"APE" RECALL

It's a spectacular sight: over 100 upright, clothed apes stand tensed and ready for their agitated simian leader to give them the sign to follow him into battle. This scene in director Tim Burton's "reimagining" of Planet of the Apes will make one kind of lasting impression on movie audiences this summer, and will no doubt create a different kind of indelible memory for the technicians and the performers wearing ape makeup. Then there's the small cadre of genre press on hand to do articles for various publications. There are few (if any) writers covering science fiction, fantasy and horror who don't have a long-standing love for the subject, and it's likely these folks have fond recollections of when they first saw the original 1968 Planet of the Apes.

Still, I'm the only one present experiencing a visceral backlash. Yes, I can remember the exact circumstances of the first time I saw each of the Apes films, but that's not what the sight of all that makeup and the smell of foam latex and adhesive is triggering. Watching the actors between takes, nearly all giving in to the impulse to work the makeup with exaggerated facial expressions, loping rather than walking, even grooming 'imaginary bugs out of visitors' hair, I can't stop myself from thinking, "I can't believe I'm here. Again."

In 1972, 29 years ago almost to the day, I visited my first film set: Conquest of the Planet of the Apes. I was 11 years old and didn't know a soul connected with the movie, or anyone in the film business. However, I was passionate about all things Planet of the Apes. My mother, both indulgent and supportive, read in the paper that Conquest was being filmed on location only about half an hour from where we lived. I thought I might be interested in seeing how a movie was made.

We arrived on the second night of filming in Century City's open-air shopping mall. The production company had set up their base camp, with makeup trailers, trailers and catering, in the underground parking garage. The camera and lighting equipment was arranged in the plaza at the west end of the concrete footbridge that spans the Avenue of the Stars. There were enormous lights up on stands twice my height, an apparatus that looked like an eccentric fairground ride—the camera crane—and a stuntman in gorilla makeup having his facial hairpieces regauged to the edges of his appliance to repair the damage done by sweat and the night wind. As far as I was concerned, I had found the secret heart of the universe. Nothing could have kept me away for the rest of the shoot, and—thanks, Mom and filmmakers—nobody tried. Consequently, I was there every night for two weeks.

I don't believe this would be possible today—film sets have become much more wary of invited guests. However, the Conquest company seemed simply bemused to find themselves the subject of such heartfelt scrutiny by a kid. I was told where I could safely stand and watch as camera rolled. Many of the crew were nice enough to answer questions, and I learned a lot by observing—I could see first-hand where appliances left off and skin began, how many different ways a scene could be played, the amount of preparation that went into a stunt. I saw that what in the movie appeared to be a fire born of kerosene poured on concrete was really created and controlled by a wooden platform equipped with metal coils and gas jets. This contraption is actually visible in a few shots of the riot; it's that object in the foreground that looks like a giant mousetrap. And then there was Roddy McDowall as the chimpanzee rebel Caesar, projecting so the microphone could capture his voice across the open space as he exhorted an ape mob to bloody rebellion.

The actors were incredibly kind. Hari Rhodes, who played the bureaucrat Mr. MacDonald, allowed me to read his copy of the Conquest script, even leaving it in my hands when he went back to his trailer: "I trust you." Natalie Trundy, the film's ape leading lady and wife of producer Arthur P. Jacobs, invited me to watch a day's shooting on the soundstage for the "I understand, Mr. MacDonald" scene.

As for McDowall, I surmise that he found it pretty funny to be the object of a preadolescent's blatant crush—especially when (indeed, primarily because) he was made up as an articulate chimpanzee—but he was extraordinarily gracious about it. One night, he invited me and two other young fans into his trailer, chatting with us for about 90 minutes between lighting setups. Although I didn't see it that way at the time, this was essentially my first "So, what's it like wearing effects makeup?" interview.

Of course, there were plenty of incongruous sights—apes in eyeglasses, smoking cigarettes on long holders, using the pay phone—to put things into perspective. Still, physically being there, a few yards away from an ape horde in full shrieking cry, arms swinging low as they thundered over the bridge, was a life-changing experience. On one hand, I understood it was make-believe—but then again, it was literally, tangibly happening in front of me. When it was all over, the biggest question was: How could I ever get to see anything like it again? Welcome to entertainment journalism, writing for FANGORIA—and the chance to briefly come full circle.

—Abbie Bernstein

Witnessing the Conquest of the Planet of the Apes first-hand was a thrilling experience for a budding writer.