Peter Jackson’s Planet of the apes

**The Lord of the Apes**

In 1975 a young New Zealand boy saw Planet of the Apes and fell in love with it. As he saw the four sequels and the TV series his love of all things POTA grew.

The young boy would one day give the world the Lord of the Rings trilogy but he started film making by trying to make his own sequel to one of his favourite films.

This is the story of how Peter Jackson tried and failed to make a Planet of the Apes movie that would have been the sixth in the series, and a film that we would have wanted to see.

Planet of the Apes not only worked as a sister picture to his other favourite movie “King Kong” but fired his imagination enough to start experimenting in ape prosthetics and even took him and his friend into the world of film making. It seems without this inspiration he may not have gone on to give us such fantastic movies as The Lord of the Rings trilogy, Heavenly Creatures and his re-make of the 1933 classic King Kong.

**“*I saw Planet of the Apes on TV and was blown away by it. I loved the special effects make-up but I also loved the story. I was already a fan of King Kong-although my fascination is not really with apes and gorillas so much as with a couple of great movies that both happen to have apes in them! Never the less, both films have an intriguing theme in common: that the gap separating humans from apes is far less than we might suppose!”***

Peter and his friend Pete O’herne, began sculpting and moulding their own ape masks from plasticine with layers of locally bought latex. They would then cut up old wigs to add the hair. They even went as far as ordering foam latex mixture from Canada and creating “appliances” by cooking it in Jackson’s Mothers oven! Footage of this exists and some unpublished photographs. If you look closely at the DVD extras on Lord of the Rings, you will see a “blink or you’ll miss it” fully costumed TV gorilla soldier sitting in the Jacksons production office! (Apemania perhaps?)

Many years passed and Jackson slowly made his name along with his wife and writing partner Fran Walsh, as a shlock film maker with the likes of Bad Taste, Meet the Feebles and Braindead, but one idea had stayed with him.

**A Sixth Ape Movie.**

In October 1992 Jackson, now making a name for himself as a director, was approached by Ken Kamins of 20th Century Fox to have a meeting with producer Harry J. Ufland (Last Temptation of Christ, Night and the City and Michael Jackson’s Bad) to pitch his idea for an apes movie. It would be an original story rather than a re-make and Jackson was particularly keen to include Roddy McDowall who was the key ingredient of the apes franchise in Jackson’s eyes.

***“Fran and I had devised a storyline that continued the ape’s saga from where it left off in the fifth movie. We imagined their world being in the midst of an artistic renaissance, which made the ape government very nervous. It was a time of amazing art and we wanted Roddy McDowall to play an elderly chimpanzee that we based a little on Leonardo da Vinci. The plot involved the humans rising in revolt and a half human, half ape central character that was sheltered by the liberal apes, but hunted down by the gorillas.”***

Producer Harry Ufland was excited enough to arrange a meeting between Peter, Fran and Roddy. At this time Peter also approached Rick Baker and told him of his ape’s idea that he was soon to pitch to Fox executives and Rick Baker responded with enthusiasm. Jackson, his co-writer and wife Fran Walsh and producer Harry Ufland, met with Roddy McDowall for lunch in LA in the summer of 92 and McDowall, who had by then read Peter and Fran’s treatment for the new apes movie and who was by now in his early sixties, enthused both about the story and the possibility of creating a new ape character that felt like a “comfortable grey-haired version of his first ape, Cornelius”

***“We lunched at the Ivy with Roddy, who was very sweet. He had seen and really liked Heavenly Creatures and was kind of excited about the idea of working with us. He said “I had never wanted to be in a Planet of the Apes film again, but I love your idea and Id love you guys to make it. We should do it.”***

The group then set out to meet with the Fox executives at the Fox Studios.

***“Walking from the parking lot to the office where the meeting was to be held, Roddy gave us a running commentary on the history of the studio where he had worked for over fifty years since his early films as a child star. He’d point to a sound stage and say “That’s where we shot How green was my valley....”and he’d say, “This was the street that we used for this film...And so-and-so was shot over there...” He was full of amazing memories and in just taking that short walk with him we experienced this fantastic first-hand insight into Hollywood.”***

The meeting with Fox Executive Tom Jacobson did not go well. When Harry Ufland had previously discussed the possibility of bringing the Apes project to Fox, it had been with Joe Roth, who had now left the studio to work for Disney. Jacobson was certainly interested in a **Planet of the Apes** movie, but less so in Roddy McDowall – Peter’s memory is that he really didn’t seem to know anything about the veteran actor or understood his emotional involvement with the film series.

