

URKO UNLEASHED

An interview with Mark Lenard of the CBS-TV series, *Planet of the Apes*, by Chris Claremont.

29 October 1974

PLANET OF THE APES: I guess the first basic question is how did you get into the show itself?

LENARD: How'd I get into *Planet of the Apes*? Well... just like I'd get into any other series. My agent heard about it—I had heard about it but I didn't even know it was a series; I thought it was going to be a special or something... Then, one day in May, I was asked if I was interested in going down and reading for it. So I went down to the office—and I must admit that I had kind of peculiar feelings about it, reading for the gorilla.

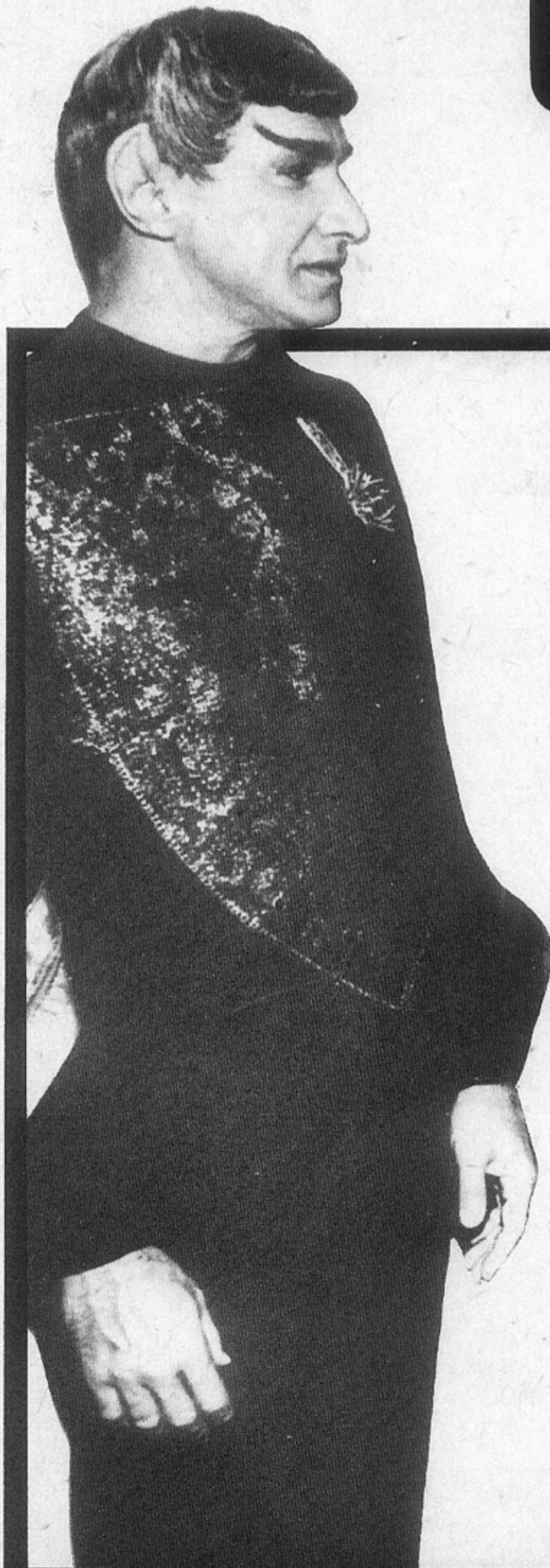
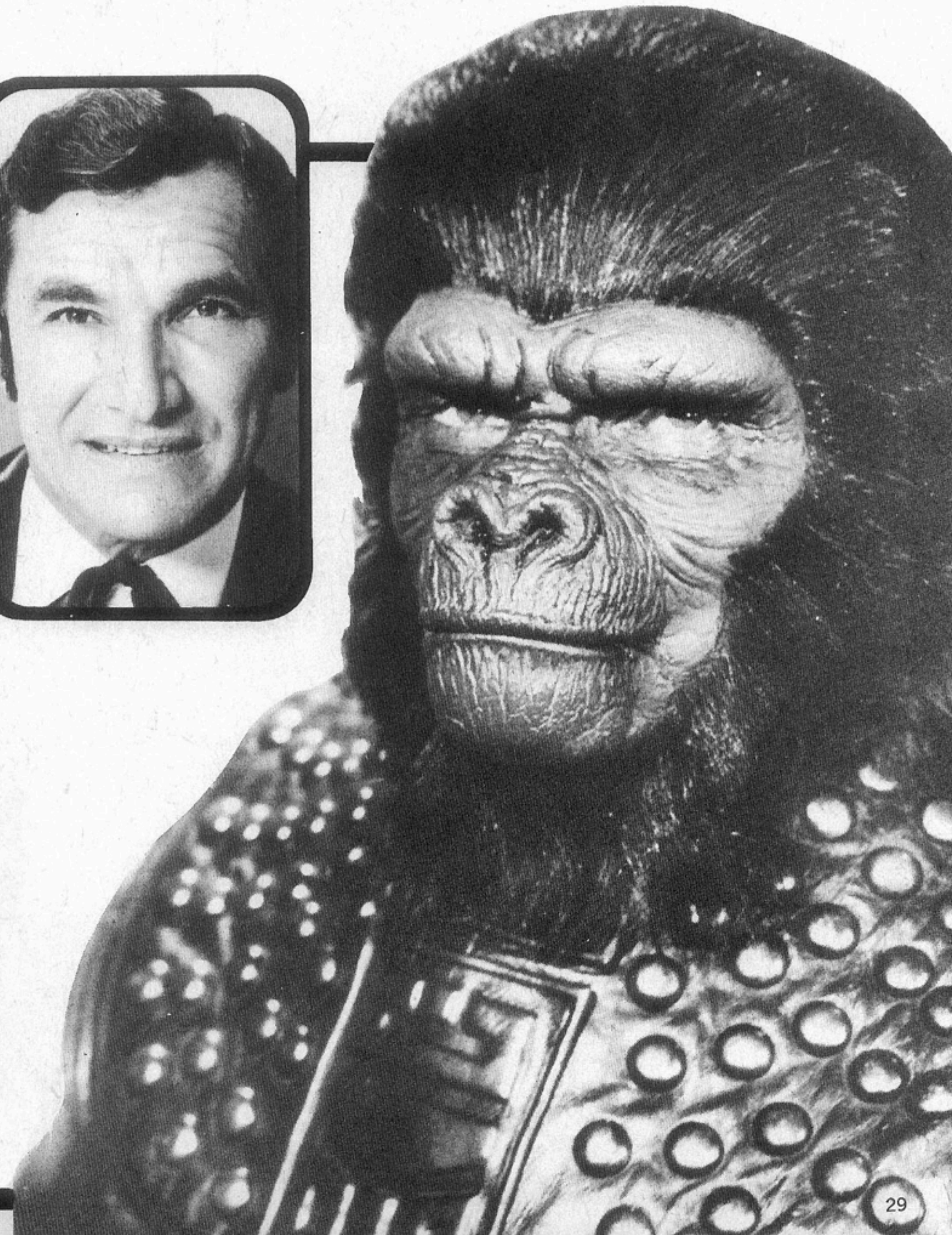
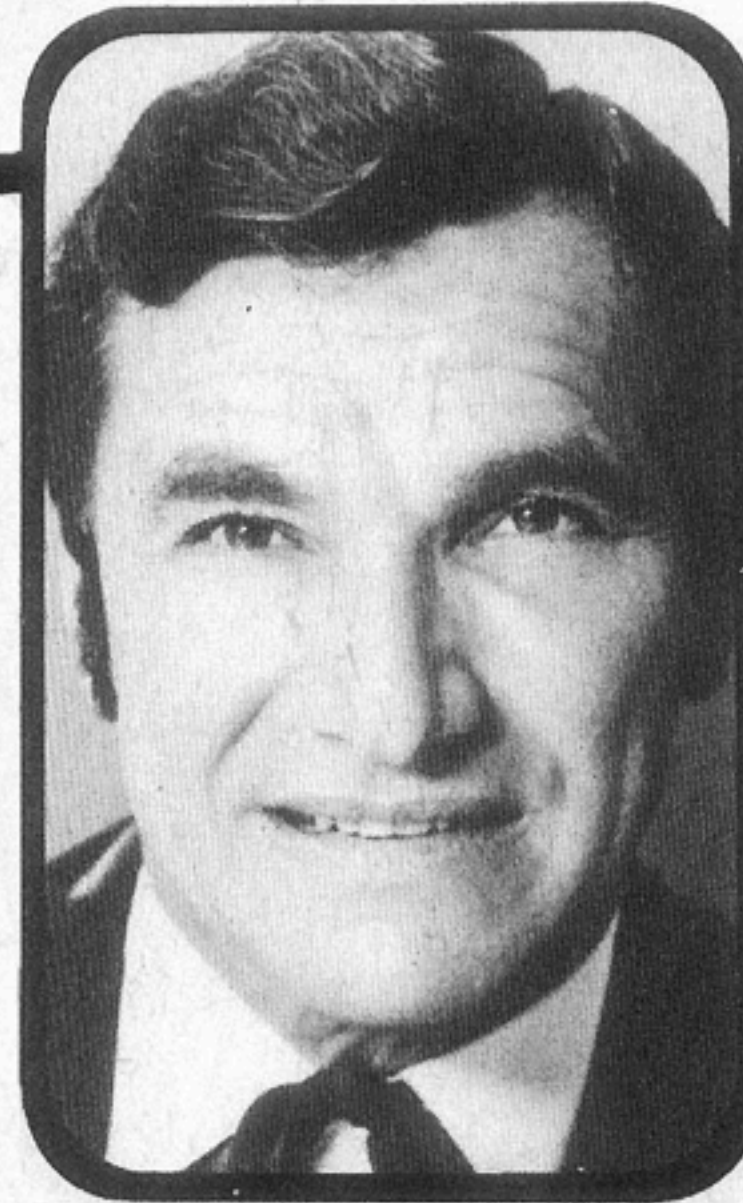
But I was kind of—I was a little bit disappointed, I guess. Or my feelings were hurt a little bit. I think that was my attitude towards it but then I thought about it—I actually talked about it to several people—including directors and others. I said, well, *Maurice Evans* played an ape; he's a fine, Shakespearian actor, and lots of very important actors had played apes. And that was the thing that kept me going.

