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John Chambers was the monkey man who fashioned the original Apes.

By JOE NAZZARO & SHEELAGH WELLS

As any makeup FX artist working in Hollywood today and they will probably tell you that the original Planet of the Apes was a major influence in their lives. Look no further than six-time Oscar-winner Rick Baker, who has spent part of his illustrious career creating primates for Greystoke, Gorillas in the Mist, Mighty Joe Young and Tim Burton’s Planet of the Apes (page 20).

But if there’s one makeup artist who will always be associated with Planet of the Apes, it’s John Chambers. His groundbreaking work on the 1968 film still represents a milestone in the makeup FX industry, and earned Chambers a richly deserved special Oscar more than a decade before the Best Makeup category even existed.

By the mid-1960s, Chambers had established himself as one of Hollywood’s most sought-after makeup artists. After overseeing the busy Universal makeup lab for six years, he decided to set up his own freelance business, converting the garage of his Burbank home into a fully equipped lab. Work quickly began to flood in: The Outer Limits, Mission: Impossible, even pointed ears for some Vulcan character named Spock.

Chambers was in Italy working on the TV series I Spy when he received a phone call that would change his life. That call came from Ben Nye, then head of the 20th Century Fox makeup department. “Ben told me they were going to do a picture called Planet of the Apes,” Chambers explains. “He wanted me to come back to America immediately, but I told him I was taking a Christmas vacation in Rome after I finished the project I was working on, so he would just have to wait! Ben had already consulted a lot of guys, but very few of them had extensive lab work [experience], so that’s how it got to me.”

By the time Chambers joined the production, Fox had already invested $5,000 on an initial makeup test to determine if a series of realistic-looking ape makeup was feasible. In March 1966, a test was shot on a hastily riggled set, with Charlton Heston (in character as the human hero) amid the apes: Edward G. Robinson as Dr. Zaius, James (Marcus Welby) Brolin as Cornelius and Linda Harrison, who would later play Nova in the film, as Zira. The results—with elementary primate makeup by Nye—were truly mixed. Although the studio was now convinced that the apes could work, it also was obvious that the makeup needed further development.

“The previous tests didn’t really work,” recalls Chambers, “so they were really up a tree. Robinson had his own beard, which he wanted to keep as the ape, and when I saw the tests, I kind of choked and said, ‘I think we can try something else.’” Robinson was a good actor, but when we were getting ready to redo the tests, he told Arthur Jacobs, the producer, that he still wanted to keep that beard.

“Arthur said to me, ‘You had better go and talk to Edward and tell him he can’t do it,’ so I spent an hour with Robinson telling...
him what I was planning. I said, "I want you to do the picture, Mr. Robinson, and I would do anything to help you but that," and he finally agreed. I later heard from friends over at Disney that he told them, "Boy, this Chambers, I never saw a guy so determined to do it one way and no other!" But I kept him as a friend. In fact, I made him turn down the role because of his heart condition [Robinson had recently had a heart attack]. We were going to be filming at a high altitude, and he needed his mouth open all the time, so I knew we couldn't take the risk."

Arranging Apes

With less than four months and a makeup budget later ballyhooed as $1 million (though it was closer to half that), Chambers had to design and build prosthetics for more than 200 apes. His biggest task was creating a look that was sufficiently ape-like while still allowing the humanity of the main actors to show through. Finding that unique look meant testing endless combinations of ape and human until the proper balance was found. "At that point, we really hadn't seen that many 'animals' on film who could talk and enunciate clearly with a big appliance a testing period to iron out any problems and develop the makeup—maybe three to three-and-a-half months for all of it, which is nothing. I had to devise a lot of ways to streamline the process, from pouring the rubber to painting the appliances with an airbrush.

"I also sculpted every one of the principal ape characters myself: Roddy McDowall, Maurice Evans, Kim Hunter, I sculpted all of them. I did this to protect myself, because there had been other makeup artists in the past who claimed to have done the work I did, and I wasn't going to let that happen again."

