

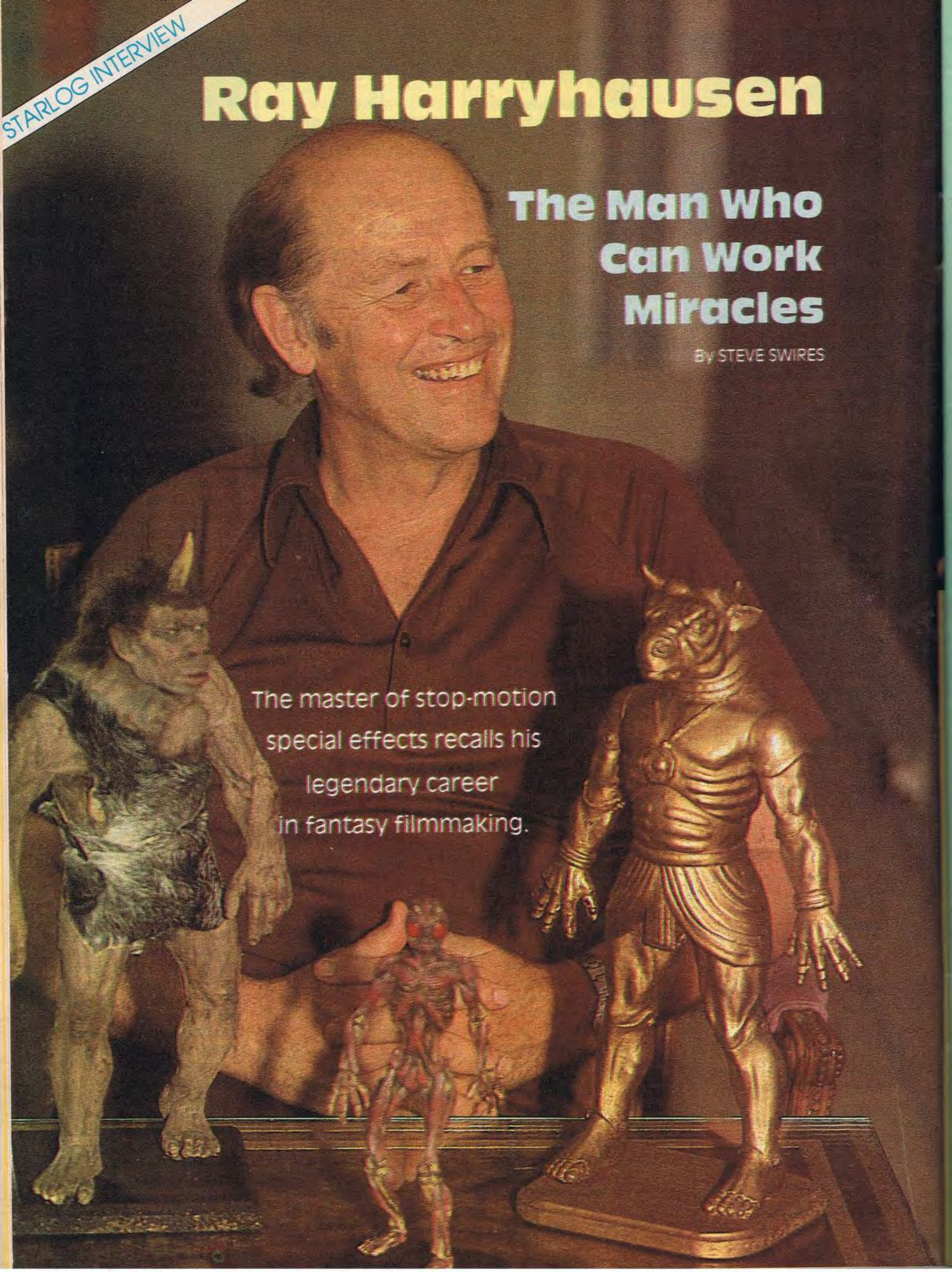
STARLOG INTERVIEW

# Ray Harryhausen

## The Man Who Can Work Miracles

By STEVE SWIRES

The master of stop-motion special effects recalls his legendary career in fantasy filmmaking.





TITANS PHOTO: COPYRIGHT 1981 MCM/UA

Sharper than a serpent's tooth are the sting of the giant scorpions that Ray Harryhausen animated to plague Perseus (Harry Hamlin) for this *Clash of the Titans*.

