If you thought the recent *War for the Planet of the Apes* was rough, check out the monkey business behind the *Planet of the Apes* TV series, as Mark Phillips reports...
Few people, network executives or otherwise, felt that Planet of the Apes needed much publicity before it premiered on CBS in 1974. As a reporter told its star, Ron Harper, “You finally have a TV series that will be a winner – this one can’t miss.”

Despite the optimism, however, the show was a gimmick backfired. A popular TV host agreed to be made up as a Planet of the Apes chimpanzee, but someone got the bright idea of bringing in a real chimpanzee to meet its alter-ego and the fur flew. The small chimp took one look at the host’s ape makeup and screamed in horror. The terrified animal ran off the set, threw several books at reporters, slammed its fist into a wall and then burst into the studio’s control room, where it began ripping telephones from the wall and smashing electronics everywhere. In fact, a police officer converged on the agitated primate and managed to subdue it, placing it in handcuffs and escorting it from the studio.

Veteran stuntman George Roberton was grateful the apes on the TV series were portrayed by mere humans: “The guys playing gorillas were all great stuntmen and real gentlemen,” recalls Roberton, a first-class stuntman himself who started his career in Batman serials of the 1940s. “Real chimpanzees are unpredictable, they can go wild on you,” he said of his fellow stuntmen. “I could tell you stories that you probably couldn’t print. For instance, there was one time where...” No, on second thought – never mind.

Planet of the Apes (the TV series) ran for an embarrassingly short time, September to December 1974 (14 episodes). Roberton’s time on the show was even briefer. “Two bloody hours,” he says, “That’s how long it took me to realise I couldn’t stand being stuck in that miserable gorilla makeup. It was the only time I’ve ever quit a job.” He ripped off his gorilla face and handed it to his shocked friend, stunt coordinator Paul Saxon. “I had to go home and I didn’t want to come back. I need my crew.”

The apes needed more than luck. Lavishly budgeted and strategically placed in what seemed to be a good time slot, Apes became the subject of media ridicule as it died a humiliating death. Network executives struggled to understand how their prized show had ended so disastrously. It never crackled the top 35, could not attract sizable audiences over the age of 14 and finished the 1974-75 season at an average of 67th place out of 84 shows, becoming the lowest rated CBS show of the year, as shown in the chart below. Worse, one of the “apes” who had replaced Apes and ended up doing worse, at 80th place. Fantasy-wise that year, Kolchak: The Night Stalker (74th) and Six Million Dollar Man (51st) hadn’t done so well either.

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The original 1968 movie was an expensive risk for 20th Century Fox but it made a fortune and was a critical success. Charlton Heston played the astronaut who landed on a post-nuclear war Earth of the future and found it ruled by apes. James Franciscus took over another astronaut in Beneath (1970), where the world was finally blown up. Friendly chimps Cornelia (Roddy McDowall) and Zira (Kim Hunter) travelled back in time in Escape from the Planet of the Apes, landing on present-day Earth where they are eventually killed by hostile humans. But their son, Caesar, (Roddy again) survives to lead a revolt of apes in Conquest. The movie series ended with Battle (1973), more apes vs mutants, and very modest box-office receipts.

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which reared up and dumped McDowall to the ground. It took him hours to recover.

Long-time western actor Ron Sohle found that playing a gorilla, “was a miserable experience” and the long hours of makeup drove him back to a dreaded habit he once conquered, smoking. David Sheiner, a guest chimpanzee, tried to avoid the 110 degree heat by sitting under a tree and reading a book. Still, he admitted he could not wait for the experience to be over. Other ape actors lost up to ten pounds a day, some passing out and collapsing from the heat and others were constantly wheezing, scratching and swatting at hungry flies. Comedian Beatrix Arthur (Maudie, The Golden Girls) brought her two sons to the set because they were such fans. Another fan was Alan Alda’s wife, who arrived via a jeep from the nearby MAJESTY set to watch filming.

