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Ron Harper recalls the fight to survive on TV's *Planet of the Apes*.

After the Planet of the Apes saga was brought to the screen over the course of five profitable feature films (1968-73), 20th Century Fox was in a quandary: The full-circle story had been told and yet a fan base, and a potential for further profit, still existed. The solution was for the story of far-future ape-human conflict to move to a new medium, television. So confident was Fox in the new series that they didn't even monkey with a pilot: Planet of the Apes went directly into production with Ron Harper and James Naughton as Alan Virton and Pete Burke, 1980 astronauts whose unscheduled trip through the time barrier lands them in 3085 California, now a primitive wilderness where apes are the masters and humans their slaves. Joining Harper and Naughton in the cast was Roddy McDowall, a carry-over from the movies, as the sympathetic chimpanzee Galen, who goes on the lam with his new human pals and helps them avoid capture by gorilla pursuers.

A combination of factors resulted in a shockingly short run, as discussed and dissected here by star Harper, who says he knew even before the ax fell that the CBS series would not have Apes fans going bananas. A native of Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania, the blond, 6-foot-1 Harper did some early acting while attending Princeton and subsequently tackled his first professional jobs on the New York stage and television. Apes (now part of Planet of the Apes: The Ultimate Collection out on DVD March 28) was his fifth TV series as a regular; he has since starred in soap operas, guested on episodic TV, traveled backward in time for the 1970s Saturday morning SF series *Land of the Lost* and, in recent years, played supporting parts in *The Odd Couple II* and *Pearl Harbor* and the genre flicks *Venomous* (killed by a mutant snake) and *Glass Trap* (killed by a giant ant!).

STARLOG: How did you land a lead role in the Planet of the Apes TV series?

RON HARPER: I was living in New York at the time, and I got a call from an agent on the West Coast who said that the producers of Planet of the Apes were interested in having me come and test for it. I was about to get married, for the first time, to my sweetheart, [actress] Sally Stark. Fox wanted me to fly out and test on a Friday, but the wedding—which had been planned for three months—was going to take place in a little church in

Riverhead, New York, where she grew up, the following day, Saturday! I knew I could just barely do it. I emphasized to the producers, through my agent, that I had to be finished on Friday because I was getting married early Saturday morning. With trepidation, I kissed Sally goodbye, got on the plane and went out.

I did the test and got out of there in time to catch a 6 p.m. plane. But after 45 minutes in the air,

Newlywed Ron Harper (left) took on 31st-century apes at 20th Century Fox rather than finishing his honeymoon.

Selected Apes Photos: Courtesy 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment

UNDER
APE
RULE
DVD OUT
3/28/06

By TOM WEAVER



the pilot's voice came over the intercom saying, "We've encountered an engine problem and are going to have to turn back." "Oh, Christ!" I said to myself. "Open the door and let me jump out, because if I'm not there tomorrow, I'm dead!" And Sally had about 10 cousins who were really big, tough guys! The plane returned to LA and I made some frantic calls to her. Fortunately, the problem with the plane was fixed and I managed to get to Long Island at about 4:30 a.m., almost dawn. But we had a wonderful wedding and the reception was great.

STARLOG: Did you get to go on a honeymoon, or did *Apes* screw things up?

HARPER: We were going to Europe for our honeymoon; we planned to spend a week in Majorca relaxing, just forgetting everything, and then a week in Ireland because she was half-Irish. We were in Majorca for a couple of days when I got a call from my agent saying, "They need you to come back. They want to test you again. And they want you to lighten your hair." I said, "Tell 'em I would be glad to do it, but I'm on my honeymoon!" After it went back and forth for two days, I was told that it was really important that I come back because they wanted to start [shooting the series] in about two weeks. They were willing to fly me back, and I stipulated, "And my bride. I'm not gonna leave her here alone!" They agreed to everything. "OK, fly them both first-class, and put 'em up in a hotel. We need him over here!"

Once I returned to Fox, they lightened my hair and I tested again—and I was still [up against] five or six other guys. Sally and I got on a plane and went back to New York. We were there two or three days when I found out I had the role. But now they wanted me to test opposite some other guys so they could figure out who they wanted for the part of Pete Burke! So I had to fly back to LA and test with six guys vying for *that* part. Jim Naughton was one of them. Then I flew *back* to New York [laughs], and within a week I was told, "They're ready to start shooting; you have to come to LA." So I



All 14 episodes of Harper's *Planet of the Apes* TV series are now available as part of Fox's *Ultimate Collection*.

said, "Hey, Sally, good luck with your married life. I'll be out in California!"

