

Movement pro transforms actors into apes on film

July 7 2014, by Sandy Cohen



In this Tuesday, June 24, 2014 photo, Terry Notary, a stuntman on the film "Dawn of the Planet of the Apes," demonstrates how he achieved ape-like movements with arm extenders for his motion capture performance for the film, at Hollywood Dance Center in Los Angeles. In the movie opening Friday, July 11, 2014, Notary plays more than 100 primates. He also taught the film's stars and stuntmen how to find their simian side. (Photo by Chris Pizzello/Invision/AP)

Terry Notary is Hollywood's human shape-shifter. In a blink, he can become an elf, an ape or almost any other moving creature. An expert in

motion-capture performance, he specializes in bringing non-human characters to life on screen. He's played goblins in "The Hobbit," a Who in "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" and a winged, dragon-like banshee in "Avatar."

In "Dawn of the Planet of the Apes," opening Friday, Notary plays more than 100 primates. He also taught the film's stars and stuntmen how to find their simian side.

"He's like an [ape](#) Zen master," said director Matt Reeves. "He lives in every frame that has an ape in it."

Notary demonstrated his technique during a recent visit to the Hollywood dance studio he uses to prepare for films. The compact, muscular father of four visibly transforms as he describes how apes are gut-driven and grounded. His stomach softens, his neck and shoulders slouch, his lower jaw protrudes. His eyelids drop slightly as his eyes take on a present yet faraway quality.

He grunts and howls before springing from his chair and breaking into a quadruped run. He bounces around the empty studio on all fours, with "arm extensions" he developed allowing him to mimic ape-like movements. He stops suddenly, as though he's spotted a threat, and becomes even more animated, emitting loud wails of distress.

Then he's back being human again to talk about the process.

Notary aspired to compete in the Olympics while training as a gymnast at UCLA but then found work with Cirque du Soleil after graduating with a theater degree. He came to Hollywood as a stuntman and from there, developed into a sought-after movement coach for motion-capture shots, where actors are wired and their movements captured electronically for the building of computer-generated imagery.

He created the lithe, long-limbed motions of the Na'vi in "Avatar," taught the Silver Surfer how to ride in "Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer" and went ape in three films, starting with Tim Burton's "Planet of the Apes" in 2001. (He performed stunts in all as well.)



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"I'm a good observer of movement and behavior," the 45-year-old said. "That's what my talent is, I think."

He begins with an image of the character. For imaginary creatures, he might picture objects from nature. When conceptualizing the Na'vi, for example, he thought of reeds swaying underwater, gracefully at ease with the energy around them. For a goblin, he thought of a piece of crumpled tin foil.

"If you throw it, it has hard edges," he said. "It's not going to be predictable. It's going to be edgy and sharp and not have any root."

To develop ape expertise, Notary hung out with a couple of chimps and spent a lot of time watching primates at the zoo, videotaping and studying their behavior.

"I just took every little video I could and dissected it into moments," he said. "And I just always watched the videos as though I was watching a person in an ape suit, playing an ape. It made me realize ... it's all in the subtleties."



This photo released by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation shows Jason Clarke, as Malcolm, front, and, from left, Andy Serkis, as Caesar; Toby Kebbell, as Koba; and Karin Konoval, as Maurice; in a scene from the film, "Dawn of the Planet of the Apes." Hollywood stuntman Terry Notary plays more than 100 primates in the film, and also taught the film's stars and stuntmen how to find their simian side. (AP Photo/Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation)

Notary had six weeks to put the actors and stuntmen starring in "Dawn of the Planet of the Apes" through his ape training. The first step? Shed preconceptions and human conditioning and just "be."

"It's not about doing anything, it's about undoing," he said. "If you can start to get back to the base, neutral animal that we are, you're an ape."

Letting go of human tendencies can take weeks, but once the actors get it, "it's magic."



In this photo released by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, Toby

Kebbell, as Koba, leads a battle in a scene from the film, "Dawn of the Planet of the Apes." Hollywood stuntman Terry Notary plays more than 100 primates in the film, and also taught the film's stars and stuntmen how to find their simian side. (AP Photo/Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation)

"You're tapping into your instinct," he said.

With a relaxed mindset and intention rooted in the gut, this would also include bounding about on all fours—with a little help from Notary's foot-long "arm extensions."

For the latest "Planet of the Apes" film, Notary even trained his two daughters, ages 9 and 11, in simian technique. "They're playing little kid apes," said Notary, who was on a media tour to promote the film.



This photo released by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation shows apes in a scene from the film, "Dawn of the Planet of the Apes." Hollywood stuntman Terry Notary plays more than 100 primates in the film, and also taught the film's stars and stuntmen how to find their simian side. (AP Photo/Twentieth Century

Fox Film Corporation)

Nearly every ape in the film, except the tiniest baby, was played by a human actor in a motion-capture suit. Tiny lights recorded their every movement, including a helmet with a face camera that tracked emotional expression. Animators at Weta Digital then transferred the data onto each of the computer-rendered apes in the film.

Now, Notary is off to New Zealand to work on the next "Hobbit" film, but it took a while for him to let go of his inner primate.

"It takes me about four months to get out of it," he said. "My wife's like, 'Can you sit up please? You're slouching.'"

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