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Dope-Smoking Chimp Learns Sign Language; Suicidal Atheist: Film

By Rick Warren - July 6, 2011

Shortly after his birth at an Oklahoma primate center in 1973, a chimpanzee was taken from his distraught mother and sent to New York as a guinea pig.

Nim became the test case in an experiment to determine if a chimp raised like a human child could learn to communicate through sign language. Sure enough, the ape soon built a vocabulary of more than 100 words, telling his handlers when he wanted to eat, play and hug. He also picked up other human habits like smoking dope, wearing clothes and using the toilet.

As we learn in James Marsh's poignant documentary "Project Nim," the tale then takes a sad turn.

The film demonstrates the folly of trying to treat animals like humans. Nim had a series of caring, educated "mothers" and for several years he lived at a spacious estate that was the former home of Columbia University's president. In the end, however, his primal instincts made him incompatible with his human caretakers.

Marsh, who directed the Oscar-winning "Man on Wire," tells the heartbreaking story through vintage footage, re-enactments and revealing interviews with project director Herbert Terrace and those who studied and work with Nim over the years.

Terrace, a Columbia University psychologist, comes across as a well-intentioned but neglectful researcher who ultimately cared more about the data than the chimp. He finally concluded that Nim was more beggar than communicator, using sign language to get what he wanted rather than expressing himself in a broader way. Others disagreed.

Medical Research

Without making judgments, Marsh elicits colorful anecdotes and candid opinions from his interview subjects. Though it's a documentary, "Project Nim" has the emotional impact of a great dramatic film.

At the age of five, after biting one too many people, Nim was sent back to the Oklahoma center, where he had to adjust to living in a cage and mingling with other chimps for the first time in his life.

Nim's situation got even worse when he was sold to a New York University lab that used chimps to conduct medical research. Film clips of apes being tied down on tables and drugged with needles is hard to watch, even if you believe that kind of research is worthwhile.

Publicity about Nim's predicament helped get him moved to a Texas ranch for abused animals. He was the only ape there, however, and he showed his frustration by killing a dog and throwing a chair through a window. Nim eventually got some chimp companions and seemed happier, though he always appeared torn between the human and animal worlds he was unfairly asked to bridge.

"Project Nim," from Roadside Attractions, opens today in New York and Chicago. Rating: ****

'The Ledge'

In "The Ledge," a policeman tries to stop a suicidal man from leaping off a tall building. Writer/director Matthew Chapman is more interested in how the man got there than what he's about to do.

It turns out that a love triangle involving three people with dark pasts has led Gavin (Charlie Hunnam) to climb onto the ledge and threaten to jump by a self-imposed deadline. A cop named Hollis (Terrence Howard), who has his own personal problems, watches from a nearby window and listens to Gavin as he explains what brought him to the precipice.

The engrossing film alternates between scenes of Gavin on the ledge and flashbacks to his life as a hotel manager entangled in an affair with Shana, a beautiful neighbor (Liv Tyler) married to an evangelical zealot (Patrick Wilson). Shana also works as a maid at Gavin's hotel, providing a convenient place for their assignations.

Gay Roommate

Atheist Gavin engages in heated religious debates with Shana's husband, who tries to convert him and his gay roommate. When the husband discovers the affair, he hatches a nefarious plot to force the illicit lovers apart.

Hunnam is charismatic as the free-spirited Gavin, while Wilson's pious believer alternates between repression and rage. Tyler is so subdued, you half expect her to fall asleep in the middle of a sentence.

"The Ledge," from IFC Films, opens today New York and Los Angeles. Rating: ***