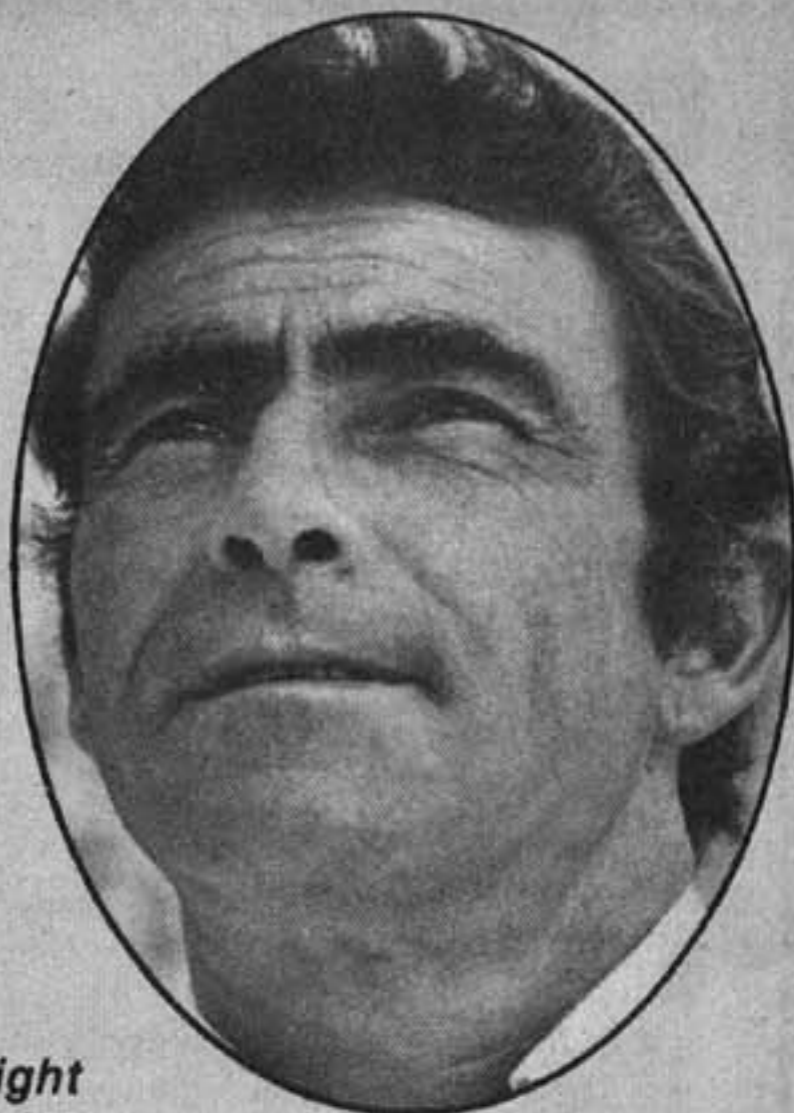


ROD SERLING RECALLS



An interview with the famed creator of *Twilight Zone* and the screenwriter of *Planet of the Apes*

by David Johnson

I first became involved with *Planet of the Apes* about ten years ago," muscular-voiced Rod Serling is saying in the sun-filled office of his Pacific Palisades home. "I was approached by an outfit called the King Brothers, who did mostly Indian-elephant pictures shot for about a \$1.80 — because elephants weren't even scale then.

"The King Brothers had a notion about doing the *Pierre Boulle* book as a nickle-and-dime picture. I was convinced that it could be done and at the time, as I recall, I did a whole treatment for them, a scene-by-scene breakdown of how we would lick the problem. They ultimately discarded it because of the ape population.

"I never heard any more about it until I got a call from Blake Edwards, who was the next individual to get into it and who was going to produce and direct it. I was told by Blake to go, not to worry about money. It was going to be a big one.

