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JOHN CHAMBERS:
MASTER OF MAKE-UP



an MW Communications publication

JOHN CHAMBERS:

Master of Make-Up

"I would subject myself to any challenge. I brought 90% of the techniques that all of the make-up people in Hollywood and the United States use. I created that system in Hollywood when I came here. In my time I taught my apprentices and the people around me the techniques.

Make-up was here a long time before I came along but I'm the first one who ever had a commercial make-up laboratory," states John Chambers emphatically. Chambers is recognized among his peers as the foremost innovator of special make-up techniques and appliances for the film and television world.

The multi-faceted Chambers is one of only two make-up artists to receive the Oscar (Planet of the Apes), is the only make-up man to win both the Oscar and the Emmy (the Survival segment of the Primal Man television special) and is the first and only make-up artist to be honored with a star in Hollywood's Walk of Fame.

Chambers joined the budding NBC make-up department in 1955 and quickly made his mark in live TV because he was resourceful and quick-thinking. He worked on Mating Theatre and Lux Video Theatre and productions like Dracula, Frankenstein, Wuthering Heights and even transformed Lon Chaney, Jr. into a monster who resided in a tower.

For the last twenty-five years the prolific and energetic Chambers has thrilled and chilled audiences with his

fantastic make-up creations. Just a fraction of his TV credits includes metamorphosing Robert Culp into a Chinese warlord in I Spy, concocting disguises for Martin Landau in Mission: Impossible and Ross Martin in The Wild Wild West, fabricating Uncle Tonoose's noses on The Danny Thomas Show and working for Gene Roddenberry on The Questor Tapes.

Part of Chambers' motion picture credits encompass the fashioning of George C. Scott's tobacco-stained teeth in Patton, the transmutation of a young man into a cobra in Dan Striepeke's Sssss, making an embryo and placenta for Embryo, constructing the robot facial appliances in Futureworld and the cheek plumpers for Brando's screen test for The Godfather.

The Chicago-born Chambers studied commercial art in high school and designed jewelry in his spare time. Later he entered the dental technician school at Fitzsimmons General Hospital in Denver during World War II. He was then transferred to Santa Maria, California, where he spent three years creating dental plates and prosthetic devices for wounded soldiers.

Chambers experimented with various synthetics, including plastics, and developed new adhesives and rubber compounds. After the war, he spent seven years working on bone implantation techniques, designing plastic thyroid glands, developing new techniques for painting artificial eyes, and was in charge of prosthetic construction at Hines General Hospital in Chicago.

Chambers is refreshingly outspoken as he takes an overview of his career, which spans a quarter of a century.