**S**ome people spend their entire lives dreaming about doing the impossible. Ray Harryhausen has spent his life creating the impossible—bringing the wonders of science fiction and mythology to cinematic life via the magic of stop-motion animation. From rampaging dinosaurs to dueling skeletons, from inquisitive Selenites to amorous centaurs, his menagerie of movie marvels has dazzled and delighted generations of grateful fantasy film fans worldwide.

A soft-spoken and unpretentious craftsman accustomed to performing his painstaking detailed work in private, Harryhausen prefers the peace and tranquility of his London home to the cutthroat competition of the Hollywood hothouse. At a point in life when most filmmakers are content to luxuriate in a well-earned retirement, he is still brimming with ideas for future projects, the challenge of conjuring new miracles keeping him eternally young, even at age 65.

Notoriously reticent about revealing any of his closely guarded trade secrets, Ray Harryhausen generously found time to sit down with *STARLOG* again (previous interviews appeared in issues #10, 51) during a New York visit, for a brief chat about his long and distinguished career.

**STARLOG:** Were you a science-fiction and fantasy fan when you were growing up?

**RAY HARRYHAUSEN:** Very much so. I always liked the bizarre. I suppose that was part of my Germanic background. Fantasy films always attracted me. I can remember my parents taking me to see *The Lost World* and *Metropolis* when I was very young.

My love for science fiction and fantasy led me to join the Science Fiction League in Los

Angeles, where I first met Ray Bradbury and Forrest J Ackerman. We all had similar interests. We dreamt about space platforms, and going to the Moon and Mars. This was in the 1930s, so most "normal" people thought we were off our rockers. They said we were only fooling ourselves, that man could never go to the Moon.

**STARLOG:** Were you able to incorporate your interests in science fiction and film into your education, to prepare yourself for a career in the field?

**HARRYHAUSEN:** There was no way I could know which courses I should take to become a stop-motion animator, but I was able to develop my artistic expression. I always had leanings towards sculpture, for example. I vividly remember assignments I had in junior high school to make models of the old missions of California. I enjoyed making them out of mud clay. I also made dioramas of the La Brea Tar Pits, which I used to visit on Sunday afternoon outings with my parents. I even modeled little saber-toothed tigers and elephants around the pit.

It never dawned on me that I could make the models move. Then, I saw *King Kong*. It stimulated my interest in photography and lighting. I went to the University of Southern California, and took courses in film editing and art direction. I also became interested in acting, and took courses at Los Angeles City College in stage and radio acting—which I still find very valuable in my work today. It all jelled, I suppose, because I didn't quite know how I was going to use all this knowledge I was gaining.

**STARLOG:** How fortunate that all your diverse interests coalesced in your chosen career.

**HARRYHAUSEN:** I would say that destiny had a lot to do with it. I believe a great deal in destiny. I think you can make your own destiny, but only up to a point. You still have leanings, according to your horoscope. If you're born at a certain time, you seem to lean in a certain direction.

That doesn't mean that everything is plotted out for you to the nth degree, but I think there *is* a pattern. There *must* be. It has to be in harmony with Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Everything has a relationship to everything else. If something moves out there in space, it *must* affect something elsewhere.

**STARLOG:** How much dues-paying did you have to do before you began to work in the film industry?

**HARRYHAUSEN:** I took some odd jobs occasionally, to earn extra money. I started out doing puppet shows and stringing puppets for a doll company, but I couldn't make a living at it. My first professional full-time job was with George (*The Time Machine*) Pal [*STARLOG* #10, 13], in the late 1930s. I worked for him until I went into the Army. When I got out, I wanted to go on my own. I had a little money saved up, so I made my own stop-motion animated short films. Finally, I got to be Willis (*King Kong*) O'Brien's assistant on *Mighty Joe Young*, which I worked on for about two years.

**STARLOG:** The budget of your first solo feature, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, was only \$210,000, which means that your personal salary must have been very low. Was the work itself so intrinsically satisfying that you were willing to make such a financial

*STEVE WIRES, senior STARLOG correspondent, profiled Peter Cushing in issue #96.*



7TH VOYAGE SINBAD PHOTOS: COPYRIGHT 1958 COLUMBIA PICTURES

*The 7th Voyage of Sinbad leads the sailors (Kerwin Mathews) into battle with a skeletal soldier. In Jason and the Argonauts, an entire skeleton crew would take up swords.*

sacrifice, hoping that it would lead to more lucrative employment?

