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ISSUE 11 SUMMER 2018
£6.95

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THE ULTIMATE APE SUIT

INDUSTRY GIANT RICK BAKER DISCUSSES A SUBJECT THAT FEATURED MANY TIMES IN HIS MAGNIFICENT CAREER

INTERVIEW WITH NEILL GORTON

Whether it was creating werewolves, aliens, old age and character makeup, or even dancing zombies, Rick Baker could do it all and always excelled in whatever he turned his hand to. However, there was one aspect of his career that he would revisit time and time again...

The ape suit!

Rick's ape suits and ape characters set the bar that the entire industry would have to aim for and for each project he took on, he would push the bar that bit higher. For an artist who from the early nineteen eighties onwards could pick and choose his projects, what drove him to take on so many ape suits?

BEGINNINGS, 1963

Growing up in Covina, a suburb of Los Angeles in the fifties and sixties, Rick's

fascination with monsters of all kinds began after watching old Universal monster movies on TV. What followed was youthful experimentation with makeup to turn himself into his favourite cinematic monsters. He found the reaction from adults to seeing 'little Ricky' made up as Frankenstein's monster a little underwhelming however. With a desire to fool his audience, Rick then moved into what he calls his 'gore phase', making himself and his neighbourhood friends up with wounds, lacerations and lashings of blood.

"...it got a bigger reaction but I saw it was a kind of sick thing to do – making up kids and sending them home to scare their parents... being a parent now I can't imagine!"

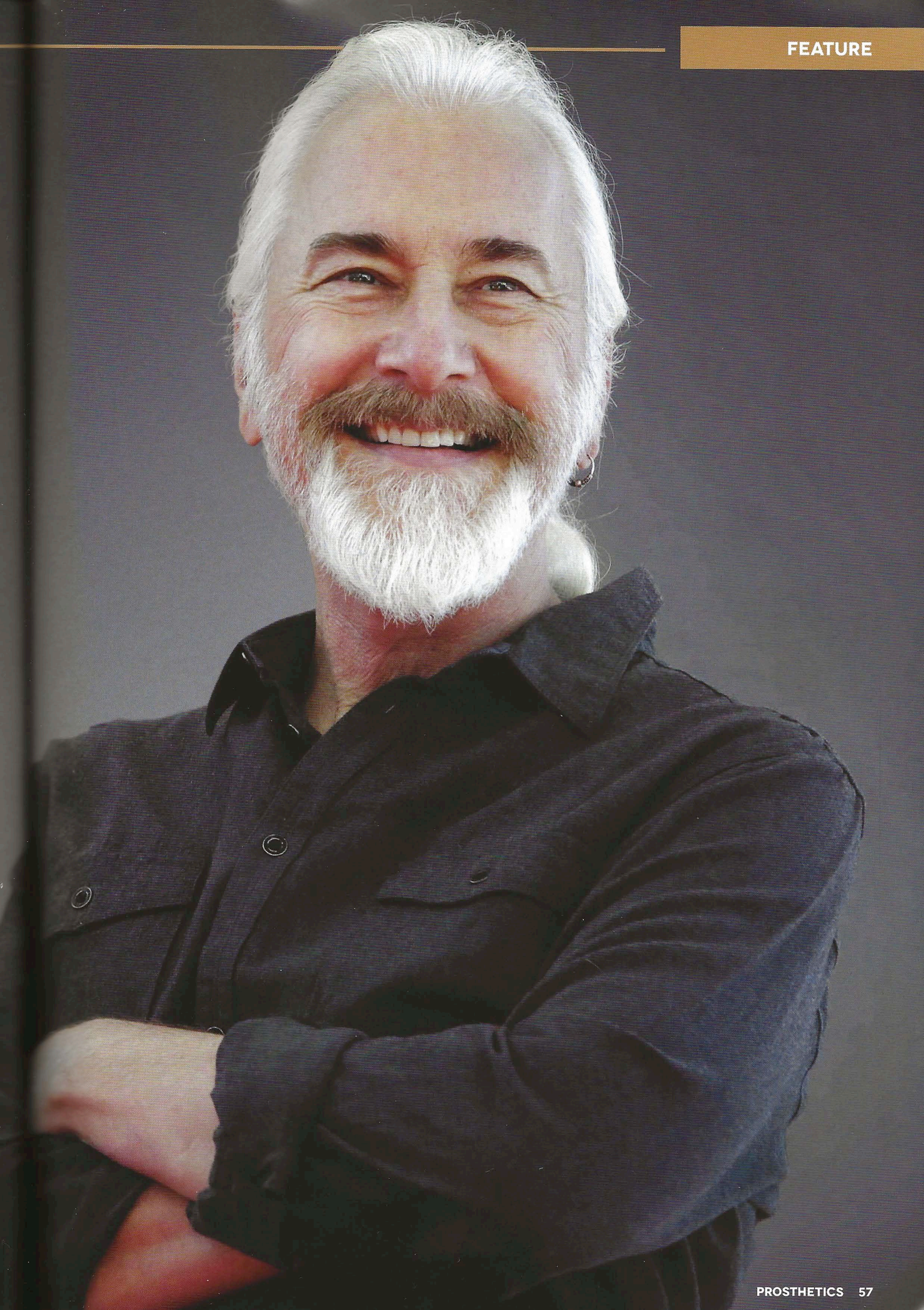
So Rick continued to look for something else he could create that was 'real' but was more akin to the monsters he loved, and gorillas seemed to fit the bill.