STARLOG: Was she working at the time?

HARPER: Yes, she was on a soap. So I went back and we started shooting immediately. It was a harried but very exciting time. **STARLOG:** The first episode you shot, "The Good Seeds," wasn't the first to air.

HARPER: That's correct. They did that deliberately, which was smart. Before they lensed the first episode to reach the air ["Escape from Tomorrow," in which Alan and Pete's spacecraft crashes in the ape-dominated future world], they wanted Jim and me to be comfortable and experienced, and they wanted everything running smoothly. So we shot "The Good Seeds" and then another episode, maybe "The Gladiator," and I believe the third one was "Escape from Tomorrow." The thinking was, "Ron and Jim will be better, they'll know their way around and they'll know each other. It'll be an easier production." By the way, the spaceship in

that first episode was left over from the first *Apes* movie. We used lots of stuff from the films. I think our uniforms were from the original movies, too.

STARLOG: What was your experience working on that first *Apes* episode?

HARPER: I liked "The Good Seeds" a lot. It was warm and not terribly violent. In it, I was living with a farm family of apes and teaching them about modern farming methods, particularly the young son, who said, "Oh, we don't use the good seeds [kernels of corn] for planting because that's silly, that's wasteful." I told him, "You're wrong. The good seeds make the best crops." But once the series was on the air, we were told that the network [CBS] wanted more action. "All the sentimental, warm, folksy stuff is great," the network told the studio, "but...that ain't *Planet of the Apes*. Get those apes out there with the guns and have 'em start shootin' some people and fightin'. Get some action goin'. Forget the sentimental crap!" [Laughs]

STARLOG: Going into it, did you think *Apes* would be a successful series and a good opportunity for you?

HARPER: Without a doubt. The five *Apes* movies made millions and millions of dollars. It was my fifth TV series, after *87th Precinct*, *Wendy and Me* with George Burns and Connie Stevens, *The Jean Arthur Show* and *Garrison's Gorillas*, a great series.

STARLOG: I was only a kid when that ran, but I loved it. I still remember being crushed when it was cancelled!

HARPER: You know why? There was a wave running through Congress of "Too much violence on television." Senator John Pastore was leading the charge, saying, "The violence on TV is ruining our youth, and the worst offender is that there *Garrison's Gorillas*." We were a war series, so I figured we were safe [laughs]. People were shooting at other people during the Second World War! Our share never fell below a 32, which was good, but they said the violence was very bad. Things have changed, boy!



Harper feels he had it easy compared to the ape actors (like Roddy McDowall), some of whom were in at 3:30 a.m. to begin their makeup ordeals.



Glamorous Connie Stevens starred with Harper in one of his early TV shows, *Wendy and Me*.

STARLOG: Talk about your *Apes* co-stars McDowall and Naughton.

HARPER: Roddy was a wonderful gentleman and an excellent actor. And, God, such patience, such endurance! He had to come in at 3:30 a.m. because it took three hours to put those appliances on his face. And he couldn't sleep while they [did the makeup], so he listened to classical music. Roddy was a sweet and bright guy. I found him very interesting and he had a sense of humor. Once he gave me a director's chair with my name on the back. It read RIN HOOPER [laughs]. Roddy said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Did I misplace a few letters?" I said, "Well, it's really Ron, but...Rin is close enough. And it's really Harper..." Then he laughed and brought out the *real* covering that said RON HARPER [laughs]. I still have it!

STARLOG: And Naughton?

HARPER: He was married and had a very nice wife and two little kids. One of my most vivid memories of him: We were on location on the back ranch at 20th Century, shooting something at a lake, and he was on one side and I was on the other. Suddenly, he started singing in this beautiful baritone voice. I said, "Jim, I'm surprised. Where did that come from?" He was an excellent singer, and years later he won a Tony, Best Actor in a Musical, for *City of Angels*.

The character Jim played, Pete Burke, didn't like being on a planet with the apes. He would be dragged into the adventures against his will, which makes for a good comic-relief part. Some people felt that if Burke had been played with a little more

In his first series role, Harper (right) brought law and order to 1960s TV, co-starring in *87th Precinct* with Norman Fell, Gregory (Plan 9 from *Outer Space*) Walcott and Robert (4D Man) Lansing.



