

'Father Murphy' called best family show

By **JERRY BUCK**
AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Merlin Olsen and Moses Gunn have their heads together in animated discussion as they thumb through a rainbow-hued script of "Father Murphy," which is seen on NBC at 8 p.m. on Tuesdays.

They don't notice the chilly wind that sweeps across the barren foothills and buffets the dressing room trailer. Outside, a youth practices on a bugle in a group of children, parents, teachers, welfare workers and crew on the Simi Valley site northwest of Los Angeles where the NBC series is filmed.

Olsen and Gunn are absorbed in a search for the motivation that will make the action of Gunn's character ring true. The two men, plus Katherine Cannon, star in the show about a freight driver in the Old West who poses as a priest to hoodwink authorities into letting them run a school for orphan children in an abandoned mining camp.

Olsen, the 6-foot-5, 250-pound former pro football lineman, plays John Michael Murphy.

"Father Murphy" was created by Michael Landon of "Little House on the Prairie" and may be the best new family show of the season. Like "Little House," where Olsen spent four years, it offers the same homespun values, gentleness and humor. "Father Murphy" has a harder edge, however, and has more of a suggestion of the problems and violence of the expanding West.

Later, Olsen, in his rustic Western garb, is sprawled on a couch in his dressing room. It has all the spaciousness and luxury of a \$2 hotel room. The trailer, which contains several other dressing rooms, trembles every time a gust of wind hits it.

He grew up in Logan, Utah, and he not only never considered a career in acting, he didn't even think seriously about football. With a B.S. degree in finance and a master's in economics, he was planning a career in business. But his huge size and great strength pulled him onto the playing field, and that in turn led to movies and television.

The soft-spoken Olsen has often been called "the gentle giant." He says, "At an early age I was big and strong, but I always had to be careful that I didn't lose my temper. I got those lectures from my mother very early on. I was also awkward enough and slow enough and rebellious enough that I got teased a great deal. So I'd been at the other end of that in terms of pain."

"So when I finally grew coordinated enough to catch up with the guys who hit and ran, I only wanted to be able to say to them, never again. I didn't have to beat up on them. I didn't have to prove to them how strong I was. And there's something nice about having that kind of feeling."

Olsen spent 15 years as a defensive lineman with the Los Angeles Rams, and he spent a lot of that time thinking about a career in business. He says, "I always had jobs with industry, such as teaching motivation. That was my fallback. I always wanted to know that if I was hurt on Sunday, and if I wanted to go to work on Monday, I could pick up the phone."

But a few years before he quit football, Olsen says, he realized he'd never be happy with a 9-to-5 job. "I sat down and did some very serious thinking about what I would do," he says. "And I decided I wanted to be an actor and broadcaster. I even wrote my own contract. I knew if you wanted something you'd better be specific."

Olsen signed with NBC as a sportscaster in 1977, but he had a taste of the business before that. He had done work for a local television station and in 1968 he had a role in "The Undefeated," a John Wayne movie made in Mexico.

"I met Andy McLaglen, the director, at a party," he recalls, "and he was looking for someone who could make John Wayne look small. There weren't that many big actors around, and at that time I probably weighed 280 to 290 pounds. I could make John Wayne look small."

"Andy said how would you like to work in a John Wayne film? I said is it fun? He said yeah. I said does it pay pretty well? He said yeah. I was very practical in a sense."

That was his introduction to acting, but even then he considered it no more than a lark.

After he signed with NBC, the network informed producers that he was available for guest star roles. One producer who got the letter was Michael Landon.

"Michael had just lost Victor French on 'Little House' and he got me down to visit with him," Olsen says. "He felt, I guess, that I could handle some responsibility and offered me a part. I thought it would be for just a guest role. I had to pick myself off the floor when I found out he wanted me as a regular."

Since then Olsen has combined both his acting and his appearances as a pro football sportscaster. But with his starring role in "Father Murphy" he has had to cut his football work in half. It was too exhausting a schedule and it kept him away from his wife and three children too much.

Nevertheless, Olsen says he's a man who likes to stay busy. He also owns an automobile agency and continues to do motivational training for big corporations. He's also a student of the West — his grandmother was born in a covered wagon — and he and fellow NBC sportscaster Charlie Jones do a series for PBS called "The American Frontier." It's a series of vignettes about colorful figures of the early West filmed at the original sites.



GENTLE GIANT — Northwest of Los Angeles on location in the Simi Valley, Merlin Olsen takes a break during filming of his Old West TV series, "Father Murphy." Created by Michael Landon of "Little House on the Prairie" fame, the show seen on NBC at 8 p.m. on Tuesdays is proving to be the best new family production of this season. Olsen is a former football lineman who is often called "the gentle giant." He says, "...I was big and strong, but I always had to be careful that I didn't lose my temper."

MEDIA MONITOR

By **STEVE K. WALZ**—TELEVISION WRITER

Doran Clark's ready to make her mark on TV

Hollywood—Fledgling actress Doran Clark possesses one of those unique 'hungry for love' looks, which is why Lorimar Productions had chosen her for the ill-fated, prime-time soap opera "Secrets of Midland Heights," and most recently re-cast her to play love-starved Jillian Beauchamp in the forthcoming "Kings Crossing" series for ABC.

Clark, who is the grand-daughter of famed World War II General Mark Clark, feels that "Kings Crossing" will make a better impression on the viewers at home.

"It's less gothic and better written," Clark told me. "'Midland Heights' was like an octopus that kept growing arms. We had too many characters, and because of that, we bit off more than we could chew. 'Kings Crossing' has been whittled down."

"It's a show about four young kids at the crossroads of their lives, each of whom is dealing with a different problem. You could call it an upper-class

show, too. "At least this time around I'll have a more sympathetic character—that's for sure. I have to cry every week in this one. That's not the easiest thing to do, you know. My character in 'Kings Crossing' also has more potential as a person. Jillian wants to taste everything!"

Career emphasis

One thing that Doran wants to avoid at all costs is becoming another weekly prime-time sex object. Said Doran matter of factly, "I wouldn't want to play an outrageous sexpot every week because that would be boring."

"What is interesting is that I'm 27 years old and my character is 17. I have more talent and experience than a teenager but the older characters haven't come my way. Hopefully somewhere down the line the viewing public will have a chance to see me in something different, perhaps in a movie of the week."



Doran Clark, star of ABC's forthcoming melodrama "Kings Crossing," is looking for recognition amongst her peers.

Ironically, Doran came to the attention of Tinseltown producers when she starred in "Too Far To Go" with Blythe Danner. More recently Clark also had a small, lusty part in the NBC remake of "Splendor in the Grass," which was well received.

As for Doran's priorities, the lovely actress claimed, "If an actor tells you that

they are not in this business for fame or recognition, they're lying. I'm in it for the recognition, but I want that first before the fame part. It's more important for me to be recognized by my peers like Blythe Danner, than anything else. Of course, if the fame part comes and it gets too crazy, I know that my husband will be there to help me."

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