"I had that misconception about gorillas that Hollywood created with King Kong basically. I always liked gorillas in movies, gorilla suits and stop motion gorillas."

Around that time, at the age of 13, Rick met Bob Burns. Burns wore many hats during his career including actor, prop maker, editor and makeup man. Burns saw a real talent in Baker and gave him direction to help to develop his hobby into a career. As well as introducing Rick to more makeup techniques, Burns also introduced him to his first gorilla suit in which Burns himself had acted in numerous movies and TV shows. This suit had been built in collaboration with Don Post, the legendary maker of latex Halloween masks and sometimes provider of masks and costumes to Hollywood. While impressed, Rick wasn't entirely convinced and recalls thinking,

"It's cool but it doesn't look real to me and I think it could be more real than it is."

With a dedication that belied his youth, and one that would be indicative of his methodical and driven approach to all his professional work, Rick started to research gorillas and gorilla suits. In the days before the VCR, researching suits involved trying to catch movies and shows on TV when they happened to air. Rick coupled this





ODYSSEYS AND APES, 1968

At age 17 Rick received a further boost to his interest in primates with the cinema release of both *Planet of the Apes* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, both within the first couple of months of 1968.

"Life magazine; on the last page, they had this parting shot. There was the first photo released from *Planet of the Apes* of Maurice Evans in the orangutan makeup with an umbrella, kinda smiling. I was like, 'What the... what is this?' I was so excited to see that."

While blown away by *Planet of the Apes*, 17-year old Rick would still view the prosthetics with a critical eye and was aware of the limitations of this approach to realising the look of the apes – especially with the mouth and mouth corners and how the characters couldn't show their teeth.

Just weeks later he would go to see *2001: A Space Odyssey* – what he thought was just a space movie.

"It started out with that dawn of man sequence and those cool apes that Stuart [Freeborn] did. I was blown away by those, I was blown away by *Planet of the Apes*...both of those things fuelled the desire to want to do better."

He also learnt a very important lesson when comparing these films: He noted that, while both very different, the approach taken for each of the films was the right decision in each instance.

"It made me aware of the fact that there isn't always just one answer, and I always tried to make the right decision for the film I was making."

THE THING WITH TWO HEADS, 1972

By 1971 Rick had been working around the fringes of Hollywood for a couple of years. When working on a job he happened to show the stunt co-ordinator a picture he kept in his wallet of his early ape suit. The stuntman went on to co-ordinate stunts for *The Thing with Two Heads* and when the production required a gorilla suit he recommended Rick for the job based on that photo.

"They called me in and I took that head in and the picture, but didn't tell them I didn't really have a complete suit. They said 'We need you to make another head and we film in two weeks. Can you make another head in two weeks?' I said 'sure.'

The Thing with Two Heads (1972) - Rick in his first feature film gorilla suit

...I SAW IT WAS A KIND OF SICK THING TO DO - MAKING UP KIDS AND SENDING THEM HOME TO SCARE THEIR PARENTS...

with researching the real animals, and when comparing the two he began to see just how significantly different the Hollywood gorillas were from the real animal. This disparity sparked an idea in the mind of 13-year old Rick Baker that would stay with him for decades:

"I really made it my mission; at a very early age I said I'm going to build a gorilla suit that people don't know is a gorilla suit."

Rick's first attempt at building a gorilla mask was a cotton and latex build-up on top of upholstery foam with a jaw articulated on elastic. Not satisfied with this first effort, he would go on to replace it with a sculpted mask cast in latex. Wanting to expand the character further than just a mask, but limited in resources, the solution was presented to him in an episode of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, in which another Hollywood gorilla man, George Barrows, appears in his gorilla

suit wearing the hillbilly staple of denim bib overalls. By adopting this look Rick would only need the bare minimum of fur fabric to create his first suit.

