

MICHAEL LANDON: BIG MAN IN A "LITTLE HOUSE"

In "Bonanza" he grudgingly spoke dialogue as it was written, rode horses as directed. Today Michael Landon writes his own script, does his own directing—and rides herd on the entire "Little House on the Prairie" production.

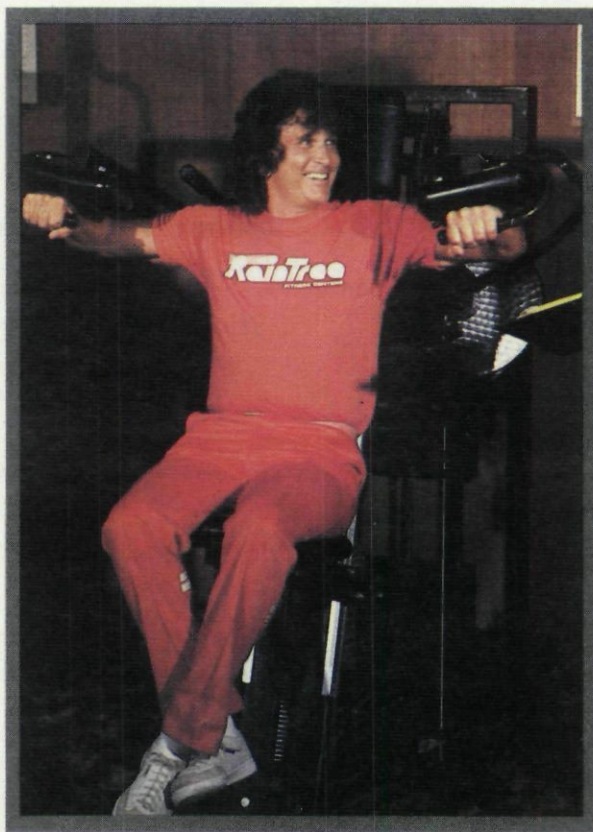
by Lisa Mitchell

There are elements that people call character traits—integrity, sound values, kindness, generosity. On other sets, in other studios, everyone talks about the Christmas gifts Michael Landon gives to 120 members of his company every year: color television sets, stereo systems, \$500 gold coins—and last year's wine-and-cheese-filled copper buckets with the \$900 Swiss gold watches as surprises at the bottom. To 120 individuals.

"People not only like the man," a long-time associate tells me. "They adore him!"

The first time I met Michael Landon on the "Little House on the Prairie" set at MGM, he was standing around between shots describing some of the practical jokes he and Dan Blocker used to pull during the old "Bonanza" days. He draws you into the tales beyond his words by reaching out to put a hand on your hand, a hand on your arm. He touches a lot. Men, women, children, Johnny Carson when he's on the "Tonight" show. Everyone. He is a connecting person.

But it is not easy to interview him. It is not, for example, easy to read your notes when your mascara keeps running into your eyes because he keeps you laughing so much. You also want to keep excusing yourself to go and fix what that streaked mascara is probably doing to your face, because that warmth that comes across as tele-



Michael Landon, executive producer, star and sometimes director and writer, bases many of the "Little House" episodes on scenes from the house of 35 rooms where his family lives.

vision's Charles Ingalls on Monday nights becomes something decidedly more electric, more sensual, through Landon's own intelligence and potent eye contact. I recall a friend who worked on the show for months saying that she and the other women around the set found that he repeatedly kept appearing in their dreams.

He will be 44 on October 31, but the gray hair of his younger "Bonanza" self is now nowhere in sight. "Well, honey, haven't you

ever heard of Clairol's Medium Ash Brown? I just whip that in. I was gray when I was 20 and got progressively grayer. On 'Bonanza' it didn't really matter. After killing off all your neighbors, you'd have a little gray hair, too. But at the beginning of this show, Charles Ingalls had two little kids and was a fairly young father."

He seems taller in person and more the romantic lead than a father figure. Yet spending only a little time around him as he directs 15-year-old Melissa Gilbert as Laura—calling her "Sweetheart," "Sugar," "Kitten"—hearing just a little about the guidance he has provided both the children and adults who work for him, refocuses him in the light of benevolent, protective padrone.

