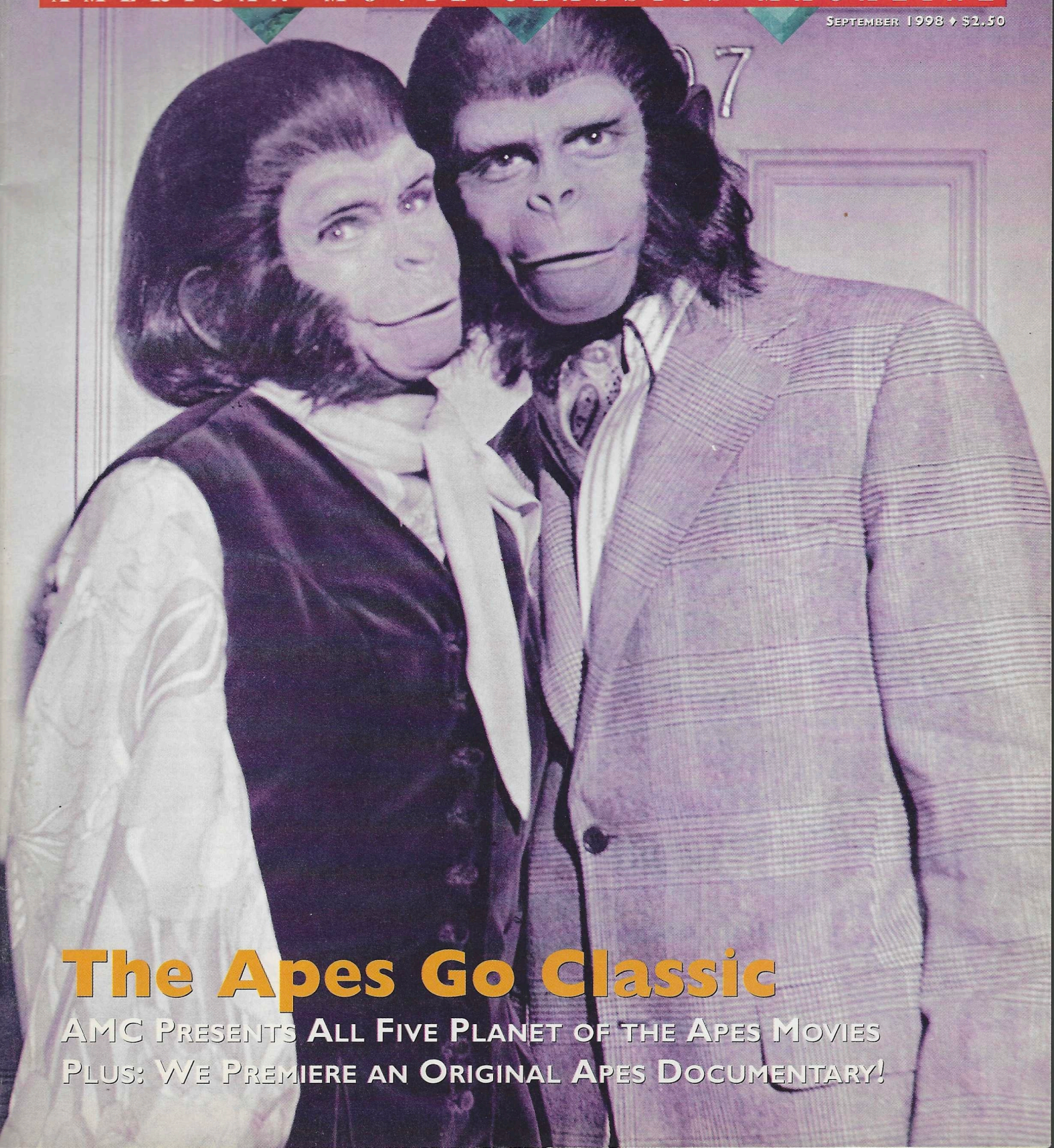


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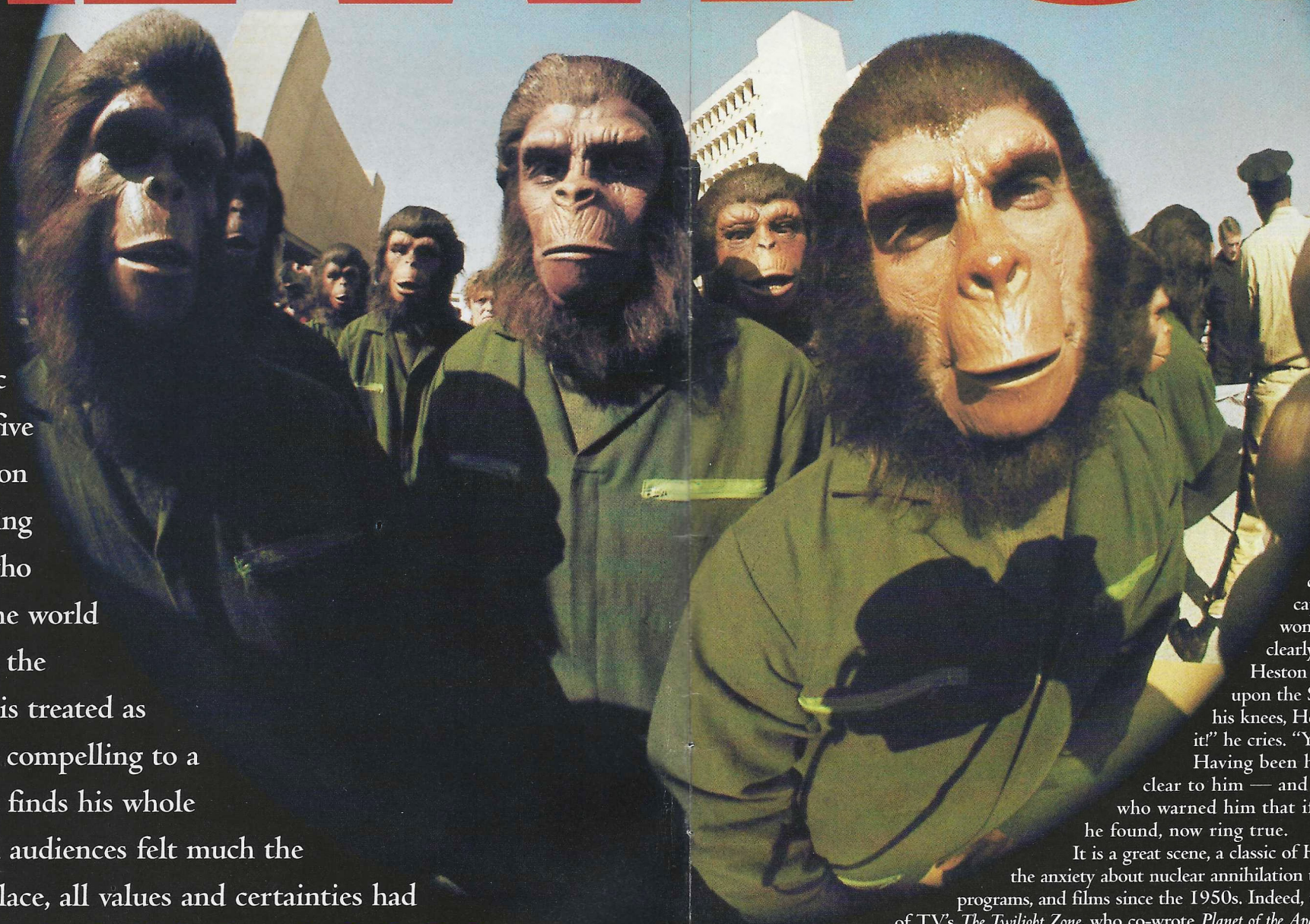
The Apes Go Classic

AMC PRESENTS ALL FIVE PLANET OF THE APES MOVIES
PLUS: WE PREMIERE AN ORIGINAL APES DOCUMENTARY!

WHAT PLANET ARE WE ON?