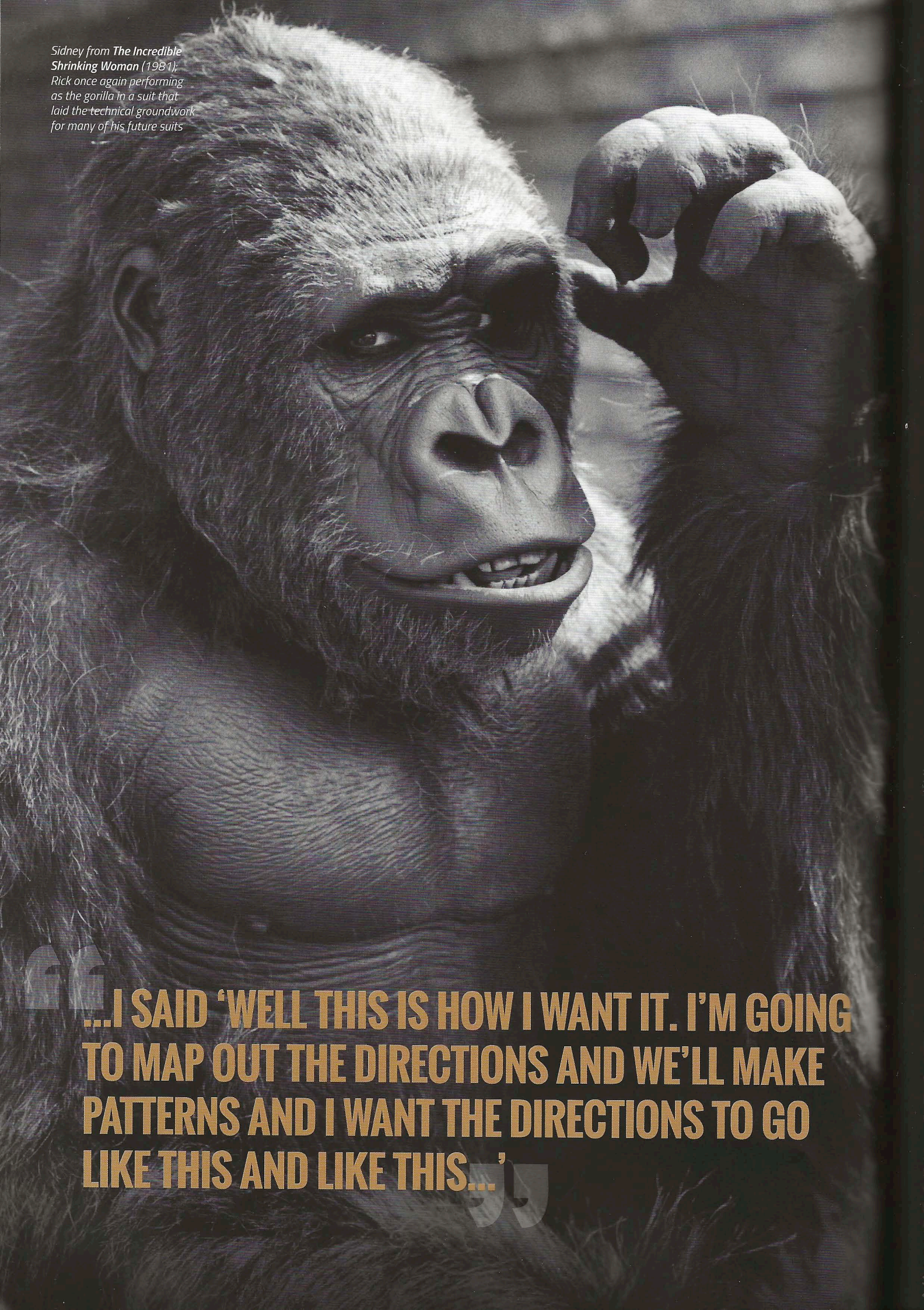
"All they had was this really crappy fake fur, really shiny and real plasticky. It was the only thing I could find anywhere. So I got like a yard of that and fabricated a bit of the upper body and sleeves."

With his first full gorilla suit, albeit clothed hillbilly style, Rick also embarked on his first foray into gorilla suit performance.

"They had a parade [in Covina] and I just joined the parade, just got in between and marched through. I'd go to the park in Covina and climb a tree in this suit just to try and get a response from people, and I was amazed at just how many people, even with this crappy suit, believed it was real!"

King Kong (1976). Rick sculpted Kong and also performed as the legendary gorilla, spending six months in the suit filming on miniature sets

“...I HAD THAT MISCONCEPTION ABOUT GORILLAS THAT HOLLYWOOD CREATED WITH KING KONG BASICALLY...”



