Charlton Heston Talks About Science Fiction

Interview by DON SHAY

For nearly three decades, Charlton Heston has lent his imposing figure to dozens of motion pictures calling for larger-than-life characters of indomitable strength—the sort of roles painfully ill-suited to all but a dwindling number of today's film actors. In a series of epic dramas spanning two millennia of recorded history, Heston came to be acknowledged as the unchallenged master of the costumed period piece, a stereotype he sought to overcome with little success. Even more disturbing for an actor who began his career performing the classics on the Broadway stage, critical opinion had him pigeon-holed in the role of the non-acting superstar—an impression which neither his Academy Award for best actor nor his frequent forays into dramatically challenging stage roles could seem to deter. In 1968, Heston made a concerted move against type by accepting different and demanding roles in Counterpoint, Will Penny and Planet of the Apes, demonstrating to critics and audiences alike that the old image of Charlton Heston was due for revision.

Planet of the Apes marked the first time a major film star had appeared in a science fiction film, a fact made even more significant by the likelihood that without his expressed interest and support it would never have been launched at all. The result was one of the most successful box office attractions of all time—a film which spawned four sequels and thrust science fiction firmly into the public consciousness. In the five years that followed, Heston appeared briefly in the first of the Apes sequels, and was again instrumental in getting personal science fiction projects, The Omega Man and Sayonara, to screen.

FF: Even today, in the midst of the science fiction "boom," it's still relatively rare for a prominent film actor to appear in a speculative film. And yet, you have done four over the last decade or so. Do you have a particular affinity for the science fiction genre?

HESTON: Not really. I always base my decision on whether or not to do a picture by looking at the script from the point of view of my own part. You try to look for other things, and intellectually you do: you look for a freshness of material, a significant or valid story, some kind of comment that seems to you meaningful and at the same time to have some validity for a potential audience. So what I look for in a script is really what I can find in the part, either to get from it or to give it to.

Until Planet of the Apes came along, it seemed to me that all science fiction, from an acting point of view, seemed to fall into two categories: either a tourist or a fugitive. You were going to the moon or somewhere, and the part consisted of, "Wow, look at that!" Or you were running away from a bug-eyed monster, and the lines were, "Look out, here it comes again!" That was why I never accepted the occasional offer that would come along—and I was around Paramount at the time they were making Destination Moon and War of the Worlds and stuff like that.

Planet of the Apes, of course, offered a very different potential. The thing that I think distinguished it from perhaps all of its predecessors was that there was a part to play. And the kind of black Swiftian satire that Boule had written into the novel was something I think Frank Schaffner captured very fully on the screen.

FF: What was it about the Taylor character that you found so appealing?

HESTON: I would say, as much as any character I have ever played, Taylor reflects my own views about mankind. I have infinite faith and admiration for the extraordinary individual man—the Gandhi, the Christ, the Caesar, the Michaelangelo, the Shakespeare—but very limited expectations for man as a species. And that, of course, was Taylor's view. And the irony of a man so misanthropic that he almost welcomes the chance to escape entirely from the world finding himself then cast in a situation where he is spokesman for his
whole species and forced to defend their qualities and abilities—it was a very appealing thing to act.

**FF: As an actor with total script approval, I'm sure you're able to exercise some of your ideas and get them on film. What would you say were your major contributions to *Planet of the Apes* in this regard?**

**HESTON:** It was my idea to have Taylor stripped naked during the trial scene. It was the only nude scene I've ever done. One of the reasons for that is that I've been persuaded that nudity doesn't have an erotic effect on the screen—it's distracting, and in love scenes it seldom works. But in this case I saw no way you could more clearly and effectively make the point we were trying to make in the trial sequence—one of the basic points of the whole story—that to the apes, Taylor is an animal. And you couldn't do that any better than by stripping him naked. I mean, the question of whether a dog is dressed or not is something you just don't bother to discuss, because he's an animal. So stripping Taylor naked in that scene worked, and it worked better than anything else we could have said or done there.

