hoardings down. One man was putting letters onto the marquee. A single word.

CLOSED.

"No . . ." Ann whispered.

She hurried toward the venue, aware of the group of her fellow performers that had already gathered around the front doors, but unable to even acknowledge them. Their faces were a blur. The sidewalk was piled high with props and trunks full of costumes. The strength threatened to go out of her legs and she felt a woozy moment where she might have tumbled to the concrete. When she spied the sign on the doors that read THEATER CLOSED TILL FURTHER NOTICE, a dark anger took hold.

Heavy chains were looped through the Lyric's door handles, tightly wound and locked. Ann reached out as though the chains weren't even there, grabbing the handles and tugging, rattling the doors.

"There's a law against this!" she called, turning on her heel to glare at the workmen. She glanced at the

man on the ladder above her. "You're lucky we don't sue you for damages!"

The guy on the ladder only gave her a smirk. Ann backed away, giving him a hateful look, and then spun to face the other performers clustered around her on the sidewalk, nearly tripping over a prop umbrella.

"They're not going to get away with this," she snapped.

A few feet away, Maude bent to pick up an ornate fan as though it were a souvenir. She stood and glanced at Ann, her expression bleak.

"They just did," Maude said, and turned to go.

Ann could only watch as one by one, others did the same, claiming some item from the ground as though they were talismans of some magical power and then wandering off, dejected. Not one of them seemed to have any destination in mind: just anywhere other than here.

"Yeah, well, we'll see about that!" She turned again to glare at the theater, at the sign, at the workmen.

"Ann . . ."

She bent to gather up props: Manny's broom, Harry's parasol, her top hat.

"Ann."

Taking a deep breath, she turned to face Manny, whose eyes were filled with sad resignation. He was slumped down on top of a battered old leather trunk.

"It's over," he said. "The show . . . it's done."

She frowned and looked away.

"I'm done, Annie," he said. "I'm leaving. Going back to Chicago."

Ann stared at him in shock.

Manny swallowed visibly. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Ever since you were small, people been letting you down. Some folks have it easy, but it's never been that way for you."

Ann glanced away, knowing it was the truth but unable to say it.

"It never stopped you, either," Manny said. "You should do it, Annie."

"Do what?"

"Try out for that part."

She shook her head. "Me? No . . ."

"Why not? It's what you've always wanted. You must have read that play a hundred times. Get yourself an audition."

Ann took a long breath. It wasn't that easy and Manny knew this. She looked at him warily.

"I know what you're thinking. Whenever you reach for something you care about, fate comes along and snatches it away," Manny said. He grabbed her hand. "But not this time, Annie. That's what you've got to tell yourself. Not this time."

She let the words swim around in her head a bit. Nearby, the loud rumble of an El train was thunderous. Manny's hand was like leather to the touch. Ann squeezed it tightly, thinking.

Thinking *maybe*. After all, she had nowhere else to go.

Ann had done it. She'd contacted the office of the producer, Mr. Weston, and sent him her résumé, hoping for

an audition. Days had passed—days in which she had chosen to use what little money she had left to buy food instead of paying her landlord—but she had not given up. Something good was bound to come her way, she told herself. It had to. The alternative was too horrible to contemplate. She passed the starving vagrants on the street and could not imagine becoming one of them, could not imagine it even as she ate the last of her food, hiding in her meager quarters at the rooming house, not answering the door when the landlord came to demand the rent.

Then, today—her stomach tight with hunger and afraid that any day, she would return to find herself evicted—something had been delivered for her, an envelope from Mr. Weston.

He had returned her résumé unopened.

What was she to do now? There was no work for anyone these days, least of all a vaudeville girl. Without this, she was lost. And the man had not even had the decency to open her letter.

Once upon a time she might have just gone away, given up on her ambition. But she had no choice. Without the theater, she was cast adrift. She had no family, no money, and today she'd had nothing to eat but some small bits of bread and cheese gone almost stale. Soon enough, she'd have nowhere to live. Not if things kept on like this.

And yet, in spite of her predicament, Ann's determination didn't come from having nothing to lose. It was more than that. She had simply grown tired of people disappointing her. If she was going to lose, it wasn't going to be without a fight.