*Sidney from **The Incredible Shrinking Woman** (1981); Rick once again performing as the gorilla in a suit that laid the technical groundwork for many of his future suits*

“...I SAID ‘WELL THIS IS HOW I WANT IT. I’M GOING TO MAP OUT THE DIRECTIONS AND WE’LL MAKE PATTERNS AND I WANT THE DIRECTIONS TO GO LIKE THIS AND LIKE THIS...’”

They had like \$500 in the budget for the suit and performer...and it looks it!"

Unbeknownst to the producers, Rick wasn't only making another head but also an entire suit including new glove hands, feet and some crude arm extensions. Regardless, the finished suit, also worn by Rick during filming, is impressive given the budget, time constraints and Baker's youth. Like with his very first creation the fur proved to be a challenge. With his meagre budget in hand he headed down to La Cienega Blvd where he knew of several fabric supply stores. What he found was a fur fabric made for a bed spread that reminded him a little of lowland gorilla fur. The problem was the material had lighter base hair and darker, longer guard hairs which looked ok when flat and brushed down, but when the suit wrinkled it created dark stripes. In addition, the crude way he sewed the suit together also caused the fur to appear striped.

Another technical challenge, and hard lesson learnt, was how Velcro fastenings and fake fur just don't mix. The head and neck muscle area joined down the back of the suit and Rick discovered that the Velcro he'd used clogged quickly with loose hairs making it ineffective.

Of course, being the performer also opened Rick's eyes to something he'd not previously considered. His acting contributions were filmed over just two days; the first day was easy enough as he spent the majority of it strapped to a gurney with a sheet over him. Day two however was a different story. After a full day of intensive gorilla action, including breaking out of a cage and running down suburban LA streets, he found himself in pain from holding a gorilla pose and performing action he'd not prepared himself physically for.

"I'd thought it would be fun to be a gorilla. I wanted to be a monster in a movie."

While flawed, Rick learnt a lot from both building and performing in *The Thing with Two Heads'* gorilla suit. Knowledge that he took with him to his next and far more challenging project.

KING KONG, 1976

While Baker's first movie gorilla was for a low budget exploitation movie, *King Kong* was one of the biggest budgeted movies of the year.

"I heard from John Landis that they were going to do a remake of *King Kong* and I was outraged...I said, 'they're probably going to get some idiot and put him in a gorilla suit'... and I was right!"

...THAT WAS THE BIGGEST BUDGET MOVIE OF THE TIME AND THEY WEREN'T REALLY PUTTING THE MONEY INTO THE SUIT...

Somehow Baker's name was put to the producers as a guy who'd done some gorilla suit work and he was called in for a meeting. Initially the producers' approach to the look of Kong was more primitive man, but Baker pushed back against this idea.

"It's *King Kong* - he should be a super gorilla not less of a gorilla!"

The creation and issues with *King Kong* have been well documented. Rick found himself first pitted against Italian special effects artist Carlo Rambaldi in a competition to build test suits, with both artists creating their own interpretation. Rick won the battle to keep Kong more gorilla than Rambaldi's ape man. Ultimately, despite his being considered a superior aesthetic, the producers, Dino De Laurentiis and his son Federico De Laurentiis, gave fellow Italian Rambaldi final say on the construction of the suit including the decision to use real, heavy and inflexible bear hides for the fur. Rambaldi would also pursue the idea of building a full size mechanical Kong at huge expense, that he claimed could be used for many of the creature's scenes in the movie. Ultimately it only makes it on to screen for about fifteen seconds.

"It was a disappointment because I figured this was my opportunity to create the ultimate gorilla costume. I mean, how many movies do they make about gorillas, ya know! That was the biggest budget movie of the time and they weren't really putting the money into the suit."

Rick also learned valuable lessons regarding Hollywood politics, including seeing his credit reduced to 'special contributions by Rick Baker', while Rambaldi walked away with an Academy Award for his contribution to the visual effects.

THE KENTUCKY FRIED MOVIE, 1977

The next gorilla project was a comedy outing with Baker's friend and director John Landis, a slapstick anthology comedy movie made up of various unrelated sketches. In one, a parody of a morning news show called *A.M. Today*, a

gorilla is presented in the studio but becomes enraged as the presenter and handler openly discuss its lack of sexual prowess and inability to mate, sending it on a destructive rampage.

Coming only a year after the release of *King Kong*, and given Baker's unhappy experience on that movie, it comes as no surprise that the gorilla in *Kentucky Fried Movie* goes by the name Dino.

With a limited budget and schedule, Rick still produced what he felt was a superior suit to Kong. The Dino suit utilised a good quality fake fur as opposed to the real animal hides of Kong and, while the head lacked the mechanical complexity of Kong, the mechanisms were adequate for what limited screen time Dino would have.

Rick also found better ways to hide the joins after the Kong suit's poor construction had left fasteners and openings very visible.