The toughest friction on a point of script that I had in the whole piece was my last line, where I say, "God damn you! God damn you! God damn you, all to hell!" Well, in those days you weren't supposed to quite say that. Language was getting more permissive, but still you weren't supposed to say, "God damn you." I kept arguing that it wasn't swearing and that Taylor was specifically appealing to God to damn all those people that ended the world. It
was literal. There’s just no question that that’s the only line you can say there. I said, “What do you want me to say? ‘Shucks! Damn you!’” And with great reluctance, they finally allowed it.  
**FF:** You mentioned an early concern that the apes might get unwanted laughs and ruin the whole impact. Was this an active concern all through the production?  
**HESTON:** Yes, it was, but Frank handled it all beautifully. He was very resourceful, too, in preventing the initial reaction of the audience to the apes. The first time you see them is in the hunting scene. You see them in long shots, and then the people are running in terror, and you think, “My God, what is this?” Then in closeup you see the gorilla turn toward the camera, and it’s quite scary. It just works a ton. And from there on, Frank had ‘em.  
He also bleeds off a little in the chimpanzee scenes. The gorillas are awfully scary; you’re not likely to laugh at them. But the chimpanzees you might laugh at, so Frank starts giving you laughs on purpose very early in those scenes. All the stuff with Roddy McDowell has a lot of built-in laughs in it. It kept the whole thing in balance.  
**FF:** It seems the biggest objection was the low humor—the “hear no evil, speak no evil” sort of thing.  
**HESTON:** That seems to be the single point where those who examine the film seriously find fault; or, if someone has a fault to find, it almost invariably includes that shot. The history of that shot is interesting and reveals something about the way films are achieved. When Frank was shooting that scene—the trial scene—which is, of course, one, the longest scene in the piece, two, in terms of the development of Taylor’s character, the most significant because he is in that scene stripped naked, both literally and spiritually; and three, the most important in terms of the comment, the satiric burden of the piece. Because it is in this scene that the simian world is revealed as a mirror of the human world. And I think it was quite an achievement on Frank’s part that he took essentially quite a static and very talky scene—it’s about a nine-page scene, and solid dialogue—and kept it interesting.  
But nonetheless, in the course of shooting this scene, he said, “You know, I have a terribly funny idea. I don’t dare do it; but you know, it would be very easy to do the ‘hear no evil, speak no evil’ thing with those three judges sitting there. Ah, I can’t do that. It’s wrong. I know.” And then he said, “I think I’ll do one take, just for fun.” So we did one take; and Maurice Evans and Jimmy Whitmore and Woody Parfrey were amused by it and they all did it. They arrived at it plausibly—if not subtly, plausibly—and then he did another version where they didn’t do that; and he said, “I’ll just print that up so we can put it in the dailies; it’ll be rather fun.” So we looked at it in the dailies and we all laughed, and then when he was cutting the picture together, he said, “You know, I think I’m going to put that in the rough cut. I’m sure it’s too much, but I’ll just put it in.”  
Then the rough cut was refined a little bit and finally refined to the point where you have your first sneak preview, after which you look forward to eliminating a great deal of footage since the preview cut is often fairly loose. But as it happened, the sneak preview was one of the most successful sneaks in the history of 20th Century-Fox, so everybody said, “God! Don’t touch it! Don’t change anything!” And Frank said, “You know, or throwing things at me or hitting me with sticks or hosing me with water or pushing me around or tying me up. I was constantly mistreated. That, combined with the fact that most of the time my wardrobe consisted of a tattered loincloth, made it really a very uncomfortable film.  
An odd thing about it was that I never saw the actors who played the apes, because they came in at about the morning to get the makeups put on. And it took about 40 minutes at night to get the makeup off, which is very unusual. Normally, you can take the most difficult makeup off in no time, but these had to be taken off very carefully to avoid tearing the skin underneath. So I got there after they did in the morning, and by the time they were back to being human beings again at night, I had gone home. So I did the whole picture without every laying eyes on any of these people. What was really strange was that Kim Hunter—whom I had not known before—came up to me at one of the screenings and spoke, and I didn’t know who she was. And we’d worked on the picture together for three months.  
Another thing I noticed, at lunch there was an unconscious segregation. The gorillas would eat at one table, the chimpanzees would eat at another, the orangutans would eat at another, and the humans would eat by themselves. It was quite spooky.  
**FF:** Was there any thought of leaving the female member of the flight crew alive?  
**HESTON:** No, it was just a good spook thing. But speaking of that, though, because of the device of seeing the woman’s aged skeleton, I said, “Well, certainly, we all have to have beards then.” Well, they didn’t like that. Astrologically, don’t we? And I said, “Yeah, but you’re in suspended animation for however long it is. People’s hair and fingernails grow even after they’re dead. If they’re alive, certainly they’d have beards.” And so they finally allowed, reluctantly, as how this made sense.  
There are a lot of these film business myths, like, “No, no. You can’t die at the end of the film.” Well, I’ve died at the end of about half my more successful films. Maybe there’s a message there that I’m ignoring, but it was the same thing with the beards. For a long time they said you couldn’t have beards. Well, Christ, I was wearing beards long before they became fashionable—in Tan Commandments and El Cid and all kinds of things.  
**FF:** Speaking of dying at the end, wasn’t Taylor, at one point, supposed to be killed, and Nova, who is by then pregnant with his child, to ride off into the wilderness alone?  
**HESTON:** Yes, that’s right. I’ve forgotten why they changed that, but if they didn’t do it that way, I wouldn’t have had to be in the sequel.  
**FF:** Shortly after Planet of the Apes was released, you went on record as saying
you wouldn't appear in a sequel. And yet you did. What made you change your mind?

