

"The Smartest Chimp in the World"

By

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Screen Story #29

FADE IN:

INT - EDUCATION LAB, SAN MATEO INSTITUTE - PRESENT DAY

We are watching a documentary interview with two academic researchers, DR. DAVID MESSENGER and DR. SUSAN HAYWIRTH-MESSENGER, a husband-and-wife team. They are being interviewed in the offices of the San Mateo Primate Institute, a small academic research laboratory in Northern California. The two are seated about 3 feet apart, talking to an off-screen interviewer.

SUSAN

She's very smart. She knows who she is and what she wants. She can't be bought or sold, and she always has to do things her way.

DAVID

Just like her Mom.

SUSAN

(a bit uncomfortably) Yeah, I guess... (resuming) I don't regard her as an animal at all. She's more like... a person! A little person. A real child. She knows over 5000 signs - 5000 words essentially - which is more than most human children her age. And she can put them together in novel ways, in sentences, in ways that she has never been taught, just like a human child....

As Susan speaks, we cutaway to LULU, a three-year-old chimpanzee. Lulu is seated in a laboratory working on a puzzle that experimenters have set up for her. With her hands, she is moving symbols around on a board, apparently in some sort of meaningful way. She seems to be concentrating intently on the board, trying to figure it out. Laboratory staff in white coats are watching what she does and taking notes on clipboards.

SUSAN

...(with a laugh) You know, I have to be really careful what I say and do, because she picks up on everything SO fast! Luckily, I don't know any swear words in sign language, because I only have to use a word once, and she will remember it forever and use it against me.

DAVID

Stinky butt.

SUSAN

(laughs) Yeah, "stinky butt" is the worst phrase she knows, and she'll use it when she's in a bad mood, when she wants to irritate me. Mostly, though, she's pretty clean. She's usually a joy to work with. She really wants to learn, which is why she has such a big vocabulary.

CUT TO:

INT - LULU'S LEARNING ROOM

We are inside what looks like a small kindergarten classroom. Along the walls are colorful toys, tools, books and posters used in Lulu's training. There are observation windows along one side of the room so researchers can discreetly monitor and videotape what goes on there.

Lulu herself is seated on a child's classroom chair at a child-height table. SUSAN is seated on the other side of the table, obviously too big for the child's chair she is sitting on. Susan is facing Lulu and between them on the table is a set of blocks and shapes in bright primary colors.

(When Susan speaks to Lulu, she uses sign language. It's a special sign language designed just for Lulu. Of course, we don't know what the signs mean, but when Susan signs, she also speaks out loud. When Lulu signs, subtitles show us what she is saying.)

SUSAN

(signing and speaking slowly)

Lulu, please give me the red square block.

Lulu looks over the many colored shapes in front of her - green squares, red triangles, blue circles, etc. - picks out the red square and hands it to Susan.

LULU

(signing with subtitles)

Red square.

SUSAN

(signing and speaking)

Very good!

Now, put the green triangle in the box and put the box in the bag.

Lulu knows just what to do. She picks up the green triangle, puts it in the box, puts the box in the bag and hands the bag to Susan.

LULU

Good girl?

SUSAN

Yes, you're a very good girl! Lulu smart!

Lulu looks satisfied with herself.

LULU

Lulu smart!

SUSAN

Now, Lulu, put the orange triangle
on top of the red square.

Lulu grabs the orange triangle but becomes confused
for a moment, because she can't find the red square.

LULU

You have it!

SUSAN
(feigning ignorance)

Have what?

LULU

Red square! Give me red square!

SUSAN

Where?

LULU

Your lap!

After a dramatic pause, Susan smiles and brings out
the red square from under the table where she was
hiding it.

SUSAN

Oh, okay, here's the red square.

Lulu jumps up and down in excitement, half joy, half
anger.

LULU

Stinky butt!

SUSAN

I know, I was a stinky butt. I'm
sorry. Forgive me?

