

Sexy Beast

Why Godzilla keeps us coming back for more.

by MIKE WINDER

AT THIS VERY moment, North Korea is preparing to test a missile that could reach U.S. shores, diplomats are scrambling to stop Iran from developing an atomic program, and Karl Rove just announced he'll be appearing in the third season of *Dancing with the Stars*. Okay, I made that last one

the American Cinematheque's *Giant Monsters on the Loose!* film festival (June 30 through July 2) is the perfect excuse to put down that John Updike snoozer and get your *kaiju* on.

In the original Japanese *Gojira* (1954), Godzilla is a living, breathing metaphor for the dangers of the nuclear age. Awoken by a hydrogen bomb test in

and Nagasaki. It was very fresh in people's minds." A visit to the aftermath of Hiroshima left a powerful impression on *Gojira* director Ishiro Honda, adding an unexpected gravitas to scenes of crowds running for their lives, children being measured for radioactivity, and the injured masses suffering in hospitals. As mankind struggles to find a way to stop Godzilla, they discover that conventional weapons have virtually no effect on him. Only a device more horrific than Godzilla himself, the Oxygen Destroyer that the tortured scientist Dr. Serizawa stumbles upon, can stop the beast. "The nuke creates Godzilla and the only thing that can stop him is even worse," says Aiken, "It's this never-ending cycle that Serizawa has to deal with. It's one of the reasons *Godzilla* really struck a chord."

One of science fiction's greatest strengths is taking societal concerns, and addressing them through entertaining and fantastic means. This was true for *Gojira* in '54 and it's still true today. Take for example Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005). Released less than four years after 9/11, the film defied pundits who questioned whether audiences would ever be willing to shell out money to see large-scale cinematic destruction again. The violent alien invasion film contained several visual references to 9/11, and even had Dakota Fanning's character ask her father as they fled an attack, "Is it the terrorists?" With a stark tone and terrifying visual effects, *War of the Worlds* thrilled audiences by tapping into deep-seated fears,

the aftermath of Operation Castle Bravo, the largest nuclear bomb ever detonated by the United States. "The bombs exploded by the United States in the '50s made Hiroshima look like a firecracker," says Ryfle. "Castle Bravo was supposed to yield a five megaton blast, but it's been calculated that it 'ran away' to 15 megatons." Or approximately 1,000 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. When the Lucky Dragon returned to Tokyo, all 23 members were sick from radiation poisoning, and one man eventually died. Not only did this tragedy give birth to an anti-nuclear movement, eventually forcing the United States to stop testing in the South Pacific, it also gave birth to Godzilla. Tomoyuki Tanaka, a producer for Toho Studios, ran into his boss' office with a newspaper article on the incident and convinced him they needed to make a film about a giant monster who attacks Japan after being awoken by such a bomb.

The magnitude of Godzilla's rampage in *Gojira* is no doubt a big reason for his longevity. In his screen debut, Godzilla crushes a village, derails a train, tears down a bridge and sets Tokyo ablaze. "How many films can you think of that show destruction on that scale?" asks Ryfle. But attitudes change with time, and far from eliciting terror, audiences now watch the destruction of familiar structures with glee. Toho had originally asked for blueprints of downtown Tokyo for the making of *Gojira*, but was turned down. "In more recent years, cities have actually petitioned Toho

lava streaming down Wilshire Boulevard.

But one thing Godzilla has that natural disasters don't is personality, a trait he shares with both his classic monster predecessors and more recent horror figures. From Frankenstein's creation to Hannibal the Cannibal, monsters are characters audiences tend to latch on to. "Nobody remembers who fought the mummy," says Aiken. After the success of the first film, Toho began creating additional creatures for Godzilla to contend with. "In the late '50s, and especially the '60s, Toho reinvented the [giant monster] formula, and cast aside a lot of the conventions," says Ryfle. "The monsters simply existed. You didn't need convincing or semi-convincing scientific explanations." So with more monsters, came more personalities. Among Toho's most famous monster creations are Mothra, a benevolent moth who often sacrifices herself to save the world, and King Ghidorah, a ruthless three-headed dragon and frequent nemesis of Godzilla. And with more personalities came more battles. Later Godzilla films forgo the serious themes of the original and turn into pure spectacle, featuring epic battles between monsters that result in the elaborate destruction of miniature cities. Why do *kaiju* fans have such a soft spot for these sequences? "It's a sickness," jokes Ryfle, "I can't explain it." J.D. Lees, editor of *G-Fan*, a quarterly publication of all things Godzilla, puts things in a larger historical perspective. "People have always been interested in watching battles between strange animals," says Lees. "They even staged them in Roman days in the Coliseum. It's a popular concept and the Godzilla movies take it to the zenith."