So I went down and I read for the part of the gorilla—there were an awful lot of people there, and all kinds. And I read for it, and I never expected to get it. The next day there were readings for Zaius, as I found out later on, and the day after that they called couples down to the studio. And there were three couples: one Zaius and one Urko—*Ursus*, as he was called at the time; they changed the name to Urko—and each of them read again, together. I read with *Booth Colman*; but I found out that the studio had already chosen—decided on us—and were just discussing it with CBS.

And it was as simple as that. And then it was a question of negotiations and all that sort of thing; and deciding what to do. It was a series and its potential at the time—y'know, everybody thought it was going to be a raging, roaring success and I think it will be yet; of course, starting not quite there at the top, for various reasons, but everybody expected it to be a blockbuster. There's nothing like being with a top show. And I thought that I would have much more time than I've had. I thought that I would work a couple of days a show and have lots of time to do other things—writing and directing—so it was for those reasons that I decided to go ahead with it.

APES: Had you seen any of the film series?

LENARD: Oh, yes. I saw the first one, which—of the ones I've seen—made the deepest impression on me. I think that's partially because of the shock value of the whole thing. I didn't know what to expect and I was

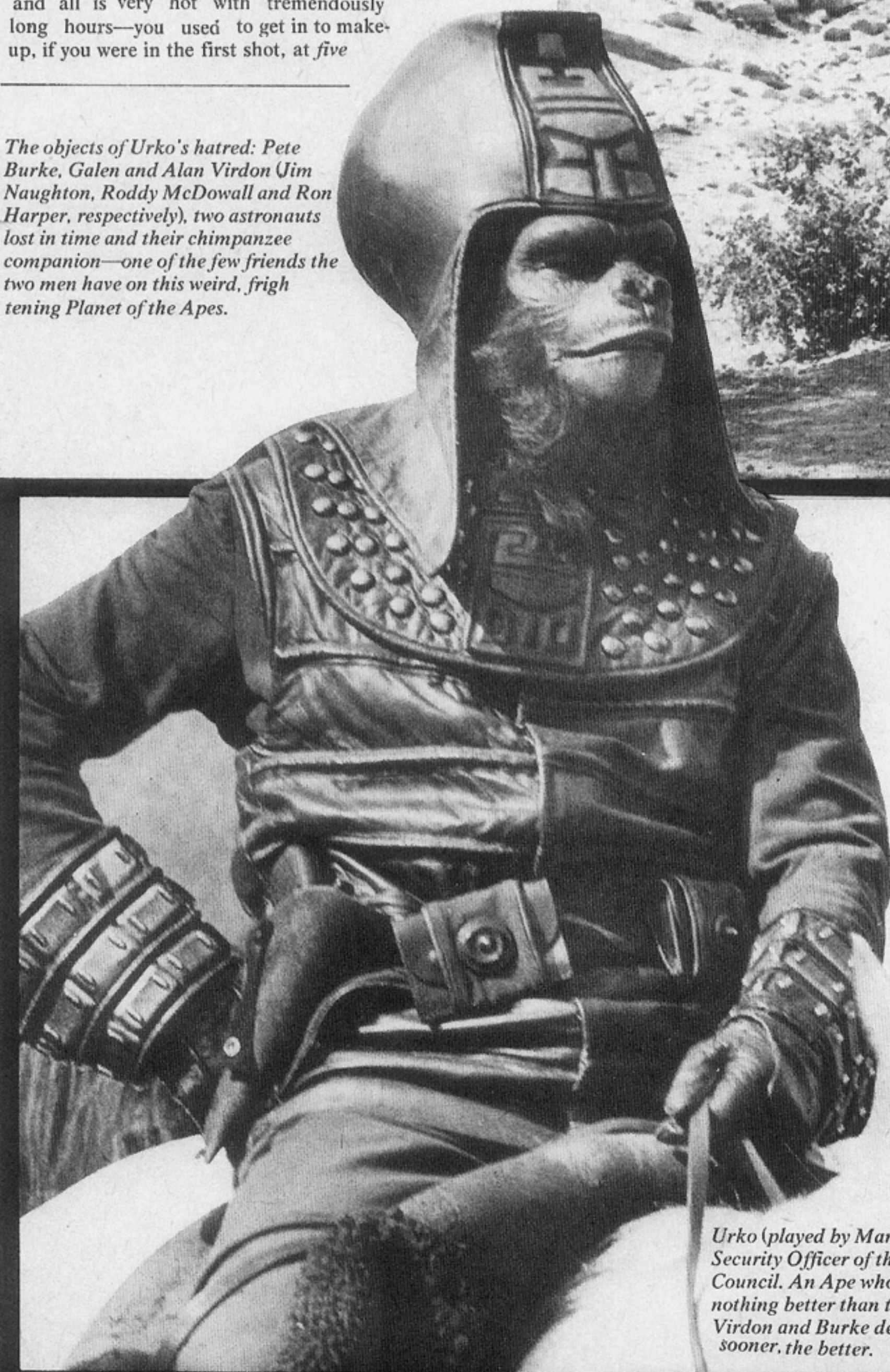


fascinated with it, but I never dreamed of playing an ape.

APES: How do you find working under—working through—the application?

LENARD: Well, I'll tell you. It's a bitch. It is not easy. It's very uncomfortable and the costume and all is very hot with tremendously long hours—you used to get in to make-up, if you were in the first shot, at five

The objects of Urko's hatred: Pete Burke, Galen and Alan Virdon (Jim Naughton, Roddy McDowall and Ron Harper, respectively), two astronauts lost in time and their chimpanzee companion—one of the few friends the two men have on this weird, frightening Planet of the Apes.



Urko (played by Mark Lenard), Chief Security Officer of the Ape High Council. An Ape who would like nothing better than to see Galen, Virdon and Burke dead. The sooner, the better.



in the morning—and stay there for three hours; now they're going to bring people in at four in the morning—I don't know if that will be for the studio but certainly for location at the ranch because, out there, there are places where you don't have any light at 3:30 in the afternoon. And that makes it very difficult.

But as far as wearing the stuff is concerned, when it gets hot—or when it gets very cold—it's very uncomfortable. It's a constant kind of strain. It took me, I think, 'til the third show to be completely free and unaware of the make-up.

At first, I was—y'see, you hear a lot of stories: stories came from Roddy and stories came from make-up men who worked on the movies, and others, and they tell you that you can't move your face too much, because it loosens everything up and you can't eat—or you have to sit in front of a mirror to eat, or you have to drink liquids all day long, all kinds of things. Which were wrong, I discovered.

And I find now that I can do anything I want in the make-up—I can laugh, smile, anything. And you get used to the strange muffled sound; there's hair and everything all around your face and your ears and you don't hear yourself and you're not sure that you're talking or that you can be understood—but after you get used to it, and it took me, as I say, until about the third show. It just happened like a flash—and from then on it was just as though I didn't have anything on at all. Easy.