Even if he weren't in a business where everyone is assumed to look out for just himself, you would think the all-consuming involvement of being the show's producer, director, writer and star would prevent his having an interest and involvement in other people's lives. Not Landon, who goes out of his way to see that those around him can move up, can become all they can be. He gives an assistant director the life-changing opportunity to direct, sees that a stand-in who wants to get into the make-up union gets in, and when a women's costumer comes to him with a story idea for a "Little House" segment, he helps her



write it, buys it from her, gives her writer's screen credit. When 17-year-old Melissa Sue Anderson—Mary Ingalls Kendall—expressed an interest in directing two years ago, Landon started taking her aside between set-ups, familiarizing her with which lens he was using or how he was cutting a scene. Clearly, Landon does not forget much about his own background or the experiences and emotions that shaped his life. Wherever, whenever he can, he tries to pass on some of the gifts he was given, tries to alleviate for others some of the pains he knew.

Perhaps the most rewarding translation of this was in getting his highly autobiographical movie, "The Loneliest Runner," on TV in 1977. It dealt with the problems and misconceptions about bed-wetting, and he had struggled for years to get it made. (Before succeeding, he had commented: "There are 20 million bed-wetters in this country. Out of the network executives who turn off when you mention the subject, two out of five were bed-wetters themselves.") As a child, Landon had suffered unmercifully—and unnecessarily—because of the way the situation was treated. "I had to sleep all curled up in a baby bed because my mother wouldn't buy a new bed until I got over the bed-wetting." Like the boy in the movie, he became a remarkably swift runner by trying to race home from school to take in the sheets his mother hung from the windows before the other kids would see them.

Michael Landon was born Eugene Maurice Orowitz in Forest Hills, New York, and grew up in Collingswood, New Jersey. His proficiency at running made him a track star at Collingswood High, and, in 1954, he won the national high school javelin championship, which earned him a scholarship to the University of Southern California. A torn ligament curtailed his athletic career and he went to work in factories. He unloaded freight, he

washed cars. When a fellow employee at a warehouse who was an aspiring actor asked Landon to read with him at an audition, it led to Landon's acceptance in the Warner Brothers acting school.

He got small parts in a few films, did *Tea and Sympathy* at The Player's Ring Theatre in West Hollywood and starred in the 1958 film, *I Was a Teen-age Werewolf*. He appeared in such prestigious live television dramatic showcases as "Playhouse 90" and "Studio One." But it was a "Restless Gun" episode that brought him to the attention of "Bonanza" producer, David Dortort, who cast him as Little Joe.

He was not exactly a stranger in a strange land. He had been on the stage for the first time back in New Jersey when he was 13 in a play called *The Bat*—in which he played a Japanese houseboy—and had been around the fringes of show business since he was born.

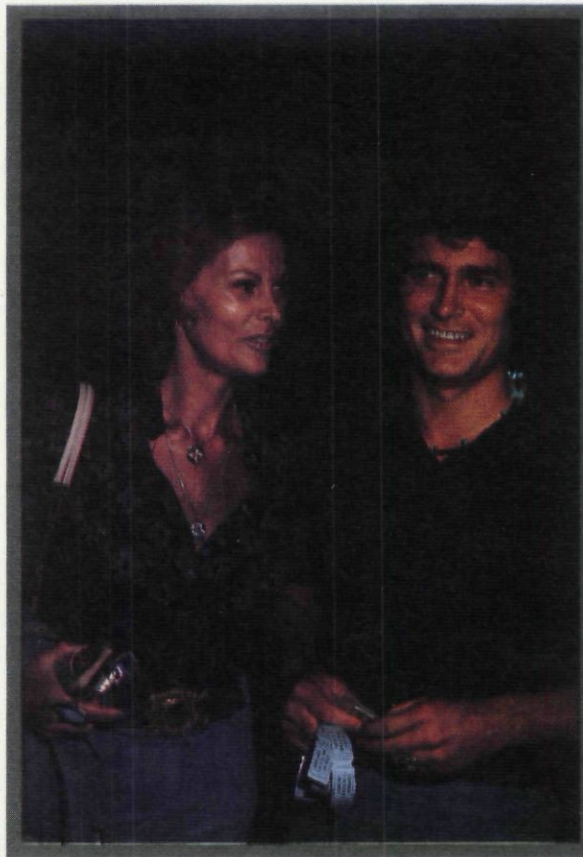
His mother had been a singer named, like the popular song,

Peggy O'Neill. His father, Eli Maurice Orowitz—or just "EMO," as he was also known—went from job to job: a press agent, movie commentator for a local radio station, theatre manager. Landon remarked once in an interview: "I'll never forget the crushed look on my father's face when he came to Los Angeles and went to visit some of his movie star 'friends' at Paramount—and they wouldn't even let him in at the gate. Maybe I'm the way I am because I never wanted anything like that to happen to me."