***“It went incredibly badly, but in the process we learned a useful lesson in Hollywood politics. Harry Ufland and Joe Roth were good friends and obviously Joe had been happy to help Harry with his Planet of the Apes project. However Tom Jacobson was not committed to any previous discussions that may have taken place. So, when Harry made remarks about Joe having said this or that, he simply looked up and said “Joe is not here anymore...!” And at this point we realised, okay, there are no allies! No matter what Fox think about a Planet of the Apes movie, they are not interested in Harry Ufland being Joe Roth’s old buddy and they don’t care about Roddy McDowall.”And as for us...Heavenly Creatures hadn’t been released at this stage, which left us with Bad Taste, Meet the Feebles and Braindead as our films, and they were films that none of those people had seen. So we walked out and somehow, at that meeting, the project died.***

When Peter and Fran had left the offices of Fox after pitching their idea for sixth Planet of the Apes movie, it had seemed that that particular door had closed, but with the passing of a few years (and executives) it opened for a second time. Accompanied by producer Ken Kamins, Peter met with two of Fox’s senior personnel, Peter Chermin and Tom Rothman, over lunch at the Hotel Bel-Air to discuss his script idea for the apes.

***“We re-pitched exactly the same idea to these two high-powered Fox executives who’d never heard it before. Once again it was met with a lot of enthusiasm but when we launched into this long explanation about how they’d spent a lot of money developing a potential Planet of the Apes film-though not with us because we worked on spec and never earned a cent!- and how they already had one or two failed screenplays. We heard of various versions including one by Terry Hayes, who wrote Mad Max 2 AND 3 and went on to write Vertical Limit. Anyway, at the end of this preamble, they said that they’d like to use our story, and have Fran and I write the script and me direct but they also wanted James Cameron to produce it for Arnold Schwarzenegger to star in it. “We have a real commitment” they said, “for this to be a vehicle for Schwarzenegger, why not meet with James Cameron before you leave town and pitch him your ideas? We think as a group you’ll make a great team....”***

Back at their hotel Peter and Fran discussed the proposition and were of one mind..

***“It felt bad. Not because I don’t like Cameron or Schwarzenegger, I’m actually a big fan of their films, but Fran and I are incredibly independent spirits, you know, and we are very protective of our work. We thought that if we had James Cameron as the producer and Arnold Schwarzenegger as the star, I would have absolutely no power, and if, for example, there were a conflict with Schwarzenegger then Cameron would be likely to back him rather than me. I didn’t know for certain, it was just assumptions, but it didn’t feel like a work situation that we should put ourselves into. So we declined to take the meeting and, this time round, it was us who passed on the project. We finally met Jim Cameron in 2005 and we found him to be charming. I couldn’t help wondering what might have happened if we’d said “Yes” to the deal...........”***

In 1996 Fox approached Jackson again but this time the lawyers killed the deal dead when two other studios were mooted as possible partners in the Jackson Ape movie.

In 1997 Fran and Peter, who by now were becoming players in the film industry and actively involved in the development of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, played with the idea of resurrecting the Apes movie idea as back up project, while they got the Rings trilogy off the ground. The death of Roddy McDowall a few months later caused Peter to lose whatever remnants of interest he had left for the idea.

Fox eventually went with Tim Burton as director and even got Zanuck involved as producer but the result although enjoyable to some, was not what the fans wanted. The make-up and effects design was of course as Rick Baker perfect as you can get but the movie lacked the kind of human/ape story and even the kind of cast that the people and fans of the original franchise had offered.

To think that some executive at Fox had treat Roddy so shamefully and had turned away the team that went on to create Lord of the Rings is saddening to an old ape fan like myself. To have seen a sixth movie as part of the original time line with Roddy giving one last swan (ape?) song would have been magnificent.

Maybe Fran and Peters story will be picked up at some point in the future but with the new on/off again “Caesar” movie being somehow an apes movie and then again nothing to do with Planet of the apes (??!!) then maybe it would be best to remember and enjoy what we do have: five great films, a live action TV series and some charming cartoons. Not forgetting the huge amount of written and graphic depictions of our favourite planet both authorised and some fan led.

Written by John B Kirtley

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**To read more of Peter Jacksons story get a copy of Brain Sibley’s book**

**Peter Jackson: A film-makers journey. Harper and Collins**