

## **Martha's Choice**

### **A ten-minute play**

**By Rich Espey**

#### **Based on a true story:**

*March 12, 2003 - Covington, LA (AP) – Two dozen monkeys escaped from a research center and holed up in a forest, where animal-control workers used bananas and oranges to try to lure them out.*

#### **Characters**

*Martha, a female rhesus monkey*

*Snowball, a male rhesus monkey*

*Charles, a male rhesus monkey*

#### **The Time**

The present

#### **The Place**

A forest outside of a primate research facility

**Synopsis:** Martha, Charles and Snowball are the last holdouts of a research cohort that has escaped from a biological weapons research facility. As they try to figure out how to survive in the wild, Martha reveals that she has brought with her the deadly biological agents to which their cohort has proven immune. Martha is determined to release the pathogens, killing all primates including “the Homos”, and begin the repopulation of the world with gentle rhesus monkeys at the top of the evolutionary ladder. She must choose either gentle Charles or aggressive Snowball for that repopulation. She chooses the prospect of Charles’ “gentle genes”, but Snowball refuses to accept this. Snowball’s hunger for food, however, outweighs his aggressive desire to reproduce, and he is lured by a cheeseburger back to the research facility. Ultimately, Martha’s bigger choice is whether or not to unleash the weapons of mass destruction on humanity. Charles convinces her that her position of moral superiority is negated if she acts in a hostile manner. Martha and Charles choose to return to captivity, but not without first planning their own first attempts at passing their gentle genes to the next generation.

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## **Martha's Choice**

*(A forest. Some lab paraphernalia – glassware, instruments, bowls, a cardboard box. Snowball is rolling and playing. Charles, who wears glasses, is reading a book. Martha is looking out, calling off. They all assume a monkey-like posture.)*

### **MARTHA**

Ludwig! Come back! Be strong! You can hold out a little longer! Ludwig!!!! Damn! Now there's only three of us.

### **CHARLES**

He was hungry. I can't say that I blame him. We've missed two scheduled feedings.

### **SNOWBALL**

Hey, I'm hungry, too. You don't see me wussing out. *(beat)* What'd they offer up?

### **MARTHA**

What they always feed us. Bananas.

### **SNOWBALL**

Bananas! Again with the bananas. When what I really want is a nice, juicy, cheeseburger.

### **CHARLES**

They're not going to give us cheeseburgers, Snowball. We're rhesus monkeys.

### **MARTHA**

We must be able to eat something out here...what about those berries?

### **CHARLES**

You don't know if they're safe or not.

### **SNOWBALL**

What, you scared, wuss monkey?

### **CHARLES**

I'm merely pointing out that we've never had to forage for our own foodstuffs before.

### **MARTHA**

Our ancestors managed to survive for millions of years in the wild. We just need to tap our primal urges.

### **SNOWBALL**

Let me show you how it's done.

*(He eats some berries, becomes ill and spits them out.)*

**CHARLES**

You see, I told you that this plan was infeasible. We've been caged in the research facility all our lives -

**SNOWBALL**

Shut up you little wuss!

**MARTHA**

Snowball, please –

**SNOWBALL**

Hey, at least I'm tryin' here, Martha. Not like foureyes who just sits there reading. You look like a homo with those things on!

**CHARLES**

That is an insult! Never call me that again! I am not a Homo sapiens, I am a rhesus monkey, thank you very much!

**MARTHA**

Charles, I'm sure Snowball didn't mean anything by -

**SNOWBALL**

Why do you wear those stupid homo glasses, homo? Only homos wear those things.

**CHARLES**

These spectacles were given to me after...after ...

**MARTHA**

It's all right, Charles, you don't have to go there.

**CHARLES**

No! They were given to me after they botched that frightful experiment on my corneas. Testing out laser eye surgery on rhesus monkeys! Another injustice! I suppose the Homo Sapiens felt remorseful, for once. At least I can still see clearly. And don't you question my monkeyhood, Snowball. I'm still here, keeping a stiff upper lip, after the rest of them gave up the minute they became a bit peckish.

**SNOWBALL**

Well, maybe they just don't got what it takes to survive in nature!

**MARTHA**

That's just it, Snowball! Of course they do. We all do! Our research cohort has been exposed to every virus, every bacterium, every parasite they can throw at us in their experiments. And we are the few who survived it all. What is it called, Charles?

**CHARLES**

Survival of the fittest. We are the most fit, simply because we have survived.

**MARTHA**

We are the few with the genes to survive anything – bioterror, chemical attack, global warming, funding cuts – you name it. And now that we've escaped from our cages there is nothing that could destroy us. Nothing!

**SNOWBALL**

Freedom, baby! That's what this is all about! Now let's kick some homo butt!

**CHARLES**

How do you expect to do that without food resources? You didn't think of that, did you, Martha.

**MARTHA**

I came up with the escape plan, didn't I? Give me a little credit here.