HESTON: Well, a sequel is always a bad idea, really, from an acting point of view, which is the reason why I wasn't attracted to Fox's obvious determination to make several more. I mean, where can you go from the Statue of Liberty? But while as an actor there was no reason for me to do the part, it was certainly a wise move from the studio's point of view. So Dick Zanuck submitted the idea to me, even though they didn't have a script at that point. And I just stated the obvious—I said, "We've already done the story, and that's the only one with an acting role in it. I don't blame you for wanting to do some more, but all it's going to be is more adventures among the monkeys." "Well, son of a bitch," he said, "we really can't do it if you're not in it, you know." So I said, "Well, how about if I'm in it at the beginning and you kill me off right away?" And he said, "Fine."

FF: I understand that Pierre Boulle wrote the original script for the sequel, and was planning to call it Planet of the Men.

HESTON: I never saw that script. I heard that he was involved briefly, but I don't know anything about it. Unlike the other one, I had no involvement in the creative preparation of that. I was just a hired hand. After they started working on the script, though, I got another call from Dick Zanuck, and he said, "Listen, would you mind if we had you disappear in the beginning and then come back at the end and get killed?" Obviously, that was better from their point of view, because if I disappeared everyone would figure that I'd show up again. So I said, "I don't care, if that seems to work better. I just don't want to be in the whole thing." And it still meant that I'd only have to work about four days on it.

FF: Aside from your acting, did you make any creative input to Beneath the Planet of the Apes?
HESTON: Well, you know, I thought I’d been very clever, because as we were working on the last scene I sold the director and the producer on the idea of having Taylor, as he’s dying, hit the bomb—like the Alec Guinness character in Bridge on the River Kwai, I suppose. And they agreed that that would be very good, so we did that and I thought, “That finishes the series. You’ve blown up the world, and that’s the end of it.” But of course, they were cleverer than I was, because they managed to keep going anyway.

FF: You just made it tougher on the new writer,

HESTON: Yeah, I’ll bet he really appreciated that. I never saw any of the others, although I understand that at least one of them was quite good. Nevertheless, the first film was by far the best, and the only one with a valid, creative point of view—a kind of black indictment of man as a species.

The ape society was intended as a model of human society in which none of the individuals really turned out to be particularly attractive. The chimpanzees were okay, but even as man, they were all pretty terrible. In the later ones, the chimpanzees became marvelous fellows, and the gorillas became fascists, and I forget what the orangutangs were—but it all became very cartoonish. I don’t mean to be dismissive. What they were doing was exactly right; and if I’d had any Fox stock I would have applauded them, because each of the five, I believe, was vigorously profitable.

