

TV's Michael Landon: He Runs "Little House on the Prairie"

By Wilbur Martin

"I ONCE MADE ribbon in a ribbon factory," says Michael Landon, star of NBC's "Little House on the Prairie."

"I was really concerned about the quality of that ribbon.

"Now, making ribbon may seem silly to some people, but I wanted to make the best ribbon around, because that's what made me enjoy that job.

"I think you have to be proud of what you do, no matter what you're doing. The reward is knowing you've done whatever you do well. I know that's the feeling in this company."

The company is the one of which he is executive producer, and instead of miles of ribbon, it produces miles of film that is edited into the hour-long, top-ranked weekly program, "Little House on the Prairie."

"Of course, this is a business," says Mr. Landon. "We have 120 people in the company, a \$400,000 budget for each of 22 shows, and we worry about the same things other business people do: inflation, meeting the budget, rising costs."

Mr. Landon, 42, is every bit as much an entrepreneur as any of the millions of people across the nation who have made a success out of individual talent. In his business, he is a master of all jobs, just like any small business person on Main Street, Anytown, U. S. A.

Only Mr. Landon's Main Street is a make-believe one, depicting 19th century frontier America in the upper Midwest.

"In those days," he says, "people either worked or they starved. It was tough, but it was good for people, mentally and physically. We were created to have to go out, get our food, and build our shelters in order to survive.

"When all of these things are taken for granted, people develop a great deal of time on their hands. They begin to invent problems that don't exist.

"I think this causes a bad mental state, and that's part and parcel of the drug problem in this country. If you



Executive producer and director-star Michael Landon runs a company with 120 people and an \$8 million-plus budget to produce 22 hour-long TV shows each season.

Like Any Other Business

PHOTOS: THOMAS SHEPHERD



Michael Landon switches from acting to directing without ever changing hats. Here, he is directing a "Little House" scene at an outdoor location north of Los Angeles.

know you have to go to work to survive, then you're not going to spend your day higher than a kite."

"Little House on the Prairie" is a family TV show, one of the few in prime time, and one of the few to rank consistently among the best viewed programs. Mr. Landon is executive producer, the star, director of every other episode, and frequent scriptwriter. He is personally involved in all aspects of production, from selecting the music to lighting Sound Stage 32 at Paramount Studios, in Hollywood, Calif., where interior scenes are filmed.

Management principles

If he were operating another type of business—that ribbon factory, for instance—Mr. Landon says he would use the same management principles: Let the person who knows his job do it, and motivate people to do their very best.

"The reason I cared so much about whether I made good ribbon was because the man who ran the factory would come down and explain why our ribbon was the best and why we had to keep it that way.

"I learned a lot from the long list of jobs I had before I went into acting," says Mr. Landon.

"Direct selling, for instance. There's nothing tougher. You meet some awfully rude people in direct selling. And you meet some awfully nice people.

"Most of the people who were rude to me at the door weren't basically rude people. They just didn't want to buy anything or they couldn't afford to buy anything. But instead of admitting that, they were rude as a sort of defense."

The role of Charles Ingalls, the father struggling to raise a family on the frontier, is fictional. But, to a large degree, it is self-portrayal for Mr. Landon. The central character believes in the values of family, hard work, and pride of accomplishment.

So does Michael Landon.

"The setting may be 19th century frontier," he says, "but this is really a

contemporary show. People can relate to incidents in it, because they involve people and what people do, especially within families.

"Take the episode where Mary, Mr. Ingalls' oldest daughter, first had to wear glasses. She was embarrassed at having to wear them. She was always taking them off and hiding them.

"That happened to my daughter, and it happens in a lot of families."

"Little House," which is based on the series of children's books written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, has had an enormous impact on young people, according to one national poll of elementary schoolchildren.

"We don't beat kids over the head with a message, but there are things I'd like them to listen to," says Mr. Landon.