Jacqueline Scott agreed to do two guest roles, as a mother chimp of a farm family in “Good Seeds” and as Galen’s fiancée in “The Surgeon,” where she performed life-saving surgery on Vindon. Scott, who had appeared in TV shows such as Twilight Zone, Outer Limits and The Fugitive, recalls, “They had at least seven full-time makeup artists on the show and they were the absolute best but it was all very expensive.”

Even though it took three to four hours to apply the makeup, she adapted right away. “Just before they applied the bottom chin, they fed you breakfast because once it was attached, you could not eat. You had to sip nourishment through a straw. You couldn’t laugh either, that could crack your face. I never got used to looking like a chimpanzee. I would glance at myself in a mirror and it scared the daylight out of me. I remember my mother hated to see me as an ape on TV! But the casting director, Marvin Paige, said that Beverly Garland and I were the two actresses who dealt best with the makeup. After a few days, Roddy came up to me and said, ‘I’ve noticed the makeup doesn’t bother you as much as it bothers other people,’ and it didn’t.

‘Roddy was just marvellous. He and everyone else who played apes looked out for one another. We’d check each other’s face for cracks or smudges and offered morale support.’

McDowall, as the lead ape, had makeup that was painstakingly applied. “I wish I could tell you what it was, because I can’t explain it, but there was something different about Roddy’s makeup,” Scott says. “It wasn’t the same as anyone else’s. Ours seemed glued onto our faces but his had much more flexibility.”

For his own comfort, McDowall had an air-conditioned motor-home and a stipulation he would work only four days a week, to preserve his face. It didn’t always work. “After four or five episodes, his face looked like raw hamburger because of the rubber appliance,” recall Ron Harper. “He had to take a week off for his skin to heal.”

One thing McDowall wanted to do but couldn’t was to curl his lips back in a snarl, exposing his teeth (like Tarzan’s Cheetah). But his mask didn’t allow that. McDowall loved the Galen character, describing him as a bit of a common with a great sense of humour. “As Galen, I am suppose to be both intellectual and sensitive. How do I convey that? Well, for one, I sound British.”

During the production of Escape from the Planet of the Apes (1971) in Beverly Hills, a woman had pushed past security guards and fiercely grabbed Kim Hunter (Zira). “You’re so cute,” the woman exclaimed and tried touching her face, nearly bringing Kim to tears. Roddy, who justifiably called the intruder “a dumb woman,” angrily stepped in and stopped the woman’s harassment of his co-star. “When we are in makeup, people will do the most annoying
While dressed as a chimpanzee, McDowall was prodded, poked, badgered, and disrespected by some people. "There should be a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Actors," he said. When wise-ass reporters began making jokes about "going ape" or "monkeying around" McDowall rolled his eyes in frustration. "Truly, I've really grown soooooo tired of hearing those expressions..."

"Things, they can be very intrusive," McDowall snapped.

Ironically, while filming the first movie in 1967, McDowall's makeup often frightened bystanders, who staggered away in revulsion and fear. "People were put off when they would see me," McDowall claimed. That changed over the years. While dressed as a chimpanzee, the actor was prodded, poked, badgered and disrespected by some people. "There should be a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Actors," he said. When wise-ass reporters began making jokes about "going ape" or "monkeying around" McDowall rolled his eyes in frustration. "Truly, I've really grown soooooo tired of hearing those expressions..."

"People really did treat us like animals," says Jacqueline Scott. "I was walking outside the studio with a fellow ape when a car suddenly screeched to a halt. People jumped out and grabbed us. 'Come here! Don't run away—we want a picture with you!' We had no say in the matter. They didn't speak to us kindly or with respect, they were very demanding, and kept trying to touch our faces. Oh, it was very rude! It wasn't a fun experience but it was fascinating how these normal people became so impolite and pushy. Roddy McDowall told me that's how he learned to really hate people because they did the same thing to him all of the time."

The media reported that many actors were clamoring to play apes but she doubts that. "I personally knew many actors who refused to do the show, they didn't like the idea of all that latex and rubber on their faces and vanity was probably a part of that. But I loved the challenge of expressing myself as that character."