THE EVOLUTION OF THE APES FILMS

The Planet of the Apes series became a science fiction cult classic from the moment the first of the five films was released in 1968. Charlton Heston's portrayal of a time-traveling U. S. astronaut from the present who arrives in the future to find that the world is now ruled by apes, and that it is the remaining human population that is treated as mute, inferior beasts, was instantly compelling to a '60s audience. Why? Well, Heston finds his whole world has turned upside down and audiences felt much the same way; in their own time and place, all values and certainties had come up for questioning. **IBY DAVID RIEFF**



You'd think, though, that the strong political message of the Apes films might seem hopelessly dated today. We live in more staid times. And, after all, movies with powerful political overtones are like novels with too much contemporary slang; they rarely age well. When they do, it is usually because a new generation of viewers finds an additional message from the one that seemed most obvious before. Nuclear war then, as it were, ethnic strife now.

The initial picture, *Planet of the Apes* (1968; September 6, 7, 12, 21) was released as the Cold War, Richard Nixon and the anti-Vietnam War movement were nearing their high-water marks. When Charlton Heston demands of one of his ape captors, "How in hell did this upside-down world get started?" he might as well have been a befuddled suburban parent wondering why his kids were burning the flag and smoking pot. And yet the premise of the film is that the old values led to no good, since, as Heston realizes, the reason the apes have come to rule over and passionately hate *homo sapiens* is that human civilization — not some other alien culture, as he'd assumed — has destroyed itself in a nuclear apocalypse.

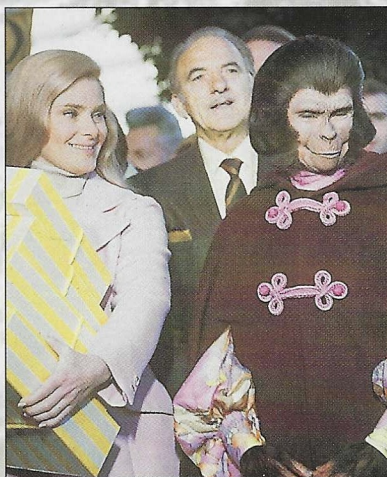
In the last, justly-famous scene of *Planet of the Apes*, Heston discovers mankind's fate. He's made his escape from his simian captors, aided by two non-mainstream, "humane" ape scientists, wonderfully played by Roddy McDowall and Kim Hunter, who are clearly meant to represent our own Sixties counterculture. But as Heston rides into what the apes call "The Forbidden Zone," he comes upon the Statue of Liberty, half-submerged along the shoreline. Falling to his knees, Heston pounds his fist on the damp sand. "You finally really did it!" he cries. "You maniacs! You blew it all to hell!"

Having been hunted and caged by the apes, suddenly their hatred becomes clear to him — and to the audience. The words of Dr. Zaius, the ape scientist, who warned him that if he went into The Forbidden Zone he wouldn't like what he found, now ring true.

It is a great scene, a classic of Hollywood science fiction movie-making. The scene also reflects the anxiety about nuclear annihilation that had been a staple of science-fiction books, television programs, and films since the 1950s. Indeed, the viewer can detect the practiced hand of Rod Serling, creator of TV's *The Twilight Zone*, who co-wrote *Planet of the Apes*. Such bitter, pessimistic, beautifully dramatized endings were a signature of Serling's work. So was the intense moralism and the ability to make such seriousness of purpose immensely entertaining.

We are, however, a long way from the era in which Serling worked and in which *Planet of the Apes* and its sequels were conceived. *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970; September 6, 7, 12, 22), the second installment, ends with nuclear Armageddon. But for all its fissures, America is a far more placid now than the '60s. Heston's remark that he is "leaving the twentieth century with no regrets," is one that few would make in this era of the greatest bull market in history. The Cold War is over and so, despite the continuing threat of nuclear proliferation, is the crippling fear that one of these days our planet will be reduced to a cinder.

Why, then, particularly since the technology of sci-fi filmmaking has grown much richer over the past 30 years, does the Planet of the Apes series continue to seem so compelling and so fresh? There are two reasons, I think. The first is that, in an age of often-upbeat *Star Wars*-ian science fiction where nobody really dies and the force is always with Luke Skywalker, the pessimism of the Apes films is arresting. Throughout all five, the moral is consistent. The writers seem to agree with the poet W. H. Auden, who said, "we must love one another or die," but they do not seem to be willing to bet all that much that we will make it. In each film, the ability of individuals to get along is swept away by the madness of leaders and mobs.



