

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 163, No. 141

Serving Chicago's legal community for 162 years

'War' flick in 'Apes' franchise doesn't fit the typical war mold

Beautifully shot with a tight script, sci-fi film alludes to famous cinema history

The title "War for the Planet of the Apes" is a misnomer.

In this third installment of the prequel trilogy chronicling the events leading up to 1968's "Planet of the Apes," there is no planet of apes — it's more like a tribe. But make no mistake: The humans have declared war.

The film begins with the family of Caesar, a human-raised and educated chimpanzee, seemingly safe in a California forest. Then human soldiers invade, intent on exterminating the apes.

As far as we can tell, the apes and the humans are pretty much on par, except the humans have fiercer weapons and are more numerous.

Caesar's wife and oldest son are slaughtered. In the aftermath of

the attack, Caesar installs his toddler Cornelius with his dead son's girlfriend, and sends the surviving members of his clan away to take refuge in the desert. They are distraught and confused without his leadership.

But Caesar is single-minded as he sets off with a few loyal companions to seek retribution against

the mad, Kurtz-like Colonel (Woody Harrelson), who ordered the savagery.

On the road, these warriors add to their crew: Nova (Amiah Miller), a feral human girl afflicted with



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the simian flu; and Bad Ape (Steve Zahn), a zoo chimp raised in captivity who has comically internalized an ape-loathing vocabulary.

The simian virus afflicting Nova is the biological byproduct of human scientific experiments to make apes more intelligent. While it succeeds in making apes smarter, it also causes humans

exposed to the virus to lose the power of speech and primitively regress.

The virus is spreading, and humans are in a race against their own extinction to stop it by

exterminating the apes.

The violence of the film is in the cruelty and inhumanity it depicts. For a war movie, there is minimal blood and gore — and minimal hope for civilization.

Oddly, it doesn't seem to matter that half the characters are apes. There is none of the what-if-the-tables-were-turned shock value of the original "Planet of the Apes" film, or any science-fiction-based wonder. There are just good guys and bad guys, shirts and skins — and Team Caesar's uniforms are computer-generated effects.

Cinematographically, the movie is exquisitely executed. Shot on 65 mm film, the panoramic beach scenes on horseback, the wintry landscapes and the apocalyptic explosions are so eerily beautiful your eyes won't open wide enough to take them all in.

The tight script follows a logical arc. But it is a recognizable mosaic of carefully assembled plot elements from other venerated films. The storyline reads like a late-night cable binger's fever dream: "The Ten Commandments" remade as a western in which the hero crashes the "Great Escape" prison, which is located in "Apocalypse Now," where he becomes "Spartacus."

Beautiful and downbeat, "War for the Planet of the Apes" borrows from the best. The result of this artful remix is a whole that is exactly equal to the sum of its parts.

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