"Dick Kline [director of photography on *Kong*] who shot the film did a great job of hiding its faults as best he could - because there were a lot. The Dino suit could walk down the street and you wouldn't see seams and stuff...but it still wasn't the ultimate suit."

THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING WOMAN, 1981

John Landis would, once again, play a part in Rick's next gorilla project. Landis was slated to direct *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*. In his version of the project Sidney, the gorilla, would play second lead to Lilly Tomlin's character and they'd go on adventures across Washington DC. In typical Landis fashion this would involve car chases, crashes and all manner of chaos. Although Landis would eventually be replaced as director, Rick remained with the project. Getting a 'decent amount of money' to build Sidney allowed Rick to address some of the technical issues he'd not been able to on previous suits due to financial limitations or, with Kong, due to Rambaldi's involvement. A key aesthetic limitation had been the use of fake furs. While Rambaldi had addressed this on Kong by using real bear hides, the result was no more convincing and far less flexible



Rick spent 10 months creating this troupe of ape characters for *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (1984)

...SHE SAID, 'THIS ISN'T GOING TO WORK' AND I SAID, 'IT IS GOING TO WORK AND IT'S GOING TO BE COOL'

than the fake furs Rick had favoured on his other suits. Considering both approaches unconvincing, Rick chose instead to have the hair on Sidney hand tied like a wig. Unlike a wig though the hair would be knotted into a flexible power net fabric.

This approach had been used before in one form or another. Stuart Freeborn had his undersuits knitted in wool for the dawn of man apes in *2001*, with hair then hand tied into the wool. He'd use the same process a decade later to create Chewbacca for *Star Wars*. Further back still, Rick is convinced that Charlie Gemora, an innovative artist and gorilla performer from the early days of cinema who both built and performed in his own gorilla suits, also hand tied the hair on his suits, judging by their appearance.

As often happens in Hollywood, when De Laurentiis announced his *King Kong*, there'd been another Kong project in development at Universal. Rather than

create a muscle suit for a film test, Universal instead hired 5' 5" champion bodybuilder Franco Columbu to play Kong. Columbu was almost ape-like in his physique and was outfitted with a foam latex *Planet of the Apes* style facial prosthetic and sported a hand tied hair suit created by legendary Hollywood wig maker Josephine Turner, who had previously created the wigs for *Planet of the Apes*.

Rick had seen this suit and noticed that the hair had all been knotted in one direction – all straight down – making it look no better than fake fur fabric. Rick hired Josephine Turner to knot his hair suit for Sidney, but he was very specific about how he wanted the knotting done.

"She said 'I know how to do this' and I said 'well this is how I want it. I'm going to map out the directions and we'll make patterns and I want the directions to go like this and like this and to peak here', and she thought I was

nuts. She said, 'this isn't going to work' and I said, 'it is going to work and it's going to be cool' and she fought me the whole way."

When it was done, Josephine was amazed at the results, admitting to Rick that she was wrong to doubt him.

While Sidney was ground breaking, Rick still considered it a 'Hollywood' gorilla and certainly not his ultimate gorilla suit. However, Sidney did bring together, in one suit, all the technological advancements that would eventually become the industry standard approach to ape suit construction.

GREYSTOKE: THE LEGEND OF TARZAN, LORD OF THE APES, 1984

Rick was first approached about creating the apes for this reimagining of the Tarzan legend several years previously to it finally being shot...

"I was originally contacted when Robert Towne was going to do it - who wrote the script - and he was nuts!"

Robert Towne had been reading the Jane Goodall books about life amongst a troop of chimps while writing the script for *Greystoke* and wanted the apes to be completely self-

contained, telling Rick he wanted to see veins throbbing under fur, to see them shit and their fur to stand on end in fear and rage.

Rick explained to Towne that what he described just wasn't practical even just from the point of view of finding enough crew to do the work.

"This was at a time when it was hard to find a couple of people to do it. There's very few people doing this kind of work especially in the rest of the world, it was like me and Stuart Freeborn!"

This version of *Greystoke* would stall and was eventually resurrected several years later with Hugh Hudson at the helm, but this time Rick wasn't the production's first choice.

"They originally went to Carlo Rambaldi. Carlo built a test suit that I never saw but heard it looked good, but it wasn't practical...and they spent a fortune on it."

Stuart Craig, the production designer, wasn't convinced by Carlo and had the art department do a spreadsheet and chart with what he thought would be the number of heads, costumes and parts required, in order to visualise the scale of the project.

Rick met Craig and the new production team and, feeling more confident than when it was under Towne's leadership, took on the project. It was still a huge undertaking, especially as Rick also had to relocate to England to do it and assemble a new team to tackle the enormous workload.