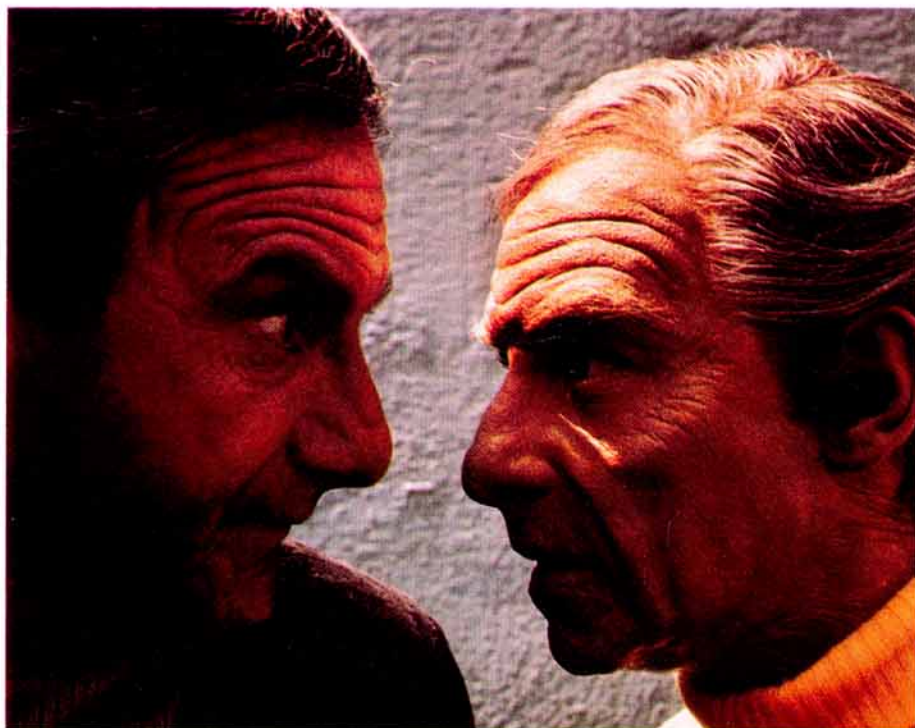


As a young man, Chambers arrived in Hollywood eager to share with and contribute new make-up techniques to the industry, but instead he was met with disinterest and downright resentment. "The make-up people tried to keep me out," Chambers recounts with an air of disgust. "They read my portfolio and knew I was a threat before I even got a chance. I promised them I would get in. I said, 'My father fought for the unions and the union is fighting me. I'll get in.'"

"Finally I got to work at NBC. I could fight the union and had a chance to survive because I was making money. I remember going to an executive board meeting and they all said, 'Over our *dead bodies* are you going to get in.' There was a group from TV that was trying to get in with me. I promised the union that I'd learn their unionism and contracts and use it against them, and I did. This guy with a broken nose said to me one day, 'Over my dead body are you going to get in.' I said, 'Then it's over your dead body. If you don't shut up I'm going to put that broken nose on the side of your face.'"

"How ironic and bitter this was because they were trying to preserve a certain make-up culture that they thought was the epitome of good talent. It *wasn't*. They were protecting the status quo. I said, 'I'm going to bring in people that are talented. I don't give a damn what you say. I made that vow and I trained a lot of young people.'" Tom Berman (*The Devil's Rain*, *CE3K*) and Stan Winston (*Dead and Buried*) are among the many notable make-up artists Chambers has trained.

"They caused me a lot of unwarranted nights of anguish and depression. I said, 'Someone's going to pay for this in the future. I'm a hot-blooded Irishman. One day I'll hire and fire most of you.' And I did. I was going to



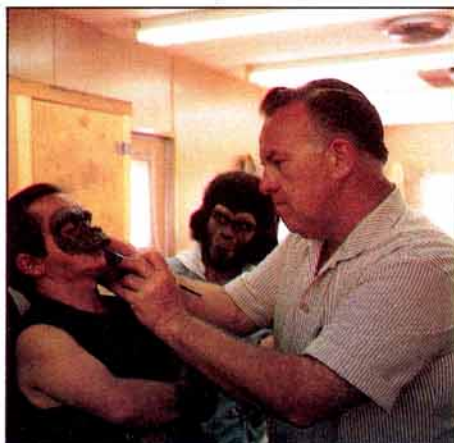
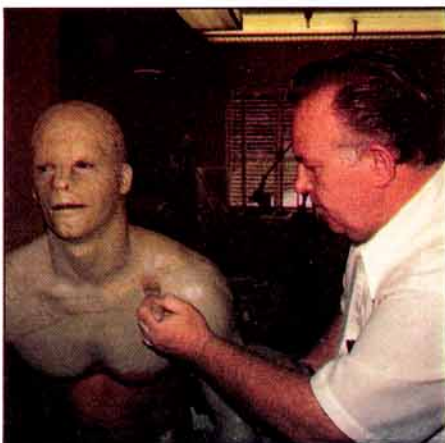
be seen and heard. I didn't know how far I'd get. But God was good to me. It wasn't gained by politics. It was gained by wearing the skin off my fingers and burning the midnight oil."

Chambers evolved David McCallum into a superior being in *The Sixth Finger* episode of *The Outer Limits* (1963) by creating three molds of McCallum's head progressing into an enlarged domed and pointed-ear humanoid. "That was in collaboration with Fred Phillips," observes Chambers. "Fred was doing the series at the time and he brought me the breakdown on what he had to have done on three changes of how McCallum's character would advance when his head grew. I did create all the make-up and Fred executed it with someone else. McCallum was a very cooperative person. Foam latex was used to make the head. We get into areas of the urethane foams and a lot of times we find they have restrictions where you are limited and don't get finely blended edges as you can with foam rubber."

PHOTO BY STEVE SANTANGELO



Left: miniature model of "Pickman's Model" made by one of Chambers' fans. Below: Chambers and his assistants work on the human snake mutation for *Sssss*; Kim Hunter looks on as Chambers prepares another ape; Chambers applies the leg scales on "Pickman's Model."



It has toxicity and sometimes it has more of an allergy-creating thing than some of the other foams. But foam rubber latex is your best type of material."

