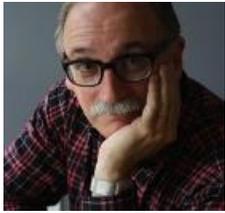


# Feature



## Gojira, King of the Monsters Jim Shepard

*In the world of monster movies, Gojira (Godzilla) stands head and shoulders above the rest. But for the team charged with building the costume and the actor who wore it, the costume was the real villain. Costumers around the world feel their pain.*

He was falling behind everywhere: whether he put in fourteen- or sixteen-hour days, each evening left his production team with still more to accomplish, with principal photography set to commence one way or the other on August first.

He told his staff whenever they protested that there was no sense in blaming Tanaka, since he hadn't misled anyone. "Well, then he's the first producer who hasn't," one of his assistants grumbled. But

### Editors Note

This article is excerpted from Jim Shepard's short story of the same name that appeared in his story collection, *You Think That's Bad*, published by Knopf, a division of Random House in 2011. The editor thanks Kathryn Zuckerman for permission to publish these excerpts.



Gojira original movie poster. Toho Company Ltd. 1954.

it was true, Tsuburaya reminded them: at the meeting at which Tsuburaya had agreed to come aboard, Tanaka had begun by saying, "The good news is: do you want to make this movie with me or not? The bad news is, we won't have enough time."

The year before Tsuburaya had forced Tanaka to go to see his beloved *King Kong*, which had just earned four times as much in

its worldwide release as it had originally, and Tanaka had also been impressed by the global numbers for Warner Bros.' *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, the story of a dinosaur thawed from its hibernation by American nuclear testing in Baffin Bay.

Tanaka recounted that it struck him that the stories could be combined, and he scribbled on the back of a folder the outline of a story in which a prehistoric creature was awakened by an H-bomb test in the Pacific and then went on to destroy Tokyo.

For months his project was known at Toho Studios only as Project G, for giant, but lately the staff had taken to calling it *Gojira*, a fusion of the word for gorilla, because of the monster's agility, and the one for whale, because of its size. Tanaka and Honda, the director, liked that as much as anything else anyone had come up with.

During an interview with the *Weekly Asahi*, the reporter, a young man with goggled-sized glasses, seemed to prize his own skepticism and asked each of his questions as if jabbing a tired dog with a stick. Did Eiji Tsuburaya, the Master of Miniatures and head of Toho's Special Arts Department, *feel* the burden of his responsibility for the visual effects on which Toho's new flagship production would either float or sink? Tsuburaya assured him that he did. Was it true there was a nuclear subtext

to the story? Tsuburaya admitted that there was. And would Mr. Tsuburaya be willing to favor the *Weekly Asahi's* readers with an exclusive first glimpse of the movie's monster? Mr. Tsuburaya would not.

Tsuburaya had seen the *Lost World* some years earlier, but when *King Kong* came to Japan, it was staggering; Willis O'Brien had, with his little figures and suitcase jungles, transformed RKO Studio Pictures from whatever it had been before into a world power. Tsuburaya wrote him with questions but never discovered if his letters had gotten through

He saw the film six times. He took his son, who was so terrified that they had to leave in the middle. Without a response from O'Brien, his only recourse was to use his connections to obtain a 35mm print and break down its effects himself, frame by frame.

When Mori, the executive production manager, and Honda first approached him, he'd been thrilled at the prospect after all of those years of finally being able to work on



Gojira director Ishiro Honda and producer Tomoyuki Tanaka.



"Master of Miniatures" Eiji Tsuburaya with Gojira actor Haruo Nakajima. Toho Company, Ltd. 1954.

the kind of stop-motion effects he had so admired in *King Kong*. But when Mori asked him to write up a projected preproduction and shooting schedule for his unit, even after every shortcut he could conceive, he was forced to report that to do the job right he would need a little less than seven years.

On the phone he could hear Mori repeating what he'd said to the others in his office and there was a general hilarity in the background. When Mori returned to the line he was still chuckling. He said he could give Tsuburaya two months for preproduction and another two for shooting.

So if on this new project O'Brien's solutions were denied to them, it meant only that they had to approach the situation in a new way. This didn't dishearten them, since they already understood that whenever fixed rules were applied to a problem, only parts of it might be perceived. They operated on

the principle that you weren't ready for a task until you admitted it was beyond you.