In the early "Bonanza" days, he just did what he was hired to do. Said the lines. Rode the horses. But after a while, he began fighting for more believable dialogue and, unhappy over the quality of the scripts being shot, started writing some of his own. During these years, he was called "abrasive," about which he says today: "To a lot of people, if you're an actor, what you're supposed to do is go in and say all the dialogue, even if it really stinks. Even if it's really awful, just say it. You shouldn't know whether it's good or bad because someone far more intelligent than you did it who was a writer. Well, the fact of the matter is, there is a lot of lousy dialogue. And 'abrasiveness' to some people would simply be that I didn't agree and I wanted to argue about it."

While other actors might have taken off for pleasure spas over the weekends, Landon stayed home and wrote scripts. Other actors might have gone back to their dressing rooms to nap between set-ups or might have sat around playing cards on the set between shots, but Landon became an insatiable apprentice and went around asking technical questions of directors, cameramen and the crew.

Ted Voightlander, the Emmy award-winning cinematographer of "Little House" who was Landon's photographic mentor on "Bonanza," remembers how "writing stirred up other little things in Mike's system.



Kodak commercials are not all that the Landons share. She has a daughter from a former marriage, he has two adopted sons, and they are the impartial parents of two boys and two girls.

He started asking questions about lenses. Very bright questions... So I made the 'mistake' of giving him, kind of as a gag, a copy of the American Society of Cinematographers handbook—that's our bible. Well, I come in one day and there he is saying, 'Teddy, let's put on a 50; let's do this, let's do that.' 'You've read the book! Page 47, right?' 'Right!' That kind of thing. Actually, he caught on so fast! Many writers can 'see' things that maybe you can't photograph. Well, after getting to know the camera and lenses, Mike can write things that you can actually *do*.

"The man knows so much now, knows what *everybody* does, he could take over the whole picture. I'm very lucky he's made me a part of the thing. Working with him is like playing with a good golfer: The way he does it, you want to do *your* best. Has he changed much since those 'Bonanza' days? Just become more mature, more acquainted with more facets of the business, such as editing. The love that was there from the beginning still exists. If he were a girl, I'd marry him."

After Landon began writing some "Bonanza" episodes, it was not long before he was directing them, about which Lorne Greene said in 1972: "I've seen him grow from a lad to a man. I have seen the man mature into an artist. No finer director exists in this business...."

Landon's salary had risen to a reported \$15,000 a week. By the time "Bonanza" ended in December of 1972, he was in a position to turn down the offers with which he was deluged to do other series of every conceivable description. He wrote and directed a few television movie specials, but did not commit to any long-term involvement until the idea of a series based on Laura Ingalls Wilder's saga of "The Little House on the Prairie" was brought to him in 1974.

At the time, Landon said that his enthusiasm for the project was heightened by coming home and finding his then 12-year-old daughter, Leslie Ann, engrossed in the Wilder books. "Then I discovered that my wife, Lynn, had devoured them when she was a girl and was reading them again. I thought,



Two of the reasons Michael Landon looks youthful at 43: hard work and exercise. Competing in a tennis tournament with his peers, such as tennis buff Johnny Carson, is one of his favorite means of staying trim.

"How wonderful if parents and children can watch this series together—and maybe it would start the kids *reading* the books after seeing the episodes on television. Imagine a TV show that would make kids *read*."

If the fictional Walnut Grove seems more authentic than most television communities, it may be because of a certain actual permanence. The entire Stage 15, where all interiors are shot, accommodates only "Little House." Sets for the insides of the Ingalls' home or the schoolhouse, say, are not going to be struck next week because some other company is coming in to build on their spots. About 50 miles northwest of Los Angeles in the Simi Valley, Walnut Grove and its environs actually exist. That is, the outsides of the buildings familiar to viewers have been built to stand the year round. All of the exteriors are shot here and every building is an exact replica of one that actually existed in frontier Minnesota of the 1870s.