The make-up artist recalls a particular stint on *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1966) with some amusement. "That was a schlock show," declares Chambers. "Shows like *Voyage* had a collaboration between the make-up and wardrobe departments and the wardrobe fellow was dedicated to producer Irwin Allen and he made all kinds of weirdo suits for the series' creatures."

"I remember we had to make so many Blob people and it had to be done in two days. I made Blob people in a matter of a few hours. They didn't know how I was going to do it. I used plaster heads and shoulders of mannequins and got polyurethane foam, put in the catalyst and plastic, and all I did was free-flow it. I put a sheet of polyethylene over the model, then mixed up the polyurethane in batches, put the catalyst in it to foam up, and then poured it on. It foamed up in big blobs. We had all the heads we wanted. The foam then set; we airbrushed it and put weird things on it. It was a schlock accommodation to create an illusion. *Voyage* had a great audience and the kids liked it. The filmmakers were creative but I still say it was schlock. It came off all right but I would never put my name on it."

For an episode of Irwin Allen's *Lost in Space* (1965), Chambers duplicated Dr. Zachary Smith's (Jonathan Harris) head in all sizes, which was worn by Will Robinson (Billy Mumy). "That was another schlock show," Chambers sums up unequivocally.

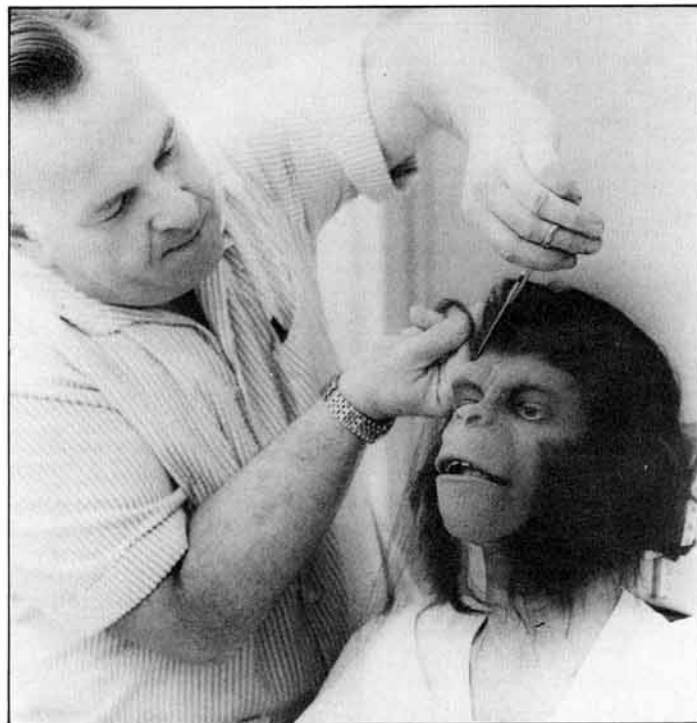


Chambers devised the famous ears for Mister Spock in *Star Trek* (1965). "I made all the Spock ears for the series," asserts Chambers. "There were two make-up artists who did the two pilots for *Star Trek*. One was Bob Dawn, a top make-up lab man. The other was Fred Phillips, whose history in motion pictures goes way back. After the pilots were made they wanted a make-up artist on the show. Gene Roddenberry came to me to do the show and I negotiated with them to do the show on the Paramount lot. It was the first time I ever decided to do a TV show on a daily basis. I thought it would be a challenge but money was the failing point. Gene was going to pay me out of his own pocket but I said no.

"Then Fred took over the series. He brought me a set of ear molds but they had been damaged so I couldn't use those molds. I had to remake the whole thing. The molds I devised were technically functional molds and it was my background in moldmaking that originally brought me to Hollywood. I then devised proper molds that you could get nice ears out of."

In the *Pickman's Model* episode of *The Night Gallery* (1971), Chambers designed a mask and costume for a horrifying reptilian-rat creature who pursued human females and lived in the sewers of Boston. Chambers credits artist Tom Wright, who created many of the macabre *Gallery* paintings, with illustrating the creature through his concept sketches.

John Chambers received an Academy Award for his excellent make-up design for *Planet of the Apes*. The work entailed a large number of facial variations to provide Charlton Heston with a variety of adversaries in the film.



PHOTOS COURTESY JOHN CHAMBERS



PHOTO © 1980 20TH CENTURY-FOX FILM CORP.