Except that I have to maintain the posture of a gorilla, which isn't easy; I have to walk like a gorilla, and all that sort of thing. And you do character things, as though you were playing an old man, and one of them is, like, twitching your nose; y'know, moving your face. And that seems to help bring things to life. But it's like acting in any other medium; it's what you feel that comes through, and your voice, of course, is very important, but the emotion is more important. And you can be in repose or

almost any way in the scene, just so the scene has good strong feeling—and it comes through. Of course, it has to be shot properly; in this case, the close-ups are, by far, the best. And profiles are all right if they're close enough, otherwise you lose a lot of the expression.

APES: I know that when I was out on the Coast, you were shooting the San Francisco episode ("The Trap")—the scene between you and Jim Naughton in the subway station. I noticed when I saw the episode telecast that there were a fair number of close-ups of you and Naughton actually rolling around in the rubble, fighting. Did that put any special kind of strain... I mean, extreme physical action—riding, fighting...

LENARD: I don't do that. I used to do all the riding, but I have a double now. We all do. And the things like falling off the horse, or falling through the roof, and all that, was done by Leo Jones.

APES: But, the physical action in a scene... does it create any additional strain, doing it under the application?

LENARD: Well, you know, you can't get hit in the face; it'd ruin your make-up. But, no, it doesn't... the stuff we did there in "The Trap" where I was pulling Naughton around and all that, that was all right; it was sort of fun. There's no great danger. I mean, if you can do physical action, you can do it, with or without make-up. You know you have added encumbrances because of it, you have to maintain the posture, and do things like a gorilla, but it comes through different phases.

In any series, things evolve. They start with a general premise, you know, and then, depending on what comes up, ideas change. And one of the things that they've done that I don't like is the humans kind of beating up the

gorillas, which is absurd. So, in that particular episode, I had something to do about it and I made sure that the, y'know, relationship between the two as far as strength goes was maintained, that Urko was much stronger, that gorillas are much stronger than the human and the only way the human could overcome Urko was through guile, through trickery.

And that's how he did it, eventually, in the end.

APES: I saw in one of the episodes a scene where an astronaut actually does beat up an ape.

LENARD: Yeah, they do that; they do that with regularity. In fact, they did it in one episode which will be very interesting, set in a hospital. Burke is captured—the episode is “The Interrogation,” and is about brainwashing. The Apes capture Burke and there is this very intelligent scientist, Wanda, played by *Beverly Garland*, and she is a female scientist; and Zaius thinks that this brainwashing is a way that they will determine what makes these Astronauts tick, and thus eliminate the danger. There's a scene in the hospital where they're invaded by Galen and Virdon and there's a great deal of fighting and semi-beating up of gorillas and what not...

APES: I've noticed over the past six or seven weeks that Urko—as a part—has been a much more regular

supporting character than Zaius. Was that intended from the beginning or was that one of the things that evolved?

LENARD: I think they were intended to be kind of equal, originally, but like I said, you never know. First of all, with a series, you decide what you want to do, of course, but then it depends on what scripts come in, what materials; you get story ideas and a lot of it depends on the story editor—or editors, depending on how many there are.

I think it's been easier; I mean, it's easier to decide what Urko has to do within the show. He's obviously the antagonist and he really makes most of the plots go; he's there as a threat. Zaius—other than the first episode, where he was with Galen—kind of works in conjunction with Urko, and I don't think they have quite figured out yet just what they're going to do with him. I know he's very good and they like him very much, but this is one of the things that happens.

I did a series before; we had excellent roles all the way through. But the last four or five shows of the series we got a new story editor and there were about seven regular characters and he really didn't know what to do with them, and so I began getting smaller parts; they were not only smaller, they were just not me, you know—they just had no meaning, it was just sort of filling in. It's all kind

of complicated. Stories don't come out of thin air and sometimes the stories are farmed out as stories, but the scripts that the writers bring in are just...they sometimes don't work, even with fewrites.

APES: Do you find, acting in a series with scripts being done by different people and with different directors, that most of the responsibility for maintaining your character is up to you?

LENARD: Yeah. Oh sure.

APES: You have a large amount of say in what is or is not in character?

LENARD: Well, you certainly do about what is or is not in character, and about a lot of other things, too, depending on, y'know, the individual and how good his judgement is and how much you can discuss with the particular director. There's a lot of latitude there. You don't just change the script, you may...the script is a script but it's a piece of paper. It's on paper. When the scene comes to life it may turn out totally different.

I do a lot of changing and a certain amount of improvising with the other actors and with the director; we don't change the script itself too much, though we do change the scene. Or else we kind of recreate it, y'know,

from the paper to the tube, to the film. It's very flexible, and the people who are in the series, the regulars, are the ones who know the most about what the whole Ape culture is supposed to be like, what their characters have been like, and how to be consistent. At first, it was difficult, we had to send down memos, or make quick calls to producers or somebody saying, would they do this, would they do that, and so forth.

And there was nobody who knew except the producers and the writers, at first; but that's changed now.

APES: Basically, with a series, it's a very...fast production schedule; do you feel that there is ever enough adequate rehearsal time?

LENARD: I think the people who worry about that the most are the directors, because they're the ones that are pressured. They've got a seven day shooting schedule, which is adequate for an ordinary series—I mean, for television—but for this show, it's not enough; they should have, probably, eight days. And it depends, it depends on the director, his temperament, the organization; the crew has a lot to do with it. They're an excellent, excellent crew on this show, very fine technicians. Very experienced. In fact, Jerry Finnerman—who is the Director of Photography—was the cameraman on the first show that I did, *Star Trek*. Sometimes, they take

In a climactic sequence from “The Cure,” Urko challenges the authority of Dr. Zaius (Booth Colman)...