Photo: NBC



Vowing to continue acting "as long as anyone atill asks me," Harper has been seen lately in the SF film *Glass Trap* and the indie drama *Touched*.

humor, the combination of a hero and a "reluctant hero" on the series would have been better.

STARLOG: What challenges did the ape actors face on a day-to-day basis?

HARPER: Those poor sons of... [laughs] It was a three-hour job, putting appliances on those guys. The makeup people had to glue those on individually, hold them and set them. And there wasn't just one ape mask; they were all different faces, so that each character had a distinct personality. It got to be like 120 degrees underneath those masks, particularly out on location at the 20th Century Ranch in Malibu. Poor Roddy! After two or three episodes, his face looked like raw hamburger. They had to give him two weeks off to let his skin breathe and

come back to normal again. I don't know how those ape actors could stand it.

STARLOG: And not many of 'em got to do much real acting through all those appliances and hair.

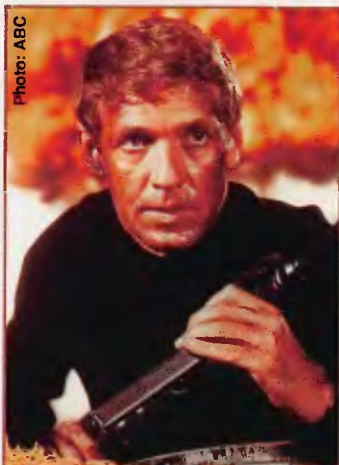
HARPER: It was difficult for the ones who weren't that experienced. For instance, the exaggerated movements that were necessary if they wanted to get their mouth appliance to open wider. With some of the ape actors, you would hardly see their ape mouths move while they were speaking. Roddy, of course, was the best because he had all that experience from the movies. He used his mouth and eyes, and you could see the different expressions. Some of the other actors had to really strain to convey that.

Ron Stein is a name you'll see often in the show's credits. He was a good stuntman and I became very fond of him. Ron doubled me a little bit before they got someone who looked more like me. In one episode ["The Legacy"], I had to jump down off of a window ledge and fight a gorilla. Ron—who was made up as an ape—came over to me and suggested a couple of moves that he said would "sell" as possibly capable of incapacitating a gorilla. I told him, "That's very good!" and he thanked me.

At this time, they hadn't yet selected a head stuntperson, so I called Stan Hough, our producer, and said, "Ron Stein is an excellent stuntman." I made that comment not only because of that incident, but because I saw some of his other work. I told Stan, "You ought to make him the head stuntperson because he knows what he's doing. He's smart, has the experience and he presents [the information to the actors] in such a way that it's easy to accept." So they made him the head stuntperson. Ron was a wonderful guy.

STARLOG: Do you have any particular favorite episode?

HARPER: "The Horse Race," in which I compete in a race against an ape. I knew how to ride pretty well because, years earlier, I had worked on a ranch out in South Dakota



A U.S. senator concerned with violence on TV did what the German army couldn't: wiped out *Garrison's Gorillas* (Harper's 1967-68 WWII series).



Alan and Peta (James Naughton) bridged the gap between centuries by recruiting chimpanzee Galen (McDowall) to join them in their TV travels.



Keeping one step ahead of gorilla aggressors grew complicated when Harper's character got caught up in the lives of future humans.



Taking advantage of MGM's demolition-in-progress backlot, the *Apes* producers gave some episodes a big-budget look.

for one summer. But the ape was played by a stuntman who could *really* ride. There's one scene where I'm going full-out and he's riding next to me, and he starts hitting me with his whip, and then I grab the whip. It's an old, standard thing in Westerns, where you take the whip out of the other rider's hand and smack him back with it. Well, he worked with me on that, and we were even able to keep the horses going at a pretty good clip as we carried this off. I had three stuntmen doubling me in that episode. Two of them broke a leg, and one wrenched his ankle or knee so badly he was incapacitated for the rest of the shoot. All three injuries involved the horses.

STARLOG: Do you remember the two other regulars, Mark Lenard and Booth Colman, who played General Urko and Dr. Zaius?