Giant Monsters on the Loose! runs from June 30 through July 2. *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (1956) screens July 1 at 6 p.m., followed by a discussion between Steve Ryfle and editor Terry Morse Jr. in anticipation of the film's upcoming DVD release. *Godzilla 2000* (1999), and *Godzilla, Mothra, and King Ghidorah: Giant Monsters All-Out Attack* (2001) screen on July 1 at 8:30 p.m., with a discussion between films with *Godzilla 2000* cast and crew responsible for the American version. "Giant Monsters" also features the US premiers of *Gamera the Brave* (2006), *Mirror Man: Reflex* (2006) and the Los Angeles premiere of Takashi Miike's fantasy epic *The Great Yokai War* (2005). **LAA**

Egyptian Theatre; 6712 Hollywood Boulevard. Tickets \$9; students/seniors \$7. For additional information, call (323) 466-FILM or visit www.americancinematheque.com.



Radioactive lizard run amuck, or a timeless symbol of atomic age anxieties?

up. But the world's still a pretty scary place, right? Now that summer has officially begun, why not get away from it all by heading to your local movie theater, grabbing a bucket of popcorn, and watching a few films about nuclear heavyweights battling for supremacy?

Huh? If you haven't guessed by now (or skipped the headline above), I'm talking about *kaiju eiga*, the Japanese giant monster film genre. Sure, these films have developed a reputation for featuring actors in awkward rubber costumes, poor dubbing, and bizarre musical numbers, but open your mind and you'll find there are plenty of meaty reasons to spend a few hours with Godzilla and his beastly brethren. Inspired by a real-life human tragedy tied to nuclear testing in the South Pacific, Godzilla is a compelling creation that first appeared on U.S. screens 50 years ago. Over time, he has become a symbol for atomic age anxieties, and his first rampage through Tokyo continues to influence filmmakers today. For the uninitiated and the faithful alike,

the Pacific Ocean, the monster that emerges from Tokyo Bay is truly terrifying. A highlight of the Cinematheque's festival is a rare screening of *Godzilla: King of The Monsters* (1956), in which footage of a pre-Perry Mason Raymond Burr was inserted into the original Japanese *Gojira*, to make it appear as though an American reporter was on hand to witness Godzilla's rampage through Tokyo. "Being so close to World War II, the distributors realized a Japanese film wasn't going to play well to Middle America," says Keith Aiken, editor of SciFiJapan.com, who helped organize the festival for the American Cinematheque.

"With *Gojira*, you're watching a film made by people who experienced a nuclear holocaust," says Aiken. "The film was made nine years after Hiroshima

much in the same way *Gojira* did half a century earlier.

The actual event that inspired Godzilla's conception was not Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or the firebombing of Tokyo, but rather the Lucky Dragon incident. "It was such a big story at the time, but nowadays it's more of a footnote in history," says Steve Ryfle, film journalist and author of *Japan's Favorite Mon-Star: The Unauthorized Biography of 'The Big G.'* In late February 1954, the crew of the Lucky Dragon, a Japanese fishing vessel, changed course and ventured deeper into the South Pacific, towards the Marshall Islands. On March 1, 1954, they were rocked by an explosion. They came out on deck, saw a big light on the horizon, and were rained down upon by nuclear fallout. The crew had experienced

[to be destroyed]," says Aiken, and adds that Japanese audiences cheered when the colossally expensive Tokyo City Hall, affectionately dubbed the "Tax Towers," was toppled in *Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah* (1991). Los Angeles audiences may have experienced similar guilty pleasures when watching their landmarks destroyed in recent special effects heavy films. One of the more exciting sequences in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) featured tornados tearing through Hollywood and reducing the Capitol Records building to shreds. Hostile aliens in *Independence Day* (1996) took a swipe at our fair city by blasting the U.S. Bank Tower (then called the Library Tower) to smithereens. *Volcano* (1997) had a (what else?) volcano rise out of the La Brea tar pits and sent a river of

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—KEITH AIKEN, editor of SciFiJapan.com