

Investment in Little House Pays Off for Actor-Director

By LAWRENCE LAURENT
Michael Landon grew up on television, right before the eyes of millions of viewers. He didn't just get older during 14 seasons of Bonanza. He grew from featured performer to star and learned other skills such as writing for a television series and directing the filming.

With the start of The Little House on The Prairie, Landon became the producer, who is the person in charge; the one who says "yes" or "no" to proposals.

At the age of 37, he has demonstrated four-way capacities as actor, writer, director and producer. In short, he's the boss of Little House, and he doesn't have to tell anyone that he's the boss, everyone on the set knows it.

After Bonanza was canceled, Landon was in no hurry for another job. "I am set financially," he told me at Paramount Studios last autumn. "But you get used to working. I like it, I like these people." He also brought along "15 to 20" of the crew who had worked on Bonanza.

He was never really very idle. After Bonanza stopped in December, 1972, he took a job with the short-lived "Love Story" series, writing and directing the premiere epi-

sode, Love Came Laughing. He directed the drama about baseball's Roy Campanella and made guest appearances on variety shows. In the spring of 1974 he began filling in for Johnny Carson on the Tonight show and later was the master of ceremonies for the Junior Miss pageant on TV.

He took on Little House on The Prairie after being convinced that NBC-TV would provide full backing for the series. He wasn't disappointed. The network invested heavily in the physical settings for the series.

First, the interior shot are made mostly on sound stages number 31 and 32 at Paramount. A sound stage is about eight stories high and big enough for a football field. With two such sets, the large cast of Little House was plenty of room.

The outdoor shots are made mainly in the Simi Valley, about 40-miles north and west of Hollywood.

The community of Plum Creek, Minn., has been constructed in the arid, khaki-colored desert land of Ventura County, Calif. Only the setting is green, watered by several miles of underground pipes that convert California into Minnesota.

Landon says the budget, per episode, is "about \$250,000," which means that the 24 episodes that make up a season will come to about \$6 million.

This has been a good investment, for Little House has stayed among the top one-third of the A.C. Nielsen ratings all season. It has been as high as 6th place and never lower than 24th among the 62 prime-time programs.

But Landon knew that he was taking a chance. The series is based on the Laura Ingalls Wilder books and the stories are gentle; nothing like the hot-tempered, hard-riding, quick-draw, straight-shooting character of Little Joe Cartwright.

"No," said Landon, "there's not much action. There are no guns. Charles Ingalls is just a farmer, trying to make a living and a good home for his family."

The series has a definite "second generation" atmosphere to it, and Landon has regularly cast the children of show business professionals in the series. Regular Melissa Gilbert, who plays Laura Ingalls, is the daughter of comedian Paul Gilbert. The infant child, Carrie Ingalls, is played by Lindsay and Sidney Green Bush, twin daughters of actor Billy Green Bush (Electra

Glide In, Blue.) Five easy Pieces and 40 Carates).

The guests have included Dirm Blocker, 17, the son of Dan Blocker, who played Hoss Cartwright until his death in 1972. Anne Archer, whose mother is Marjorie Lord and whose father is actor John Archer, was a Little House guest in January. Julie Cobb, the daughter of actor Lee J. Cobb, was featured in February.

Mitch Vogel, the youngster who was in the final years of Bonanza, also had a guest shot in Little House.

Landon has also hired such expensive talent as Academy award winners Ernest Borgnine and Red Buttons, and he persuaded comedic actor Chuck McCann (the guy in the shared medicine cabinet, who used Right Guard, "and I'm good for the whole day") to play a mule coppersmith in The Voice of Tinker Jones.