When Landon wants especially exquisite nature backgrounds, off the company goes on location shoots—six weeks out of the year, making two to four trips to the gold rush country in the High Sierras for the right trees and waterfalls, shooting in Old Tucson for breathtaking skylines and sunsets.

Closer to home, there's a perfect lake with just the right ducks over at the Disney Ranch.

Because every single aspect of the show has long been governed by Landon's own sensibilities, "Little House" probably bears the unmistakable stamp of one man's look—and outlook—more than any other series on the air. Some weeks after our initial meeting, when I was talking with Landon in his office at MGM, I suggested that this personal signature and control is the TV version of an older Hollywood and Cecil B. DeMille. Sophisticated critics have called "Little House" sugar-coated, just as DeMille's movies were considered golden bantam corn. Nobody loved them but the public, Mr. DeMille used to say of his consistently popular pictures, as can be said of the "Little House" shows—perhaps because, regardless of the shameless sentimentality, the truth of basic human emotions always, *always* comes through. And Landon goes for it. He spends as much time as he can with his composer, David Rose, another "Bonanza" alumnus whom Landon calls "an absolute genius." His scores for "Little House," as one observer put it, "really wrench exactly where your tears live."

Yet this is no "Frontier Father

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A recent study in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* examined a group of vegetarians and meat eaters to assess their nutritional intakes.

Results of these measurements showed that vegetarians took in at least the recommended daily allowance (RDA) of protein, fat and carbohydrates in the majority of cases. There was a trend among the meat eaters to take in substantially greater than the RDA of protein. Vegetarians tended to be on the low side of the RDA for riboflavin (a vitamin) and iron.

Measurements of body size showed vegetarians tended to have much lower body fat contents. None of the vegetarians showed evidence of nutritional deficiencies.

Overall studies such as this tend to support the growing contention that thoughtful intake of non-meat foods can easily provide adequate energy, vitamins and minerals and assist in maintenance of a leaner body build. ❖

Sonar

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A recent study of 1,000 women showed that ultrasound was 80 percent accurate in diagnosing breast cancers. Ten thousand women, 1,500 of whom have no cancer symptoms, will be examined with this instrument at multiple medical centers to compare ultrasound with X-ray on a large scale as a diagnostic device. The 1,500 patients with no cancer symptoms will be testing ultrasound as a potential screening device. It is hoped this will show conclusively that ultrasound breast scanners are worth their keep, which is presently about \$150,000 apiece (compared to around \$80,000 for the best X-ray equipment). Unfortunately, the results won't be in for another year. It may be some time before you see an ultrasound screening van in your neighborhood. However, it is quite possible that your hospital or medical center will have available, in the near future, an ultrasound scanner for diagnosing those women who find lumps in their breasts. ❖

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Knows Best." Meaty, touchy issues are dealt with and Charles Ingalls does not have all the answers. And more to the point, does not pretend to have them. Time and again, subtly woven into the fabric of the dramas, Landon gets some sound values across. If "Little House" has done nothing more than show grown men touching, embracing one another, sharing feelings, crying; nothing more than show girls and women as intelligent, indomitable, independent persons—it has done enough. Which is not to diminish the impact of Landon's jibes at prejudice, many of which grew out of personal experience. Take the episode in which Nellie agrees to marry a short, Jewish accountant. At first, she is against that shortness. At first, her mother is against that Jewishness. The pain, the tenderness, the humor in that situation as he dramatized it, emanated, he says, from Eugene Orowitz's memories of his own tall Catholic mother and shorter Jewish father.

When I wonder about some of his racially integrated situations being anachronistic, he says, "We always show both sides of acceptance and non-acceptance. There's two and a half million tons of prejudice in this country. Also, fortunately—and this was true even a hundred years ago—there's been incredible love between blacks and whites. Deep love."

When Landon speaks of his show as being family-oriented, he is not speaking only of its audience appeal. He programs the work day, for example, to break early enough "so the guys get to eat with their families. It's a lot of monster work if you're not going to see your family. The guys that do detective shows, their marriages fall apart, everything goes to pot, because they work all night. The amount of time taken for car chases doesn't leave much time for the actors, so they have to work late. The cars get to go home early, though."