...and is forced to back down.

takes that you wouldn't ordinarily—I mean, that you might want to do again, particularly toward the end of the day. I don't have a lot of trouble with that; sometimes, it depends.

APES: I guess that harkens back to the question I was groping towards before: do you feel it affects you as an actor?

LENARD: Oh, sure; I don't think you can work exclusively in a series for a long time without being affected by it, but I also think it's very valuable. I think you learn how to use the time that you have most effectively. They don't push you.

You see, if you're a series regular—if you're a guest, that's something else again—but if you're a series regular and you don't like it, y'know, and you want to do a scene again or to rehearse it again, they may not let you reshoot it, but you can certainly break off in the middle if it's not going right. And if you feel that you need a little more preparation, you can demand it.

Well, you can ask for it.

I mean, they're usually saying, "let's get going," and "we gotta be moving," but if you stamp your feet a little and grunt, they'll give you the time. Sometimes you come up to the necessity, y'know, of having just a certain amount of time and you do your best work. The things that suffer, of course, are things like production values, technical aspects; they might need more time. That takes up the bulk of the time, anyway, in shooting. The acting takes up a minority of the time.

APES: Does the fact that a large proportion of the day is spent just standing around, or waiting for a new scene to be set up, or getting made-up, or getting the application fixed—does that wear you down?

LENARD: Oh, yes—yeah. Oh, it's very tiring; the whole thing is tiring, because just being in that damned suit, in that make-up, all day long is kind of a drain. At first it used to take me the whole weekend to get feeling normal again. One day off wasn't enough, because, without realizing it, being in that thing is a kind of a . . . strain.

I don't notice it; y'know, it's in your mind, so it's really a sort of mind control, and you've got to turn it off. Some people, some actors just can't do this show because they're claustrophobic or else they have a thing about that; and you really get encased in it, with the appliances and the make-up and the hair and the wig and the helmet and God knows what all; it can drive you crazy.

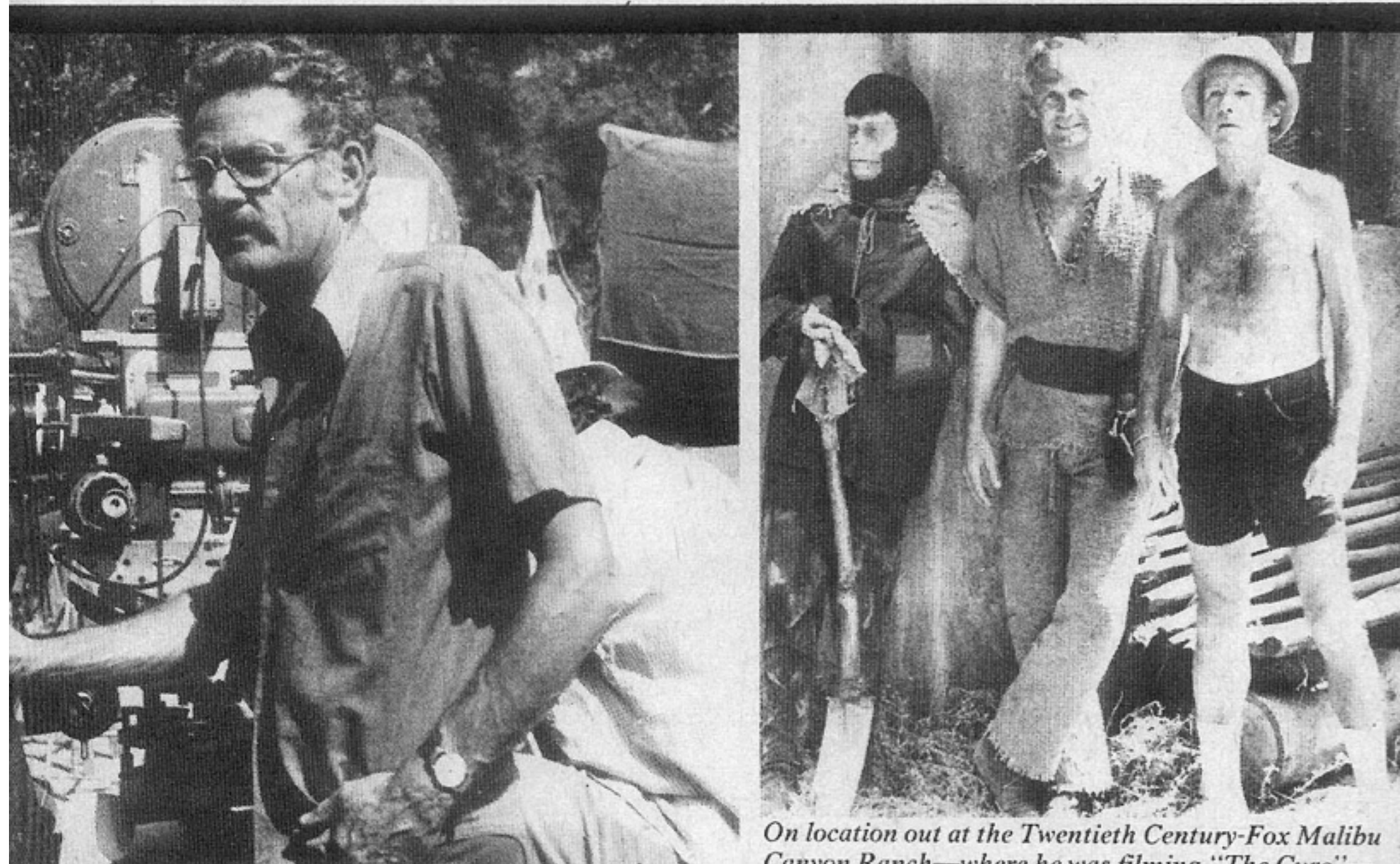
But if you're fairly relaxed there is a strain without you being aware of it. And towards the end of the day, it really wears you out, and you're really tired.