"I know with my own children (he has seven), I want them to strive in terms of getting a feeling of accomplishment, of getting something done, whether they really want to do it or not. The fact is that you're not going to have a job or a task you're going to like every day. There are days you'd rather be doing something else.

"Any person who runs a business probably feels like that on some days."

There is one message that the boyish-looking producer-star hopes the

thing and do it as well or better than anybody else. And that kind of feeling has carried over to all of my jobs."

Mr. Landon was born Eugene Maurice Orowitz on Oct. 31, 1936, in Forest Hills, N. Y., but grew up in Collingswood, N. J., on the outskirts of Philadelphia. In high school he was "scrawny and not a very good student," but he took up the javelin, became an all-American high school athlete, and then enrolled at the University of Southern California.

Many different jobs

His athletic career ended when he tore the ligaments in his throwing arm. Disappointed, he dropped out of college after his freshman year and went to work—as a blanket salesman, car washer, process server, factory hand.

While Mr. Landon was unloading freight cars at a North Hollywood warehouse, an aspiring actor also working there asked him to help prepare for an audition by reading the other part. This encouraged Mr. Landon to sign up for Warner Brothers' acting school. He picked the name Michael Landon out of the Los Angeles telephone book to use as his professional name.

Mr. Landon had a number of bit roles before being cast as Little Joe, one of three sons of a patriarch rancher, on the television program, "Bonanza," which first went on the air in 1959.

For 14 years, Mr. Landon played the part of Little Joe. During this period he began the on-the-job training which has resulted in his multifaceted role today.

"I grew up on that show," he says. "I could have sat in the corner between scenes, but I wanted to learn this business, and I did. I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time to do it."

Doing it all

By the time "Bonanza" went off the air, he was writing scripts and directing as well as acting. "I like to do it all," says Mr. Landon.

"Maybe I like directing just a little bit better. But I like to bring in a show at price—to meet the budget. Last year we finished the season under budget."

There is little outward difference between the Michael Landon before the camera and the Michael Landon behind the camera. When he talks to someone, his green eyes rarely leave the face of that person.

"Whatever you are doing," he says,



Director-star Michael Landon blocks out a scene with two child actors for an episode of "Little House on the Prairie."

The Face Is Familiar

Almost as many people have seen Michael Landon in commercials for Kodak as have seen him in "Little House on the Prairie."

"It's funny," he says, "people who are in the film business tend not to take many pictures at home because they are so involved with pictures in their work.

"But my commercial work for Kodak has actually gotten me to take a lot more photographs. My children have a wonderful time doing the commercials. All of the pictures used are the ones we take."

Does he ever get complaints from viewers whose pictures didn't come out?

"Oh, no. Kodak makes good products. It's easy to take pictures."

program gets across: Parents and their children should communicate.

"Maybe it is because of my own background—my parents sometimes went for six weeks without speaking to each other—but I think that the most important thing people can do is communicate.

"That was the advantage of the 'little house.' When something was wrong with one person, there was no place to hide that from anybody else. Everyone had to work together; it was a team effort, a family. People talked to each other."

In his view, that philosophy is timeless, as valid today in a suburban, ranch-style home as it was in a tiny, prairie homestead.

Mr. Landon also believes that everybody needs to be good at something, regardless of what it is.

"I look at myself," he says. "I wasn't going anywhere as a kid. Something as silly as a javelin gave me a feeling of accomplishment, and I could do some-

"the most important thing is to communicate with people—to listen to what they are saying. There isn't anyone in this company who can't make a suggestion or propose an idea and not be listened to seriously."

Most of the company have been together for years, coming over from the "Bonanza" show.

"When you have a business—and this is a business—the people working in it are the most important assets you have. They make it work or not work."

Mr. Landon spends far more time on the series behind the camera than he does before it. An early riser, his "think" time is usually between 5:30 a.m. and when he leaves his Beverly Hills home to be at work by 7 a.m. "I do my planning and thinking about things while drinking coffee on the patio."

