

The body in motion-capture who's rarely at rest

Andy Serkis puts talent to work in new 'Apes' movie

By Scott Bowles
USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — Andy Serkis walks and talks like a normal human being.

A refined one at that. With a British accent, a mop of unencumbered hair and a shirt that drapes a cut musculature, Serkis could be any other tourist at the Campo Gorilla Reserve at the Los Angeles Zoo.

Until he gets on his haunches. Then the guy is all simian.

"An ape will do this," Serkis says, rising from a crouch with the help of a loose fist that he slams on a park bench. "Their arms are so powerful, but all that pressure is on the knuckles."

Serkis' knuckles are knotted like biscuits and big as marbles. All worth it, he says, if you're going to get King Kong right. And Gollum. And, beginning Friday, Caesar, the quick-thinking ape that will lead the monkey revolution in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*.

With the help of computer monitors and a motion-capture leotard, the actor has been bringing creatures to life since 1999, when filming began for the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, in which he played Gollum.

Since then, he has become Hollywood's favorite bendable man. He was the big guy in *King Kong*, directed by friend Peter Jackson, and will play a partially animated Capt. Haddock in *The Adventures of Tintin*, Steven Spielberg's homage to the children's comic book (out Dec. 23). He teams with Jackson again for the two-part telling of *The Hobbit* in 2012 and 2013.

Yet despite a career that includes more than 50 film and television credits playing non-creature characters, Serkis, 47, walks unnoticed through the zoo. Except perhaps for one western lowland gorilla, who ambles out shortly after Serkis drops his forearms on the surrounding fence.

"Oh, I studied that guy for months to get how he walks," Serkis says, gesturing at the gorilla as it hulks across the reserve for shade, flashing one glance Serkis' way.

He may be regularly hidden beneath pixels, but Serkis is getting recognized as a workhorse with an occasional De Niro-like intensity. Though he is a vegetarian, he began eating fish because



By Dan MacMedan, USA TODAY

Precious talent: Andy Serkis has been Hollywood's go-to guy for motion-capture creatures since he played Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

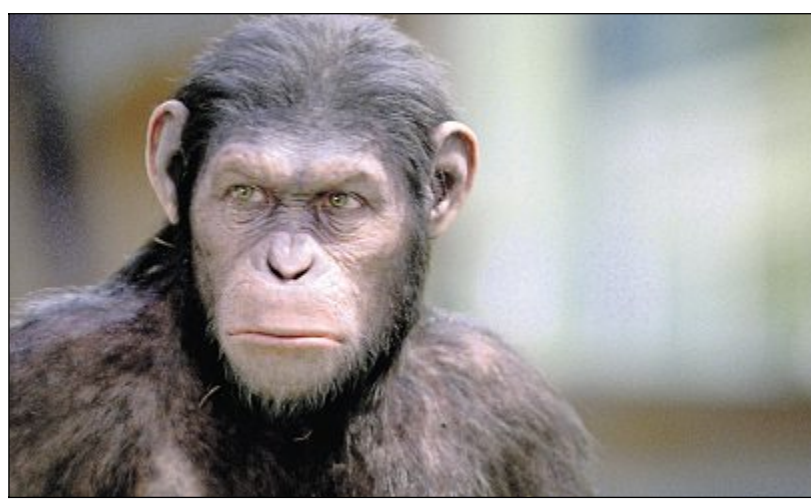
Serkis is "the Charlie Chaplin of motion-capture... an actor who can act through the limits of technology."

— Rupert Wyatt, director,
Rise of the Planet of the Apes

Gollum would do the same. For *Kong*, he spent days at home with his legs shackled to work his Kong calves. He wore foot-long weights on his wrists to get *Kong's* wrecking-ball forearms.

For *Apes*, Serkis hiked mountains to build his forearms and studied hours of footage of Ambam, the gorilla who became an Internet favorite thanks to footage of him walking upright and standing as if waiting for a bus.

"You don't want to anthropomorphize an animal too much," Serkis says.



WETA/20th Century Fox

Hail Caesar: Serkis in character in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. The actor spent months studying the movement of apes to prepare for the role.

"But they really are like us. We share 97% of the same DNA."

Or perhaps 98%, in Serkis' case. "The guy can act more like a monkey than a monkey can act like a monkey," says

James Franco, who plays Caesar's caretaker. The film, which also stars Freida Pinto and Brian Cox, suggests apes hopped the evolutionary chain through genetic testing.

Apes marks one of the first movies to take motion-capture out of the green-screen warehouse and onto physical sets and locales.

Director Rupert Wyatt, who calls Serkis "the Charlie Chaplin of motion-capture," says that the effect works only "if you've got an actor who can act through the limits of technology — a motion-capture suit and helmet with cameras all over your face. Andy is that actor."

He's becoming that Hollywood ascender, too. In addition to working as an assistant director on the two *Hobbit* films, Serkis founded The Imaginarium, a London-based studio focused on motion-capture acting.

Not that all audiences need high-tech entertainment. Serkis' sons, Sonny, 11, and Louis, 7 (he also has a 23-year-old daughter, Ruby), still like to clown around the house with Dad. On one condition:

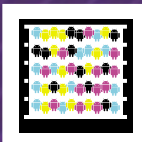
"I don't have to wear a mask or anything," Serkis says. "But I do have to run like King Kong."

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