Guest stars who endured the makeup wear, and were brought back, included John Hoyt, Martin B. Brooks, and Patricia Riley. Even James Naughton's younger brother David got a kick out of playing a chimpanzee for one segment. McDowall said there could be confusion over what was under the makeup. Director Don Weis once drew "Galen" aside to instruct him on how to play a scene until a confused voice from within the ape identified himself as Davey Rodgers, Roddy's stand-in.

When accosted by annoying people while wearing his ape-guise, McDowall would suddenly adopt an American accent and tell visitors he was actually Roddy's brother from Chicago. A charade that often worked. Out on location, Ron Harper tried to demonstrate a TV Guide writer how easy it was to identify the stuntmen playing gorillas. "Tom, hey, Tom!" Ron yelled to a nearby ape. The gorilla ignored him and briskly walked away. "Sorry," a chastened Harper conceded, "so it wasn't Tom."

EATING PROBLEMS

After filming "The Trap" in the city backlot, an episode where Urko falls into a subway station, Mark Lenard was horrified to find his mask and suit infested with hundreds of blood-sucking fleas. On another occasion, Lenard ordered a hot plate of spare ribs, only to discover his heavy ape snout prevented any eating. "All I could do was sit there, my plate got cold, and drool."

He switched to munching carrots and celery but the Planet of the Apes sound-man found the crunching sounds unbearable loud, so Lenard was forced to go back to quietly sipping liquids through a straw.

"The Good Seeds," about an ape family who help the astronauts and Galen, was actually the first episode filmed, designed specifically to imitate the family-friendly ambiance of the CBS hit The Waltons. "Escape from Tomorrow," the first episode telecast (which introduced the astronauts)
was actually the third episode filmed. The idea was to give Ron Harper and James Naughton more time to develop camaraderie and chemistry between themselves for the premiere show. "Jim and I, for whatever reason, were never as close as we could have been," says Harper vaguely. "Maybe it was the old thing of two leading men trying to work together."

There was actually a third astronaut, Jones, who didn't survive the spaceship landing and was quickly buried by the gorillas. Everyone from Ron Harper to A.D. Bill Derwin has raked their memory in vain, trying to recall who played that bit part. Whoever he was, he deserves credit for maintaining an impressive dead-eye stare as he is seen slumped over in his chair with a broken neck.

Some of the program's other guest stars included Mark Singer, Sondra Locke, Roy Dano, Roscoe Lee Browne, Geoffrey Deuel, William Smith and Jackie Earl Haley. Eileen Dietz played the teenaged chimp in "Good Seeds" who develops a crush on the injured Galen. She had just completed the role of the green-faced devil (dubbing Linda Blair) in The Exorcist a week after moving to Los Angeles, heard about the Planet of the Apes TV show. She snuck into the 20th Century-Fox building and located casting director Marvin Paige. "I told him I had just done The Exorcist and was used to sitting for hours in the makeup chair as my life-mask was made."

She got the role and Dietz performed well in the blistering heat of Malibu Canyon. "The only uncomfortable thing were our big ape feet had sneakers hidden inside them and that made our feet really sweat. But everyone was nice to me, especially Roddy."

But her feelings did get hurt. "In New York, whenever a show was finished, the cast and crew would always get together for a drink and talk about the day's work. But in Apes, after we wrapped for the day, everybody just left. They all disappeared. I remember standing there alone, going (plaintively), 'Where did everybody go? It took me awhile to realize that it was nothing personal. Everyone lived so far away that they had a long drive to get home. They didn't have time to sit around and chat.'"

She couldn't wait to see her show on TV. "I was really excited and I invited everybody I knew in California to my house to watch it. But as it played on my TV, everybody got really bored and began talking. I remember being very distraught and saying, 'Hey, wait a minute, people—stop talking. Please! My show is on.'"

After doing Apes, Eileen played a cavegirl in Hanna-Barbera's series Korg 70,000. "My Mom said, 'Eileen, are you ever going to play a part where you can show your face?'" Eileen is proud of "The Good Seeds," and it has seen several times. "It showed the kind of backward racism the apes had towards the humans. The story examined their fear and prejudice". It ends with the ape family and humans becoming friends.