LULU

No forgive! Stinky butt!

SUSAN

Pleeease forgive me? I'll give you
a cookie.

LULU

No cookie. Hug.

SUSAN

Sure, I'll give you a hug!

Susan gets out of her chair and goes over to Lulu.
Lulu reaches up to her and they embrace with genuine
affection.

SUSAN

I'm sorry I tricked you.

Just then, Dave comes into the classroom. Lulu is very
excited and races to him.

LULU

Dad!

She jumps into his arms with great energy, almost
knocking him over. Susan smiles, David laughs and they
all seem to be having a warm family moment together.

CUT BACK TO:

INTERVIEW SETTING

SUSAN

She calls us Mom and Dad, which I
think is very sweet.

DAVID
(slightly condescending)

Actually, she calls us Mom and Dad because those are the names we taught her.

SUSAN

Well, we are the closest thing she has to parents. Her mother was killed by poachers. Local game wardens brought her to us. This was in Tanzania...

As Susan speaks, we see a series of still photos of Susan working with apes in Africa. In one scene, she is carrying a juvenile orangutan in her arms and is leading another by the hand.

...I was working on my doctoral thesis there, studying apes in the wild, and David...

DAVID

And I was biking across Africa.

We see still photos of a rugged-looking David in Africa, standing beside his muddy and heavily-laden bicycle.

SUSAN

...was biking across Africa. David was always a doer. It was like, draw a line on the map and follow that line no matter what. Whatever he encountered along that route - rivers, mountains, jungles - he just plowed right through it. He stayed at the research center for a few of days and that's how we met.

DAVID

And I remember her as passionate about her animals. Her own comfort meant nothing to her as long as she could be with them, study them, defend them. I remember her just raging over poachers, and the rest of us are trying to calm her down, saying you have to be practical, you can't fight all the poachers at once. She would have stood between the poachers and the animals if she could. Not a lot of common sense sometimes, but I admired her passion.

SUSAN

I felt we had a synergy. He's biking across Africa, but it happens he's also a neuroscientist with an interest in primates, which is why he stopped at our station. I wouldn't call it love at first sight, but there was definitely something there.

DAVID

It worked well.

SUSAN

Anyway, my grant in Tanzania was running out, and I was getting ready to head back to the States. David finished his bike trip and came back to the station, and we were both at a crossroads, thinking out various plans of what to do next. That's when Lulu came into our lives.

We see shaky home videos of Lulu as an infant. Susan is holding the chimp in her arms, wrapped in a blanket like a human infant, with David at her side. They are both smiling, aglow over their new child.

DAVID

It was clear from the beginning Lulu wasn't an ordinary chimp. She rated very high on the Sheppard Scale. I mean off the charts for a primate, virtually the equivalent of a human infant in raw learning ability. Everything clicked. We were ready, and Lulu was ready, and the initial funding was there, so we brought her back here and essentially built the institute around her.

SUSAN

And here she is!

Lulu saunters into view, carrying a stuffed animal with her. She climbs up into a chair between David and Susan, visually bridging the gap between them. She reaches over and gives Susan a hug, then she hugs David, giving them both equal time.

SUSAN

(signing and speaking)

And this is Toto. Lulu, can you show us Toto?

Lulu holds the stuffed animal out toward the camera. It appears to be some kind of teddy bear, but it is so worn from use that you can hardly tell. Eyes, nose and mouth are still recognizable, but just barely.

SUSAN

(speaking only)

Toto is Lulu's constant companion. She has been with her since she was an infant. Lulu signs to Toto, even though Toto can't sign back. They even have tea parties together.

DAVID

It provides evidence of a fantasy life, which is very rare for a primate.

As Susan and David speak, Lulu looks back and forth between them, following their conversation. Since they are not signing now, Lulu can't understand exactly what they are saying, but she is still intently focused on them.

SUSAN

People don't realize that these aren't just dumb animals. They have hopes, dreams and feelings just like people. They are aware of themselves and know what's happening around them.