**HARRYHAUSEN:** Yes, you might say that. My salary was almost tuppence. The producer sold *Beast* to Warner Bros. for \$450,000. They re-scored it, and released it in "glorious Sepiatone." It became an unexpected box-office hit. Everybody made money off of it, except those of us who had actually done the work. Fortunately, I received a very good salary on *Mighty Joe Young*, and I managed to save some of it.

I took a chance when I made *Beast*. If I had been married and had a family at the time, I probably couldn't have afforded taking that chance. But you must *always* sacrifice for the things you really want.

**STARLOG:** How receptive were studio executives at that time to your ideas for stop-motion animated fantasy films?

**HARRYHAUSEN:** They were very negative. For example, after I did *Beast*, I designed sketches for *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad*. I made 12 drawings, with a typed outline of how the story could be developed. I took my drawings around to all the studios. It turned out that, despite *Mighty Joe Young*, nobody had ever heard of me. The executives just ignored me, because they believed costume pictures were dead. So, I shelved *Sinbad* for many years until after my producer, Charles Schneer, and I had made several films together.

**STARLOG:** Eventually, you and Schneer established yourselves at Columbia Pictures, with whom you were successfully associated for more than two decades. When you began there, the studio was run by the autocratic and eccentric Harry Cohn. How were you able to function effectively amidst the penny-pinching pressure he imposed on most filmmakers?

**HARRYHAUSEN:** Fortunately, I never met Cohn. Charles always acted as my buffer. We had our own little nook, and we made our pictures cheaply enough that we never had any interference from the front office. They knew

our movies made a certain amount of money, and we tried to keep to a very tight budget. Cohn was only interested in making a profit, and he didn't want to break the pattern, so he was happy to leave us alone.

I was able to work by myself, in another part of Los Angeles. I don't like to be disturbed, and I can't concentrate if I have many people around me. So, I managed to find my little niche, and stayed there out of everybody's sight. Of course, I was always under pressure to get my work done on schedule and on budget, but that was good training. It taught me to be creative in trying to get big effects with *very* little money.

**STARLOG:** *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* represented a significant leap forward for you, away from the stigma of low-budget exploitation pictures. Columbia marketed *Sinbad* as a wholesome family film intended for a general audience, as opposed to the often crude and vulgar campaigns they used to sell *It Came From Beneath the Sea*, *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* and *20 Million Miles to Earth*.

**HARRYHAUSEN:** *Sinbad* was a breakaway from the mad monsters and the dinosaurs-on-the-loose. I was trying to get away from that type of inexpensive exploitation picture, which was very popular in those days. They were all based on the concept that aliens from outer space were *evil*. We had to include a lot of destruction and fast movement, or we couldn't sell the idea to the studio.

But we still had to make *Sinbad* very frugally. Charles kept strict reins on the budget, and I planned every shot carefully, so we didn't shoot any footage that would end up on the cutting room floor. We also had an advantage in that we were able to use the costumes from a big Rita Hayworth Biblical epic that Columbia planned, but never made. So, even though we used Spanish locations and shot in color, we managed to bring *Sinbad* in for about \$650,000. To Columbia's surprise, it turned out to be a "sleeper."

**STARLOG:** Your collaboration with Colum-

bia survived several changes in studio administration. Why was that particular company so responsive to your projects for so many years? **HARRYHAUSEN:** Charles had a good reputation with Columbia for making money on these movies, so they listened to us. They kept backing us until we wanted to make *The Valley of Gwangi*, which cost so much money that they couldn't finance it. We had to shop around for other financing, and went with Warner Bros. instead.

**STARLOG:** You were one of the few filmmakers specializing in stop-motion animation during the 1950s and 1960s. As an original working in an industry of imitators, how were you perceived in Hollywood at that time?

**HARRYHAUSEN:** People didn't know *what* to think of me, because I was in such a strange profession. It wasn't until several years later, when fans started to accumulate and write to me and say they wanted to visit my studio, that stop-motion animation developed into something that anyone knew about.

**STARLOG:** Your fan following increased tremendously in the 1970s, following the explosion of interest in the fantasy film field. How did it make you feel to learn that your work has meant so much to so many people?

**HARRYHAUSEN:** I'm very flattered. I'm most happy that I've reached somebody, particularly young people, because one doesn't like to make a picture and think that nobody is going to care about it.

When I made the publicity tour with *Clash of the Titans*, I was quite impressed by all the adulation every time I visited a university. I received standing ovations and all sorts of wonderful compliments. I even get letters from fans who say that seeing *Sinbad* changed their lives—just like seeing *King Kong* changed mine.