"It was a one-of-a-kind costume," the make-up man relates. "Universal came up and said, 'We need it working for next week.' My forte is that I can improvise on a shoe-string and make something work. I had one woman who worked with me for years, Pat Newman, devise and sculpt part of the creature's head. I then took molds for the reptilian skin off of the monster from Universal's *Creature From the Black Lagoon* model by using a short-cut method of mixing foam rubber, slushing it into the mold with a flat scraper and mixing it up. It saved days and hours of curing.

"We got the skin out of the mold in a half-hour, whereas it would take *hours* to run a normal mold. We then took all these bits and pieces, made hair out of the sheepskin and put it all on a leotard. We did have a mold of the head from the *Creature's* head. A lot of people liked it and it became a cult object. It was a job done really fast and I was proud of it, but it was not one of my best labors."

The List of Adrian Messenger (1963) offered Chambers his first opportunity to work on a motion picture. Chambers' artistry transformed Kirk Douglas into ten different characters ranging from a young farmer to an elderly parson. "That picture was a flop not in the sense that it was in the story or in John Huston's direction but because it was shot in black and white," Chambers readily points out. "Certain people were afraid, like Bud Westmore, who was the head of make-up at Universal at the time I had just started there as a laboratory man. Westmore felt that because there was so much make-up and so many characters color would *accentuate* it. He also believed that because we couldn't have everyone look perfect that the make-up jobs would be more recognizable in color than in black and white.

"Westmore convinced the director and producer to shoot the film in black and white, which was wrong. He was told that he was wrong by me and by many others. It was a picture made when color was in its heyday and the thing to do, and I always regretted it. When I see it on TV it looks like an old movie of the thirties or forties. However, I'm the one that did the full labor control and created all the new techniques.

"But the concept was always interfered with by Westmore. That was fine if he would have relegated part of that concept judgment to some of us. My artistic concept was far different than his. I was new at that studio but wanted to do the film so I worked in collaboration with him and yet my hands were tied. I felt all the characters looked alike. We had several people sculpting with me, but the noses, if they were humped, crooked or anything, were pretty near the same type after Westmore got his finger in there.

"The *challenge*, and we accomplished it, was to make Kirk Douglas into many characters that were believable, and it worked well. John Huston and the crew did a good job in executing the technical points of the picture. The picture was such that Kirk Douglas, who is willing to do anything for his art, wasn't needed for all the parts of the characters who were disguised, except



maybe to throw in his voice sometimes. A character actor, Jan Merlin, built very much like Douglas, played a majority of the characters in disguise. Jan never got a credit in the picture because it would have destroyed the illusion we created."

Planet of the Apes (1968) presented Chambers with his most ambitious and complicated endeavor—to create an illusion of something which never existed—talking animals, and to make them believable. He received an honorary Academy Award for his outstanding achievement on *Apes*. Chambers worked on the two *Apes* sequels and supervised the re-making of the molds and hiring of the technicians on the final two *Apes* films.

"I happened to be on the right one," discloses Chambers. "Everything clicked. The story, camera work and make-up were good. Look at *The Wiz* and the fine innovations of make-up there. But the film was a big flop. The story didn't work and there are many like that. *Planet of the Apes* was shot in 70mm color and most of it was shot outside. None of it was shot in caves. The lighting wasn't that subdued in a lot of instances. We had to perfect the make-up enough so we wouldn't destroy the illusion that we were trying to get.

"Functionally, we didn't have the option to go mechanical or get contrivances of solenoid. We had to use the musculature of the face because the muzzle of the animal was projected out an inch and a half from the natural lips. We had to devise it to fit properly so they could get as much animation out of an inanimate piece of foam as possible. It worked. I devised the lip curve of the chimps and orangutans so it would have animation in a fixed position. There are so many compound curves and planes to a lip.

"At the same time in England they were doing *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In fact, they wanted me to go over and teach their technicians how to do the laboratory make-up while I was in Europe just before I took the job on *Apes*. I didn't want that. *Apes* was my first challenge in creating that kind of animation and still not make it look like a cartoon. Was the audience going to laugh at

the apes whenever they came on the screen? Laughing at a serious sequence in a picture destroys the whole structure. This was what we were fighting.

"Let me tell you, the producers weren't intellectual geniuses. They were hard-core successful businessmen who knew how to push pictures. Richard Zanuck, then president of Twentieth Century-Fox Studios, was the one who felt that if anyone could devise it, he'd have a good picture. They tried for three and a half years to sell *Apes* and get a concept. They did several pilots but they failed because they couldn't get a concept. The Fox make-up department had done several tests which were *atrocious*. When they came to me I couldn't promise them anything because I didn't know what they wanted. My concept was all on the other end of the spectrum. They wanted human with a touch of animal. I wanted animal with a touch of human and I ultimately won out.