PERSISTENT MYTH
As the series geared up for its CBS premiere on September 13, McDowell tried to correct the persistent myth that he was continuing his role from the original film. "No, that is not true—Cornelius is dead," McDowell said. "Galax is an entirely new character." The confusion was caused by a chimp in the first film named Galen, played by Wright King, but he had no relation to the TV character. "We are not borrowing anything from the motion pictures," McDowell
Apes was originally supposed to air Tuesdays, competing against Adam-12 and Happy Days. But when comedian Redd Foxx walked off Sanford and Son, CBS knew a Fox-less Sanford on Friday nights would be extremely vulnerable, so Apes was switched opposite Sanford and a new show, Charlie and the Man. Unfortunately, Redd Foxx returned to Sanford at the last minute, with a lot of publicity. Still, many people placed their bets on Planet of the Apes, including many advertising executives in New York.

An agency man named McHugh said, “Apes will trample its competition at first but if the show turns out to be poorly done, ratings will fall off immediately and CBS will be left with a real bomb.” Another advertiser agreed that Apes had a good chance but he reasoned CBS kept saying Planet of the Apes would get a huge 40% of the audience every week. “No one can say that for sure,” the agency man warned. Sadly, Apes would end up averaging a pathetic 24% share.

The early reviews of the premiere episode were encouraging. Movie historian Steven H. Scheuer noted, “the woolen astronauts and apes riding on horseback are silly but it’s a lively show and Roddy McDowell is delightful as Galen.” Charles Benbow of The St. Petersburg Times said Apes was “excellent” television, but only by one disappointing production short-cut: “The landing of the spaceship happens off-camera.”

The Los Angeles Times predicted Apes and Born Free (also destined to die by mid-season) would be big hits. The Christian Science Monitor called Apes “fascinating and superb” while Rex Polier of The Philadelphia Bulletin said, “It is well-produced, provocative and entertaining.” Jay Sharbutt of The Associated Press was one of the few naysayers: “Apes will slip on its own banana peel by December.” Columnist Ken Murphy was just plain mean: “The only people who will have use for this garbage are Star Trek fans.”

But it was the ratings that would kill the beast. The first episode ranked 37th out of 56 shows. The second episode was 43rd, the third episode 47th and the fourth episode 53rd. The competition, Sanford and Chico and the Man, was always in the top five. The Chicago Tribune noted, “Apes has been getting creamed by NBC and it has turned into a sore flop for CBS.” The death watch had begun.

Yet the show must go on. Sandra Gimpel, who was Billy Mumy’s stunt double on Lost in Space and performed hundreds of stunts in films like Towering Inferno and Escape from New York, recalls thinking that doubling as a chimpanzee for Jane Actman in “The Deception” would be “no big deal. I just sat there as they applied the prosthetics for two and a half hours, breathed through a straw and fell asleep.”

As a blind chimpanzee, she falls off a cliff into the Pacific Ocean. “I was in the water, screaming and splashing, and James Naughton’s character swims out to save me.” By the time work was over, “I had worn this makeup for over six hours. We wrapped for the day, I sat down for them to remove this stuff from my face and... they couldn’t. The salt water had adhered the makeup to my face. The reaction by everyone around me was ‘Oh no!’ I will never forget sitting there, holding on tightly to the arms of the chair, with tears rolling down my eyes and they were trying and trying to get it off my face.” They finally did, but Gimpel recalls that experience as “horrible, just horrible.”

LONG, HOT DAYS

A very young Cheryl Downey was halfway through her Directors Guild of America apprenticeship to becoming an Assistant Director when, as a DGA trainee, she worked on Apes with second A.D. Ed Ledding “where we had to handle everything.” She had to be at the Fox ranch (now called Malibu State Park) at 3:30am to check on the makeup and hair team. Her day finished around 9:30pm.

“Almost everything was shot at the Ranch, so five days a week I had a 45 minute commute, speeding each way! Those 18-hour days were brutal, especially in the summer heat. I had to sleep round the clock Saturdays to try and make up for my week of four hours of sleep per night.”

