

Half-Pint grows up

Melissa Gilbert isn't a 'little squirt' anymore

By KATHY LARKIN
King Features

It's hard to believe she's been working for 17 years, but then Melissa Gilbert looks younger than her age, which is just 20.

She got her first working papers for a baby commercial before she hit 3. By age 9, she had appeared in more than 30 TV commercials. And she grew up literally on-screen in that long-running "Little House on the Prairie" for almost a decade from age 8 to 18, playing Laura Ingalls Wilder.

She was the kid whom her mentor, series star and producer director Michael Landon once summed up with: "She was a tiny little squirt . . . but, boy, was she determined to do a good job!"

Some, but not all, things have changed since then.

This grown-up Melissa Gilbert is still determined to do a good job. But that means globe-hopping. And she fears flying.

In the past 12 months, fly-shy Gilbert has spent over 30 percent of her time breathing deep and practicing flight control. She winged to England to visit boyfriend Rob Lowe on location, shot her movie debut, "Sylvester," in Texas and Kentucky, flew to Canada where Lowe was on another movie set and soared home to California. Crossing her fingers all the way. Gilbert finally landed at home in the place where she feels as secure as a fledgling landing in a nest—the guest cottage behind her mother's house.

Her stepfather, show business lawyer Harold Abeles, now divorced from her mother . . . What was he like?

"A stepfather," says Gilbert flatly, adding in an obvious effort to be fair. "He was very helpful with me in school, but we never got very close. I don't really talk about that very much. He was my little sister's father."

There is one undiluted hurrah for her stepfather. He and Gilbert's mother, Barbara, produced Sarah, now 10. Ask Gilbert about that and a smile as involuntary as daylight slowly spreads across her face. "Sarah is a great kid—bright, loving, warm and funny."

Brother Jonathan, the middle child who joined Gilbert on "Little House" and more than once threatened to "punch out" anyone who harmed her . . . what about Jonathan? Gilbert chuckles. "He just wants to be a billionaire businessman."

Growing up for Gilbert—despite the "baby star" syndrome that has haunted and indelibly marked Judy Garland, