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## PROFILES

### Steven Sommers

**The American Humane Association sits down with Director Steven Sommers**

*Director Steven Sommers, the creative dynamo behind box office bonanzas such as [The Scorpion King](#) and [Van Helsing](#) shares his sensitive side with American Humane's Film & Television Unit.*

Audiences may be surprised to learn that Steven Sommers, with his rock-solid reputation as the go-to guy of the action/horror/adventure genre, is actually a softy when it comes to animals. While he can script the slaying of legions of baddies without blinking an eye, if a movie depicts an animal being killed, for Sommers, "it's over, it ruins the movie for me." He says, "I remember watching [Dances with Wolves](#) and I was so upset at the end—not at the filmmakers, because obviously they didn't really kill the wolf; they didn't really kill the horse. But as much as I loved the film, I couldn't see it twice."

### Real animals versus computer-generated imagery

Critics of the use of animals in entertainment claim that with the sophisticated special effects, animatronics, and digital wizardry available today, there is no reason to use live animals in film anymore. But this director disagrees. "Animatronics are kind of a joke, in my opinion," he says. When Sommers remade Rudyard Kipling's [The Jungle Book](#) more than a decade ago, he says someone talked him into doing a couple of animatronic animal heads. "The guys who were doing it even said, 'Hey, we can get his eyes to blink!' I said, 'Guys, if I'm close enough to see that tiger's eyes blink, it's gonna look like a puppet.'"

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Expensive and sometimes painfully fake in appearance, animatronics may have met a need now better served by advanced computer-generated techniques. Even Sommers concedes there might come a time when digital images replace the real thing, as they did in many scenes in Sommers' *Van Helsing*.

American Humane's Certified Animal Safety Representatives traveled to the Czech Republic to monitor the action on *Van Helsing*, which includes a seamless blend of real and computer-generated horses. In tight shots of a horse running right up to the camera, it is almost impossible to distinguish what's real and what isn't—even for the director. Regarding a carriage race scene in the film when a horse trips and almost loses his balance, Sommers says, "I've looked at that in slo-mo and it looks like a horse! And that's CG."

### Working with animals: Difficult yet wonderful

For a filmmaker who uses animals in every movie, Sommers knows the challenges of working with four-legged actors. He says, "After I did *Van Helsing*, which is one of the most complicated movies ever made, I can tell you right now, I still say *Jungle Book* was harder, because I was working with kids and animals in India."

That experience might have soured many young directors permanently, but Sommers had a more Zen approach. The key to working with animals, he says, is patience. "In most other movies, if you have the time and the money, you can pull off anything. But with animals, you may never get it. I was rewriting every day on set! That was so hard."

These days, more and more productions cut costs by shooting abroad, where attitudes about proper animal care and training vary widely. An outspoken critic of overseas productions that use inhumane training practices, Sommers offers filmmakers this no-nonsense advice: "Whether it's the writing or the editing or the shooting...if an animal needs to do something, you've got to figure it out without hurting the animal—period."

The director doesn't mince words when it comes to his own views of on-set safety, saying, "I don't expect any animals or stunt people to get hurt on my set. It's just not part of the deal." For directors and filmmakers, having American Humane's Certified Animal Safety Representatives monitor the production can help them make the best decisions for everyone's safety.

"Everybody should have morals and ethics and standards, and no animal should ever be hurt. The difference is—people have a choice," says Sommers. "I never want to hurt a stuntman, but it was their choice. Animals don't have that choice, so you have to be doubly careful. That's my attitude." And that's an attitude American Humane wholeheartedly applauds.

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*Running horses image in banner courtesy of Clifford Oliver*

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