Because the ape masks would take several hours to apply and totally obscure the actor's features, Chambers sat down with each of the prospective cast members before filming began to advise them what to expect. Not surprisingly, the response wasn't always positive. "There was a leading actress brought in before Kim who was certainly not aware of what was going to happen. I asked if she realized that her facial features as a well-known actress would never be seen, and she would only appear as a monkey. She looked stunned and said she wasn't aware of that. I told her that her acting skills alone were going to be what sold the movie, and she said, 'John, I can't do it. I've always depended on my features to help me,' and turned it down."

Ultimately, the filmmakers were able to assemble a talented group of actors willing to

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The makeup became a familiar process (shown here in stages) for Roddy McDowall. He eventually played three different apes: Cornelius (Planet, Escape), his son Caesar (Conquest, Battle) and Galen (the TV series).
wear the elaborate prosthetic makeups for several months, in what would often be uncomfortable circumstances. It included veteran British actor Evans, who took over the role of Dr. Zaius, as well as McDowall and Hunter as husband-wife ape scientists Cornelius and Zira. "There were no prima donnas," insists Chambers, "Kim was one of the most pleasant people I’ve ever worked with, and so was Roddy; the whole bunch that we finally had to deal with were marvelous. We never had an argument, never had a show of temperament because of tiredness—nothing. People got tired, but they suffered it, and they got through it.

"I used to tell them, ‘If this picture is successful, I can see it being shown over and over in the years to come. You may be remembered for other things you’ve done before, but you’ll be noted more for this.’ I honestly felt that, and it’s interesting to see how it turned out to be true."

Most of the actors were successful in bringing their characters to life thanks to the countless hours they spent learning how to act beneath their prosthetic masks. Although Chambers had devised a flexible rubber for his makeup appliances, if an actor didn’t know how to transmit his facial expressions through them, it would look like a motionless rubber mask. "Roddy and Kim were so effective because they would sit in front of the mirror, pushing up the lip and getting the feel of what it would do on camera. The hardest things to compensate for were the inanimate quality of the rubber and the difference in the curvature of the lips as the actors opened and closed their mouths. It had to hit that happy line where it didn’t not look fake when it was either open or closed, and luckily, it worked. There was no real animation in the actual lip curvature of the mask, so the actors had to make it work by opening their mouths and twisting their own lips underneath."

The actors’ faces may have been virtually invisible behind a thin layer of rubber, but their teeth were still visible when they opened their mouths. Chambers tried to from the camera’s eyeline, Franklin Schaffner, the director, was terrific when I wanted to stand by the camera and tell them whether the shot worked or not. I explained that the angle of the mouth was very important, because there were times when you could see too far inside, and the shot simply wouldn’t be effective. Schaffner allowed me to stop the camera a few times, tell them what to do, and he would re-shoot it."

**Painting Primates**

_Planet of the Apes_ lensed on locations where temperatures frequently topped 100 degrees Fahrenheit, so Chambers was understandably worried that perspiration would cause the ape appliances to loosen up as the day went on. "We were on location in Utah near the Colorado River, and the climate was very hot," he recalls. "We anticipated that the actors would perspire a lot beneath their rubber masks, but we had mixed up a good spirit gum that was really tacky and held very well. The real problem was eating and drinking. Every day, I would tell the actors to drink a lot of liquids over lunchtime, and not to eat food that required a lot of chewing. They would agree, and then go off and have a steak, so when they came back after lunch, the lower chin piece would be broken free from their own lips and hanging forward. They would deny eating regular food, but I could always tell, because there would be carrots and peas inside the mask!"

With nearly 80 makeup artists working on the movie, Chambers knew it was vital to pre-paint each of the appliances for the next day’s filming. This would not only allow a great deal of control in terms of the overall look, but also trim nearly an hour of application time for each character every morning. The trick was developing a special paint that could be air-brushed onto large quantities of appliances. "It
was the first time we did pre-painted appliances with an airbrush," Chambers says, "but it went on pretty well, and the paint skin would stretch but not break apart. I got the idea after doing some research into rubberized paint used to advertise on balloons. No one in our industry had ever thought of it before, but after visiting a paint factory in Ohio, I came up with a concoction that worked."

