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Planet of the Apes

EACH MONTH, Sci-Fi Series Collection in the United States showcases unforgettable favorites and rarely seen gems from the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and classic horror. This month, the Sci-Fi Channel features *Planet of the Apes*.

"I actually enjoyed doing the *Planet of the Apes* series," Roddy McDowall told an interviewer in 1985. "And I was really sorry when it didn't last — it was a good show that never found its audience. I believe it would have worked, had it been on at 7 p.m. on a Saturday or a Sunday. But, as I only realized after the fact, the show was expected to pull audience away from *Sanford and Son*, which was a huge hit in its second season at the time. Obviously, it didn't beat *Sanford*, and it wasn't given a second chance."

McDowall's kind words for the 1974 CBS series can be best appreciated when one realizes that the show's failure had a negative effect on the actor's career, bringing his first prolonged show business slump since his film debut as a child actor in 1938. It was widely publicized that McDowall, generally regarded as a serious film actor, would play a recurring character in full ape makeup. While McDowall had also played an ape role in the 1968 *Planet of the Apes* film, that move was vindicated by the film's success. When the series was canceled after thirteen episodes, McDowall became an easy target for cheap comedy japes, usually made by people who had never seen an episode:

It wasn't just the Redd Fox comedy series that deprived *Planet of the Apes* of the audience that it deserved. There was also the fact that Twentieth Century Fox had started its feature series with an above-average SF film, and then proceeded to kill off its own market with a rapid-fire sequence of cut-rate sequels — five films in six years — culminating in the nearly unwatchable *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, just a year before the series debut. No wonder, then, that it was difficult getting people to tune in.

In remodeling the franchise into a television series, Twentieth Century Fox distilled the various plotlines of the films into a single concept that, like many dramatic series of the day, owed a major debt to the "man on the run" genre established by *The Fugitive*.

The first episode establishes the premise, as astronauts Alan Virdon (Ron Harper) and Peter Burke (James Naughton) make an emergency landing on what they presume to



Even assisted by Galen (McDowall, center), Virdon and Burke never did find their way home due to the show's cancellation.

be their home planet — but is actually Earth in the distant future. Apes have become the dominant species; humans are confined to their own village preserves, where they may be recruited by their ape masters as laborers and servants.

Thanks to their own carelessness, the astronauts are soon captured and brought before the apes' High Council. In contrast to the cardboardlike apes of the later Fox films, we learn that the apes are as complex in their motives as humans. Zaius (Booth Coleman), the head of the High Council, seems most concerned that the visitors from Earth's past pose a threat to his own nation; though deeply prejudiced, he is capable of reason. Urko (Mark Lenard — *Star Trek's* Sarek), the High Council's security chief, sees the humans as potentially dangerous subversives who would best be exterminated. And Galen (McDowall), though at first confused by the preposterous claims of Virdon and Burke, is eventually convinced of the truth, becoming the visitors' companion as they flee Urko and his goons, and seek out the ancient human technology that could help them to return home.

After *Apes*, McDowall's career radically shifted its course. No longer offered the A-level roles that had made his reputation through the '50s and '60s, he threw himself whole-heartedly into the genre material that started to come his way. In all of his later films, ranging from the sublime *The Legend of Hell House* to the ridiculous *Laserblast*, McDowall's contributions frequently make dreary dialogue sparkle.

Casting directors will sooner or later realize the degree to which McDowall's talent is being ignored. Meanwhile, thanks to the short-lived *Apes* series, their loss is the sci-fi fan's gain. *Planet of the Apes* airs on Sci-Fi Series Collection June 24 - 28, at 9 p.m. and 1 a.m. ET. American viewers please adjust for your local time zone.□