So, the snowball rolls on. It really started with Willis O'Brien, who was the father of it all. Then, it got bigger with me. And it continues to grow. Who knows where it will go next?

**STARLOG:** Many of your fans are disappointed by your reluctance to reveal your specific special effects techniques. Why are you so secretive about your animation procedures?

**HARRYHAUSEN:** I *have* been criticized many times for not blabbing my mouth more. But I've always felt that my work is like a magician's illusion. I knock my brains out trying to create a fantasy, but if I tell everybody how it was done, it would be like a magician giving away his tricks. You would no longer be interested in the magician.

There are too many fantasy film magazines today which tell *all*. I think that's a pity. The average person doesn't want to know how the special effects are done. All they want to do is enjoy the movie. But now the fans have become critics; they're looking for the seams. They think that just because they read an article about how an effect was done, that makes them a super-critic.

**STARLOG:** You have also been criticized for your films' relatively unsophisticated storylines and for your willingness to settle for a superficial level of mere escapism. Why have you avoided more intellectually ambitious material?

**HARRYHAUSEN:** I think *entertainment* is what filmmaking is all about. Samuel Goldwyn hit it on the head when he said: "If you want to send a message, use Western Union." What's wrong with the film industry today is that too many people are trying to inflict their ideas on the audience, by sending out negative messages with anti-heroes. I think that has taken its toll.

This is not just nostalgia speaking. The films made during the "Golden Age of Hollywood" were quality entertainment. But we look back on them as being somewhat old-fashioned, because they had a beginning, a middle and an end.

Today, of course, television has taken over our lives. Commercials try to sell you a load of *junk* in only 30 seconds, so they have to be very fast-paced and give you the whammy at the beginning. This has influenced the film industry. Many current movies have no story qualities. They're just a series of happenings, like a TV commercial.

The young people who were raised on television haven't developed much of an attention span. The people of *my* generation were expected to read novels and have a literary background. But TV has annihilated that.

**STARLOG:** Considering TV's immense cultural impact, and the significant downward demographic shift in the moviegoing audience, might your films be considered outdated

by the young people raised on the high-powered, computer-enhanced visual effects of Douglas Trumbull and John Dykstra?

**HARRYHAUSEN:** Just because Trumbull and Dykstra may have done wonderful things using computers, that is *no* reason for me to feel obligated to copy them. If everybody copied each other, then we would never have a variety of motion pictures.

I think there is room for all types of films. As long as I have an audience that likes *my* type of film, then I'll continue to make what *I* think is a good, entertaining picture. Other filmmakers think a different approach is better. That's fine for them. I'm doing the best I can with the way *I* see it. If I have a following, then I'm a success. If I don't, then I'm a failure.

**STARLOG:** Yet Trumbull and Dykstra are far more lucratively rewarded for their efforts than you were at a comparable stage in your career. To an extent, they and their peers are reaping the rewards of the dues *you* paid.

**HARRYHAUSEN:** That's all part of the process of evolution in any industry. I wanted a certain thing out of my career, which I feel I achieved. Trumbull and Dykstra wanted something different, and they've gotten it.

I'm sure if I had changed many of my attitudes, and had a more business-like point-of-view, I would have become a millionaire years ago. Then again, I might not have made as many movies. Hindsight is much easier

than foresight.

**STARLOG:** In a sense, all of today's leading fantasy filmmakers are your "spiritual grandchildren," passing on your legacy to succeeding generations of moviegoers by redefining and extrapolating your influence and innovations. When you look back at your nearly 50 years in the film industry, are you satisfied with the body of work you have created?

**HARRYHAUSEN:** I have no major complaints about my career. I certainly feel myself much more fortunate than Willis O'Brien, who had so many projects collapse under him. I made a lot of movies I'm glad I made. I also made some movies I regret making. But they were all useful experiences.

People tell me I haven't kept up with the times, but you must remember that my type of film is very distinctive from the average special-effects picture. My films are classified as special-effects pictures, but they really belong in a separate category, which I don't think many people realize. I don't just go out and say: "*Star Wars* was such a success, I'm going to copy it." That's not for me. Maybe that's a mistake; maybe it's not. It remains to be seen.

I just hope to continue to make pictures I enjoy making. If they're successful, then *bravo!* If they're not, and I can't make any more, then so be it. I've had a great run.

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A cyclops riding a dragon is one of the many things a sightseer will view on *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* as arranged by magic master and tour guide Harryhausen.