NBC publicist Bill Kiley—also with Landon since "Bonanza"—affectionately says that "he can run a studio, but he can't run himself." So there is always someone to put gas in his car because he doesn't "remember" to do it. "He'd run out on the way home and wouldn't even have a dime in his pocket to make a phone call." Seems he never carries money because he'd "lose it." Same thing with keys. "I've never had a key to my house," Landon says. "Even though it says 'no solicitors,' I just keep ringing the bell. If no one can hear me I have to climb over those

WHERE IN THE WORLD?

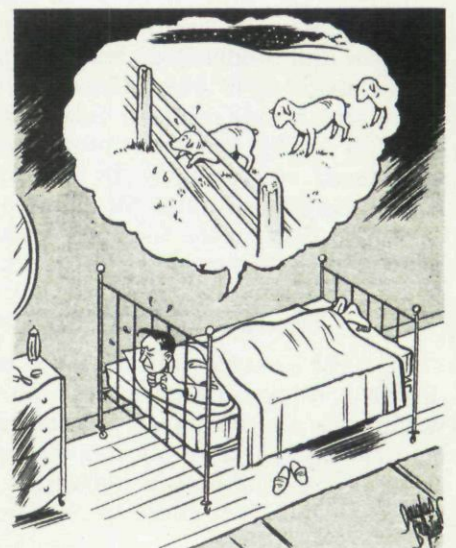
(Answers from page 128)

1 The statue of Kamehameha I stands in front of the Iolani Palace, Honolulu, on the island of Oahu. Actually, this statue is only a copy of the original by American sculptor T.R. Gould, which was lost in a shipwreck on its way to the islands. The original was later salvaged and now stands on the island of Hawaii, the birthplace of Kamehameha.

2 According to legend, George Vanderbilt decided early in his life to build a mansion in the most beautiful place in the world. His choice was Asheville, North Carolina. Biltmore House was inspired by the famous French Renaissance chateaux, Chenoceaux, Blois and Chambord. Its 17-acre garden blooms with 5,000 roses May through October.

3 Ever since Columbus' time, the 10 major islands of the Azores, spread out over 400 miles of the mid-Atlantic, have been stepping stones between Europe and the New World. The once-flourishing whaling industry has dwindled to a handful of holders on who bring in about 200 whales each year.

4 The news of the existence of the Philippines was brought to Europe by Ferdinand Magellan—or rather by the 18 survivors of his crew. The great explorer himself was killed here at Cebu in a fight with the islanders on April 27, 1521.



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damned spikes, and if you don't think that's scary some nights! I haven't had a credit card in years because I'll lose it and someone will take it."

One of the ways he keeps all his money, Landon jokes, is by not spending it on his clothes. The elegant gray silk shirt he has on this day in his office, does not, I say, look much like a parking lot special. Well, that, he says, came from one of the Kodak commercials he does. The shirt, like all I've seen on him, is open wide at the collar, open several buttons down. He wears necklaces, large flat-linked chains. This day, with his gray silk shirt, he is wearing gray-beige trousers with thin black stripes and yellow-tan cowboy boots. "He always wears boots," Kiley says, "because he wouldn't remember to tie his shoes."

Incidents that bother or please him, mood swings, his feelings about his life—about *life*—are all recorded in a journal he has been keeping regularly for 19 years. What emotions are not released in these spiral-bound school notebooks in longhand, in pencil, probably find outlets on the tennis courts, as Landon is, as he puts it, "a tennis nut." He has been an Easter Seals chairman and has involved himself in fund raising for C.E.D.U., a local drug rehabilitation facility, which greatly helped his daughter Cheryl through its program about five or six years ago.

Landon does not socialize with the "Little House" family outside of work. "I loved Lorne and Dan, but I never socialized with *them*," he says of his "Bonanza" era. "Twelve hours a day for all those years? Who wants to go to a party and the minute you start a joke, the other guy's telling the punch line? Though, if a series lasts long enough, you can start all over again. Jokes we told in the first year, we were telling again in the ninth."

But "Little House" will not live long enough to have its jokes recycled. The series "is most definitely over at the end of year eight," Landon says, after I suggested that it could go on indefinitely, what with the Ingalls girls growing up, having families of their own and all. No. "It has to end," he says, because of "many contractual

agreements." So, in a year and a half, he'll be doing...? "A lot of different projects, mostly for NBC," but nothing he's going to talk about specifically now, of course, or he'll "see them all on the air next season. Unless," he says to me, "this interview is all just for *your* journal."

