

Apes of Wrath

Between 2001 and Star Wars there was one true sci-fi phenomenon — “The Planet of the Apes”

By SAMUEL JAMES MARONIE



As unthinkable as it sounds today, there was once a time when high-quality fantasy films were in desperately short supply.

The 1960s had almost gasped their last, and the decade had yet to provide filmgoers with anything in the way of memorable entertainment.

It wasn't until 1968 that the cinema experienced a small boom period, mostly featuring science-fiction offerings like *2001—A Space Odyssey*, *Barbarella*, and a sleeper of a movie that took audiences by delightful surprise: *Planet of the Apes*.

Not only was *Apes* one of the year's most financially successful pictures, but it also spawned a quartet of sequels and fired up a legion of fans who remain zealously devoted to the series today.

The basic plot-line of the original film (and many of its follow-ups) is familiar to anyone the least bit familiar with the popular O. Henry “shock ending” style. A group of astronauts (headed by Charlton Heston) are returning to Earth from a deep-space mission and crash-land on what they believe is an alien world.

As the crew eventually contact intelligent life forms, the Earthlings are stunned to find a role-reversal whereby articulate simians are the masters of the society and humans are savage creatures used for sport and scientific experiments.

Through a series of nightmarish adventures, the visitors ultimately come to realize that they have indeed arrived on their native planet, now a post-Armageddon world in which humans have regressed barely above the animal level. This discovery is capped in a powerful climax; as the camera pulls back, astronaut Heston is revealed crying out in grief amid the ruins of the Statue of Liberty.

Scarcely a happy ending, but audiences loved it just the same.

Above: The proud race of warrior apes stood vigil against the post-holocaust mutants in *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*.
Below: The apes mobilize to invade the New York mutant colony.



Planet of the Apes performed so well at the all-important box-office that it became one of Fox's highest-grossing films ever. Furthermore, it was shown that fantasy pictures could be done in a mature fashion and still prove a sound investment for the studio.

"Apes" Proponent

Apes would probably never have been made if not for the persistence of public-relations-man-turned-producer Arthur P. Jacobs. The late filmmaker had purchased the Pierre Boulle novel while still unpublished—and in French; the author's agent gave Jacobs a verbal synopsis in English, and that was enough to convince him of its potential.

Eventually, a screenplay was commissioned, and with this tucked under his arm Jacobs made the rounds of various studios to obtain backing. He was rejected by them all—major and minor—twice. Disappointedly, he put the project aside to wait for just the right moment.

A couple of years later Jacobs was producing several features for Fox (*The Chairman*, *Dr. Doolittle*) and recalled the way-out story. He persuaded studio chief Richard Zanuck to let him make a "test reel" whereby he could dramatically present the man/beast conflict to skeptical executives.

The producer quickly fashioned a long talking sequence between actor Charlton Heston and a crudely made-up Edward G. Robinson to showcase his idea. He confided to a friend just prior to the screening, "If anyone so much as laughs—we've had it!" No one even snickered, and Zanuck gave him his blessings.

Everyone knew that if the film was to succeed, the concept of a simian society had to be absolutely convincing. Subsequently, no expense was spared to achieve this sense of believability.

An unprecedented \$1 million makeup budget was allotted cosmetic wizards Dan Striepeke and John Chambers to develop the ape faces. Instead of conventional masks, the appliances were designed as custom-made sections that allowed for full dramatic expression.

Kim Hunter, Roddy McDowall and others were subjected to five-hour-plus makeup sessions each morning, followed by a full day emoting in front of hot studio lights. Eating was out of the question and an occasional cigarette was only managed through the use of a long holder.

The real test of the actors' stamina, though, came during several days spent in the Arizona desert. Temperatures climbed beyond 120 degrees and the simian performers often found themselves on the verge of suffocation. Kim



Returning astronaut Charlton Heston gets a rousing reception—but not exactly what he had in mind.

Hunter actually fainted from heat exhaustion on more than one occasion.

But no one complained or asked to go home. McDowall, Hunter and Maurice Evans all remarked that they always believed strongly in Jacobs' unique project and felt the hardships were a small price to pay in order to be a part of the team. Their dedication is even more evident in viewing the fine performances they turned in.

How to Make an Ape Planet

Creating an actual planet of apes was the job tackled by the film's production designer, Bill Creber. While the original novel was set in a scientifically advanced community, this idea was rejected as being too complex for a film with an already hefty budget. Instead, Creber went with a primitive look that added to the picture's bizarreness.