DAVID

Aware to a certain extent. They're not people really. In certain areas, a human child is still far more advanced.

SUSAN

I think if people could see the world through a chimp's eyes, feel what they are feeling, we would be taking a lot better care of our environment. The loss of habitat is just devastating to these animals. Heartbreaking. One of the goals of the project is to make people understand, help them see the world through an animal's eyes.

DAVID

And I see this project as a unique opportunity to do rigorous science. When we say that Lulu knows over 5000 signs, that's not just a random number. The signs may be unique to Lulu, but each has been independently verified in double-blind studies. I think it's five thousand two hundred seventeen signs right now.

SUSAN

But I don't see her as a research subject. She is a sentient being, a child like any other. She has to determine her own fate, choose her own path. (Glaring at David) She must decide on her own whether she participates in our Frankenstein experiments.

As the tension rises between Susan and David, Lulu looks increasingly distressed. She hands the stuffed animal to Susan.

LULU

Hug Toto!

The ploy works! Susan is distracted and relaxes a little.

SUSAN

(signing and speaking)

Sure, I'll hug Toto!

DAVID

Probably our biggest challenge right now is funding. Most of our initial grants have expired and we've been actively looking for sponsorship.

SUSAN
(more relaxed now)

Funding is ALWAYS a problem. We'd like to be working full-time with Lulu, but so much of our time is taken over by logistics and grant-writing, trying to make ends meet. It's hard to get any of the major foundations to even look at our work. The long-term value of this research is huge, but you have to have vision.

DAVID

Which most non-profit foundations just don't have. That's why we've had to sell Lulu's commercial marketing rights.

SUSAN
(shocked)

We've sold WHAT!?

DAVID
(nervously)

Oh, I thought we discussed it. Commercial marketing rights. The right to market products under Lulu's name and likeness.

SUSAN
(furious)

No we didn't "discuss it"! This is the first I've heard of it! Marketing what? Bananas?

As the argument escalates, Lulu tries to intervene. She tries to hand her stuffed animal to someone, but both David and Susan are ignoring her.

LULU

Play with Toto?

DAVID

We don't know yet. We signed an option with an advertizing agency. Now they're going to see what sort of deals can be put together. It's good money: fifty thousand just for the option.

SUSAN

So you're telling me that Lulu is going to be appearing on billboards and on television, promoting some kind of product, and you don't even know what the product is?

DAVID

It's only an option at this point.

SUSAN

Did it even occur to you to talk to me about this? More importantly, did you ask Lulu? It's her face, her name, her endorsement. Shouldn't she have a say in what's happening to her?

DAVID

Really, she's not in a position to understand...

SUSAN

Oh, she's not in a position to understand. She's not in a position to understand. WHAT DO YOU THINK THIS WHOLE PROJECT IS ABOUT? Of course she understands! She knows 5000 signs. How many signs do you know?

David is speechless.

SUSAN

Maybe 1000 signs at most! So who's not in a position to understand?

DAVID

She's only three years old.

SUSAN

That's irrelevant. This is her life, her future.

Lulu is very distressed now. She has been trying to get their attention by tugging on their clothing, but the couple has been too wrapped up in their argument to notice.

But suddenly Susan bends down to Lulu's level and starts talking to her.

SUSAN

(signing and speaking)

Lulu, do you want to be on TV? Do you want to be a circus animal? Do you want to be selling things to people?

Lulu looks at Susan and then at David. She is being put in the middle of the argument, and she seems to know it.

She doesn't answer. Instead, she hands her stuffed animal in Susan's direction.

LULU

Hug Toto!

The diversion doesn't work this time. Susan ignores Toto and turns her attention back to David.

SUSAN

You've gone too far this time.
You've just ploughed over Lulu and
me like we don't exist. It's like
your stupid trips across Africa.
Draw a line on the map and follow
it. Well, what if there are people
along that line? You bulldoze right
over them!