FF: How did The Omega Man come about? I understand that was one of your personal projects.

HESTON: Yes, it was. I had read a paperback by Richard Matheson called I Am Legend, and thought it was just marvelous. Last man on Earth stories are always intriguing—I think it’s a fantasy everyone has from time to time, to be the last man on Earth and be able to go into a department store and pick up a new shirt whenever your other one gets dirty, or go to a museum and take whatever paintings you want home with you. And I thought the book also incorporated some convictions I have about the human race. So I was really knocked out by it.

I showed it to Walter Seltzer, for whom I had done several films, and he liked it too. So we started moving on it, and Warner’s was just at the point where they were about to commit when Walter called me up one day and said, “I think we’re dead on I Am Legend.” And I said, “Why?” He said, “It’s already been made.” And I said, “You’re kidding! Who made it?” And he said, “Some bunch of Italians.” And sure enough, it had been made just a few years before and released as The Last Man on Earth. Vinnie Price was in it.

We took a look at it—and nothing against Vinnie, but it was a nothing pro-
duction. I was furious. But strangely enough, I think Dick Sheppard was the significant executive at Warners then, and he said, “Look, this really doesn’t count. Nobody saw it. It’s nothing.” So they went ahead with it—which must be very rare, maybe unique in fact, to undertake a remake of a terribly unsuccessful film. They’ll remake a huge hit ten or 20 years later, but to remake a flop, a terrible film, three years later is something pretty rare.

FF: The Omega Man didn’t resemble the book at all.

HESTON: You’re quite right. I know Matheson feels very ill-served by both versions of the film.

FF: Matheson’s a very talented screenwriter. Was there any consideration given to having him write the script?

HESTON: No, we’d already decided to devote so much from the book that we didn’t think he would have accepted it. Our basic decision to demythologize the story was, I think, a good one. Maybe it wasn’t—maybe we should have left the vampires in. But somehow, when you’re doing a last man on Earth story that involves all kinds of scientific plausibility, it seemed that vampires would not fit very well and would really get you into another kind of story. Instead we tried to render the spooks in scientific terms, with a blood disease and albinism and photophobia and all. Now that may have been a basic error in judgment, but in any event, it was the idea that we had, and it all fit together very well.

The problem was that it wasn’t done very well. The film could have been much better than it was; but as it is, it’s simply a fairly ordinary filming of a marvelous idea. In fact, of all the films that I’ve made that I really cared about, with the possible exception of Major Dundee, this is the one that I’m least happy with.

FF: What happened to it?

HESTON: Lots of things. I think it was made under too great a pressure at the time. The makeups weren’t done well, and they were photographed with too much light so you saw them. They simply weren’t frightening, and that was a major flaw.

FF: Was the film cut a lot in post-production? There are a lot of inconsistencies in it. For example, in the stadium, someone throws a switch and all the lights come on with no explanation of where the power’s coming from.

HESTON: Well, I don’t recall exactly, but I’m sure there was at least a general fiction in the direction of an explanation in the original cut.

FF: Did you find the narrative device of having Neville talking to himself difficult to handle as an actor?

HESTON: I loved the idea of that. People do talk to themselves. The problem is that they don’t talk to themselves the way writers have them talking to themselves. Based on my own experience, your tone and manner in talking to yourself is usually exhilaratory—you’re usually criticizing yourself, and you talk in the third person, “You dumb sonofabitch, how could you forget that!” You never say the kind of musing things that writers write for you. But people who are alone a great deal do talk to themselves,
and I think we could have done more of that and done it better.

I think, in a sense, the sequences in the beginning where he's all by himself are the more interesting ones. That's the last man on Earth. Once you're no longer the last man on Earth, then all of a sudden you're in a different story. The business of playing chess with himself I think is fine. And that odd apartment. Obviously, the longer you live alone, the more the way you chose to live would seem bizarrely abnormal because your own personal idiosyncrasies would become more and more dominant, completely unaffected by normal considerations of what everybody else does. The business of dressing for dinner, for instance, is based on a combination of what I'm inclined to think I might do, and the record of nineteenth century Englishmen who used to dress in the desert. And I think, to that point, that any intelligent man would impose certain requirements of form upon himself to guard against the gradual erosion of any personal discipline at all.