"I brought some people [from the USA] that I knew would do the stuff the way I wanted it done. In some ways, I was a lot better off hair-wise as there were more and better hair knotters. I brought Gunnar [Ferdinandson] who is THE mold maker here, but it turned out there were some great mold makers there."

Even though a lot of the English crew had worked on *Return of the Jedi* and *The Dark Crystal* Rick still needed to train a lot of the crew to bring them up to his standards.

"I couldn't find a sculptor who would finish a sculpture the way I wanted it finished. Their forms were beautiful but they just left it at a point that I didn't consider finished. That's why I pretty much sculpted all the principal characters."

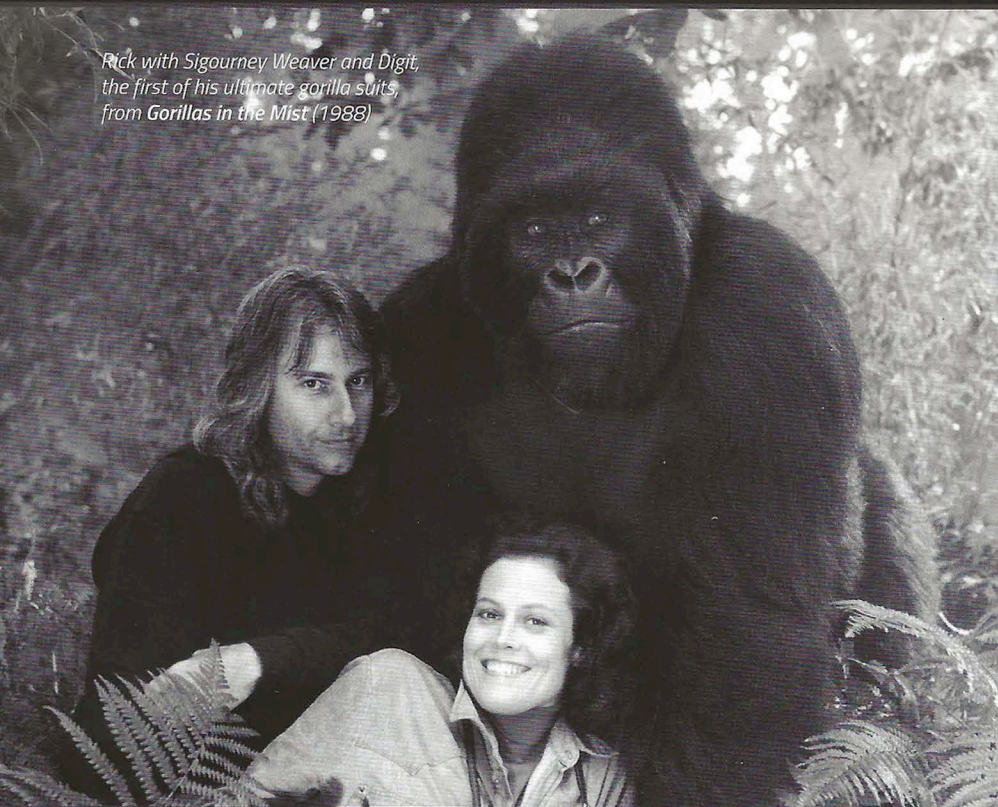
Rick had about a 10-month prep, but in that time he needed to literally build a studio and hire and train artists. This was still considered tight given the sheer volume of work and he

...THERE'S VERY FEW PEOPLE DOING THIS KIND OF WORK ESPECIALLY IN THE REST OF THE WORLD...



Aged Silverbeard (played by Peter Elliott) from *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (1984)

Rick with Sigourney Weaver and Digit, the first of his ultimate gorilla suits, from *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988)



...AT A VERY EARLY AGE I SAID I'M GOING TO BUILD A GORILLA SUIT THAT PEOPLE DON'T KNOW IS A GORILLA SUIT...

spent some of the pre-production living in a caravan on the studio lot at Elstree, because he was putting in so many hours.

At one stage the studio started getting cold feet over the project and demanded to see a working suit within six weeks. Fortunately, Rick had the ape workshop up and running by this time so was able to rise to the challenge and deliver a test suit to the quality that kept the project moving forwards.

The apes in *Greystoke* were hugely successful and for Rick it was another technical and creative milestone. More advancements and refinements were made to the processes and the incredible achievement of creating the movie's apes would garner him an Academy Award nomination, but still it wasn't quite the ultimate ape suit.

"What I liked was I got to make characters which was really important to me. They're all so individual and I really wanted to bring that out. I still had that

longing to really make a real gorilla, and a male adult, and when *Gorillas in the Mist* happened I thought 'this is my chance.'