Time-out for horseshoes

Television shows are filmed in bits and pieces out of sequence, to be cut and spliced into the finished product weeks later. Most of the outdoor scenes

are filmed on location 50 miles north of Hollywood, but some are also shot in the High Sierras of Northern California or in Arizona.

It takes seven production days to film a one-hour episode and another two or three weeks to edit the film and put in the musical background.

There is an air of informality at the shooting workplace. Occasionally a child actor will fluff a line and tense up. Mr. Landon has closed down shooting for as much as an hour and a half while he played horseshoes or Ping-Pong to relax the child.

But there is no doubt who makes the decisions on "Little House." "I want the responsibility to be mine if something goes wrong," Mr. Landon says.

Some executives may take their jobs home with them, but the producer of "Little House" does not.

"When I'm done at 6 o'clock, I'm done. I go home to my family. I don't stew about what happened that day or worry about what's going to happen tomorrow.

"I consider my family more impor-

tant than the job. Maybe it's because I've had a lot of jobs, and I know I can always get one doing something. But I don't believe you help yourself by putting your job above everything else."

Why is there so much sex and violence in the movies and on television these days?

"Whose fault is it?" Mr. Landon asks. "If adults would take their children to theaters when G-rated films are playing, there would be nothing but G-rated films made. But they don't.

"It's the same with television. It's tough to make it with a family show. The networks don't arbitrarily put on sex and violence; they put on what the public apparently watches."

To Mr. Landon, the critical rocks thrown at television are the same sort that are thrown at any number of businesses or institutions.

"People complain a lot, but what do they do about it? They should support the things they talk about, but they always seem to want to leave this to somebody else." □

A 60-Second Look at Broadcasting

Broadcasting is a classic example of an industry made up of thousands of individual small businesses. Of the 8,290 radio and television stations licensed in the United States, 8,241 are locally owned and operated. The national networks own and operate 34 radio and 15 television stations.

But large or small, each of the stations is regulated to some degree by the Federal Communications Commission, the Federal Trade Commission, the Department of Commerce, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Department of Labor, the Federal Election Commission, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

There are currently four areas of major importance to the broadcast industry.

One is the FCC's proposed regulations on advertising some sugared food products, primarily ready-to-eat cereals.

The FCC wants to ban all television advertising of these products to certain groups of children. The agency also proposes to require that advertisements for food products not banned be balanced by industry-funded nutritional "disclosures."

"The broadcasting industry is as

concerned as anyone about what information reaches children during their developmental years," says Vincent T. Wasilewski, president of the National Association of Broadcasters.

"The question is, however, whether the federal government should mandate the content of television advertising messages for children.

"Broadcasters believe that the mechanism is already in place to monitor advertisements and set standards. This is NAB's television code, which includes specific guidelines for toy, snack-food, and breakfast-food advertising. For example, under code standards, sugared-cereal products are advertised only as part of a balanced breakfast; snack foods are recommended only in moderation."

The NAB president says that "the ultimate responsibility and decision to purchase products rest with parents. Governmental intervention, no matter how well-intentioned, is a dangerous precedent and not the answer."

The other areas of concern include minority acquisition of broadcast properties; rewriting of the Communications Act of 1934, and cross-ownership of newspaper and broadcast properties.

NAB, Mr. Wasilewski says, has established a task force to assist minorities in purchasing broadcast properties and is working with the Small Business Administration in this area.

NAB is supporting some proposed changes in the communications act, particularly in the area of deregulation of broadcasting, but many broadcasters are concerned that some proposed standards are vague.

Broadcasters generally were pleased with the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding multiple ownership; but, Mr. Wasilewski says, some small market areas are still not being treated fairly.

There are more than 3,000 communities in the United States which have at least one radio station, and more than 300 communities with at least one television station.

The average household has five radios in working order, and 94 percent of all households are now able to receive at least four television stations.

The industry employs 157,000 people. In 1976, the last year for which final figures are available, gross revenues were \$7.2 billion. Of this total, television accounted for \$5.2 billion, and radio grossed \$2 billion.