

'Godzilla vs. Kong' monster smackdown — the catharsis we need right now?

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The Philadelphia Inquirer

(TNS) — A year ago around this time, fans of the MonsterVerse were getting psyched for “Godzilla vs. Kong,” reviving an age-old movie debate: When Kong fights Godzilla, who wins?

The correct response, by the way, is “Hollywood,” but in 2020 the answer was the global COVID-19 pandemic, which managed to do what Monster Zero, Mechagodzilla and a dozen other monsters couldn't do — pin them both to the mat for a year.

The movie has been held in suspended animation since last March, when director Adam Wingard finished his director's cut, and is now slated to arrive in theaters and stream on HBO Max Wednesday, March 31.

It's pegged by analysts to be the first movie to post a \$20 million opening weekend since the pandemic began, thus reaffirming America's blockbuster habit.

The big “GvK” release ends a long 12 months for Wingard, who had just started showing that first cut to enthusiastic audiences as he prepared to make final trims and refine special effects. He and Warner Bros. were ramping up for a global November 2020 release when the virus hit and movie theaters closed the world over.

Wingard, a veteran of modestly budgeted horror (“You're Next,” “The Guest,” “Blair Witch”), was making his leap to the movie big leagues and found himself in that state of flux, confusion and dread that so many of us remember from those early COVID days.

“It was March 13 or 14 or something like that when we all got sent home from the office. I'll never forget that week. The [production company] was sending out these just-in-case protocols about working remotely, and I remember just



Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures/TNS

Godzilla battles Kong in “Godzilla vs. Kong,” which arrives on big and small screens March 31.

dismissing it, thinking, there's no way. This can't be that serious. At that point, we just didn't believe it would turn out the way it did,” he said.

That denial quickly gave way to reality. Everything just stopped, and Wingard was suddenly the captain of a massive but abandoned ship.

“I was one of the last ones there, with my editor. But even then, we thought, 100%, we'll be back in the office in two weeks. It felt like that,” he said.

Wrong again. He joined the rest of the world in conceding the severity of the pandemic, and then faced the disorienting reality that his movie was in an unprecedented kind of limbo. Godzilla, Kong, James Bond, Black Widow — they were all in the same purgatory.

As spring turned to summer, theaters remained closed and movies were shelved, “GvK” until 2021.

“This is my biggest movie to date, a massive opportunity for my career, financially, professionally, all those kinds of things,” Wingard said.

“We were originally supposed to come out in November 2020, and as that date approached you could see it wasn't going to happen. I was like, ‘Oh no. There's no way.’ I'm beginning to realize: We can't do this at all.”

Still, Wingard had tested the movie, knew he had something that audiences liked, and was waiting for the day he could show it on the big screen. Then, more bad news.

Warner Bros. announced in December that all of its 2021 slate of films would be released simultane-

ously in theaters and for streaming on HBO Max.

He felt strongly that his movie is “one that is meant to be seen on the biggest screens. These are the biggest monsters in the world. They're sharing the screen. You gotta see it in IMAX. And here I am being told I'm doing this hybrid streaming thing. I felt like all the hope just got sucked out of me,” he said.

His mood changed in January when MonsterVerse fans got a peek at the trailer — Kong and Godzilla, surfing on an aircraft carrier, Kong punching Godzilla in the face.

“I'm watching YouTube videos of everybody filming their reactions to it, and being so stoked, even people who were watching it on their phones,” Wingard recalled.

He'd still prefer that people see it on the biggest screen when they safely can, but the experience of watching fan reactions made him less of a platform snob.

“I learned a lesson,” he said, remembering that “half of my favorite films I've never seen in a theater, because they came out before I was born.”

However fans watch “GvK,” he's hoping they'll find it “cathartic” after the extreme divisiveness of the last year.

“I am in no way trying to build up the importance of my giant radioactive lizard and giant mon-

key fighting on an aircraft carrier movie,” Wingard says, but he sees it as a release valve.

“We've been beating each other up for so long. I hope that it's going to be like, ‘Let's step back and get a bowl of popcorn and let these monsters do it for us.’”

Though Wingard is of course not going to reveal who wins the Kong/ Godzilla smackdown, he doesn't mind saying that Kong gets most of the screen time here, with a subplot that has him bonded with a young girl (played by 8-year-old actor Kaylee Hottle) who has a special ability to communicate with him.

Wingard said this honors the traditional “alchemy” of the MonsterVerse, wherein characters like Kong and Godzilla have always captured the imaginations of children. Hottle is taken by scientists (Rebecca Hall, Alexander Skarsgard) on a mission to find the source of the so-called Titan monsters, shadowed by amateur sleuths Millie Bobby Brown, Brian Tyree Henry and Julian Dennison.

Her Kong-whisperer relationship with the monster, he said, also “updates” the character of Kong, who in the past has made gorilla goo-goo eyes at Fay Wray, Jessica Lange and Naomi Watts.

Wingard is now ready to start work on a sequel to the '90s sci-fi/ action hit “Face/Off,” and intends to bring John Travolta and Nicolas Cage back to reprise their roles.

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