It was an experience she has never forgotten. “The Prince of the cast was Roddy McDowell. The foam rubber appliance glued to the face of the principal actors playing chimps and gorillas prevented eating anything until their removal. Only liquids could be consumed. Roddy faced this daily prospect with good cheer. He was always prepared, never complained, even though the skin on his face deteriorated from the glue and the glue removal.”

She recalls only one landline telephone on the ranch, “no mobile phones” which added to the challenges of production coordination. “We tried to shoot all of Roddy’s scenes as soon as possible,” she recalls. “The heat and sweat caused the appliance to sort of melt, requiring extensive repairs after lunch.”

There was also a lot to move between filming—horses, goats, chickens, trailers and lots of extras. The directors learned to compromise their ‘dream shots’ in order not to fall behind schedule.” She remained on the series for its entire six months of production. “Roddy was my favourite person on the whole show but I worked later with James Naughton who was also a real professional.

Story-wise, kids looking for fantasy in apocalyptic form were put off by mundane scenarios about the astronauts curing malaria, teaching a human to fly a hang-glider, being subjected to brainwashing or participating in a horse race. Outdoor locales boiled down to either the Fox Ranch, the Pacific Ocean or the old ruined city. But no matter how far the trio travelled, the same mountains kept popping up behind them. Verdin’s goal was to find an advanced civilization with a computer that could interpret Verdin’s flight disc, and then build them a spaceship. Had the astronauts decided on Houston or Florida as a specific walking destination, to locate old spacecrafts stored at NASA centres, it would have given them a geographical goal rather than aimless wandering.

As the show continued, critics became tougher. “If apes in zoos had TVs, this show would be number one,” said columnist,Michael Drew. “But humans over the age of 14 will be very bored.” The Montreal Times said, “The series rests primarily on the capable talents of Roddy McDowell and a fine supporting cast — and no, we’re not talking about the third-raters imitating Charlton Heston and James Francis.”

The Calgary Herald suggested viewers read Pierre Boulle’s original Planet of the Apes novel instead, bitterly complaining that series could have been a winner, “if it had more thought and good writing.” Even NBC got into the fray, with its vice-president calling Apes, “A Saturday morning cartoon show that is not working.” However, when NBC’s friendly lion series Born Free got cancelled, the NBC men shrugged and said, “Well, I guess this wasn’t the year for apes or lions.”

A California viewer named Bill pleaded with CBS to move the show to a different time period, Wednesdays at 8pm, where it would be up against Michael Landon’s Little House on the Prairie and a comedy. That’s My Mama. “Yes, if Planet of the Apes still remains a poorly rated show after that, then I would not fault you for taking it off,” he said. But no one was listening, the network had determined that nothing could save the show.
RACIST ACCUSATIONS

Besides ratings, there were other concerns. One angry viewer wrote to a newspaper to say she didn't like "the way this awful show is pushing evolution." A.D. Bill Derwin recalled that the series was also being unfairly accused of being racist. "As the show went on, the image of the gorillas was toned down and it soon became The Planet of the Benevolent Apes."

An associate director of CBS research remained agitated about how poorly Apes was doing against Sanford and Son. "If I had to believe NBC is doing so well on Friday nights against us," he lamented. Adding to the confusion was that Apes merchandise was selling like wildfire, everything from toys, action figures and puzzles. The department store Woolworth's reported that the merchandise was selling so well, "it's hard to keep it in stock."

Another network executive was so disillusioned about the reportedly bad ratings that he did his own stealth research by pointing his telescope out of his high-rise apartment on Friday nights and scanning all of the TV sets flickering across the New York City skyline. He discovered the bitter truth: almost every television in New York City was tuned to Apes. The Nielsen ratings were right, these two situation comedies were conquering the planet of the apes.

The Oakland Tribune's Robert Mackenzie loved literary science fiction but with the exception of praising Land of the Giants, he felt every other show in the genre - Star Trek, UFO, Invaders, The Starlost and now Apes - had blundered their potential and produced bad television. "Planet of the Apes is just men wearing plastic masks and it's one dull chase after another," he said. He also felt the franchise was being mercilessly exploited. "These poor apes will be worked by the studio until there is not another dollar left to be squeezed from their furry hides."

