

Charlotte Stewart took both the scenic and the rocky path to avoid being typecast. Shortly after her four-year term as the cheery schoolteacher on "Little House on the Prairie," she found herself homeless, strapped for cash due to an addiction to drugs and alcohol.

After a lifesaving stint in rehab, she rekindled a professional relationship with David Lynch, who had originally cast her as Mary X in his student film "Eraserhead," and now wanted her for a surreal experiment called "Twin Peaks."

These days, Stewart, 75, is looking back — and forward. She'll reprise her role as Betty Briggs in Showtime's highly anticipated "Twin Peaks" follow-up, which wrapped principal shooting in April, and she is featured in Neil Young's 1992 apocalyptic comedy "Human Highway," which was rereleased this year.

In addition, she just got married for the third time and has published a memoir, "Little House in the Hollywood Hills." In between reading excerpts from Laura Ingalls Wilder's letters and signing autographs in Walnut Grove, Minn. (the setting for the landmark 1970s series), Stewart chatted by phone last weekend about her career and relationships with legendary rockers and actors, including an Oscar winner whom she tried, unsuccessfully, to get high with.

Q: "Little House" is in reruns on the Hallmark Channel, but do you think it's appreciated today?

A: No, I actually don't. I find the fans here in Minnesota do, because a lot of kids probably grew up a lot like the kids in the book and can understand the hardship. Gosh, I remember when we were shooting the show, there was nothing cornier in Hollywood. It was all about "Maude" and "Laverne & Shirley." But where are those shows today? We're still on the air.

Q: What was Michael Landon like? I have heard he could be difficult.

A: Oh, not at all. I'd see him sitting in a folding chair like the rest of us, no entourage, no assistant getting him this or that, jotting down notes on his yellow legal pad. He wrote a lot of the show. He was demanding, though. Kids had to learn their lines. No excuse for showing up late. Michael liked to go home at 6 and wanted the crew to go home at 6. That's the only show I've ever worked on that was like that, but he could do it because he always knew what he was shooting and what he wanted ahead of time.

Q: I don't mean to be insensitive, but after your drug recovery, did you ever look back and laugh at the irony Miss Beadle had become an addict?

A: I never had a sense of humor about it. That was a really horrible time for me. In the early '80s, my business manager had managed to put a lot of my money up his nose and I wasn't getting jobs. I was spending too much time playing. People were trying to help me, but I didn't want to hear what they were saying. That's common with addicts. I'm grateful that I had friends and family that hung in there with me and I had some sense to listen to them.

Q: And shortly after that, David Lynch came back into your life. How did you first meet?

A: In 1971, my roommate was a volunteer at the American Film Institute and David was a student director. She came home one day and said, "I've been assigned this guy named David and I told him my roommate was an actress, so I invited him to dinner." I thought it would take four days to shoot. It took four years. I was shooting "The Waltons" and "Little House" and would work on "Eraserhead" from midnight to 6 in the morning.

Q: What are your thoughts on "Eraserhead" after all these years?

A: Some people have said they have no idea what it's about. My opinion is that it doesn't matter. What

matters is how it affects you emotionally, whether it's one extreme or the other. It's like a painting; you just need to let it wash over you.

Q: Did "Twin Peaks" help get you back on track?

A: Before he cast me, he came to dinner again. He never auditioned anybody. I was still working in a production facility when I did "Peaks" and "Tremors." I kept that full-time job through it all. I've always supported myself.

Q: You got to know a lot of big names. Who do you have the fondest memories of?

A: There's several. Jim Morrison comes to mind. We made this great escape together. It was a really hard time in his life. I cherished working with Elvis Presley. I remember him holding my hand before a scene (in "Speedway") and talking about his mother, Gladys. You know, I once tried to borrow a joint from Henry Fonda. He looked at me and said, "I think you have the wrong Fonda."

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