Because "Little House" will go out with its good ratings intact, Landon will move on to his next plateau respected, with even more production credibility, more autonomy, more power than ever. It will be interesting to see what will come from this man whose most outstanding characteristic may be embodying two nearly impossible combinations: being a perfectionist and not worrying. Not nervously in-

money, who also do not "have" to do certain things just to earn a living, but fall in love with their own omnipotence and wind up doing anything just to satisfy egos that keep growing like atomic mutants from a '50s horror movie? He seems to be free of that kind of megalomania and to be free of that is a blessing. His position of credibility does not come from having money, but from having a successful series, and that had to do with dedication, judgment, talent and, yes, hard work.

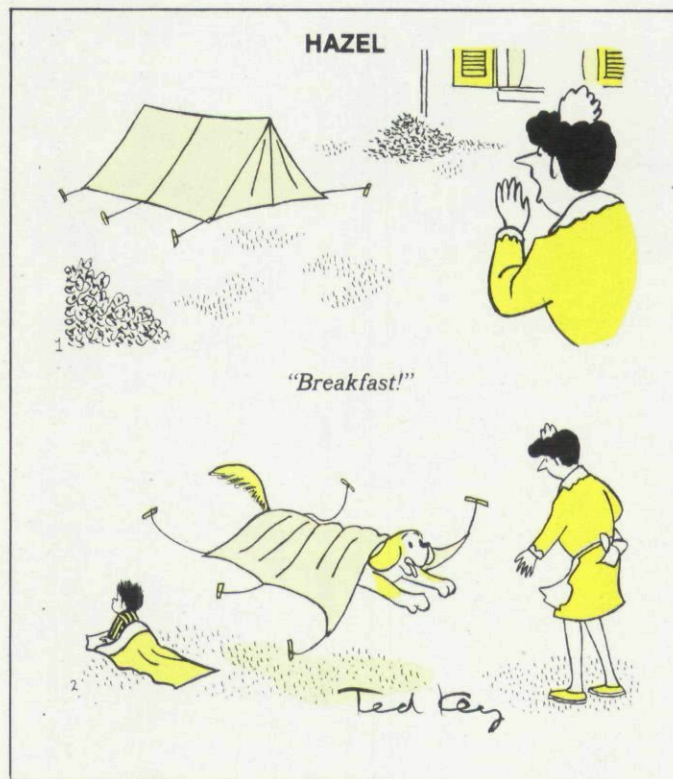
For a minute, he agrees. Then covers himself with something to make me laugh again. This funny, dynamic, attractive man is wonderful to be around, but the jokes still make it hard to interview him. Not because of mascara run-

ning and notes blurring, but because, after a while, the jokes become such a smoke screen. Well, who can blame him? A person has to do something to preserve his private resources. I will push no further.

Michael Landon says he is lucky. Lucky to have the enormous house and all the money that people love to mention in interviews and that he loves to joke about; lucky to have complete control over every aspect of his successful "Little House on the Prairie" television series; lucky finally to have enough credibility as a producer to get just about any other project he wants on the air now.

While one may admire a certain lack of hubris in this tallying things up to luck, it sounds too magical, amorphous, ephemeral for those who are still dreamers of the American Dream and need to sustain

beliefs in cause and effect. Though he probably *was* lucky to have been cast, 20 years ago, as Little Joe Cartwright in "Bonanza." And, granted, he was lucky that that series ran for 14 years—long enough for him to learn the things beyond acting that paved the way to his present world. Perhaps you could argue that it is luck to be born with looks and an I.Q. of 150; even perhaps that the circumstances of one's early life are what promote ambition, determination, tenacity; that it is a God-given gift to have a genuine zeal for work, to decide to stretch, to want to learn. In any event, Michael Landon was willing to push beyond that status quo—and that looks like a leaf we might take from his book. ■



tense ("there are many times I'll nod off"), yet refusing to compromise, his attitude is: "If it's not going to be the right thing, then let's not do it."

When I commend him for this attitude, noting how a person operating from a desperate position can cancel his creativity, he again retreats to the quip: "Well, if they all were as rich as I am, they wouldn't be desperate, either. You know... it has nothing to do with the fact that I'm a more powerful, wonderful person than anyone else. In this business, I just happen to be able to go in and say, 'I don't care.' But most people are not in that position. Everybody's got to earn a living."

Absolutely true. But what about all those people who also have pots of

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