TV Guide made the first official pronouncement that the Apes saga was doomed in their October 26, 1974 issue. "The network and many other people were positive a new series based on the features would be a solid success," the magazine said. "Not so and Planet of the Apes is as good as gone by January."

"When we shut down in November, we did not know if the network was going to renew us and we were cancelled shortly thereafter," says Cheryl Downey. "Although the show was very ambitious, it could not approach the standards set by the feature film."

Its surprising demise left a lot of questions. "We don't know what went wrong," said William Shatner's father-in-law, Perry Lafferty, an executive at CBS.

"We are shocked that our judgment was so wrong. We figured Planet of the Apes would eliminate Sanford and Son in quick order. The first three Planet movie pictures were among the highest-grossing movies on CBS. But when we ran the fourth movie this year (Conquest), it got a very poor rating." The Washington Post was annoyed too. "For months we heard how Planet of the Apes couldn't miss, that it would be in the top ten -- and now, come January. It's missing!"

Charlie Pike of High Point Enterprise offered a false hope when he wrote, "There's still a very good possibility Apes will pop up on another network."

That didn't happen, although NBC made a Saturday morning cartoon series, Return to the Planet of the Apes, in 1975. A fan asked columnist Dick Klein if astronauts Virdon and Burke would ever get back home? "No," Klein said. "Never. The show has been cancelled. The astronauts will never get home. Those two guys are trapped there forever, with all of those apes." Cecil Smith of The Los Angeles Times liked the series but was surprised when his own children and their elementary schoolmates begged him to stop the cancellation. But there was nothing Daddy Cecil could do. Nevertheless, when the series' 14 episodes were later sold to countries such as England, Japan and Australia, the show proved to be a big hit.

UNIMAGINATIVE WRITING

Many of the show's actors felt the show could have been better. "The stories went progressively downhill and it got boring," says Harper. "If you analyse the episodes, we used one basic plot - one of us gets captured, the other two have to rescue him. Well, that's not very imaginative writing." Harper felt that, among other ideas, it would have been interesting for the trio to have encountered a rescue expedition from Earth. Booth Colman, who played Dr. Zaius, agreed. "The only episode done well was our premiere show, it had a good script. After that, we fell into the usual claptrap of unimaginative, inferior stories. Still, with time, it could have gotten better."

Mark Lenard said, "I was a big mistake for the human villagers to talk - I liked it better in the first movie, where the humans were mute and kept in cages." McDowell considered Planet's loss a tragedy. "It was a much better series than it was ever given credit for," he said years later and felt the apes merchandise could have carried the show into a new era of ratings but that wouldn't have compensated for sponsors' products of soap and automobiles not being purchased by Apes' biggest demographic, kids aged 2-11 years old.

"Maybe if Charlton Heston had starred in the TV version and Rod Serling had written all the scripts, it might have survived," opined The Evening News but that was unlikely too. Apes fever on television had simply vanished.

In 1980, 20th Century Fox syndicated 10 of the 14-episode series by combining them into a total of five TV movies, and gave them such sensational titles as Life, Liberty and Pursuit on the Planet of the Apes. Some of these ersatz movies contained new footage of Roddy McDowell as an ancient Galen, sitting in a cottage with a 1970s Commodore PET computer flickering behind him. Galen provided brief commentary but his eccentrically cloy dialogue was dull, except to reveal that, "Virdon and Burke did find their computer and they disappeared back into space..." Galen turned down their offer to fly back with them.

As late as 1994, McDowell held out hope someone would ask him to do a TV reunion film. "After all," he said, "you could be 90 years old and yet, with the makeup on, you would still look the same!" Planet of the Apes is still fondly remembered by a generation and, in retrospect, much of its acting, humour, and many well-written (and often poignant) scenes still play well. Gerald Finerman's cinematography was also excellent.