"My earliest version of the script featured an ape city, much like New York. It wasn't carved out rocks with caves on the side of a hill. It was a metropolis. Everything related to anthropoid. The automobiles, the buildings, the elevators, the rooms, the furniture. The script was very long and I think the estimate of the production people was that if they had shot that script it would've cost no less than a hundred million dollars — y'know, by the time they created an ape population, clothed it and built a city for them to live in.

"Then Arthur Jacobs got into it, as I recall. Arthur said it could be done but not for that kind of money. So I redid it — with an eye toward a very special society, one that was semi-primitive, semi-civilized. I think I did about three drafts of the actual screenplay."

What were some of the problems he faced in bringing the *Boulle* novel to celluloid life? "Well, I think the major one was to make apes speak and not get a laugh. The whole thing was to make an audience believe it and take it seriously.

"Mine was a very free adaptation of the original material. Actually, it was not an adaptation. It was 'based on' the book by Boulle. There's quite a distinction.

"God, it's so long since I've read the book but I believe

the story ended on a completely different note. Where they go back to Earth and they land at an airport and they open the door and there are apes. The evolution has taken place on earth while they were away."

So the denouement in the film version (*Charlton Heston* and *Linda Harrison* riding along the beach past the tip of the Statue of Liberty, indicating that the astronauts had landed on their own planet in the future) was Serling's? "Yes. In collaboration with Jacobs."

In response to the interviewer's unabashed enthusiasm for that ending, Rod says: "Yes, it was a wild cinematic scene."

What happened then with the project? "Well, Arthur and I kept in touch over a period of time but then he decided to give the script to Mike Wilson, who in turn took away almost all of my dialogue and used his own. My recollection, though, of the shooting script is that the chronology of scenes and events was identical to mine — except that the people didn't say the same things.

"For example, there was the museum sequence where you see the astronauts stuffed. That was mine. But I didn't have the dialogue that covered it.

"Mine was much more somber and serious dialogue. There was very little humor in my piece. If you recall, Wilson used a lot of puns and juxtaposed familiar expressions like 'I've never met an ape I didn't like,' that kind of thing.

"I gather the humor was one of the key reasons for the success of the picture. I blew it and Wilson did it."

Was it necessary to go to the Writers Guild of America for arbitration? "No, never. As I said, we'd been in touch roughly all during that time. They offered me collaborative credit almost immediately. But it's really Mike Wilson's screenplay, much more than mine."

Did Franklin Schaffner, the film's director, work on the project with Serling? "No, he came into it later. But Frank and I worked together years and years ago for a long time — y'know, on *Studio One* and *Playhouse 90*. Schaffner is a brilliant director. He's tops, as far as I'm concerned."

Had Rod seen any of the sequels to *Planet of the Apes*? "Just one." (It was the second in the series, *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*.)

"Arthur offered it to me from London and I remember spending \$200 on a phone conversation about what we'd do with it. We literally got into the hydrogen bomb and the resurgence of civilization over the apes and we very much plugged the concept of the ape's desperate fear of the humans. Because the humans repeated what they'd done before which, essentially, was to wreck the earth.

"As it turned out, I couldn't do the script when Arthur wanted it done. I was on another assignment. So I didn't have the remotest connection with the approach Jacobs eventually went with."

Did Rod have any thoughts about the theories expressed in *Erich von Daniken's* controversial bestseller *Chariots of the Gods?* (Serling did the narration for the TV version.) "I believe much of it. Some of it I will take in a neutral fashion. I'll say, 'I'm not sure you're right. But somebody else give me something else by way of a projection.' I feel much of what he said can be put to scientific test and found pretty valid.

"The most negative reaction has come from theologians. They hate it. Because obviously everything von Daniken suggests by way of theory — evolutionary and otherwise — goes very much against the New Testament. So when you read a book like *Crash Go the Chariots*, which was supposed to be the definitive knockdown of the von Daniken book, you look at the critic's credits. He's written nothing but theological books. What he's defending is the Mother Church. So his rebuttal to von Daniken is subject to considerable thought and second-guessing."

