Curse of the Werewolf of London!

Return of the Vampire's Nina Foch

Disney's Tarzan Forrest J Ackerman

plus the radio adventures of Sherlock Holmes
Ted Post employs Nova in many clever ways, using her reactions as a barometer for the events unfolding before her and Brent, the astronaut sent to find out what happened to Taylor. While obviously chosen for his Heston-esque rugged good looks, James Franciscus does a fine job in this role, particularly when he encounters radiation-mutated human beings still living in the forbidden zone. The plot takes us to an inevitable showdown between apes and mutants. The creative sets and careful matte work depicting a nuclear-ravaged New York City subway system are spectacular. The old pan and scan videotape of this film is pathetic by comparison.

The third installment, ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES (1971), has Roddy McDowall and Kim Hunter reprising their roles as Cornelius and Zira. Thanks to the genius of Dr. Milo (Sal Mineo, in a very small role), they manage to repair Taylor's ship and avoid the destructive finale of BENEATH, back in time to 1973. (If we assume there were enough parts to cannibalize from Brent's ship to repair Taylor's, the suspension of disbelief seems easier to accommodate.) The first half of ESCAPE is light-hearted and humorous, as the apes become celebrities while adjusting to human society. Gradually the mood shifts, as a suspicious government agent (effectively played by Eric Braeden) interrogates the now-pregnant Zira until she reveals mankind's eventual fate. Soon she and Cornelius are being hunted, the government out to prevent their baby's birth. The film ends with their tragic deaths, but not before a sympathetic circus owner, Armando (Ricardo Montalban), helps them switch their child with a baby chimp from his circus.

CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES (1972) continues the saga years later with the fully-grown son of Cornelius and Zira, Caesar (McDowall again). A mysterious plague has wiped out all dogs and cats, resulting in apes being domesticated and turned into slaves. Caesar is appalled at the inhumane treatment and voices his anger. Armando is interrogated and killed by the authorities, who now realize that he switched the baby apes (and made monkeys out of them). Learning of Armando’s death, Caesar organizes the apes and plots a rebellion against their cruel masters.

This is understandably the darkest and most violent chapter of the saga. The acting and storyline are its strengths, since the budget cuts for each succeeding film had by this time become noticeable. Montalban and McDowall convey a broad range of emotion. Of interesting note is Natalie Trundy as the female ape Lisa. Trundy had previously appeared as Albina (a mutant in BENEATH) and Dr. Stephanie Branton (the sympathetic animal psychologist in ESCAPE).

BATTLE FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES (1973) brings the cycle full-circle. Caesar rules over a small community following the war between man and ape. He finds himself in a fight with the gorilla leader, Aldo (Claude Akins), as well as mutant human survivors from the city, who descend upon the ape village. (Sharp-eyed viewers will find a young John Landis as the Afro-wearing human who is handed the reins of Aldo’s horse when the gorilla stops to help repair a wagon.) After defeating the mutants and Aldo, Caesar decides he is no better than man and vows to create a future in which man and apes might live together peacefully. Six hundred years later, we witness the wisest of apes, the Lawgiver (John Huston), teaching both ape and human children about Caesar.

Although four different directors made these five films, the irony and clever nuances throughout the storyline are of a piece and ingenious. Despite each successive film crew being forced to create magic with increasingly smaller budgets, the films hold together quite well. What keeps the Ape Series fresh is the combination of political and social satire with a serious inquiry of issues still relevant today. Their appeal also lies in their ability to cross age, race, and gender barriers. The Planet Of The Apes Saga is that rare work of art that entertains on a multitude of levels.

—Michael D. Walker