HARPER: Not very well, though I was fond of 'em. Mark was wonderful, but I didn't get to know the [actors who played] gorillas much at all. They were there three hours before me, and at night I would be gone while they were still getting out of makeup. Booth is another one I don't remember seeing out of makeup during the entire series. I bump into him quite a bit at autograph shows, and I've sat with him a few times. I think he has a nice little second career going!

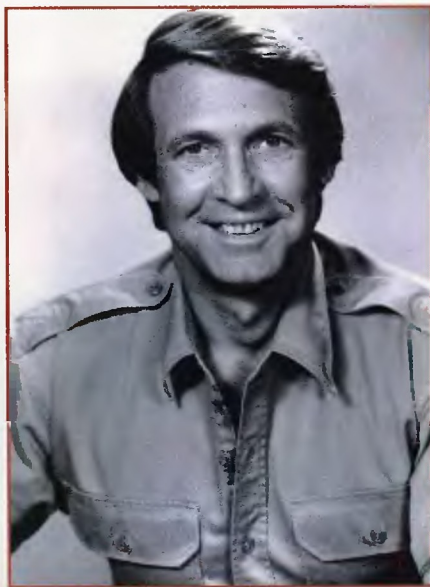
STARLOG: Where was *Apes* shot?

HARPER: Apart from the studio? Generally on the 20th Century Ranch out in Malibu. At that time, they had maybe 75 acres. It was a good location because there were no telephone poles or anything, so it looked "natural." The original sets from the *Apes* movies were still up at the Ranch, so we took advantage of that. Another favorite spot was north of Malibu, on the Pacific Coast. The episode with the hang glider ["Up Above the World So High"] and the shark ["Tomorrow's Tide"] were shot over there.

Do you remember the scene in "Tomorrow's Tide" where James and I swim

under flaming water trying to spear fish? We filmed that in a pond on the CBS backlot in Studio City, where they shot *Gunsmoke*. The flames were coming up from gas pipes, and the director, Don McDougall, had me walk into the water and get closer and closer to them. When I was about 20 feet from the flames, Don said, "Go out further." So I went out another 15 feet and asked, "OK?" He said, "Go a little further." Finally, I'm practically *touching* the flames, which didn't bother me, but I knew if I got burned, it would interfere with the production schedule! [Laughs] I shouted, "For Christ's sake, I'm almost in the flames! What do you want to do, *toast* me?" He said, "OK, that's far enough, Ron. Back down." Then he laughed and said, "I just wanted to see how far you would go!" Don McDougall—I liked him!

STARLOG: What do you recall about shooting that show's underwater scenes?



Apes and '70s TV fans can get a DVD double-dose of Harper by seeking out the *Land of the Lost* sets from Rhino.

HARPER: We shot that off Catalina Island, in about 35 feet of water. Jim and I put on face masks, mouthpieces and air tanks, and two stuntmen took us down to the bottom. To help us stay down, there were lead weights in those rags that we wore, and we would also grab ahold of some seaweed or rocks. They would get the camera in position, as well as this *really* phony-looking mechanical shark, and when the shot was lined up, the stuntmen would rip off our masks, take out our mouthpieces and get out of the shot. Then we would swim around—acting for about a minute at the most—and come up to the surface. We kept repeating that all day long.

STARLOG: Did *Apes* use sets made for other TV shows or Fox movies?

HARPER: There was one that took place in a castle ["The Legacy"]. I enjoyed that episode, because it was a kind of an acting thing with Zina Bethune and the little boy [Jackie Earle Haley] playing her son. They were supposed to be symbolic of my character's wife and son on *Earth*, back in 1980. Anyway, that castle set was left over from *Young Frankenstein*. It was going to be torn down, so Stan Hough, who was a hands-on producer, asked, "When do you have to tear it down?" They said, "Next week." He said, "All right, we're gonna shoot it." [Laughs] So we shot it *that* week!

Do you remember the episodes set in the wrecked city with the huge piles of rubble? MGM had that beautiful backlot—where we shot *Garrison's Gorillas*, by the way. But in 1974, MGM sold it off, and now they were destroying those city street sets. So, of course, 20th Century jumped in and said, "Hey! You mind if we use those rubblestrewn streets?" And we did. Those streets became our "destroyed cities."

STARLOG: Any guest stars stand out in your mind?

HARPER: Royal Dano, who was in "Escape from Tomorrow." I always admired him because somewhere along the line I had

With all that ape makeup, Harper sometimes wasn't sure what actors he was playing opposite. Director Don Weis seems to know.