**FF:** In your death scene at the end, you end up in a position that looks very much like Christ on the cross. Was this intentional?

**HESTON:** That was just a personal indulgence. It seemed to me an interesting idea, but I didn't think it would register nearly as clearly as it did. It goes back to a thing we wanted to get in that I liked very much, and that was that these people—whatever you want to call them—fell really into two groups: The ones who are night creatures, totally photophobic and mad and extremely dangerous; and then this tiny group of mostly young people and children who were probably infected also, but the disease hadn't begun to progress. They could still live in the daytime, and were quite defenseless against the night creatures.

Being mostly children, they were highly impressionable and susceptible to strange ideas, and as such could easily become very superstitious—in the way a primitive people would—about this strange house with lights in it and this curious omnipotent creature that races about the city killing. Indeed, they regard him as almost superhuman—a god.

Well, we had a scene that I liked very much, which was cut quite early. Involving one of these children who live in the daytime and hide in the night like rabbits. In this particular scene, a little girl rides her bicycle to Neville's house and leaves an offering of flowers and fruit and says a prayer to him about keeping the night people away. We used a girl about nine or ten, and she was really quite good. I thought it was a marvelous scene and I was very sorry to see it go. Then, of course, if you follow that a little bit further, to where Neville's blood becomes the basis for a serum that will save mankind, then the Christ analogy becomes almost inescapable.

So it was at that point that I said, "Let's play with this a little in the death scene." I thought it worked; but it seemed to annoy some people; I think probably because the picture wasn't
really that good. I think if the picture had been better, it wouldn’t have bothered people. Plus you’re not prepared for it—it looks like just a gag. If we’d kept the scene with the little girl, it might have been more of a whole.

FF: Why was it cut?

HESTON: Just a time cut. In almost every film, there is a tendency to make it as tight and exciting and with as strong an impact as possible. But that kind of cutting invariably loses some textures and points of character development. It’s often difficult to strike a balance. I’ve gone through it for 25 years, and there are arguments on both sides.

FF: How did Soylent Green come about?

HESTON: That, too, was a book I read—Harry Harrison’s Make Room! Make Room! I have very good luck reading books on the transporal flight to London. I got Number One out of that, and Omega Man and Soylent Green. It was the same thing. I took it to Walter Seltzer and he took it to Metro. Metro, as I recall, bit quite early on it. Incidentally, in both cases, I have to credit the studios with the titles. I think one of the best things about Omega Man is the title. It’s good and the way it works. And Soylent Green is a much better title than Make Room! Make Room!, because it’s an odd title. You don’t know what the hell it means—like Mogambo, or something like that.

Although the script of Soylent Green follows Make Room! Make Room! more closely than Omega Man did I Am Legend, there are significant differences. The basic idea of the cop just absolutely overwhelmed—as indeed, police are now getting to be—we of course, followed. But the idea of having the crackers made out of people was not in the book. And that’s a very good idea, and makes for a marvelous payoff. And it makes the film be about something much bigger than just solving that crime. After all, who really cares? And, of course, the whole “going home” idea—the suicidethings—was very good.

But the best thing about the picture was Eddie G. Robinson. I’d known Eddie casually for a long time. We’d worked together in The Ten Commandments and I’d see him at parties and things like that; and we always had a cordial relationship. And then he was suggested for the part, it seemed like a marvelous idea. Of course, what we didn’t know— but which he knew—was that he was terminally ill. And he died within a very few weeks of finishing the film. You know, the last scene he did in the film happened to be the euthaniasia scene, and he often thought what a thing it must have been for him to play. Knowing he would never act again. And he was so good in it.

