

Cannibals Are Cooking

a solo drama of
EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS
creator of Tarzan

by
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PRODUCTIONS

CANNIBALS ARE COOKING was first staged at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in October 1992. Kevin Stevens played Edgar Rice Burroughs. The production was directed by Bob May.

CANNIBALS ARE COOKING was next produced by 10,000 Comic Books and staged at the Bryant Lake Bowl in Minneapolis, MN. Tim Uren directed the production and played Edgar Rice Burroughs. The play was performed in May 2008.

CAST

EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS-- A pulp adventure writer in his early seventies, bald, and moderately overweight. He recently has been suffering from ill health, but still it can be seen how strong he has been in the recent past.

SETTING

April 10, 1947. The office of EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS in Tarzana, California. A large desk sits in front of a comfortable, well worn maroon leather back chair. A small garbage can is close to the desk.

Pieces of African style folk art, the fake kind that one would buy in America, hang from the walls. The walls are also filled with large paintings of Tarzan, apparently art from short story magazines or pulp novels. A recent picture of EDGAR in a World War II bomber jacket is also tacked up on the wall.

A fake stuffed ape, once used for movie advertising, stands guard next to a messy bookcase. This bookcase occupies a whole wall and is full of papers, documents, and books. These books are mostly editions of ERB's novels.

There is a small bar cleverly placed in one corner.

A projector mounted on a cart has been wheeled out in the middle of the office. A small table and a chair are close to the audience. Ceiling fans slowly rotate above.

STAGING NOTE

An associate producer from RKO pictures has come to get EDGAR to sign a contract for the next Tarzan film. At first this unseen producer will seem to be the audience, but later EDGAR has this character sit in a chair on the stage.

(AT RISE: EDGAR stares out, looking at someone. He holds a film reel.)

EDGAR

Sorry the studio wasted your time bringing this out. The newest release?

(EDGAR puts on his glasses.)

I don't go to these anymore. Not worth it. Well, that's not completely true. My... grandson likes to go, so I humor him. I don't... don't understand the appeal to these pictures. Never have. When I go, it's not for these abysmal.... I go for the company, not the story.

(He plops the film on his desk. He grabs a large glass full of liquor off the bar.)

My jungle sense can hear what you're thinking. Why should I watch it? I know what these are like. When I find time, I'll mount it on the projector.

(Gazes at his unseen guest.)

I really need to improve relations between Edgar Rice Burroughs, Incorporated and RKO, don't I? Frankly, that is impossible. But I see the studio's making an effort, you've driven out and delivered this personally. This is special treatment. And who does the studio grace me with this afternoon? I've never seen you before. Are you the new producer? No wait, I can guess! The assistant to the producer. Pegged you, didn't I? Don't seem so astonished, I dealt with Hollywood for a long, long time. Well. Thank you for coming. I am honored. Take that seat right there. So what do they call this one? Tarzan and the Huntress. And still starring John Weissmuller? I thought the studio had given up on him. Isn't his belly hanging over his loin cloth? I suppose he's somehow still popular, yes, I suppose he is. Suppose he is. You interrupted my drink.

(EDGAR finishes his drink.)

Now I am being rude. They send a servant and I'm all.... Go ahead, sit in that seat there. What can I pour you? Bourbon? Scotch? I have got just about everything you've heard of and a few things you haven't. Pick your poison. No? Well I'm filling my glass.

(EDGAR mixes together several strange liquors into a glass. This is his "Tarzan Special," which he will describe later.)

I realize, of course, that you aren't here show off the latest movie. No, this is far from a social visit. The studio always finds a reason to be nice, don't they? At least they're trying to be nice over money. I have looked over the movie contract. Got it right here in my drawer.

(EDGAR tosses the legal contract on the table.)

It's not enough. Your studio collects a mint off my boy. And he is my boy. Not yours. He's my John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, Tarzan of the Apes. And of course.... Tarzan the cash man. No, no, do not parrot the latest spiel about the quality improving. No one connected with the making of a single Tarzan picture has had the remotest conception of his character. Oh, I have complained before. Not lately... but I have complained. He's not some baboon like you people make him out as. You've hurt the sales of my books with this trash! You should see my latest banks records. My accountant's screaming worse than a baboon. And I've read the papers. I've heard your director talk about how

EDGAR(CONT.)

Tarzan is moving into a new direction. That's good, very good. Just means to me that RKO can spare a little more.

(He stirs his glass around, trying to take out a little tension by watching the contents of his glass spin.)

I have attended many, many meetings with your creative consultants. It's just plain and simple reality here, friend. People are tired of seeing Tarzan the way you've depicted him! Book sales have been dropping. The public is losing interest. And it starts with films like this! But who am I, talking to you. You are the movie men. You know how jungle films should be done! Have you read any of my books? No? That doesn't surprise me. Yet I am supposed to watch your great picture based on something you've never read.