GORILLAS IN THE MIST, 1988

Hollywood is never known to turn its nose up at an opportunity. When Dian Fossey was murdered Rick was naturally shocked, but also recalled thinking to himself that it was only a matter of time before someone made a movie about her life. Sure enough he was contacted by not one but two studios keen to tell her life story.

The two studios, Universal and Warner Brothers, would eventually team up to make the movie of her life and engaged Rick to build the gorilla suits. The producers however initially set the bar too high for his liking;

"They said, 'We want to shoot the real gorillas as much as we can but we know we won't get the whole movie so then

we want to use your gorilla suits...' My response was 'it won't work...I know I can build this better than anyone, but I can't build one you can put real gorilla, fake gorilla, real gorilla...I'll do my best but I'll not make any promises!'"

While Rick's concerns were well founded, it did mean he had no choice but to set the bar ridiculously high for himself. It also forced certain aesthetic decisions such as using animatronic eyes as opposed to what he had done with all his previous suits, which was to use the performer's own eyes.

"There's a certain practicality to using the performer's own eyes. How do you see? Because of that flatness [of the face] you have to use radio controlled eyes."

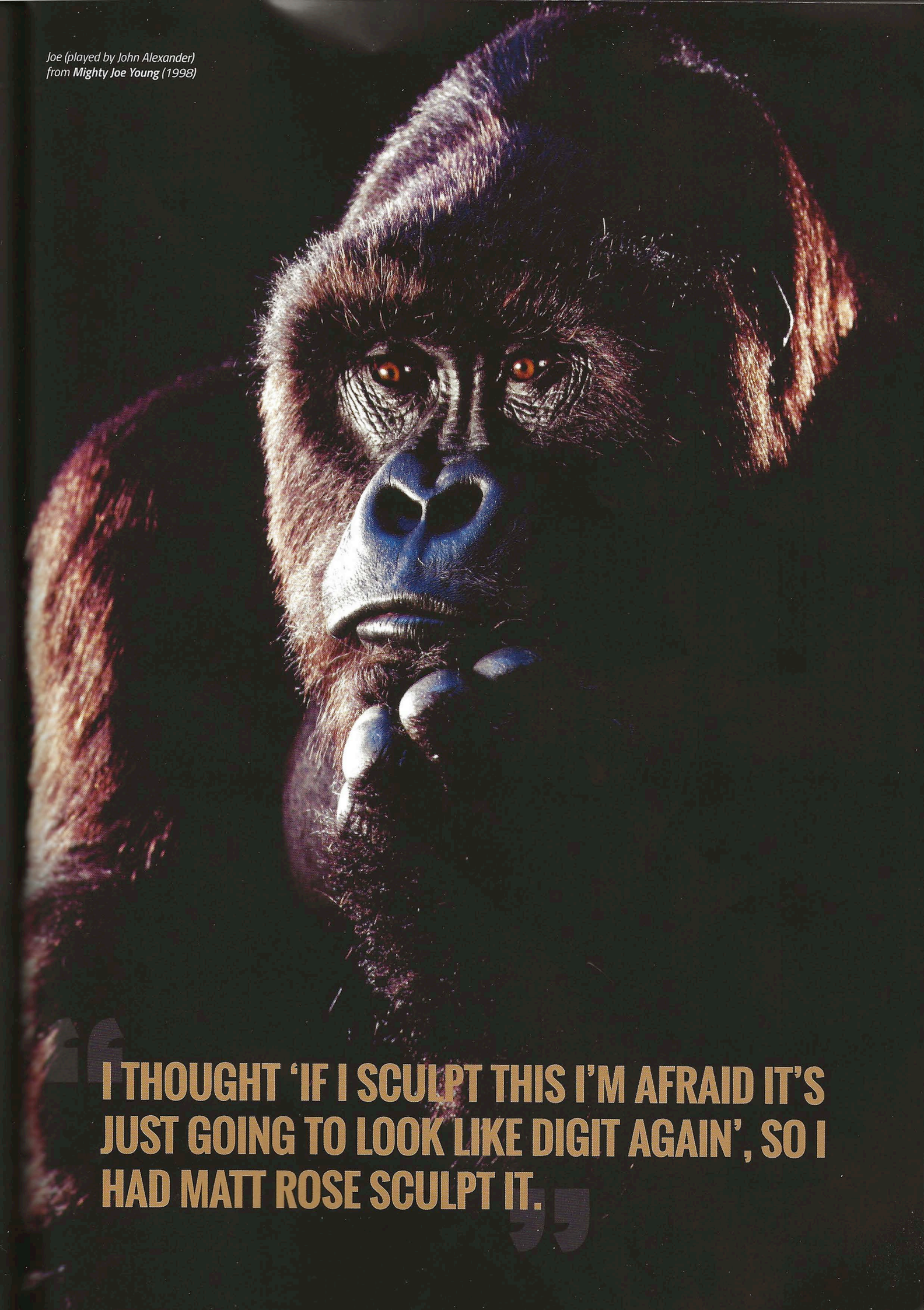
Digit was one of Fossey's favourite gorillas amongst the groups she'd studied and would feature heavily in the script for the film. The real Digit had been killed by poachers in 1978, so Rick travelled to Rwanda to photograph the real gorillas the film makers had chosen to portray Fossey's study group, and selected a silverback to portray Digit that he would then model his gorilla suit on.