And, of course, the hours are very long.

APES: How do you find dealing with people—or vice versa—wearing the application?

LENARD: Well, I'll tell you. I just had a director in the horse race episode who had never met me, never seen me before; and, as Urko, I'd done several days of shooting and had a late call, so I went out to the Fox Ranch early and said hello to him. He got a funny look on his face, and I said, "you don't remember me, do you?" And he said, "well, I've seen you somewhere; I've seen your face somewhere." And I told him I was Urko. He turned crimson, blushed, and got embarrassed.

I have worked with other gorillas and so forth on the show who were guests, and we've worked together without ever seeing each other's faces. When they finally take off their make-up and clean up, you look over and there's a stranger. It's a very funny feeling.



Director Arnold Lavan—director of various *Planet of the Apes* episodes, including "The Trap."

On location out at the Twentieth Century-Fox Malibu Canyon Ranch—where he was filming "The Cure"—*Apes* Director Bernard McEveety relaxes with Roddy McDowall and Ron Harper.



APES: The first day I was on the Fox lot, Roddy McDowall finished shooting and as he was walking back to his dressing room he just peeled off a huge chunk of his application—he started to, anyway—and it was like, who is that person? You had to look twice to be sure...

LENARD: It's very odd. And, of course, now it's a little more common around the lot—but at first you couldn't walk down the street at Twentieth Century-Fox without somebody making a crack; it was like an obligation. Especially the men.

36 And the girls would kind of look shyly. And now they

aren't even making cracks. But everyone felt obliged to make some sort of remark, while you're suffering in this damn' thing. I remember a guy stopping a car and he said, "I gotta see this; I gotta see." And here it was six or seven o'clock in the evening and I was just dragging back to the make-up room to remove my make-up. You get a little surly sometimes.

But the kids are fascinated.

APES: Yeah, it's incredible. The little kids eyes would shine like saucers every time they came near an ape; it was just like they... *believed* it.

(Left).

A somewhat lighter side of Planet of the Apes; looking at these scenes, one might say: Where once the Apes stood supreme...

... Man might rule once more! Then again, one might not.

As the villagers scatter in terror, Urko and his gorillas conduct a lightning raid on an outlying human settlement.



LENARD: Oh yeah. They love it. Well now there are kids that come around, little ones, that want to meet Urko. You ask them what they want to be and they say, "I want to be Urko."

APES: How do you feel about that? Having been involved with two incredibly popular series from that point of view—*Star Trek* and *Apes*—how does it feel being the focus of this kind of mass attention?

LENARD: Well, I don't know. I've been too busy to really... it hasn't, y'know, it hasn't... I haven't had any

great obligations, as I did with some of the others, with personal appearances and that sort of thing.

Being in a series—in a popular series—is very good. It's good for you, and it's good for your ego; it's good for your career and it's good for your pocketbook and it also, y'know, opens other avenues for you. This is awfully hard work and I'm much busier than I thought I'd be, as I said before, so I don't have the time I wanted to do everything, but otherwise there's nothing wrong.

Except most of the time after I take off my make-up, people don't know me as Urko; they only know me from the other things that I've done. And they may say, I 37



Urko in front of his troops—the average working day for Mark Lenard begins at 4 AM for make-up and usually ends around 8 in the evening; fourteen hours a day, three-to-five days a week.

In full make-up and costume, under a late summer sun and blisteringly hot arc lamps, it can get a trifle warm in full make-up and costume, 100 degrees or better on a hot day—and you thought acting was all fun and games.

haven't seen you lately, although I'm on quite a bit; there are a lot of re-runs and other things—I haven't done anything outside of *Planet of the Apes* since the end of June, when we started shooting, cause I haven't had time to do any other shows.

APES: Does it bother you, the fact that people identify the ape, but not the man underneath?

LENARD: Yeah. Well, no—not anymore. But it did at first. There were a couple of articles in the paper, pictures and so forth; and they said, here is a picture of *Ron Harper* being knocked off his horse by Urko. No name, just *Urko*. That bugged me, sure, something like that, where I'm Urko and not the actor. But that's been rare, that sort of piece. I think that humans have a tendency to think of animals as *animals*, and refer to them as Rex or Prince or Urko, whatever they happen to be, because on several occasions they don't mention the Apes names; it's funny.

APES: Playing an Ape, has it given you any kind of new insight into the relationship between humans and animals?

LENARD: Oh, yeah; well that's the crux, I think, of the whole series. It may not always come to grips with it, though I think it did in "The Trap" and still does periodically—much more so in the movies. I'd like to see more of that; I think it's the kind of investigation of what the Ape culture would be like and you have free rein to deal with our own culture through the kind of comparison with the Ape culture. I think it can be a very fine series, provided it continues.

APES: If the show does continue—if it gets picked up for another season—is there anywhere you'd like it to go in terms of concept or in terms of the Apes and the humans, their relationship?

