ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES

ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES now in release from 20th Century Fox. Top: As a token of affection for Zira (Kim Hunter) and Cornelius (Roddy McDowall) and their baby, the circus owner (Ricardo Montalban) puts a medal around the baby's neck. Bottom: Milo (Sal Mineo), Zira, and Cornelius being taken into custody after landing. The series now shows the promise of becoming a science fiction saga of epic proportions.

Scenes from ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES gives one an excellent vantage point to see where the series has been and how well it has fit together, and gives some idea of where CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES, the next in the series, should lead us.

The new film has Zira and Cornelius, the personal chimpanzee characters of the first two films, escape the destruction of the earth in the conclusion of the second film with a third ape Milo, a scientist who has revitalized Taylor's old space ship. Their journey follows the same bend in time which had brought Taylor and Brent to the future and brings them to modern day America. The opening portions of the film are, necessarily, hastily edited in a light vein as the apes acclimate themselves to a totally alien culture, but even here there are ominous undertones in the story which gradually emerge to turn Cornelius and Zira's promising new life into tragedy. Zira's pregnancy naturally troubles Dr. Haselein, scientific advisor to the President, who sees it as the beginning of a chain of events that will lead to the future ascendency of the apes, and while he succeeds in destroying both Cornelius and Zira, their baby, Milo, survives to plague future generations.

If CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES can fulfill the promise of the earlier films, it will go on to show the rise of ape civilization and its eventual predominance over mankind. This raises a fascinating question: will baby Milo be the cause of the reversal of the natural order, or, having his origins in the future, will he somehow change the course of history so as to avoid emnity between apes and man and the future destruction of earth?

Ricardo Montalban as Armando

I love sequels. It harks back, probably, to my weening on the classic Universal horror films, the Frankenstein, the Mummies, the Draculas and others too numerous to mention. When critics de-smerge sequels I wonder if they're not losing sight of the fact that film is an entertainment medium, and I wonder too, if they were as stuffy as kids as they are as critics. It seems to me that they have let an important part of our enjoyment of film die when they come to regard the simple entertainment film as a low form. The sequel is based on the sound reasoning that if you liked something once, you'd probably like it again and again. This premise can easily hold true for some and probably would for a lot more filmmakers if they could prevent certain of their artistic prejudices from getting in the way of their fun.

This is all in the way of leading up to saying that I like ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES very much, and I'm feeling defensive about it. While critical reception of the series has taken a complete turnabout after having shown much enthusiasm for the first film PLANET OF THE APES (1968), my interest has grown with each new episode. I cannot think of any fantasy film series that has evolved as dynamically or as inventively as these three films while maintaining a convincingly continuous and consistent storyline. The key to my fascination in these films is that they have evolved, and this, too, leaves to my bewilderment at their being dismissed so offhandedly. While they all subsist of the same broad thematic character, consisting in the coldly satirical examination of humankind, each has done so on its own level; the first film, by utilizing apes that act like humans; in the second, by using future man refined from the worst elements, utilizing apes that act like apes, a clever reversal of the motif of the original film. The producers have extended the production of the first two segments (the third does evidence overt planning for a follow-up), but in doing so, they have managed to extend and further explore the concept of the original film rather than repeat its formula. The result is a rich mosaic that is beginning to assume epic proportions by chronicling the downfall of humankind in a saga that weaves across the boundaries of both time and space. The characters of the original film have been expanded and new characters have been introduced aloud the way, living and playing out their roles against the larger story and plotlines. The end result is a richly interrelated history. Looking back from ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES gives one such a vantage point to see where the series has been and how well it has fit together, and gives some indication of where CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES, the next in the series, should lead us.

Frederick S. Clarke