

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 rrrreproduce!

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