"Finally, Franklin Schaffner came along. Schaffner had done a lot of work on live TV and a couple of movies. (Schaffner later went on to win an Oscar for *Patton*). Schaffner had done his homework and had the scenes all storyboarded. I said to the crew, 'This is a fine director. This is the best we could have. Mark my words.' I talked with him for several hours and he agreed that animals were the way to go and to forget all the rest of it. From then on I devised the concept in a couple of days. I had done about a month and a half of pre-production work before they hired the director.

"At that time it was a very crucial time. There were the Watts riots in Los Angeles. We were involved in dealing with images of supposed mimicry of the blacks. The black actors trusted me because I had, from the beginning, asked for blacks, Asiatics and Latins, not because I was trying to give the minorities a break but because it was something that would help the picture. Most of them have dark noses, eyes and skin and the simians are dark-eyed. But the studio wouldn't take the blacks. They took the Asiatics and Latins and the blacks were hurt about that.

"A stuntman, who was head of the NAACP on the lot, came to me one day and said, 'You're an honest man because we've all dealt with you. We need an honest answer from you. Why aren't the blacks being picked for this picture?' I said, 'You know what it is? It's a backlash of discrimination. They don't want to create any situation where you might feel discriminated against. How do you like that? The studio feels because the gorilla is dark and may have Negroid features, we might be doing a caricature of the blacks because the apes are speaking creatures. We'll have gorillas that are black and chimps with the skin-tones of blacks.' He said, 'Oh, my God. Is that what it really is? Well, I'll tell you one thing. Our people want to work. We don't care what you call the creatures.' Then we had blacks in the picture.

"But we did have a lot of technical firsts on the movie. They were hard then, but

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simple when we resolved them. What normally would take six months to do we did in two and a half months making hundreds and hundreds of foam rubber pieces and pre-painting them. I devised a technique of pre-painting so we'd save hours of doing it on the person. I controlled the color by having it all pre-done and having all the perimeter work, like the edges of the appliances, finished and then blended hair over them. This controlled an awful lot of the image.

"These were a first: devising flexible paints and adhesives, developing hair techniques and lace techniques. We had all kinds of lace hairpieces before, but to have them go on compounded curves to fit periphally all around the head was really something. You needed a mass production basis to get everything ironed out. You didn't need just twenty-five wigs. You needed three hundred wigs.

"Everything had to be done as if it were a military production and that was not a big picture. But we had a lot of monkeys to take care of and that's where we had to define the military routine. I was like an old Master Sergeant. I had details of people working in certain schedules. It was like a Ford motor plant. It was piece work with so many guys painting certain things, so many guys doing hair work and all the work was done on the Fox studio compound. The make-up area looked like an old army barracks and we had to supply it with equipment, put in sinks, build lavatories and put in air conditioning in a matter of weeks. We had three shifts of make-up staffs working around the clock running rubber because rubber is not like a punch-press operation where you get the identical thing punched out every time. It's an *art*. You mix the rubber, the rubber has a setting time and by the fluctuation of temperature it might set prematurely. You never have a set control. Everything is by artistic feel. The men you had doing the work were trained. You'd run the rubber and maybe the whole batch would come out with bubbles in the muzzle or in the nose. Nothing was controlled to that extent.

"Also, if we had to we could get the chimp teeth and put them in the orangutans' mouths and nobody knew it. We had to do that many times. We made it so because the people we chose to do the character chimps and gorillas had facial structures that were large enough to accomodate many faces. And it came off well.

"For the one time in my life I had dramatic license over the cameraman and the director. I could say whether a scene was a take or not. If I saw fault with the make-up I could say, 'We've got to take it over or you're shooting that angle wrong.' And they accepted that. No other director except Schaffner would do that. I can look back on *Planet of the Apes* and it's weathered thirteen years of exposure but it hasn't been diminished."

Chambers developed an artificial hand

which met a gruesome end when John Wayne chopped off its fingers in a controversial scene from *True Grit* (1969). "I coated the hand with urethane foam and had simulated bones and channels in there where the blood was fed in from a cylinder pressure gun," details Chambers. The tubes went down into the fingers and the foam was a type which absorbed like a sponge so it absorbed the blood as you squirted it in. It stayed encapsulated through the hand because the skin on the outside was plastic.