The outspoken Mr. Serling, born in Binghamton, New York, graduate of Antioch, recipient of Emmy and Peabody Awards, gained his initial fame for those hard-hitting plays aired during the Golden Age of Television (*Requiem for a Heavyweight*, *Patterns*, etc.). But that reputation may have been eclipsed by the writer's entrance into the field of fantasy and science-fiction with his classic TV anthology *Twilight Zone* and later, *Night Gallery*.

Does the occult hold a fascination for him? "I'm interested, but as an *afficionado*, not as a knowledgeable practitioner. I know very little about it.

"I really can't claim to being a science-fiction man either. Fantasy was really more my bag. And I'm very much a Johnny-Come-Lately into that. The guys — the really key men — like *Asimov*, *Clarke*, *Bradbury* — they all preceded me by years and years and have a body of literature to show for it. I have nothing but a television show. My only claim is that I put science-fiction and fantasy into a mass media more than any other person. We predated *Star Trek* and *Outer Limits*. I think in its day *Twilight Zone* was a pretty qualitative little entry. It was a fairly professional piece of work that we were all proud of. It fell down frequently as television is wont to do, but I think the effort always showed.

"With the reruns, the show has had a renaissance. I go out on lecture things around to the colleges and, hell, the kids watch it fairly religiously."

Does he ever watch the reruns? "Rarely. They take key scenes and arbitrarily scissor them out. You're watching and think, 'What the hell happened to so-and-so?' Y'know, characters disappear without any explanation because they've taken two or three minutes out for additional commercials. And those scripts were carefully wrought to be precisely 26 minutes in length or whatever it was then. When you do something that explicitly and

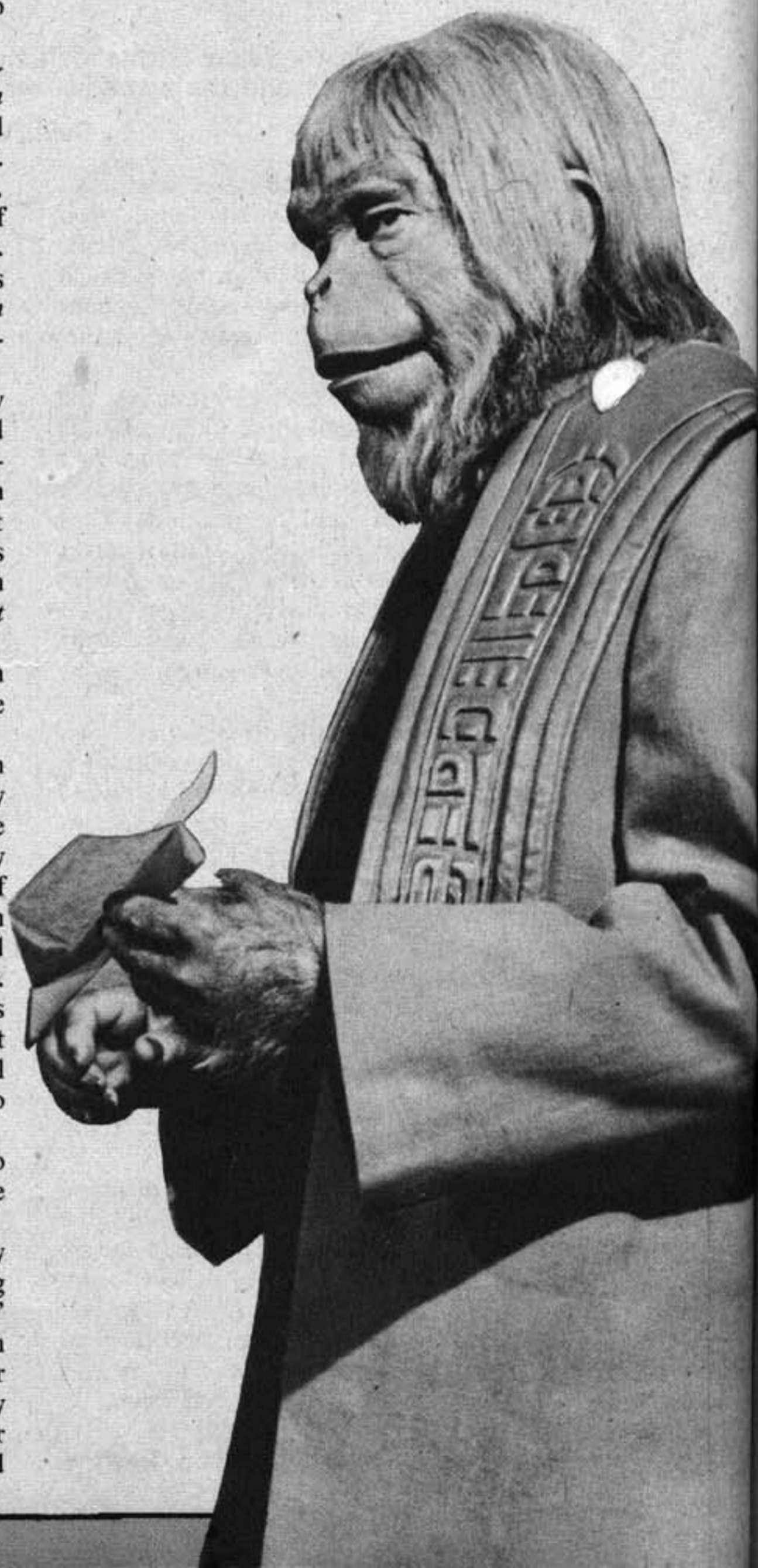
that carefully and suddenly have a minute or two taken out — well, they're not just taking out flesh, they're taking bone out too."

