

# King Kong

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**W**ITH Wednesday's premiere of the blockbuster "King Kong," the big ape has never been hotter. In a worldwide exclusive, the New York Post talks with the world's most famous simian star and discusses his career, those rumors about Fay Wray, fellow animal actors like Lassie and his plans for the future.

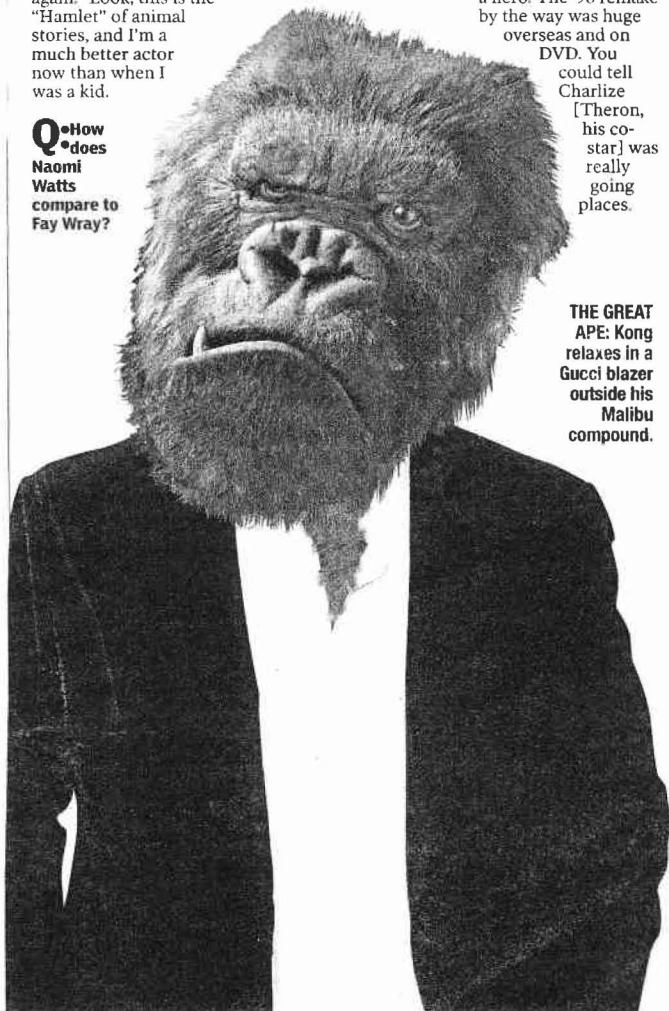
**Q**•The original 1933 "King Kong" just came out on DVD with loads of extras. But you were noticeably absent. Did they ask you to take part?

**A**•That was unfortunate. You know, I never made any money off of the original "Kong" — \$50 a day and all the bananas you could eat seemed like a good deal then. And of course they'll make a bundle on the DVD. The studio asked me to do one of those commentaries, but we couldn't agree on a price. It's too bad, but why should I do something for nothing?

**Q**•How does it feel to return to the role that made you famous? For years after the disastrous 1976 version, you swore you'd never do it again.

**A**•It's like that James Bond saying, "Never say never again." Look, this is the "Hamlet" of animal stories, and I'm a much better actor now than when I was a kid.

**Q**•How does Naomi Watts compare to Fay Wray?



THE GREAT APE: Kong relaxes in a Gucci blazer outside his Malibu compound.

**A**•They're both consummate professionals. Those Page Six rumors about me and Fay, by the way, were a studio publicist's idea. We were just friends. But some theater chains in the South even refused to show the movie because of it.

**Q**•You're the consummate animal actor, the first one to get top billing and a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. What do you think of your contemporaries? Flipper? Lassie?

**A**•Flipper is a sweetheart — just as nice as everyone says. Lassie... Lassie does great work but she is very, very difficult to deal with. Frankly, she's a bitch and everyone knows it.

**Q**•Your groundbreaking deal on 1949's "Mighty Joe Young" was the first time an animal actor got paid like a human actor — and getting a piece of the toy sales was prescient and long before George Lucas and "Star Wars."

**A**•Jimmy Stewart always gets credit for taking a lower salary in exchange for a cut of the box office when he made those '50s westerns. But animals were starting so far behind humans in terms of pay that I think my deal was more of a landmark. And "Mighty Joe Young" was a great chance for me to play a hero. The '98 remake by the way was huge overseas and on DVD. You

could tell Charlize [Theron, his co-star] was really going places.

**Q**•Your biggest regret has always been the first "Planet of the Apes."

**A**•I was born to play Cornelius!

**Q**•Adding insult to injury, the main roles were played by humans in makeup — a sort of simian equivalent to blackface, something you've strongly condemned over the years.

**A**•Monkeyface, we call it. It's demeaning. With so many talented simians to choose from, why would they use humans?

**Q**•Did director Tim Burton approach you about the 2001 remake?

**A**•Well, I can't say they made me an offer. But they did send me the script. If I'd been interested, they would have been interested.

**Q**•So what happened?

**A**•I read the script.

**Q**•Finally, Godzilla always said you two...

**A**•Godzilla? What's she been saying?

**Q**•She? Godzilla is a guy.

**A**•Sure. But have you seen "Godzilla vs. Mothra" with those singing girls and that dance sequence? Campy, campy, campy. Besides, does he have to trash every village he comes across? Couldn't he just walk around them once in a while? Talk about overcompensating.

**Q**•Are you saying Godzilla is gay?

**A**•No comment.

**Q**•So what are your future plans?

**A**•Well, MTV wants to do a reality series about my life, sort of a cross between "The Osbournes" and "Wild Kingdom" I guess. But I'm not sure I want to go that route. This movie is going to be huge — have you seen the reviews? Variety mentioned "Titanic"-level box office — and I want to keep up the quality. We're talking with HBO about an all-animal series — "The Sopranos" set in a jungle. And I'm really excited for my nephew. He's got "Curious George" coming out in February. I've seen a rough cut and he is terrific.

**Q**•Any Oscar buzz?

**A**•Well, you know how prejudiced the Academy is against animal actors. Sure, we've received a few honorary Oscars over the years, but not one animal actor has ever been nominated for best actor or actress. Isn't that ridiculous? If the movie is nominated, I don't even know if I'll go to the ceremony.

**Q**•So you don't think you have a chance with this movie?

**A**•No, it's a remake and it'll make too much money. Now if I could ever get that biopic of Koko the Gorilla made, I'd be a shoo-in for at least a nomination. It's the best script I've ever read.

**Q**•What's your biggest complaint about success?

**A**•People screaming whenever they see you. Sometimes you just want a quiet night on the town, you know. Then, when people notice you, they get hysterical and make a big deal of it. Next thing you know, the National Guard gets involved, and it's a whole thing.