**CHARLES**

Well, I will say your plan worked beautifully. Having us save our urine in jars for three weeks and then flood the control room with it during exercise time to short circuit the electric fence was a stroke of genius.

**SNOWBALL**

You saved it in jars? I just held it for three weeks. Man.

**MARTHA**

And now that we're free all we have to do is figure out how to survive in the wild and reproduce before we starve to death.

**SNOWBALL**

Yeah, babe! Let's get rrrready to rrrrreproduce!

**CHARLES**

I think finding a means of sustenance is our primary need right now.

**SNOWBALL**

Look, jerkoff, you're not helping any, reading a book just like the homos do.

**CHARLES**

Perhaps, Snowball, if you had ever tried to improve yourself rhesus monkeys wouldn't be in the state we're in today. We're completely at their mercy, unable to survive in our natural ecological niche -

**SNOWBALL**

Reading is for homos! Homo wannabe!

**CHARLES**

If we're going to outlast our oppressor then we have to survive his world!

**MARTHA**

(*indicating his "book"*) What is that, anyway?

**CHARLES**

It's a book of pages and pages of letters! I think it may be the genetic code! (*It's a book of Word Search puzzles.*) I took it from my keeper when we escaped. I think it holds the secrets about our genes, about why we're the only ones who are resistant to every known pathogen.

**MARTHA**

Is it our code or theirs?

**CHARLES**

It...doesn't say. I can't read that well yet. But if I can figure this out, Martha, then we -

**SNOWBALL**

Who gives a baboon's ass? You shoulda took some food!

**CHARLES**

It's important to understand natural history! Haven't you ever listened to them? Our genetic code is ninety-five percent similar to the Homo sapiens.

**MARTHA**

Ew. So?

**CHARLES**

About ten or eleven million years ago we and the Homos shared a common ancestor -

**MARTHA**

Wait, you're saying we're related to them?

**SNOWBALL**

Baby, this guy is a whack job!

**CHARLES**

Hear me out, Martha. We and the Homos are both branches on a family tree that goes back millions and millions of years to a common ancestor. One of the branches became us, one became them, one became orangutans, one baboons, one gorillas, one became chimpanzees – they share ninety-nine percent of their genes with the Homo sapiens.

**MARTHA**

Poor things.

**CHARLES**

A few genes of difference – that's all.

**MARTHA**

But somehow that tiny difference was enough to put the Homo sapiens in charge.

**SNOWBALL**

Yeah, they think they run the whole show.

**CHARLES**

Well, considering that they're the ones who put everyone else in cages, I guess, in fact, they do. Now if we could just figure out what the precise difference is...

**SNOWBALL**

Yeah, what do they got that I ain't got? Let me see that.

**MARTHA**

Who cares! I don't want to be like them! I'm glad we're different!

**SNOWBALL**

Yeah, so shut your banana hole, ya nimrod!

**MARTHA**

What have rhesus monkeys done for the last ten million years? We have lived in peace and harmony with our neighbors. What has Homo sapiens done since the big split? Nothing but war, conflict, violence, destruction, enslavement of other species.

**CHARLES**

I do cringe when I see what they've done to the canines and the felines.

**MARTHA**

And the poor bovines! They eat them!

**CHARLES**

Bovine. It's what's for dinner.

**SNOWBALL**

I wouldn't mind a cheeseburger right now myself.

**MARTHA**

But if we were in charge of the whole shebang, the world would be a kinder, gentler place! And if we can just fill the planet with enough gentle rhesus monkeys, we can set things straight.

**SNOWBALL**

Yeah, baby, let's get it started!

**MARTHA**

Easy, Snowball.

**SNOWBALL**

I got primal urges, baby! And don't call me Snowball! It's a dumb name the Homos gave me. Now that I'm free I'm gonna call myself...let's see...Boddabanga! What do you think of that?

**MARTHA**

I think it's time rhesus monkeys were in charge. We will be kind and gentle leaders for this planet! The Homo sapiens are a threat to everything. And we need to address this threat before it destroys the world!

**CHARLES**

But there are six billion of them!

**MARTHA**

Maybe not for long.

*(She reveals a cardboard box.)*

**CHARLES**

What is that?

**MARTHA**

Just a little something I grabbed during the escape.

**SNOWBALL**

Our afternoon crunchy treats?

**MARTHA**

Every biological agent we've been exposed to. All of the viruses, bacteria and parasites they've been injecting into us. All of the infectious diseases we've proven our immunity to. How ironic. They used us in their experiments to create weapons of mass destruction, and in turn, created superior beings, immune to those very weapons. And now we have the weapons.

**SNOWBALL**

I wish they were crunchy treats.

**CHARLES**

How can you be certain we're immune to what's in all of those tubes?

**MARTHA**

Are you kidding? They walk in to our room dressed head to toe in rubber suits and hoods and gloves and stick us full of all sorts of crap they're scared to death to come within

three feet of while we have to freakin' lick the residue off our naked asses! And we're still here, aren't we? We must be immune!