In *Escape From the Planet of the Apes*, Kim Hunter is in the pink.

In the third and fourth films, *Escape From the Planet of the Apes* (1971; September 6, 7, 12, 23) and *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (1972; September 6, 7, 12, 23), where the premise is reversed and two apes travel back in time to the human-dominated earth from which Heston came, this theme is particularly evident. This world,

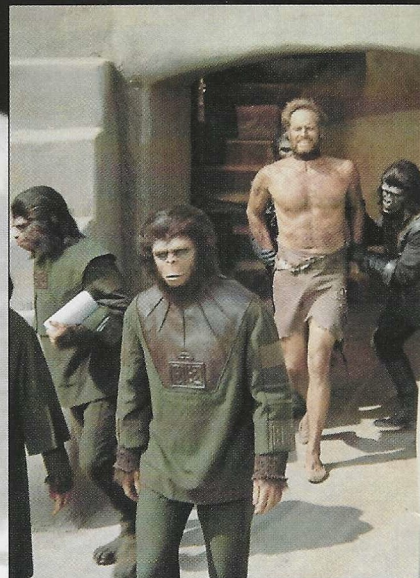
in which very few people can resist the madness of hatred, is not far from Rodney King's Los Angeles — and other depressingly familiar examples of recent all-against-all wars.

Another, related theme which strikes the contemporary viewer is that of ethnic cleansing. For in each of the

Apes films, the efforts of humans and simians to coexist is thwarted by those who believe, as the ape minister of science in *Planet of the Apes* tells Charlton Heston, that "the only good human is a dead human," and that "the sooner he is exterminated the better." Doubtless, the scriptwriters were thinking of Vietnam. But what comes to mind now is Bosnia or Rwanda. Because for all their entertainment value, the Planet of the Apes series shrewdly and bitterly anatomizes the irrationality and fear that in the past decade has led, not once but several times, to genocide.

It would be absurd to suggest that the Planet of the Apes films were great art; due partly to slashed shooting budgets, the effect had begun to pale in the last three entries, particularly the last, *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (1973; September 6, 7, 12, 25, 27). But their combination of appealing Hollywood pop characterization and deep political shrewdness meant that they endured — while other films that seemed far more serious at the time have been long forgotten. ♦

David Rieff has reported extensively from Bosnia and Rwanda and is the author of the forthcoming *A Waste of Hope?* (Simon & Schuster), about the world of humanitarian aid.



Charlton Heston gets captured in *Planet of the Apes*.



Conquest of the Planet of the Apes: Roddy McDowall is trapped.

"Most of the behind-the-scenes footage you see in the documentary came from Roddy McDowall," explains Kevin Burns, the director and executive producer of the special. McDowall, who starred in four of the films, carried a 16mm camera around with him

on each set. He captured many images, including those intricately complicated makeup techniques. "The work of (makeup supervisor) John Chambers on the Ape films is nothing short of revolutionary," Burns offers. "There had to be a massive amount of actors in makeup, seventy to one hundred actors a day, day in and day out, for months."

Behind the Planet of the Apes also features incisive interviews with a broad range of the films' stars and crew. "This was an absolute dream project," Burns recalls. "Not one person we contacted turned us down. Roddy McDowall, Charlton Heston, Kim Hunter, none of them said no. These people really believed in the movies and the themes of the movies. The Planet of the Apes films are what I would call smart fun. They're intelligent, sophisticated, profound, but they're also great fun." ♦ — Jesse Haley

APES: THE DOCUMENTARY

Planet of the Apes hit our own planet in 1968, going on to sire four sequels, two television shows, and an entire cottage (tree house?) industry of all things simian. In celebration of the 30th anniversary of that first Ape film, AMC is proud to unveil its new documentary *Behind the Planet of the Apes* (1998; September 5, 6, 7, 12, 22, 28).