Night Gallery is now in reruns too. "Well, that's a different kettle. The first year I worked very intensely on it. Then I kind of got aced out. Universal sort of took it over, creatively, completely."

Universal wanted more of an emphasis on visual horror? "Yes, that and they put in humor. One-minute blackout bits that would've been great in bad nightclubs but which I thought were destructive as hell for the thread of the show.

"Then they changed it to a half-hour, which was very destructive in itself. You can't suddenly cut an hour show in half and expect an audience to accept it as the same animal."

Episodes of *The Sixth Sense*, an hour series starring





Ape and Human, *NATURAL ENEMIES* now and for ALL TIME. Each fearing and hating the other. So says, Dr. Zaius. (MAURICE EVANS).

Ape and Human, natural enemies now and for all time. Each fearing and hating the other. So echoes Taylor (CHARLTON HESTON). Only he wonders WHY.



Gary Collins as a parapsychologist, were edited down to a half-hour length (they now resemble teasers for "next week's show" and make no sense whatsoever) by Universal and added to the *Night Gallery* package for syndication. "I haven't seen any of those," Rod admits. "I did the hosting for the new stuff and some of what they gave me to say was incredible. But I did it because I wanted out. Completely. Y'see, I had a 50% profit situation. But I didn't own any of the films or have any artistic control."

To backtrack, how *did* he get into the hosting and voice-over end of the business? (*Serling's* done TV spiels for products like Anacin, Sunkist, Ford and the commentary for the Jacques Cousteau television specials, to name just a few of his credits.) "Absolutely accidentally. I'm not an actor. I don't have a trained voice. It isn't even resonant. But it's different — very recognizable, that's all. I never aspired to anything like this. But when *Twilight Zone* needed a host, a cheap item, somebody who'd work for scale — well, literally, I was there and I spoke the language and I articulated reasonably well and I became the host. It was from that that all these other things came." A laugh. "And, thank God, because writing assignments are very sparse these days."

The writer divides his year between the East and West Coasts; six months teaching creative writing at Ithaca College in Upstate New York and the remaining six months at his homestead overlooking the blue Pacific.

What's he working on now? "I'm on my third draft of a feature film based on Jerome Bixby's short story, *It's a Good Life*. We did it originally on *Twilight Zone* but now we're doing a full-length version. Alan Landsburg, who produced *Chariots of the Gods?*, is producing it. It's in the fantasy-horror genre."

With *Rod Serling* at the creative helm, it should be a chiller we'll all go "ape" over.

