

Tim Allen Narrates the Humanity in ‘Chimpanzee’

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- [African Cats](#) [2]
- [Chimpanzee](#) [3]
- [Disneynature](#) [4]
- [Earth](#) [5]
- [Freddy](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [Isha](#) [8]
- [Jane Goodall Institute](#) [9]
- [Movie Review](#) [10]
- [Oscar](#) [11]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [12]
- [Scar](#) [13]
- [Tim Allen](#) [14]
- [True Life Adventures](#) [15]
- [Walt Disney](#) [16]



Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – It’s Earth Day this weekend, and following on the heels of “Earth” and “African Cats,” previous releases from Walt Disney Studios and Disneynature, there is “Chimpanzee.” Tim Allen narrates the story of Oscar, Isha, Freddy and Scar, and the film is co-produced by the Jane Goodall Institute, which preserves the chimpanzee natural habitats in Africa.

This is part of the remarkable and traditional Disney True Life Adventures, and with technology getting so much better and smaller for recording the action, the audience is the fly-on-the-animal for the story of the chimpanzees in their natural home. Tim Allen narrates the film in his own inimitable style, and the result is a breezy and eye-opening nature film for kids and adults alike. Studying the faces and the habits of the animal stars, we can’t help but notice how close the species are to humanity, even in the application of emotional intuition.

Oscar is the latest child to be born into a tribe of chimpanzees in the tropical forests of the Ivory Coast and Uganda, the son of an alpha female named Isha. Oscar’s tribe is led by Freddy, and then all tend and interact in a lush area where food is generally available. Oscar is taught by his mother to fit in, but he won’t reach a maturity until about age 20.



Baby Oscar and Mother Isha in ‘Chimpanzee’
Photo credit: Martyn Colbeck for © Disney

The tribe is threatened by another group of chimpanzees, led by Scar. In the quest for food, Scar wants to raid the area and take over the whole region. In the inevitable battle there are casualties, including mother Isha. Oscar is now alone in the world, but the tribe and Freddy will come through in the end, protecting the territory and their own.

Almost as fascinating as the closeup view of nature is the realization of how rare this landscape is becoming, and how amazing the patience of the film crew is in delivering it. This film was shot over three years, and the footage was edited to a clean and concise 78 minutes. If it is possible to project a leisurely pace in this time, the crew accomplished this as well, for the day-to-day actions of the tribe – like food producing methods – are as prevalent as the confrontational action. This presents a educational balance, especially for the kids.

Although some annoying elements are present...the naming of the chimpanzees and Tim Allen's inevitable wacky narrative...there was a respect for the nature of beasts as far as the "G" rating could deliver. Yes, this was a Disney squeaky clean film, but the emphasis is on the ongoing quest for food as one of the central themes, even up to the off-screen dismembering of a captured monkey. The law of the jungle is implied through the warring tribes, and there is a conclusion that life is a day-to-day struggle in the animal kingdom.

Oscar is a very photogenic chimpanzee, with the "awww" factor of being newly born to the wild. His relationships with the other members of his tribe become another central theme, it was interesting to see him reach out beyond his mother to learn about how to fend for himself, and his later adoption after the loss of Isha becomes that much more poignant. The filmmakers also had to let this story develop and the delivery of what happened successfully rides on the shoulders of its stars.



Leader of the Pack: Freddy in 'Chimpanzee'
Photo credit: © Disney

The setting is spectacular as well, with rich views of the jungle habitat. There is also a feeling of synchronicity in it all, that the jungle life occurs at the same time our life happens. And in the actions of the chimpanzee tribe there is a satisfying bit of humanity, which relates back to our own relationships. There is a gathering of knowledge for the human audience, in observing the hunter-gathering of chimpanzees.

I resisted the opportunity to use the joke, we learn everything in this film from chimpan-'A' to chimpanzee, because number one, that would be stolen from "The Simpsons," and the film is better than such a blithe amusement. The joke is still funny though, and I can't help it.

"Chimpanzee" opens everywhere on April 20th. Featuring the narration of Tim Allen and chimpanzees Oscar, Isha, Freddy and Scar. Co-produced by the Jane Goodell Institute and directed by Alastair Fothergill and Mark Linfield. Rated "G"



[17]

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Links:

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 - [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/african-cats>
 - [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/chimpanzee>
 - [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/disneynature>
 - [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/earth>
 - [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/freddy>
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 - [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/true-life-adventures>
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