



# Is it the Suit . . . or the Man?

While checking the date that this little note was due, I stumbled on the happy coincidence that the deadline corresponded with one of my favorite holidays, National Gorilla Suit Day! I thought it might be time to discuss some of the men who dressed up in gorilla suits for the Tarzan movies and one who suited up in a most unusual suit few would be able to don.

The tradition began in 1918 with "Tarzan of the Apes" where members of the New Orleans Athletic Club dressing up as our simian brothers. This practice reached the zenith with Peter Elliott's and Rick Baker's work on "Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes."

In the years before cgi and make up specialists like Rick Baker, several enterprising young men discovered that a good investment could be made in creating a gorilla suit. Good ones were expensive, took time to build and required talent to operate. The studios found it much more effective to rent the set. Ray "Crash" Corrigan, who got his nickname from crashing into opponents on the football field, was one of the earliest. He is credited with appearing in the first two Weissmuller Tarzan films. This is a little tricky though because for some unfathomable reason not a whole lot of credit was given to supporting actors in those days, let alone men dressed up like gorillas. This is further complicated by Corrigan often not wanting folks to know it was him in the suit.

"Crash" is probably best remembered for the Three Mesquiteers, a series of westerns he did for Republic, and the chapter play "Undersea Kingdom". "Undersea Kingdom" is where he first used his nickname in the credits and would take the character's last name for his stage name. Republic was trying to suggest the name "Flash" as this serial was an answer to Buster Crabbe's very successful space opera. You may also remember Corrigan's contribution as the Orangopoid in "Flash Gordon". Similar to George Barrow's addition of a helmet to

his costume for "Robot Monster", Corrigan added a huge horn to his forehead to create this Mongo monster.

He is also responsible for the creation of the movie ranch, Corriganville, in 1937 a location for countless movies and television shows. Everything from "The Lone Ranger" to "Jungle Girl" was shot there.

My favorite man in a gorilla suit though has to be Charles Gemora. He came to this country as a stowaway from the Philippines and ended up working with everyone from Bela Lugosi ("Murders of the Rue Morgue" ) to Laurel and Hardy ("Swiss Miss"). His gorilla suits go back to the one he made for Bull Montana for the "Lost World" and up to and beyond the martian suit he designed and wore in the 1953 film version of "The War of the Worlds".

He isn't listed as working on any Tarzan movies, but I have a photograph that after checking with my go-to Tarzan expert, Rob Donkers, I'm fairly certain is from "Tarzan and his Mate". Notice the number 645 on the clapslate, which appears on many of the stills from that film. Corrigan is the one who is listed in the credit and I'm unsure if they both worked on it, or if it has gotten confused overtime.



THE AUTHOR CELEBRATING NATIONAL GORILLA SUIT DAY

According to Gemora's daughter he made a film for Philippine distribution called "The Gorilla and the Lady", of particular interest to us because it seems to be a re-telling of the Tarzan story with a young lady being raised by gorillas to become Queen of the jungle. It is unclear if the film was made or just some test footage of her at six years of age being carried off by Gemora.

By far though the most unusual man in a suit to appear in a Tarzan film has to be Johnny Eck's turn as the bird. Eck was uniquely suited for this costume as he virtually had no lower half due to a condition known as sacral agenesis.



Johnny Eck had been brought to Hollywood by Todd Browning to work on his notorious film adaptation of Tod Robbins' 1923 short story "Spurs" called "Freaks". From there he somehow attracted the attention of the folks making the Weissmuller Tarzan films where he appeared as a strange bird.

The audience reaction to the performance that I really would have liked to see was his stint with the illusionist Rajah Raboid in the late thirties. Eck had a twin brother and while he was fraternal, they did resemble each other. Raboid would recruit the brother, Robert, from the audience and then substitute Johnny, then proceed to saw him in half. At this point a little person concealed in some special pants would jump out of the box, run around the stage with Eck chasing him yelling for his legs back. Johnny said the reaction was amazing, people trying escape, screaming and laughing. It must have been a sight to behold. Robert would be re-substituted for Johnny and threaten to sue the magician.

After this Johnny returned to live with his brother in

their family home in Baltimore, where he pursued photography, art and a life long love of model trains. He and his brother lived there until he passed away at 79.



There is talk of a film version of his life with possibly Leonardo DiCaprio or James Franco as the brothers and supposedly the script has a sequence in which the two Johnnys (Eck and Weissmuller) face off in a swimming match.

Well time to go air out the old gorilla suit to make sure it is wearable for National Gorilla Suit Day.



A PANEL FROM DON MARTIN'S CLASSIC CARTOON