**SNOWBALL**

That's right, baby! Bring it on! Ain't no bacteria gonna mess with Boddabanga!

**CHARLES**

Still, you can't be sure...

**SNOWBALL**

Don't listen to wuss monkey, here. You ready to get it on, baby?

**CHARLES**

You need to be careful with those vials!

**MARTHA**

As soon as I open these vials every primate on the planet will be exposed and...well, let's just say they won't be a problem anymore. Today we undo million years of erroneous evolution and install a new world order!

**CHARLES**

But they're all going to...

**MARTHA**

Our research cohort will survive and the rest of the primates – including the Homo sapiens – will be gone. Well, except for maybe a few hearty baboons and gibbons, but I think that would be OK.

**CHARLES**

And then we repopulate the world?

**MARTHA**

With rhesus monkeys on top!

**SNOWBALL**

Speaking of rhesus monkeys on top, let's get started repopulating. I'm gettin' kind of hungry here.

**MARTHA**

I need to speak to the two of you about that. You two are the last holdouts who haven't let a little hunger take their eyes off the prize. I'm going to need to choose one of you to start the repopulation of the world.

**SNOWBALL**

You gotta choose between me and four eyes? Baby, ain't no competition whatsoever!

**CHARLES**

Now look here, Snowball, I happen to think that my genetic makeup would be quite propitious for a new world.

**SNOWBALL**

You ain't got what it takes, wussie monkey! It was probably your wussie genes that let the Homos take over in the first place!

*(He challenges CHARLES.)*

**CHARLES**

The meek shall inherit the earth!

**SNOWBALL**

You ain't gettin' with Martha! It's gonna be my genes!

*(A tussle.)*

**MARTHA**

Stop it! Both of you! This is exactly how the male Homo sapiens behave! Too much aggression! Not enough altruism. Their males ruined it! Our males will not!

**SNOWBALL**

Here we go. It's always the males' fault, isn't it?

**MARTHA**

It is! Who built all their weapons? The males did.

**CHARLES**

You don't know that for certain.

**MARTHA**

Sure I do! You know why? Because they shaped them like their own penises, that's why! Spears, arrows, guns, rifles, torpedoes, intercontinental ballistic missiles – all just angry extensions of their own rigid member.

**SNOWBALL**

Yeah, speaking of that –

**MARTHA**

The point is we need a new world free from that aggression, with none of those angry genes in the population. We need to start anew with gentle genes, not mean genes! I'm only going to mate with someone with gentle genes.

**CHARLES**

“Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?”

**SNOWBALL**

Um...geez, baby, I think you're a total hottie, OK, I wanna get with you...

**MARTHA**

I'm sorry, Snowball –

**SNOWBALL**

Boddabanga!

**MARTHA**

But Charles has the gentler genes. I'm going to mate with Charles.

**SNOWBALL**

That's what you think, baby.

*(He wrestles with CHARLES, knocking him down. He then picks up MARTHA, carries her over his shoulder and begins to exit. He notices something in the distance.)*

Hey, look at that homo! Is that a cheeseburger? He's gonna give me his cheeseburger!! See, I told you if we held out long enough they'd offer up some better chow!

*(He drops MARTHA and exits.)*

**MARTHA**

Charles, are you all right?

**CHARLES**

I'm fine. My ego is a little bruised, but otherwise I'm fine.

**MARTHA**

There's nothing to be embarrassed about. I told you, gentle genes. We can restart the world with gentle genes. I just break these vials and everyone dies.

**CHARLES**

What about Snowball and the others? They're all immune, too. They won't die.

**MARTHA**

They're locked in their cages. We can't unlock them. We don't have opposable thumbs yet. It will be a wonderful new world, Charles! Kinder! Gentler!!

*(She raises the box over her head and lets out a shriek.)*

**CHARLES**

Martha! If you kill them, then, then....

**MARTHA**

Goodbye aggressors!! Farewell savage evildoers!! Here's to a new world order!!! GOD BLESS RHESUS MONKEYS!!!!

**CHARLES**

Martha, if we kill them that means we're just like them.

*(A long pause. MARTHA lowers the box.)*

**MARTHA**

I'm hungry.

**CHARLES**

Me, too.

**MARTHA**

Where's the homo with the food?

**CHARLES**

Martha, before we go back...we could still...you know...we never get a chance to, being in our cages so much of the time...what if we tried to make a little one? A little one, conceived in freedom?

**MARTHA**

That would be nice.

**CHARLES**

He.. or she...might be kind of meek.

**MARTHA**

That's all right. That's a good thing.

**CHARLES**

He might not take over the world right away.

**MARTHA**

But he would have healthy genes.

**CHARLES**

That would be a good start.

**MARTHA**

And you never know what might happen...

**CHARLES**

...Especially in ten or eleven million years.

*(CHARLES and MARTHA walk off, hand in hand, upright, as the lights fade.)*

**End of Play**