"They cut a lot of it out. I think the script girl got sick or passed out when she saw the fingers flying because she didn't expect it or know it was going to happen that way. She didn't see them rigging the hand. The hand worked very well but the scene was eliminated when the film was shown on television."

The Island of Dr. Moreau (1977), based on H. G. Wells' novel, and which was first adapted for the screen in 1932, offered Chambers another chance to demonstrate his considerable talents when he transfigured the actors into Humanimals. The make-up, which took three and a half hours to apply on each character every day, included special rubber-mask grease paint, foam latex appliances and prosthetic devices.

"That's a picture I'm happy I worked on but its outcome was kind of tragic," says Chambers pausing momentarily. "We had too many chiefs controlling the picture. If producer Sandy Howard and director Don Taylor were left alone and we were left to our own devices instead of all the outside influences, it could have been a great picture. But they made a circus out of it. They (AIP) got a nice guy, Ralph Helfer of Animal World, who had a good hype on selling his animals. He said his animals were treated with love and kindness and wouldn't bite anyone. One of the lions picked up our stuntman who was also one of the trainers. It was lunch time and the lion got hungry. The lion grabbed the stuntman by the back of the neck and punctured the guy's neck with his teeth but the stuntman kept saying, 'Keep shooting! I've got everything under control!' as the lion was dragging him off getting ready to eat him. This whole episode left a bad taste in our mouths.

"One of my basic trainings as a young kid in the army was to make teeth. All the fangs of the lion, tiger and panther were projected fangs where I took impressions of the actors' mouths, made the fangs and attached clasps to them. We were dealing with guys who would be jumping off a hill and fighting with each other. I didn't want the actors breaking their teeth so I made all the false teeth myself and made them project out at the start of their lips.

"The fangs looked great. They locked in and snapped right in place just like a partial denture. When I had those in I took an impression of the face because the face then became distorted. I did my sculpture work over that and the lion muzzle piece would then fit right over the distorted face. I had projected enough thickness and we got a lot of animation on that but they never played it up. They took it and hoked it up.

The dialogue was hokey. We lost a lot of artistry which could have been done with the humanimals. They portrayed more of a circus atmosphere complete with wild beasts jumping through a burning barn.

"It let me down. I got so disgusted right in the middle of making the picture. There were a lot of nice people on the picture like Michael York, Richard Basehart and Nigel Davenport. One morning after I'd made my decision that it was going to be a flop I said, 'You know what? This is going to be the floppiest picture I ever worked.' I didn't know it but just before Michael York had said, 'I feel this is going to be a great hit.' York immediately turned around and said, 'John, you don't mean it.' I said, 'I'm sorry. This picture isn't going to stay in town long. This is what we call a real Mickey Mouse.' And it was. It came out with *Star Wars* and it was kind of diminished on account of that.

"I liked what we tried but all the facets didn't work. The make-up was lost. It wasn't really utilized. I don't blame anyone or all but sometimes people get carried away with wanting the movie to be a hit. There were too many chiefs like production heads who should have stayed in production. They were schlock artists who were giving directorial and creative advice. They knew how many paper clips to count but not how to create a picture.

"Screenwriters John Herman Shaner and Al Ramrus are two fine writers. They wrote a nice script which was in line with the original. It could have stood on its own. I never saw the picture. I finally saw it on television where it was cut and edited. This is how gross we got when we were devising the movie's outcome.

"Michael York and Barbara Carrera are in a rowboat heading for safety because everything on the island is bedlam. The girl is pregnant. You never know who she really is. In the end you find out she is really a black panther that Moreau made into a human. We tried several endings. For one I made small fangs and two panther eyes for her. Then it got *gruesome*. We shot the scene where he's looking at the beach and then turns around to see she had given birth to a kitten. We took a little baby cat and shaved all the hair off and put a slimy clear jelly on the cat and I said, 'There goes all the audience's popcorn.' But in the final version out in the boat Carrera wanted a normal shot of herself and she didn't want the cat teeth. You can't win them all but we had great hopes for that picture."

Chambers' dedication to his craft extends into other areas. The make-up artist supplies victims of cancer, war and accidents with prosthetic ears, noses, jaws and artificial palates, and aids his local police department by contriving imaginative disguises for the officers working undercover. Chambers recently provided the leper appliances for an upcoming television special on the life of *Father Damien* and currently works as a make-up consultant in the industry. Most of all, the always ingenious Chambers is proud of his contribution to the world of make-up artistry and the attention make-up is now receiving. Q