Simian Central

Everyone remembers Planet of the Apes as that film with Charleton Heston and the Statue of Liberty, but not many people remember its second incarnation... as a 1974 television series. Summarily beaten in ratings by Chico and the Man and Sanford & Son, Planet of the Apes: The Series makes its belated DVD debut... and the results are better than we expected. by Gary Butler

PLANET OF THE APES — THE COMPLETE TV SERIES DVD
Starring Roddy McDowall, Ron Harper and James Naughton
Produced by Stan Hough
Twentieth Century Fox

I had an epiphany of supra-human proportions recently. Or was it sub-human? Regardless, I grew up believing that everything I know about life I learned from Star Trek. I now realize that everything I know about life, I learned from Planet of the Apes — The Complete TV Series.

In fact, I was in the right place at the right time. Which is a succinct way of saying that when POTA was originally broadcast for thirteen weeks in late 1974, my parents were living in a strange land that didn’t get Star Trek reruns (the natives called this place “Ottawa”), and I was five years of age.

While it admittedly helped, one didn’t need to be a kindergarten-level tabula rasa to be shocked, indeed horrified, at the sight of walking and talking apes hunting and herding humans and generally ruling the planet. Such visions were what made the original Planet of the Apes movie (1968) more than memorable and absolutely scaring. And even if the story’s greatest thrill was the image of Lady Liberty armpit-deep in beach detritus, a close second was the more visceral one: the subtle suggestion that, given human nature, all we had witnessed could somehow truly be portentous.

Set exactly ten years after the events of the original movie (and arbitrarily ignoring the explosive conclusion of the sequel, Beneath the Planet of the Apes), POTA posits the “what if apes...” scenario on its own terms and with its own agenda. Ultimately, and similar to the first movie, POTA is a potent piece of social commentary; a contemporary critique in a dystopian disguise.

Astronauts Alan Virdon and Peter Burke crash-land on what turns out to be — surprise! — Earth, in the year 3085, dominated by apes. Quickly captured by a gorilla squadron, they are liberat- ed by sympathetic chimp Galen (played by Apes stalwart Roddy McDowall), who isn’t exactly sure what to make of humans of any kind, but who respects sentient life unconditionally.

Orangutan politician Dr. Zaius (the only holdover character from the film) dispatches ultra-violent gorilla General Urko (played by Mark Lenard, Star Trek’s Sarek) to capture the fugitives. Zaius witnessed the events of “ten years ago” — the coming of Taylor in the first film; he therefore understands the power of martyrdom, and his goal becomes not to kill but to break Virdon, Burke and Galen before the very ideas that they represent (first and foremost, equality) become viral. Urko, however, has his own insidious, insurrectionist plans....

The ensuing episodes — there were a total of fourteen — are easily compared to those of shows like The Fugitive and Star Trek, as the heroes move from community to community, teaching as well as learning (though usually in that order), basically trying to make sense of the crazy world they’re living in.

POTA’s storylines are ambitious, and often-times effective enough to be emotionally upsetting. The ethics and morals might have been painted in broadstrokes, but in many cases, POTA was not a show for children.

Hot topics on the banana peeling block include execution, bloodsport, slavery, betrayal and abuse, not to mention gambling, religion and — the lynchpin of the series — racism. In episode 8, The Deception, circumstances force Burke to cold-bloodedly exploit a blind chimpanzee girl whose father has been murdered. Episode 5, The Legacy, finds a young human child earning Virdon’s fatherly trust only so that he can trade information to the gorilla soldiers in exchange for food. (Oh, the humanity!) And in perhaps the most ironically disturbing story of the lot, The Interrogation (episode 10), a chimpanzee scientist deploys the information in an old-world human textbook to savagely torture a captured Burke; primitive and barbaric as the apes may be, no one has a better instinct for cruelty than humans.

 Appropriately, POTA is a cliffhanger (albeit unintentionally so: it was cancelled before its storyline could be resolved). And given the overall doomy tone of the series, it’s actually somehow more satisfying to imagine Virdon, Burke and Galen going not-so-gentle into that good night, but definitely into that good night. Always on the run, it was almost inevitable that they suffer a very final fate at the hands of the gorilla guerrillas, Los desaparecidos; gone, and definitively forgotten.

So call POTA a Star Trek imitator, call it a Fugitive mimic — hell, call it a Planet of the Apes wannabe. Retrospect, courtesy of Fox’s 4 DVD release, has proven that no matter how clonish — not to mention clownish — the proceedings, this series was consumptive in the right kind of way: the credible one.