Another advantage to pre-painting each appliance was that Chambers could keep a consistent color mix for each gorilla, chimpanzee and orangutan from one day to the next, no matter how many makeup artists were working on the project simultaneously. "We used new facial appliances each day, so we had to ensure the color mix on all the pieces was exactly the same. The shooting of a scene could spread over several days, and the control of color was very important—if they started a scene today and finished it tomorrow, the new mask pieces had to be a precise color match. We mounted masks on the wall as color patterns and used the airbrush to give them the same paint depth. I had one specific guy doing all the color painting with the airbrush, and I told the other makeup artists not to change anything he had done. That way, I was able to keep control of the color mix."

By the time Planet of the Apes began shooting in May 1967, the production had booked virtually every available union makeup artist working in Hollywood. Chambers' old friend Dan Striepeke (who by then had replaced Nye as Fox's makeup department head), was also able to bring in a number of new makeup artists, who were quickly put to work. "Their minds were free to accept anything given to them," notes Chambers. "The older makeup artists had their own concepts, and no matter how often you showed them how to do it, they wanted to add their own ideas. The young guys accepted what we told them, and did marvelous work. I got a lot of talented young men, like Ken Chase, a new guy with a limited background, but when I saw how good he was, I decided to give him Maurice Evans, who was a kind, decent man. His look was very important to the film, but I didn't have to tell Ken anything; he was the best in the bunch in terms of creating an illusion—an exceptional makeup artist." And another crucial hero of Planet of the Apes was wig maker Josephine Turner, who had worked with Chambers and Striepeke several times in the past. "She started making wigs at age 16, and was just magic. When Danny needed a wig for George C. Scott on Patton, he asked her to make it, and it was so real, it looked like it was his own hair. She made all the mustaches and wigs we needed for Planet of the Apes, and her work was just wonderful!"

Screening Simians

Needless to say, the film was a huge gamble for Fox, who didn't quite know how the public would respond to the sight of talking apes on the big screen, and even Chambers now admits having a few reservations of his own. "I had always said this could be an exceptional film if handled right, but we needed the public on our side," he explains. "If they accepted the concept and liked the look, we would be OK, but if they laughed at it, we were dead."

The studio had a sneak preview somewhere in North Hollywood, which is where I saw it for the first time. I listened to the crowd 'Ooh-ing' and 'Ah-ing' and clapping, and when the lights came on after the showing, everyone in the audience was enthused about it, so we knew we were on the right road."

Planet of the Apes became a massive hit, spawning sequels, merchandise, TV spin-offs and now Burton's rendition. But for Chambers, the film proved even more significant when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences voted to award him an honorary Oscar for his work. It was only the second time in the Academy's history that an award had been given for outstanding achievement in makeup. (William Tuttle for Seven Faces of Dr. Lao was the first).

"Danny Striepeke had become head of Fox makeup by the first week we started shooting, and he was responsible for bringing in the right makeup men for me. I felt we should both have gone for the Oscar, but when it turned out that they could only award one, Danny said, 'I couldn't think of taking an Oscar for that. You earned it!' He was a fine guy."

In one of the Oscar ceremony's more offbeat moments, the honorary award was presented by Walter Matthau accompanied by a chimpanzee. John Chambers accepted the gag with typical good humor, which wasn't too difficult considering what almost happened on stage that night. "The guy in charge of the awards told me the chimp was supposed to be coming out in a tuxedo, with the Oscar, on roller skates. I said, 'Listen, this has been a privilege that I never thought would happen to me, but now that it's happening, I don't want a monkey to make a fool out of me! How are you going to control it? He might run away from me, or I won't be able to take it from him.'"

"He agreed to take the roller skates off, but was determined to bring the monkey on stage. So in the end, I asked him to let Walter hand it to me with the monkey in his arms, and that's exactly how it happened."