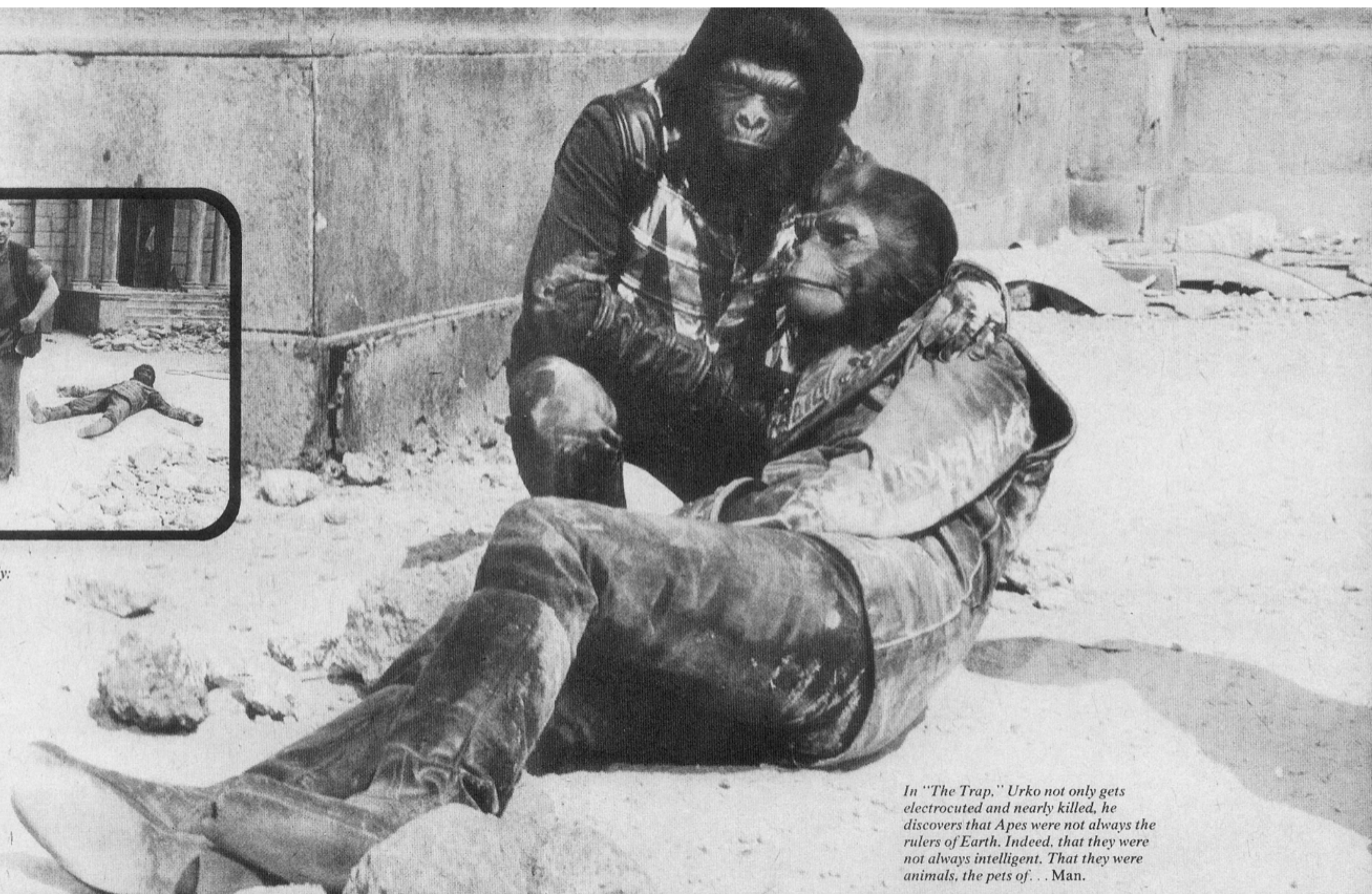
LENARD: My feeling has always been that the Apes are the interesting ones. When I saw the first movie, I liked that the humans were mute. I accepted the fact that in a series you've got to have more latitude—you're playing for younger kids and so you've got to tone some things down. I would like to see them investigate the Apes culture more, the Apes character, and abandon this whole idea of the astronauts saving the poor Apes with their technology and their...wiliness and more advanced scientific knowledge and what-not.

The Apes *do* have a fear of humans and their science; that's been expressed, because of Mankind's violent nature, but it's not really been too consistent. I don't mind a few shows like that, I think there's room for lots of variety, like the Horse Race episode, which was directed by a funny sort of western director; he brought humor into it, lots of fun and a kind of carnival atmosphere with horse racing.

Urko goes around to all his prefects and fixes the race and it's sort of fun. But it's done well—it's not quite as serious as some of them. It's a nice change of pace. And I think there's room for lots of areas. I'd like to see more of the mystery of being on a strange planet brought into it—the relationship between the humans and the Apes. And as I said, much more about the Ape culture, investigating what a planet would be, how animals like that have evolved in a very short time—what they would have taken from the humans and what they would bring from their own native beings into their own native society. I think it's fascinating.



A lot of film and TV acting is just a matter of waiting for a shot to be ready; case in point: Urko, Virton, Galen, Burke and a gorilla waiting for 'the Word' in one of the final scenes from "The Trap."



In "The Trap," Urko not only gets electrocuted and nearly killed, he discovers that Apes were not always the rulers of Earth. Indeed, that they were not always intelligent. That they were animals, the pets of... Man.

I don't think it should get into the area of science—I notice in *TV Guide* or something, the show is billed as Science Fiction, which of course it is—but I don't think it should get into the area of science fiction that *Star Trek* did. I think it would all have to be based on what is probable, not just possible. But you can go into other areas, like the Forbidden Zone or, y'know, strange isolated areas where things have not changed, or where they *have* in some peculiar way. I have a number of ideas that—if we're still on—I'd like to work out myself.

APES: Y'know, from our point of view it's very strange that the show isn't doing as well as was expected, because PLANET OF THE APES is one of the most popular

magazines we've ever published.

LENARD: Really? Tell me about it.

APES: For the first two issues we averaged three to four hundred letters a week, which is unheard of...

LENARD: Is that right?

APES: They were all basically from a young audience that wanted to get involved in PLANET OF THE APES. They would say, can we start Ape contests, can we do this...

LENARD: I'm sure there are a lot of things... well, you

know, they do have a tremendous potential—merchandising. They expect that to be enormous... if it goes.