(Silence.)

You won't leave until I watch this damn thing, will you? Alright, alright, let's watch the monkey man, but the contract will not be signed until you up your offer.

(EDGAR mounts the reel on the projector.)

We need to discuss his image. I have stories to sell, lots of unwritten stories. If America is to go on thinking all Tarzan is... is this trash. Suffice to say it is not what I intended. And the future, my future and his, he's about all I have these days. My boy, my true boy is eternal! If you would spend the time to read my books you'd understand who he is. This old thing is on its last legs. Let's see, there!

(EDGAR turns on the projector, the image of a Tarzan movie flickers either on or off stage. Tarzan is heard talking in his Hollywood broken English. He then does his jungle call. EDGAR winces.)

That isn't even what an ape sounds like! Tarzan can sure talk your ear off when he gets going, can't he? Me Tarzan, You Jane. I can't, can't listen to it.

(EDGAR turns down the volume on the projector.)

Those British can sure talk. So articulate, so, intelligent. Every word a mark of his breeding. Me Tarzan, You Jane. Now that is real grammar with a capital G A double m A R.

(He does a poor imitation of a British accent.)

"Don't you agree, old chum? Why are you so silent? He is John Clayton, Lord Greystoke. For heaven's sake old chap, you are watching a British gentleman. Oh silly, never mind the swimming trunks. Churchill knows him. And very well, I might add. Tarzan and Winston, they do tennis regularly."

(EDGAR pretends he is playing tennis. He switches to the broken English of the motion picture Tarzan.)

"Me Tarzan. Play Winston. Cheetah, get ball for Tarzan. Cheetah good monkey, good monkey Cheetah. Tarzan serve!"

(EDGAR serves the "ball" right towards the guest chair.)

EDGAR(CONT.)

Never understood... how could anybody do that to.... No, he's not yours. Not yours at all.
(EDGAR refreshes his drink.)

I fathered him in the jungle of my mind. And he's rich. He's got his father's estate and he has gold from Opar! He speaks French and Latin, and especially English and... and Swahili. Even a little German. Not by choice mind you, but after fighting that bunch in two wars he... he learned a little German. He is an African chief. And yes, Lord of the Apes, King Tarmangani. Not that it means anything to you. He's almost a god! He is our Hercules. The Greeks had Hercules, the Romans had Romulus and Remus.... many many heroes. And I... I've created Tarzan as a hero for this country. People will abandon him, already have abandoned him when the thrill of this slop wears thin! Why don't you read my tales? Once you read Tarzan you will watch this chimp... and laugh. Oh, I know what all your bosses have been telling you. The word around town is that I've had a close collaboration with Mr. Sol Lessor, mister big jungle director. Well, I've let him think that. I've let the world think that.

(EDGAR mimics the studio directors.)

"Oh, yes, yes, sure Ed tell us what you want. We'll do it." I make suggestions and I write ideas. Then he, and, I suppose you, take it, change names, change characters, change the story. What else is there left? Pretty soon "Do you have a boat?" said in French becomes "Me Tarzan, You Jane!"

(He is suddenly in pain. He swallows more liquor.)

Why not really film one of my stories? Word for word. From my mouth into your camera. Ed wrote it in French. You film it in French. Simple! Let's put that in your contract. Me Tarzan! You Jane!

(Finishing his drink, EDGAR mixes another.)

How in the hell did that get going? Jungle Jim Weissmuller didn't say that. All he said was, "Tarzan, Jane". How come people run all around, giggling at that insipid phrase. The studio even uses it! The famous line nobody wrote!

(Short on breath, he sits.)

As you see, I'm... I'm a little perturbed.

(In pain.)

No, no, sit down, it's a simple condition I have. Sit down. I'm used to conditions. These kind.

(He waves the contract.)

And this kind.

(He taps his chest.)

Just hold on, be doing my jungle call in a minute. Always have pain of some sort. Especially when I get agitated I... That's why I keep plenty medicine around. Cheers. It's the best medicine. Because it.. it makes you innocent.

(EDGAR takes a long drink.)

It's leaving again.

(He now relaxes a little.)

You sure you won't let me set you up with something? No? There's no reason for our meeting to be unfriendly. We're both Republicans here, I'm sure. At least, you should be. Raise your offer and I might consider signing, but then again, I might not. I should

EDGAR(CONT.)

take back Tarzan. You're staring at me like I'm, I'm some sort of fruitcake. Well, I'm not. I'm a normal bean. Here, look at this, just look.

(EDGAR grabs a picture from his desk. It shows his wife Emma and their three children, John, Hubert, and Joan.)