Having failed to get anyone's attention, Lulu puts her
hand over her face in frustration.

DAVID

Listen, we're running out of money.
If we want this project to continue
in any form, we have to make
compromises. The institute has to
do something, and this is a
relatively painless source of
income.

Lulu has given up! As the couple continues their
argument, Lulu gets down off her chair. Taking Toto by
the hand, she goes through an adjoining doorway into
her Learning Room. We follow her and leave the couple
behind, but we can still hear them arguing.

SUSAN (voiceover)

Don't talk to me about the
"Institute". You ARE the institute.
We're just bit players in your big
scheme. Yeah, we're running out of
money because you spent more than
we have.

DAVID (v.o.)

The grants just didn't come in the
way I expected, the way we both
expected.

Lulu sulks across the Learning Room to the opposite
wall. She withdraws into a corner, holding Toto tight
and sucking her thumb. We can sense her depression.

SUSAN (v.o.)

You know, before I married you, I was never had any debt. Never. Now look at us, hocked to the gills.

DAVID (v.o.)

Calm down, we have to keep our clarity of thought. We don't have many alternatives. The sponsorship deal is good money. We've got an asset here, and we have to use it.

SUSAN (v.o.)

Oh, an asset. Lulu's an asset.

Lulu looks up toward the door, recognizing her name being mentioned.

DAVID (v.o.)

I didn't mean it that way.

SUSAN (v.o.)

You know what we can do? Lulu and I can go back to Africa. Yeah, that's it. We'll take you asset back to Africa.

DAVID (v.o.)

Sue...

We hear a door slam hard, rattling the whole building. Lulu winces at the sound.

Then the Learning Room is suddenly silent.

We focus on Lulu, curled up in a ball in the corner of the room. We watch her eyes and see her trying to process it all.

As we watch Lulu, we hear the voice of Susan, calm this time, apparently from a later interview.

SUSAN (v.o.)

This has to be hard for Lulu. I don't know how to explain it to her, because I just don't have the words. How do you tell any child that her parents are getting a divorce?

Finally, Lulu gets up, takes Toto by the hand and walks over to her child-size table and chairs in the middle of the room. There is a doll's highchair beside the table, and Lulu puts Toto in it. Then Lulu sits down in her own chair, facing Toto across the table. Lulu signs...

LULU

Don't cry, Toto. It will be alright.

Toto, of course, says nothing.

LULU

Would you like some tea?

Toto says nothing.

Lulu goes to the side of the room and brings back a child's tea set with two sets of cups and saucers and a tea pot.

LULU

A cup of tea will make you feel better.

Lulu place a saucer and tea cup in front of Toto, then pours some imaginary tea.

LULU

When you get old like me, you won't cry anymore.

Lulu puts down the second saucer and cup, and pours some imaginary tea for herself.

LULU

Mom and dad get mad sometimes. It's
not your fault.

Suddenly, we hear a door slam again, as the arguing
couple comes back into the building.

SUSAN (v.o.)
(still angry)

Lulu and I will do just fine
without your Institute. We never
needed you to begin with.

Lulu puts her hand over her face in exasperation.

Susan bursts into the Learning Room, very agitated.
She slams the door in David's face, then sits down on
the floor with her back against the door to prevent
David from entering. She is hyperventilating.

Lulu doesn't look at Susan. In frustration, she signs
to Toto...

LULU
(to Toto)

Stinkie butt.

David raps on the window.

DAVID
(muffled)

Sue, Sue, this isn't helping.

Lulu remains seated, but turns to look at Susan.

SUSAN
(signing and speaking)

Lulu, get your bag. We're leaving.

LULU
(calmly)

We're having tea.

DAVID

Sue, this is childish. Will you
please open the door.

SUSAN

GO AWAY!

LULU

(privately to Toto)

Don't pay any attention to them,
Toto. They will calm down. We just
have to wait.

Toto says nothing.

LULU

Just drink your tea.

FADE OUT

The End.