Sequences featuring the spacecraft's crash in the desert and the astronauts' trek to civilization were filmed in portions of Utah and Arizona. A scene calling for the Earthmen to bathe in a convenient pool

forced the moviemakers to construct an artificial one—complete with waterfall and man-made plumbing.

For the stone structures of the ape city, Creber utilized a form of polyurethane foam which could be shot out of a gun, molded and left to rise like bread dough. Reinforced by pencil-thin rods, the foam was later textured to give the convincing appearance of being hewn from boulders.

While Jacobs was extravagant with the film's visual appeal, neither did he scrimp in the calibre of the shooting script. Authors Michael Wilson and Rod Serling contributed an excellent scenario full of Swiftian political satire and wit. Heston's plea before the Ape Council is an especially moving segment that comes off as both entertaining and thought-provoking.

Planet of the Apes and its sequels derived much of their popularity by appealing to the audience on two levels. Moviegoers who like message pictures found many philosophical tidbits examined through the strange role-reversal, while fantasy/adventure buffs were treat-

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ed to hours of unbridled imagination.

Many likened the situation of humans and apes to the problems suffered by blacks in this country. Humans (and later the apes) are displayed on auction blocks where they are sold into slavery and have no rights in society. Later films like *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* would detail the simian struggle for freedom from human oppressors.

In another manner, fantasy fans looked forward to the annual *Apes* film, as it was a guarantee for a rip-roaring adventure story full of colorful characters and outrageous situations. The movies were well-produced and, above all, fun—a tough enough combination for any film to achieve.

In fact, it's hard to figure out just what prompted the studio to throw in the towel after the fifth and final opus, *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*.

Ill-fated Spin-offs

While each film performed excellently at the turnstiles, there was a small—but steady—decline in revenues; perhaps Fox decided to abandon the costly series before the bottom fell out. The features were quickly sold to television, where they garnered extremely high ratings.

The inevitable TV spin-off series came about in 1974, and proved the closest thing to failure that the simians ever experienced. McDowall was on hand to lend his expertise, but even he could not lift the

show from mediocrity. The video version was mercifully cut short in mid-season.

A cartoon version on Saturday mornings helped to keep the concept alive, and managed to succeed on that level. But many fans remain fervently loyal to the original *Apes* characters and hope the concept may someday be reactivated for more films.

One recurring story relates to how the *Planet of the Apes* series positively influenced the making of *Star Wars*. Rumor has it that when George Lucas presented the concept for his outer-space extravaganza, several Fox executives were favorably inclined to the project because of the ape-like Chewbacca. Hollywood loves to repeat success stories, and the studio had already earned millions with their previous monkey-men scenario.

Whether or not we will ever see any further adventures on the planet of the apes is open to speculation. But while the jury is out, the *Apes* quintet is rerun constantly on local TV, and even the 13 episodes from the ill-fated TV series are available for viewing. The apes are not gone, and they're most definitely not forgotten.

Even if there are not any more new entries, moviegoers may take pleasure in the fact that intelligent, well-produced fantasy films have always had an eager audience. And the *Planet of the Apes* series is one of the best examples of this following.

The Apes Saga

PLANET OF THE APES (20th Century-Fox, 1968)

Charlton Heston, Kim Hunter, Roddy McDowall, Maurice Evans, James Whitmore, Linda Harrison. Director: Franklin Schaffner. Screenplay: Michael Wilson & Rod Serling. Based on the novel by Pierre Boulle.

BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES (1970)

Charlton Heston, James Franciscus, Kim Hunter, Maurice Evans, Linda Harrison, James Gregory, Victor Buono, Natalie Trundy. Director: Ted Post. Screenplay: Paul Dehn. Story: Paul Dehn & Mort Abrahams

ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES (1971)

Roddy McDowall, Kim Hunter, Eric Braeden, Bradford Dillman, Natalie Trundy. Director: Don Taylor. Screenplay: Paul Dehn.

CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES (1972)

Roddy McDowall, Don Murray, Natalie Trundy, Ricardo Montalban. Director: J. Lee Thompson. Screenplay: Paul Dehn.

BATTLE FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES (1973)

Roddy McDowall, Natalie Trundy, Claude Akins, Paul Williams, Lew Ayres. Director: J. Lee Thompson. Story: Paul Dehn. Screenplay: John William Corrington & Joyce Hooper Corrington.

"PLANET OF THE APES"—An hour-long dramatic TV series aired on the CBS network from 9/13/74 thru 12/27/74 (13 episodes). Roddy McDowall, James Naughton, Ron Harper

"RETURN TO THE PLANET OF THE APES"—A Saturday morning animated cartoon series, debuted on NBC 9/6/75.