I'm a simple family man, a wife, three kids. Well, they're grown up now, and my wife, she.... Isn't that ordinary?

Would amuse them every night with stories. The kids really liked them, especially John. Oh yes, John.... John would follow me around the yard, pretending he was a lion following my scent spoor. They deserved the best of me. The best I could give them. Which for a terribly long time wasn't... wasn't much.

(He points towards the film.)

Until this. Was in the middle of one of my fancy schemes when I... I'm always pulling schemes of some kind, but my plan of that particular year was to sell some new fangled pencil sharpeners. Of course, the pencil sharpeners weren't selling, bills were piling up. Emma got to be one worried wife, wanted me to get back my old job at Sears. Something. So there was I, waiting and waiting for a customer to change it all. I guess, I... I've been waiting for you all day to do the same. It started out... as a distraction. Fill time. I had paper, plenty of pencils. And, of course, the latest in pencil sharpener design. My first serious story. Even kept the paper I wrote it on.

(EDGAR opens a drawer and pulls out a tattered paper.)

This...

(He holds up a pencil.)

And this.

(He holds up the paper.)

Became all of me.

(EDGAR watches the movie.)

Thirty-six years ago, now. Thirty six years ago I was a... Now, I got you and Tarzan...

(Looking at the film case.)

And the Huntress. You don't need to be so fancy dancy with me, impressing me with your product. Hollywood I am not, nor will ever be. I'm just a normal bean from Chicago who writes crazy stories. Even called myself Normal Bean on my first story. Was so worried then that people would think I'd lost two or three wheels from my wagon. Doubted my own sanity so I called it... Under the Moons of Mars by Normal Bean. Foolishness. You can't write a story like that and expect one's life to continue to be the same. Not that I wanted it to be the same but--

(The pain has reappeared.)

It... whew.. there. Surprised that came back. You've really got me going. Just a little breath. There... getting back on kilter. Back to being an ordinary, healthy robust... Damn it. There. Pain, pain keeps me hoping for something better. I've got a long time yet so.... You'd be the right person to ask about this, wouldn't you? Who writes your press releases at the studio? I noticed this in the paper today. Yes, yes, there was a film review, in the paper, I was reading it and....

(EDGAR pulls out a newspaper from the garbage)

EDGAR(CONT.)

What you fools must say about me. Did you read it? No, I would guess that is another bit of writing you haven't looked over. You need to hear this. First, of course, we write here about my meal ticket. "Tarzan, impersonated by Johnny Weissmuller, who has played the character eleven times," probably about five times too many, eh?

(EDGAR pats his stomach.)

Jane should help him with his push-ups. "Once again moves back to his original setting, the jungle, where the late Edgar Rice Burroughs first imagined him." Late? Do I look...late? I am grieved to learn of my death. I hope this desk worm of a critic will advise me when and where I died. Do press releases come from your office? But you don't know anything about press releases, you're too high on the food chain for that. Late. I haven't even aged. Two years ago I was covering the war! This little problem will pass on. I'm like John Clayton. Tarzan never ages-- he's a grandfather, been a grandfather, like me, for years. He's still swinging through the trees. So am I.

(He reads from his first story.)

Yes, even though I am a very old man, how old I do not know. So far as I can recollect I have always been about... thirty. I appear today as I did forty years ago... I was a little plump then too.... yet I feel I cannot go on living forever, someday I shall die the death from which there is no resurrection. I do not know why I should fear death, I who have died twice and am still alive.... But yet... I still have the same horror of it as you. First lines of my first book. I... they were quick lines back then, but now. Dying twice. I sure have died twice.

(EDGAR watches the images flicker across the screen.)

I stopped reading this review right then and there. Movie critics. What does a review matter anyway? I doubt it's objective. Critics are all secretly communists. There is a direct line from Stalin's headquarters to every critic perched aloft in New York. They pay dues to the Reds. They do! Whoever controls the press controls the country. Read what they say! They're so quick to trash anything American. Had some foreign source before, they say. This book lacks content, they say. If no one buys our books because the critics disclaim them, democracy will erode from the inside. The fascists may be about gone but you wait, Stalin's Reds will be next. Especially if we keep Truman president. That Truman, started out pretty good for a democrat, but.... You know, there is something about a democrat, they always collapse in the end. Like FDR at Yalta, making concessions. Being humanitarian. If he had seen Pearl Harbor, I don't think he would've been so--

(The movie draws his attention.)

Is the same monkey playing Cheetah, or did that little urchin finally fall off his tree? Had to change the monkey's name. Cheetah. The monkey isn't a cat. The monkey's name should be Nikima. Say it with me. Nikima. Nikima. Tarzan didn't like that one.