"I thought it was really stupid for the network to cancel Planet of the Apes in the first place," says Jacqueline Scott, who counts herself as a loyal fan. "Children just loved the show and even today, it has not dated. It's on DVD and it will go on forever and ever."
THE TRAVELLING APE SHOW

Simon Pritchard heard through the ape vine that we were doing a Planet of the Apes special so he sent us this fun piece on his childhood memories of seeing General Urko and company on stage!

It was the scarecrows that triggered the first real sense that things didn't bode well, a sinister sting to the senses that something malevolent loomed just over the ridge. In a short time that feeling of unease erupted into full blown disorienting fear and one of the most iconic and nerve-shattering set pieces in fantasy cinema history - a shocking attack on a bunch of helpless humans in a field of corn. Some of the barely-seen attackers were on foot, slicing the corn with switches, others were on horseback, stampeding the fleeing people like cattle. The scene culminated in a stunning shot of one of the horse-mounted riders in a final mind-blowing reveal: a ferocious ape in black leather wielding a rifle.

This was my adrenaline-charged introduction to the original 1968 Planet of the Apes on UK television. I was aged about six and it was in the mid 1970's. I'm not sure of the exact year, but it must have been around 74 because the TV spin-off started that year and I promptly became an avid, excitable viewer of the show.

Planet of the Apes, in both its movie franchise and TV show formats was a phenomenon for pudding basin haircut sprogs like myself, and it quickly became an obsession. Me and my mates wanted the lot: Mega action figures, comics, jigsaw puzzles, masks etc. Weekly trips to the shops ensured that parents, nans granddads and monkey's uncles were parted from their pennies.

While all this monkey business was going on, to my great delight I discovered that The Circus Hoffman Planet of the Apes live touring show was coming to a town near me. Real-life apes on stage. I had to go, and used good behaviour as a bargaining chip, er, chip. So it was, one chilly Wolverhampton Saturday evening in November of 1975, that I persuaded my parents to take me to see it. The journey there was exhilarating to the point of seizure for an impressionable kid like me, and I was beside myself with gleeful anticipation, swinging from the trees as we travelled from West Bromwich to Wolverhampton Racecourse in our blue Austin Maxi.

Upon arrival at the venue I was lured by the sirens call of the merchandise stand, where Dad bought me a General Urko pin badge, a slightly bigger than 8 x 10 colour photo of the same Urko picture and a plastic ape mask with movable jaw. I was a very lucky boy indeed and knew it, so I treasured these.

Besides Urko they had pics and badges of Galen, Zaius and astronauts Burke and Virdon from the TV show, but it was obviously too expensive to buy them all. General Urko was the coolest character though, every kid in the playground wanted to be him, if only for an excuse to dupe up his human mates. Only the wussier kids wanted to be Galen, or maybe the elderly Dr Zaius.

Taking our places in the bleacher-style seats, the show finally kicked off, and although the passing of time has distorted the exact plotline I vividly recall the two astronaut characters being chased around the circus-like arena by a squad of soldier apes led by the mighty General Urko, gorilla leader of the ape army. Some were astride horses, with a band of soldiers on foot firing rifles. The humans were captured, then escaped again, were chased into the audience and weaved their way in and out of the rows of seats before going back into the arena.

The show was packed with impressive stunts and well-choreographed fights and shoot outs. All the time the characters drew whoops, cheers and delighted squeals from the kids in the audience. And there were gags and jeers as the villainous Urko and his henchmen baited the fans, drawing the odd frightened scream from the more 'delicate' kids, the ones who rooted for Walter the softie from The Beano's Dennis The Menace. Of course credibility is key to being sucked into the fantasy, and the costumes and ape masks were very convincing to my six-year-old eyes. Looking at photographs from the touring shows online I'd say they stand up incredibly well after all these years, so no expense appears to have been spared in the show's production design.

When the show reached its rousing climax, swarms of babbling children got to meet, and get their photos taken with, their favourite characters. General Urko was the most popular and the queue to meet him was too long so I got my pic taken with Dr Zaius instead. At least my Urko badge was proudly displayed on my green 70s coat that my Nan always said I looked a right Bobby Dazzler in (and I really did folk). It was one of the most delightful experiences of my childhood and has remained a cherished memory.