When *Apes* became "*The Fugitive with Fur*" in Harper's mind, he feared for its future. It was soon cancelled.

seen him play Abe Lincoln—and he *looked* like Abe Lincoln! He was gaunt and everything, so I always thought of him as Abe [laughs]. Beverly Garland ["The Interrogation"] has a hotel out here, and that's where they have celebrity autograph shows two or three times a year. She was also on my first series, *87th Precinct*, as a guest star. William Smith was in "*The Gladiator*" and, boy, was he well-built. I'm still friends with him. In fact, I've become better friends with him in the last 10 years. He's a weightlifter with those arms and chest, but he's also very bright. He speaks, I think, five languages. Isn't that amazing?

STARLOG: Some of the 14 episodes are, in my opinion, just "*The Fugitive with fur*," but a number of 'em feature some plot surprises. What did you think of the writing?

HARPER: Moments like that one in "*The Good Seeds*" with Zina and her little boy were what I really enjoyed. But CBS wanted more action in *Planet of the Apes*, so "*The Fugitive with fur*" is exactly right. After a while, in every episode, either Roddy, James or I would be caught by the apes and the other two would rescue him. "Whose turn is it to get captured?" It became monotonous. This was science fiction, and we could have gone anywhere in the world with our imaginations. I wished we had done something more exciting than capture-rescue, capture-rescue.

Take a look at *Land of the Lost*, a series I did after *Apes*. It's out on DVD. Their stories used old myths like the Flying Dutchman, which were much more interesting than the *Apes* stories once they degenerated into "*The Fugitive with fur*." I think that's one of the things that curtailed what should have been a longer run.

STARLOG: The series started out with your character several times mentioning the wife and kid he left behind in 1980. He was also determined to find a computer and some advanced humans so he could somehow get back to 1980. But after a few episodes, that

wasn't brought up again.

HARPER: We needed [some continuing story arc] because, obviously, the way we ended up going wasn't very successful. I mean, 14 episodes, y'know? [Laughs] But somebody up there was thinking, "Let's not get into the homey, dramatic, heartwarming stuff. Forget the wife and kid and go out and fight a few gorillas!" Early on, Alan did have a computer disc [that contained flight information about their space voyage]. He thought that if he could get it to a computer, that might give him an idea how to travel back through time. But one day—it was around the third or fourth episode—I said, "I can't find the computer disc." And they replied, "Never mind. We're not gonna use it anymore!" [Laughs] Had the series gone on, they may have brought in some more imaginative writers. Everybody expected *Apes* to be a big hit; everybody expected it to go five years; and then...

STARLOG: What was your reaction when you found out the show was being cancelled so soon?



After a few "warm, folksy" *Apes* episodes, a CBS edict came down demanding more action.

HARPER: I had seen the writing on the wall. About three or four episodes before the end, I realized, "This is a boring series." "Whose turn is it to get captured?" "Not mine. I did it last week!"

STARLOG: A couple of your more recent genre movies have been for director Fred Olen Ray.

HARPER: I'm very fond of Fred. When I did the first one for him, *Venomous*, I had just had an operation on my right shoulder, and I was still mending from that. Well, Fred was unbelievably solicitous. In one scene, I was working on an old barn and I was supposed to be picking up some 2x4s, and because of my operation, Fred told me to use my left arm instead of my right. However, in order to make that possible, he had to change all the lights, the camera direction and he went to a lot of trouble so that I wouldn't have to use my right arm. And he told everybody, "Nobody get near Ron's right shoulder," which was very thoughtful of him. Then he called me again to work in *Glass Trap*. I think Fred does excellent work; he's loyal to some of us "more mature" actors who aren't being sought after [as much as in earlier years].

STARLOG: What are your plans for the future?

HARPER: I recently did *Touched*, another independent film. This one's a drama, very well-written by a guy named Timothy Scott Bogart. It stars Jenna Elfman and has some pretty good actors in it, like Bruce Davison. It's an interesting dramatic story about a guy who sees his little boy killed in an automobile accident and then goes into a coma. When he comes out of the coma, he has lost his sense of touch—he can't feel anything. I play a doctor in it. Something else I've been doing lately is lots of interviews and commentaries for my series going to DVD. I came into this profession because I *love* acting more than anything. And I still do—except for my daughter Nicole. I will continue doing this as long as anyone still asks me.