

## Interview with Paul Dehn

by Chris Knight and Peter Nicholson

31 January, 1972, London, England

Paul Dehn (screenwriter of the *Planet of the Apes* sequels) began his film career with an Academy Award for co-authorship (with James Bernard) of the original story for *Seven Days to Noon* (1950) – a doomsday scenario about a neurotic scientist threatening to destroy London with an atomic device. Born in Manchester, England on 5 November, 1912, Dehn was a graduate of Oxford University. He served a stint as a major in Special Forces cloak-and-dagger work during World War II, an experience which stood him in good stead for future scenario material. Before he began his career as a screenwriter he wrote film reviews for British newspapers, a part-time occupation which lasted nearly 30 years. Exceptionally versatile, he also wrote four books of poetry, numerous song lyrics and sketches for musical shows, and an opera libretti.

Besides the screenplays for *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* and *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*, and the original story of *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, Dehn was the screenwriter of *Orders to Kill* (British Academy Award for Best Screenplay, 1963), the James Bond thriller *Goldfinger* (with Richard Maibaum, 1964), and two rather more grimly realistic spy stories adapted from books by John Le Carre, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1965) and *The Deadly Affair* (1967), co-adaptor for a knockabout version of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967), with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, and the author of *Fragment of Fear* (1968). His last screenplay was an all-star adaptation of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974), for which he was nominated for a further Academy Award. Paul Dehn died at the end of his 64th year, in October 1976.

*How did you get the assignment to script Beneath the Planet of the Apes?*

I was really just asked. I'd got to know Arthur Jacobs before on a project that never came off and when *Apes One* was a success he very kindly asked me if I would like to do a sequel and, having seen the film, I said yes.

*What was your reaction to receiving an assignment of a science fiction nature, and did you take it seriously?*

I've always wanted to do it and that's why I leapt at it. I am one of those writers who like darting about from one type of film to another and when I'd collaborated on *Goldfinger* I wanted to do a truthful spy story instead of a fantastic one which is why I did *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *The Deadly Affair*, and then I thought, 'Oh God, I'm going to be typed as a spy writer', and then I did *Taming of the Shrew*, as I've always wanted to do a Shakespearean play and that really has been the history of my life, that I don't want to get typed, and in a way it's kind of a curse, because I'm quite good at a lot of things but not very, very good at one particular thing.

*How did you go about developing ideas for the Apes sequels?*

The plot of *Apes Two* was suggested by the memorable last shot of *Apes One*: the half-buried Statue of Liberty. This implied that New York itself lay buried beneath what the Apes called 'the Forbidden Zone'. It remained only to people the underground city with Mutants descended from the survivors of a nuclear bomb dropped on New York 2,000 years earlier, and, thus, to motivate a war between expansionist Apes and peaceable but dangerously sophisticated Mutants resulting in the final destruction of Earth.

# Evolution = $MC^2$

by Paul A. Woods

When Paul Dehn took over as *Apes* screenwriter for the sequels, he inherited 'Hasslein's theory of time' from Rod Serling. This had been inspired by Pierre Boule's description of Ulysse Merou's spacecraft travelling 'at the speed of light minus *epsilon*': a variation on Einstein's theory of relativity, insisting any object moving at the speed of light will jump ahead in the space-time continuum. Dehn's screenplay for *Beneath* referred to 'a Hasslein curve', conforming to Einstein's suggestion that the geometry of space-time can be altered by a block of mass energy to create a time warp. The concept was expanded in *Escape*, when the energy released by the Alpha-Omega Bomb propelled Cornelius and Zira in the opposite direction along the same warp. And so the *Apes* cycle, at halfway point, became the saga of how a loop in time allowed a reverse-evolutionary future to subvert the present.

Ingenuity originally sprang from expediency, as the scriptwriter met demands from the producers and the studio that: a) 'Apes live', and the show must go on despite the planet being destroyed; b) with each sequel granted a progressively lower budget, the most expedient device was to bring the story back into the present day. **'The whole thing has become a very logical development in the form of a circle', explained Paul Dehn. 'I have a complete chronology of the time circle mapped out, and when I start a new script, I check every supposition I make against this chart to see if it is correct to use it.'** Despite this, and his ingenious expansion of concepts introduced by Boule, contradictions arose which are noted throughout this book.

The most basic contradiction lay at the heart of the initial concept. The shock ending of *Planet of the Apes* posited that nuclear war had put the natural order into reverse, causing cerebral deterioration whilst somehow advancing our simian cousins. This was reinforced by the A-bomb-fixated *Beneath*, where ape civilisation seems as much an outgrowth of nuclear catastrophe as that of the mutants. According to the later films, however, this no longer holds true: in the decade between the events of *Conquest* and the disappointing *Battle*, even the most brutish gorillas have learned basic English (cutting short the evolutionary rise predicted by Cornelius and Zira by little short of two millennia). Caesar – like the human Taylor in the unproduced *Planet of the Men* – has dragged his brethren out of their evolutionary hole simply by setting a strong example. As the President recognises in science fiction writer Jerry Pournelle's novelisation of *Escape*, the arrival of Caesar's parents and the threat it posed was a paradox: 'They create their own future! If they didn't come here to be their own great-great grandparents, they couldn't exist at all.' Thus evolution, like time, has become curved or circular, circumnavigating its own linear development.

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*Are there likely to be further sequels after the next one, Conquest of the Planet of the Apes?*

Oh yes, there's room for one if anyone else wants to do it. I'm not backing out yet, but I'm getting a very strong feeling someone else ought to do the *Apes* screenplays from now on.

*Tell us something about Conquest.*

It is about that intermediate stage which, you remember, there was a plague of cats and dogs in *Apes Three* which was only spoken about, when all the cats and all the dogs on Earth had died, so the human race was without pets, which was intolerable and they started looking around for something else and began to get monkeys, which was all mentioned in *Apes Three*. The monkeys were, at first, pets like dogs, and like dogs it was found that they could be taught to do simple things, menial tasks like fetching a newspaper, bringing in master's slippers, and being apes they were far more intelligent than dogs, so very soon they began to do very much more difficult things like bed making, cooking, sweeping and cleaning and they became the servants of mankind and having begun as pets they end, as our film opens, as slaves. It's a very curious thing that the *Apes* series has always been tremendously popular with negroes who identify themselves with the apes. They are Black Power just as the apes are Ape Power and they enjoy it greatly.

*How long does it take you to work on a first draft for one of the Apes films?*

I gauge that it takes me at most ten weeks to write a first draft but in the case of *Apes Three* the story suddenly took over and I got totally involved and the first draft was finished after three weeks, but that very rarely happens.

At the end of ten weeks it goes the round of executives, the producer and officials of the company and the actors and then the comments come in and then you sit down and page by page do the first major rewrites. Then what usually happens is that the budget is made and the film usually turns out far too big, because we always think on epic lines, we must, but since the first *Apes* film, which was done before the slump, our budgets are much more restricted now, but we have to keep what is known as a 'big look' for the picture. In some cases, the budget restricted us in small things, for example a 'crowd' of nine apes became a 'crowd' of two apes.

*Is the series likely to carry on for some time to come?*

It's anybody's guess, isn't it? While I was out there [in California], Arthur Jacobs said he thought this would be the last so I fitted it together so that it fitted in with the beginning of *Apes One*, so that the wheel had come full circle and one could stop there quite happily, I think.

I'm afraid the true answer is to wait and see how much money this one takes, as each one has made just a little bit less each time, but one can't really tell, as they're still going the rounds around the world, so until, maybe, two years time they may find that the new ones have made just as much. It is largely a question of money.