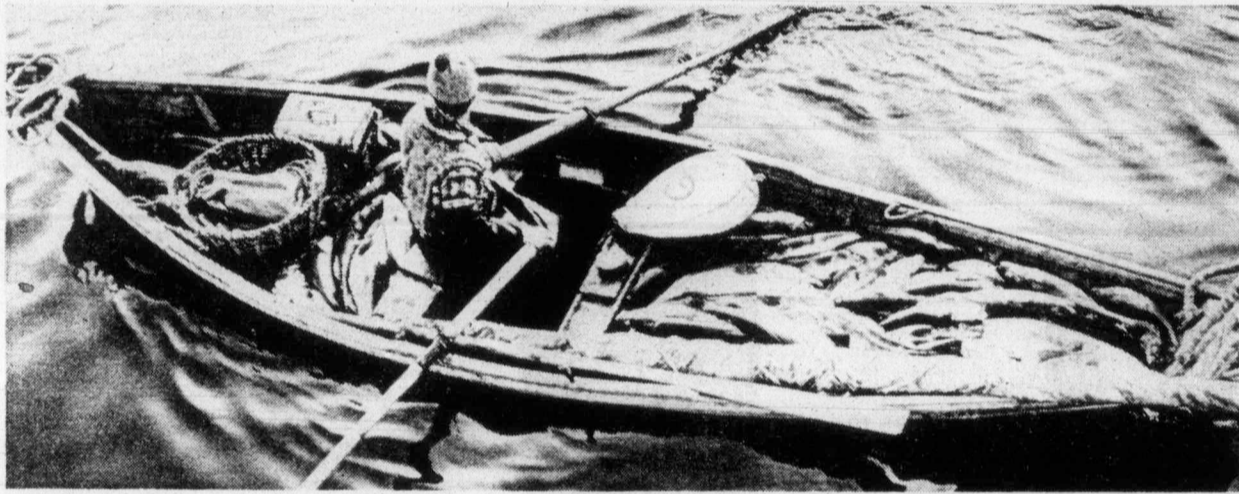
Mostly, however, Landon has stuck to stories about the farmer and his family.

And the family has been good enough to establish Little House on The Prairie as one of the excellent offerings of this season and has made it one of the season's few genuine hits.

The huge investment looks safe.



Michael Landon



The Lonely Dorymen

A Portuguese fisherman rows his small dory back to the mother ship after a full day's fishing off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, in this scene from the National Geographic special, The Lonely Dorymen: Portugal's Men of the Sea, to be telecast on Wednesday at 8 p.m. on Channel 8.

FAMILY VIEWING IN PRIME TIME

CHICAGO (UPI) — The first two hours of U.S. prime time evening television will be devoted entirely to programs suitable for family viewing beginning this fall, according to Federal Communications Commission Chairman Richard Wiley.

The second half of prime time may be devoted to adult themes, he said, but programs which might be disturbing to significant sections of the audience will be preceded by printed and broadcast warnings.

"In my opinion," Wiley

said, "this plan represents a landmark in industry self-regulation, one which has the potential of providing a real measure of protection to our nation's youth and invaluable assistance to concerned parents who wish to regulate the viewing habits of their children."

By showing programs which emphasize violence, Wiley said, the television industry "exercises its influence in a manner which is destructive of the higher values of our society."

Powerful British Drama Encored on Channel 9

The Contractor, David Storey's provocative drama exploring relationships among three generations of the working class, returns to Theater in America, May 7 at 9:00 p.m. on Channel Nine. Hal Holbrook introduces the program, which was videotaped on-location in New Orleans.

Originally staged by the Chelsea Theater Center of Brooklyn, New York, "The Contractor" explores the inner lives beneath the surface behavior of a group of ordinary people. The action revolves around the building

of a party tent for the wedding of the boss's only daughter. As the job proceeds, the relationships between boss and worker, between worker and worker, and between children and their parents, are revealed.

As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the industrialist, Mr. Ewbank, is disappointed and frustrated despite his success, and that the workmen he employs are not proud artisans, but defeated men. Working cheaply for Ewbank because they can find no other employment,

they spend their time mocking their employer. Through skillful use of wit and bantering dialogue, Storey infuses these characters with vitality, revealing a broad spectrum of conflicting feelings — affection, hostility, kindness, cruelty, humor and suffering.

The Chelsea Theater Center has presented some of the most innovative productions in theater today. Among the dramas which premiered at Chelsea are Genet's The Screens, Ginsberg's The Kadish, and LeRoi Jones' Slave Ship.

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