As the project progressed, filming the protected gorillas in Rwanda became too difficult, so production moved to Uganda where interaction with the real gorillas was less of an issue, but these gorillas looked slightly different. As it turned out any male silverback filmed doing action that fitted the story would eventually be used in the edit as Digit.

Rick spent a couple of months living in a tent shooting on location in Kenya. Production built a hut for him and his team to keep the gorilla suits in, to repair them in and keep them clean. They also built a hut for Stuart Baird, the editor, to work in and he and Rick would study the footage and plan the action the suit performers would need to do to complete the scenes.

"He had all the real footage and he'd go, 'I've got a male gorilla walking up to this point and this gorilla doing this here. I need a shot that bridges these two shots.' We'd cut it together and look at it and be, 'okay that worked.' It worked better than I thought it would ever work!"

The film went on to be successful both financially for the studio and technically for Rick, with the majority of audiences completely unaware of the use of gorilla suits to double for the real animals.



*Joe (played by John Alexander)
from **Mighty Joe Young** (1998)*

**I THOUGHT 'IF I SCULPT THIS I'M AFRAID IT'S
JUST GOING TO LOOK LIKE DIGIT AGAIN', SO I
HAD MATT ROSE SCULPT IT.**



A gorilla makeup from *Planet of the Apes* (2001). While not an ape suit, *Planet of the Apes* had been one of Rick's early inspirations in his quest, and this project brought him full circle.

...THERE WAS THE FIRST PHOTO RELEASED FROM PLANET OF THE APES OF MAURICE EVANS IN THE ORANGUTAN MAKEUP WITH AN UMBRELLA, KINDA SMILING...

"When I did that I thought, okay I can check this off my list. I can move on. I've made the gorilla suit I've always wanted to make."

MIGHTY JOE YOUNG, 1998

Rick may have felt he'd fulfilled his boyhood ambition but there was one more project he still couldn't refuse.

The original *Mighty Joe Young* had been a *King Kong*-esque giant ape movie released

in 1949 by RKO pictures - the studio behind *Kong* - and featured a stop motion gorilla. Joe's plot had similarities to *Kong* but Joe was portrayed much more like a real gorilla, a gentle animal whose aggression is triggered only in defence.

"I kind of had to do this too, as *Mighty Joe Young* is the other big ape movie. I think Joe is the best suit I've ever made."

The challenge for Rick this time would

be to also make a 15' tall animatronic version of Joe and make the suit and the large scale one match.

For the first time though, he would see digital FX coming in trying to replace some of his work. While he could see the benefits for some scenes, often he found the digital FX team proposing shots that could easily be achieved by compositing the gorilla-suited performer into scenes - and for the most part that's how Joe was realised.

Rick also found himself stepping back and being a little less hands-on during this project.

"I thought 'if I sculpt this I'm afraid it's just going to look like Digit again', so I had Matt Rose sculpt it."

I ask Rick if by taking on Joe he was in some way putting the ghost of *Kong* to rest, especially given that he was also taking on the challenge of matching a larger than life mechanical ape with a suited performer?

"Yeah, it was - I mean this is what I'd wanted *Kong* to be and we were able to do some pretty cool stuff."

PLANET OF THE APES, 2001

While the ape suit itch had been scratched for Rick, ape characters in general would still play a significant part in his career. When Tim Burton revived *Planet of the Apes* in (prophetically) 2001, Rick was the obvious choice to create the ape characters. When the film was first announced, other FX shops had pitched for the work, approaching it in a variety of ways including using animatronics for the ape characters.

In 1968 at the age of 17, when Rick had seen the original release of *Planet of the Apes* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* within just weeks of one another, he'd learnt the valuable lesson of picking the right approach for the project. Coming full circle with the Burton *Planet of the Apes*, he chose to do just that and went with an actor-driven prosthetic approach as John Chambers had in the 1968 film that had so inspired him as a kid.

At age 13 Rick had set himself the challenge of creating the ultimate gorilla suit...and he eventually succeeded. So has that fire finally been quenched?

"I have no desire to do another one. The excitement is gone. I did what I wanted to. I got it out of my system."