APES: I know. It's hard to say whether this is like the Kung Fu thing, which seemed to last a year and then peter out, or whether *Apes* will last.

LENARD: Well, I think it will depend on the series continuing; it will not be the same without the series. In the series *Here Come the Brides* there was somebody on it—a singer, *Bobby Sherman*—who had been popular before and then faded, but because of the series he became tremendously popular again for quite a while. I know that he wasn't making too much on the series, but

it didn't make any difference; it was the thing that brought him that huge exposure, that made him a... star.

I'm getting—not so much from *Apes*, though they're talking about it, appearing in some sort of act or going to fairs, what-not—I do get requests y'know, from the *Star Trek* shindigs, to appear. One just came the other day; I've never done much of that before, except to drop in once in a while when I've been around.

APES: This lack of popularity is strange, because, in a sense, the *Apes* series has lasted since 1968—it's lasted six or seven years already, as a concept.

LENARD: Yeah, but there's something about its being

on the tube, in your home. I'm sure that showing the movies on TV has made a big difference to a lot of the kids, a lot of people. My older daughter saw two of them—she didn't see the first one—and she was delighted with them, fascinated with them.

But, y'know, it's a funny thing; I can't figure it out either—the opening night of *Planet of the Apes*, we had a 32 or 33 share of the Neilsens—now the Neilsens might not reflect what is true, but that's what the networks work with—yet it's peculiar that, without seeing any of the shows that the initial kind of curiosity seekers or interested people should only be that many. And, you know, *Sanford and Son* was in the upper forties. There's something peculiar about it; either, not enough people knew about it—which is possible—or it was on at the wrong time.

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Y'see, television viewers identify with the characters—y'know, they get to know the show and start to like the characters; that's why the regulars are so important—more important, really, than anybody on the show; no guest star pulls people for a television series, unless it's a very unusual kind of thing. It's the regular actors... becoming acquainted with them and waiting every week to see them again, and the kind of shows they do.

APES: At the New York Star Trek Con last spring, they were expecting something like five thousand people and over 12,000 showed up.

LENARD: No kidding. You know who they are, don't you—younger kids.

APES: And they're kids who never saw the series when it was first released; I mean, they were too young. All they've seen are the syndicated re-runs or the cartoon show.

LENARD: In 1973, I think it was January or something, they had a convention in New York at the Commodore Hotel. I dropped by, just dropped in on Sunday evening, just walked in the back. I like to see the masquerade... what is it where they don all the costumes...

APES: The costume parade...

LENARD: Yeah, that's sort of fun, imagination... and *Issac Asimov* and the other people, *Dorothy Fontana*, *David Gerrold*, were there as judges. I just walked in at the back and someone recognized me and I had to go up and... say a couple of words. But I was amazed—there were about three thousand people, I guess, in that ballroom—and I was amazed at how young they were. The bulk of them couldn't possibly have seen the original.

It's a funny thing, you see—of course, you can't believe them—but Silverman (*Fred Silverman*, Head of Network Programming for CBS-TV) is quoted as saying something like, we're very pleased—excellent shows, well produced, well cast, etc., etc.; but I guess people don't want to see monkeys unless they have their own zoo.

I don't know if they're misquoting him or if he's trying to be funny, but we have heard that kind of attitude from Pauley, or somebody—whoever owns CBS...

APES: William Paley, Chairman of the Board of CBS?

LENARD: Paley, yes. He said, I won't have any Ape shows on my network. Or something... I don't know what the hell that means; what is an "Ape show?" It is, right now, a good entertainment show that has the potential to become even more. Once in awhile, I think shows like "The Trap" came closest to investigating the kind of thing I'd like to see in the show.

APES: It was nice, because of moments when Urko uncovered the poster of the San Diego Zoo, and it was a gorilla in a cage. It was just that moment, a nice feeling between you and Jim Naughton, like your hatred and madness and his fear—it came across very well as finally telecast.

LENARD: Yeah, it had a lot of... it had a good director, *Arnold Lavan*; I like him. He goes to get what's in the story and he sometimes gets himself in trouble with the people because he takes a little longer, but he goes for the values. And I appreciate it, and I think in the end, that's what makes the show. That episode, I think, had a combination of things; it had a certain amount of action, which they seem to like; it had a little bit of humor and suspense; and it had the tension of a dramatic show—plus it had a kind of revelation between the two.

And I think, as far as Urko is concerned, it isn't *just* that he wants to kill the astronauts—he wants to kill them *because* they're a threat, they're a danger to his whole culture, the whole Ape culture. And that's why the apes'll never give up. They'll never stop searching for the astronauts, because it's too important. It must be that important.

And I was going to say, I have gotten letters and phone calls from around the area... surprisingly, you see, Urko is not a black-and-white villain, as he was intended to be; it's very hard for kids to feel that way about an animal, plus he has a certain kind of justification for what he does. But, people have called and said that when they saw...

APES: Yeah, Urko's got levels to his character. They've all got levels, potentially.

LENARD: Yeah, it's very interesting, because you can't predict what the reaction is going to be. People said that when they saw this moment you talked about, a woman called and said that her kids were—thirteen, fifteen, twelve, something like that—and when they saw Urko looking at that poster of that gorilla in a cage, when they saw the look on his face, they were on his side from then on. They understood.

And that was interesting to me because I hadn't quite expected that. Somebody once asked me, how do you play the role? And I said—and it's what I *feel* about this role, too—that I look at it from the point of view of the character, that nobody does evil just for the sake of doing evil, or very few rational, sane people do; they do it because they need something, they want something, he's rough and so forth, depending on what stories they come up with. But he believes he is right.

Nobody does evil just for the sake of doing evil; they do it because they need something, they want something, they *believe* in something.

Urko is the same.

—Chris Claremont