APES ON STAGE
Of course being just a kid I knew nothing of the origin of the Planet of the Apes shows, but here we are in the age of the Internet and so I decided to check into their background for this article. Better late than never, eh?

The transition of Apes from film and TV to live touring shows was apparently the brainchild of Big Mike Caulfield, who in 1975, as head of
Television Character Promotions, hit on the genius idea of taking the basic character and plot elements from the *Planet of the Apes* TV series which had aired its one and only season the year before. Ironically for something so beloved of kids everywhere and backed by a wealth of popular merchandising, the TV show was cancelled after only one series due to low ratings. Talk about slipping on a banana peel.

Back at Television Character Promotions, Big Mike landed the rights from Twentieth Century Fox studios to create a touring show that would visit venues across the UK between 1975 and 1978. To further secure the show’s success another deal was cut with the UK arm of Marvel Comics, who published the *Planet of the Apes* comic book here in Blighty. The deal was that Marvel would endorse a Planet of the Apes fan club through the comic.

The Apes comic proved a success and was inundated with fan mail, so eventually TCP took the strain off Marvel by joining forces with an official Apes fan club through which it could promote the live touring shows. This new club was launched in 1975 and Big Mike and his team of five TCP employees (which included his wife June) set about creating a spectacular *Planet of the Apes* production utilising the most inventive costumes, masks and make-ups they could muster on the budget they had. Mike himself wrote the scripts for the shows and also cast himself in the role of ape leader General Urko in a number of performances.

With Marvel running the ads for the club it was quite a winner, gathering memberships from all around the globe. Fans received combo packs of badges and colour photos featuring characters from the TV show plus other sundry goodies like stickers and of course a regular newsletter.

Then the live shows hit the road, travelling the country like an army of marauding chimps and invading circuses, festivals, fairs, showgrounds and racecourses like the one in Wolverhampton where I saw it in 1975. Meanwhile, various offshoot groups from TCP made appearances at shopping centres, supermarkets and department stores to promote the full blown performances, drawing crowds everywhere they went.

**A DIFFERENT DIRECTION**

By the end of the summer of 1976 the company decided to cut back on the live arena shows and take their apes in a slightly different direction, creating a *Planet of the Apes* stage show with newly written scripts. Pre-recorded dialogue was utilised for the ape characters so that audiences could hear lines that were muffled behind the masks. These characters mimed to the dialogue while the humans recited theirs live. Two groups of players were formed so two stage shows could be running in two separate theatres for the 1976 summer season. One was booked into Stratford’s Theatre Royal in East London and the other one into the Windmill Theatre in Great Yarmouth in Norfolk.

Both runs were sellouts, proving incredibly popular with general audiences and fan club members alike. It was hoped that they could be expanded into a full-on countrywide theatre tour, but by the end of 1976 it became apparent that this was not to be. By then Mike Caulfield was working on other projects for the company and the Apes shows were beginning to wind down. They still appeared at Tesco supermarkets across the country during 1977, but probably just to buy bananas.

Meanwhile, Television Character Promotions had only official *Planet of the Apes* Fan Club with it. What happened to Big Mike, his family and other team and show members I don’t know, so if anybody knows any further details I’d be interested to hear them.

**This feature has been a simplified overview of the live *Planet of the Apes* shows from the 1970s. I just wanted to express my own memories of that special day back in 75 when I saw the touring show in Wolverhampton, experiencing an exciting spectacle that was an amazing extension of that wonderful TV show and the films that spawned it. Judged by modern high tech standards that same show would probably come across today as basic, threadbare and I guess simple. Yet I recall it being full of action and intensity with decent stunts and special effects. More important at the end of the day was its sheer entertainment value. all in the best vaudeville and pantomime tradition. All it needed was for someone to say, “Look out, Urko’s behind you!” and everyone went apeshit. Happy days.**

You can see more of Simon’s glorious artwork at: [www.artbeat64.com/](http://www.artbeat64.com/)