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Landon is everything to 'Little House on the Prairie'

HOLLYWOOD — Michael Landon produces, directs, writes and stars in "Little House on the Prairie." He denies that, given a broom, he might also sweep the set.

He is in total control of the series that last season was the highest rated show in NBC's lineup.

FOR THE record, Landon is the executive producer of "Little House on the Prairie," as well as its star. He is, unofficially, also the chief script doctor.

On the Sunday of this interview, he was up at 5 a.m. to "totally rewrite" a script, he revealed, that goes into production in four weeks.

Next season, Landon will direct every other episode — 12 all told.

"'Little House' for me is like someone else playing golf. It's my fun (directing) . . . relaxing time," Landon explains.

THE SHOW returns for its fourth season next September, on Monday nights from 8-9, where it moved at mid-season after launching the year as a Wednesday night show last September. The move proved successful in an otherwise bleak season for NBC.

There will be a few changes next

season, Landon reports. For one thing, Victor French has moved onto his own series (he'll star in ABC's "Carter Country"). So, the new man in town will be Merlin Olsen, the professional football

player (Los Angeles Rams defensive lineman), who will become a semi-regular.

"We felt we needed another guy for me to be involved with," Landon notes.



Michael Landon

THERE IS a striking resemblance between Olsen and the late Dan Blocker, who co-starred with Landon on "Bonanza" for 14 years.

"He (Merle) reminds me enough of Blocker that I cried when I saw his screen test."

The show will continue to remain faithful to the original books about the Ingalls and, in fact, will delve further into some of the situations lightly treated in the books such as when Mary Ingalls goes blind. That will emerge in the final two-hour episode of the season, Landon explains will have another child, a daughter.

LANDON IS philosophical about television success. Scheduling is a critical factor in how well a series will do.

"You can work as hard as you want, and do the best you can," he says. "but if your show happens to come up against a series that's suddenly hot, you get knocked off."

"Bonanza" lasted for 14 years,

but in its first season, it suffered poor ratings and was an endangered show, Landon recalls. But the stroke of luck that turned the tide in its favor was the advent of color TV.

"RCA CAME out with color," Landon remembers, "and wanted 'Bonanza' to remain on the air because it was a good, outdoor Western drama. They wanted it on to sell color sets."

The show was moved into Sunday nights and became one of television's biggest hits.

Landon reflects: "I don't think we could get away with a Bonanza-type show today. It lasted because no one was interested in star appeal. We were all unknowns. And the fact that we did idiotic comedy at times was accepted by the audience then."

THE INFERENCE is that today's audience might go for outrageous humor, but not idiotic comedy.

Landon finds himself working the great outdoors again in "Little House on the Prairie." He expects the company to settle in Tucson for location shooting. One of the big problems is finding a location with water. A severe water shortage has

forced rationing along the West Coast.

Chances are viewers will be seeing more of Landon's own kids in the series next season. His daughter, Leslie, already has been in two episodes, and a son, Mike, appeared in another. If they keep up their grades in school, Landon pointed out, they will do more.

LANDON HAS seven children, ranging in ages from two to 28 and he explains he's a strict father. His kids don't watch much television, and then only shows he approves for them.

"My kids read," Landon reveals. "They go to a private school which has a rule against watching television during the week. They're better readers than college kids."

According to this school rule, it was pointed out, the Landon kids are delinquent if they watch "Little House on the Prairie."

"They all break the rules," Landon says with a broad smile.

There is one rule Landon won't disturb. It permits him to be home every evening for dinner with his family. Because there are children in the cast who can't work beyond eight hours a day under California law, Landon explains, he's frequently home by mid-afternoon.