He came up with the idea of an entire 1/25 scale miniature set of the capital, detailed inside as well as out in order to be convincing when trampled. Breakaway walls would reveal entire floors with all of their furnishings when the monster sheared away the outside surfaces. Aspects of the city's infrastructure, such as mailboxes or street lamps, would be rendered in wax and melted by huge offscreen heat lamps to simulate the monster's radioactive breath.



Gojira actor Haruo Nakajima stands beside a 1/25 scale model of a building before shooting of a downtown Tokyo scene. Toho Company, Ltd. 1954.



Gojira actor Haruo Nakajima and crew on 1/25 scale set (above); Production shot (below). Toho Company Ltd, 1954.

Small and precisely calibrated pyrotechnic charges would be installed to reproduce the explosive destruction as fuel and automobile gas tanks ignited.

And 1/25 scale would allow a monster of the proper size to be generated by simply putting a man in a suit.

The simplicity of the plan held enormous appeal. He'd always been drawn to the handmade approach, and of course the studio appreciated the relative lack of

expense. Something made from nothing was how he liked to put it.

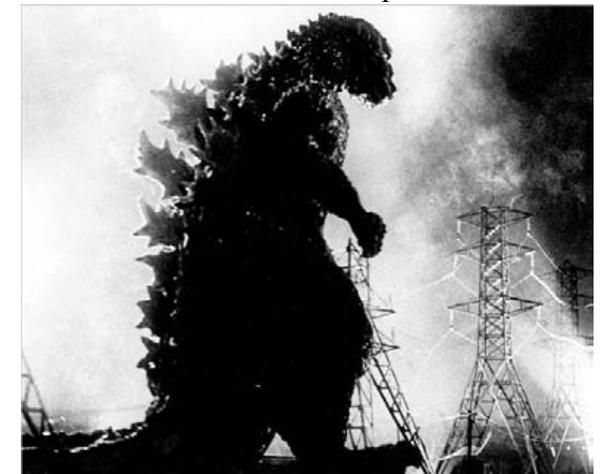
Mori and Honda loved the budget and feared the plan. A man in a suit? Tsuburaya only shrugged at their unease. They either trusted him or they didn't. Proof was stronger than argument.

They'd handed the first attempt at the script to the mystery writer Kayama, and what he'd produced was too tame, involving a nondescript dolphin-like creature that attacked only fishing boats. Most of the

story had involved the poor thing swimming this way and that in search of food. Honda had clear-cut Kayama's script, demanding something terrible enough to evoke the fire raids on Tokyo and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He'd been repatriated near Hiroshima, and then had wandered the devastation three months after the surrender.

Before getting fired, Kayama suggested that the comic-book artist Wasuke Abe should design the creature. Abe produced a month's worth of designs, each of which was less useful than the previous one. He was finally let go when he put forward a proposal that featured a giant frog's body and a head shaped like a mushroom cloud.

With no time to hire another designer, Honda and Tsuburaya decided to simply hybridize a dinosaur of their own concept. Of course it would have a Tyrannosaur's head but an Iguanodon's body seemed an easier fit for a stuntman's requirements in



terms of operating the suit. And Honda added a stegosaur's back plates along the spine to ensure their creature would appear distinct from any recorded species.

During the clay-rendering stage (below) they had his staff experiment with scaly, warty, and alligator skin before settling on the last. And that decided, one whole unit was turned over to the suit's construction.



Sculpting Gojira. Toho Company Ltd. 1954.

The first version was framed in cloth-covered wire over which rubber that had been melted in a steel drum was applied in layers. The result was immobile and weighed three hundred and fifty-five pounds. In the next attempt the cloth itself was painted with the base coat, so only two layers of rubber were necessary, but the result was still a staggeringly heavy two hundred and twenty pounds. But after a month of further futility they had to concede that rubber applied any less thickly would crack at the joints, so the second version would have to do.

To minimize the length of time the poor stuntman would have to spend in the



Hand-operated puppet sprays stream of mist for close-ups. Toho Company Ltd. 1954.

thing, another suit was produced and cut into two sections for shots requiring only part of the monster, waist-up or waist-down. For screen tests of the latter, Nakajima, the stuntman, galumphed around in his heavy suspenders like someone wearing clown pants or waders, his great rubber feet crushing the rough models they's arranged around the stage (right).