The whole idea of the projections in the room was a marvelous cinematic idea; and the documentary filmmakers who made up the montage did an excellent job. And I made one of the few musical contributions I’ve ever made to a film; because although I’m very fond of music, I’m musically illiterate—I haveno training and I can’t read music. Indeed, I can’t even carry a tune. But when I saw that footage, I said, “You’ve got to use Grieg’s ‘Mourning Theme’ from the Peer Gynt Suite.” I would know Grieg, I suppose, in any event; but I was introduced to it through the film I ever made, which was a 16mm silent version of Peer Gynt. And of course, that was the perfect music for that footage, and a perfect swan song for Eddie.

It also pleases me that Soylent Green gave him, for his last part, one of the best parts of his career—certainly the best part in several years. And there was an interesting chemistry between us. The relationship was very real. There was a lot of texture to it, and it worked very well.

FF: What was there about the Thorn character that appealed so much to you?

HESTON: Well, it was more the theme of the picture rather than the character itself. And that theme—overpopulation—I happen to think is the most important social problem in the world. I believe that so strongly that I don’t think the other problems of the world are ever solvable if we don’t lick the overpopulation problem. You can’t solve the problems of full employment, hunger, pollution, urban renewal, civil rights—any of that stuff. And that, of course, is the message of the film. And it is interesting how many people respond to the film in those terms.

Now Thorn, as a character, is an innocent. Unlike Taylor or Neville who are commenting on their situations and understand them more fully than the other characters, Thorn is completely naive. I mean, to him, this is the world. He’s bored and overworked and uncomfortable; but it doesn’t occur to him that it should be any other way, or that it ever was. And then there are two or three things that give him some insight. He’s in this lavish apartment, and his delight at finding hot water and a bar of soap—a whole bar of soap. To feel that and to look around the room is really a wonder to him; and he brings home this real food and he and Sol have this little meal, he doesn’t even know how to eat an apple. He has to imitate the old man, whom he’s been making fun of for all these years. And then, of course, in Sol’s death scene where he says, “You see? You see?” And Thorn says, “How could I know? How could I have known?” It’s just that his morals have been distorted and his values distorted by this terrible pressure of bodies, just as anyone’s would be.

It’s a curious thing—some feminists have criticized the film, “How come? Women’s rights—all that. Women have made it seem to have been neglected.” Well, of course, they would. If you have a society so crowded that the only thing you have to sell is whatever physical service you can provide—where men are pulling Rickshaws in the streets or acting as bodyguards—then women are going to be selling their ass. And if Gloria Steinem thinks women’s role will survive in a world populated with nine billion people, why she’s sadly mistaken.

FF: The ending seemed very ambiguous. Was Thatcher, Thorn’s only friend, in on the plot to get him off the streets?

HESTON: No, I don’t think so. I think it was purposely meant to be ambiguous. If you make a film about the world drowning in people, you’re cheating if you say, “Aha, now we’re on to you, so it won’t be that way any more. It’s going to be okay.” You have to leave it desperate.

The only thing I would change—and it isn’t often, as an actor, that I see a single shot that I think is wrong photographically—but Thorn’s bloody hand reaching up through the crowd as he’s being carried off just doesn’t quite register. We were a little tight on time shooting it—it was a difficult shot to set up and it was at the end of the day—and it’s hard to tell sometimes, even when you’re looking through the camera whether a shot will register. But the central image in the shot, and the central image for the tag of the film, was this bloody hand desperately stretched up through a sea of bodies, and then you pull back and back and back. If there’d been some way we could have gotten that to register a little more strongly, I think it could have been more meaningful.

Several years back, it was announced that you would star in The Micronauts. Whatever became of that project?

HESTON: I don’t know, but that was totally premature. I was sent a script, but there was nothing to act in it. And that’s just characteristic of most science fiction—even 2001. As much as I was delighted by it—by 2001, I would have acted in it—not nor would they have submitted it to me, for that matter. They certainly didn’t need an actor they’d have to pay as much as me. It would have been ridiculous.

One thing you can say about the three science fiction films I’ve made—I don’t really count Beneath the Planet of the Apes—I’ve done three things. I’ve done something to act. Granted, they may have been of varying quality, but there was a story to them. The science fiction idea—whatever the element was that made them, indeed, science fiction films—was subordinate to the central story and the characters, and that’s why I did each of them.