They chose Nakajima not only for his height and physical conditioning, but also for his dogged determination. To prepare for his role, he'd taken a projector home with him and worn out Tsuburaya's print of King Kong, and he told anyone who would listen that he'd spent two full weeks of evenings observing bears at the Ueno Zoo.

Another unit had successfully produced a smaller-scale, hand-operated puppet of the head that could



spray a stream of mist from its jaws, for close-ups of the creature's radioactive breath (left).

It turned out that before they'd even gotten through a half a day, another stunt man, Tezuka, was needed to spell Nakajima, so exhausting was the part. The suit was stifling in the August heat even without the studio lights, but

with them it was a roasting pan. Added to that were the fumes from the burning kerosene rags intended to simulate Tokyo's fires. Under the searing lights, Nakajima was barely able to breathe or see, and could only spend a maximum of fifteen minutes in the suit before being too overcome to continue. Each time he stepped out of it, the



Gojira actor Haruo Nakajima on 1/25 scale set wears bottom of costume for waist-down shot. Toho Company Ltd, 1954.

supporting technicians drained the legs as if pouring water out of a boot. One measured a cup and a half of sweat from each leg.

The second half of the first day's schedule involved the destruction of the National Diet. While Nakajima maneuvered his way down the row of buildings, crew members at Tsuburaya's signal heaved on the cable that ran up through a pulley in the rafters and worked the tail. When it crashed into the side of the National Diet, another technician detonated the pyrotechnics and plastic and wooden parts rained down on everyone in the studio. While the men extinguished the fires and sprayed



Gojira actor Haruo Nakajima enjoys a cup of tea between takes. Toho Company Ltd. 1954.

everything down, the fastenings were undone and the top part of the creature was peeled from poor Nakajima's head and shoulders. While he was given some water it hung before him like a sack (below).

Halfway through the shooting Honda told Tsuburaya that he was using many more close-ups of the monster's face than he'd thought he would, because its dilemma was becoming more real to him. In the rushes of the final scene, Honda noted how sad Gojira looked when he turned from the camera.

"That's the way I made the mask," Tsuburaya reminded him.

"No," Honda said. "The face itself is changing through the context of what we've seen him go through. By the time the movie ends he's like a hero whose departure we regret. The paradox of fearsomeness and longing is what the whole thing's about. It's like part of *us* is leaving."

"I wouldn't know about that," Tsuburaya told him.

*Jim Shepard is the author of six novels, including Project X, and four story collections, including "Like You'd Understand, Anyway" (2007), which was nominated for the National Book Award and won The Story Prize, and "You Think That's Bad" (2011). His short fiction has appeared in Harper's, McSweeney's, the Paris Review, The Atlantic Monthly, Esquire, Granta, the New Yorker and Playboy. He teaches at Williams College.*

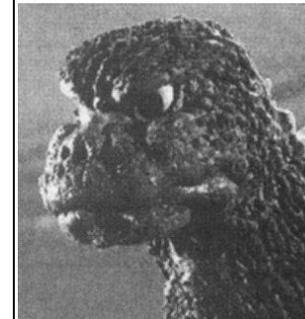
## The Evolution of Godzilla

*G-Suit variations throughout the Monster King's twenty-five films*

To the uninformed and/or occasional viewer, Godzilla is simply Godzilla. The true G-fan, however, can discern which movie a given Godzilla belongs in by observing the features of the G-suit employed. An article entitled "The Evolution of Godzilla" by Robert Biondi on the *History Vortex* web site categorizes and describes the the G-suits and their movies.

During the *King of the Monster's* forty year history, a new Godzilla costume would need to be built for each movie, or the most recent suit would be repaired and/or modified. It became a tradition at Toho Studios that each Godzilla costume would have its own distinctive look. As Godzilla's personality changed over the years, so did his physical appearance.

The entries chronicle the evolution of the G-suit from the original *Godzilla*, *King of the Monsters* (1945) through thirteen different suit types used in this long-running series, ending with *Godzilla vs. Destoroyah* (1995).



Find out why suit #8 is a strong contender for the "Worst Godzilla Suit" award.

For costumers interested in Godzilla, ["The Evolution of Godzilla"](#) is a gold mine.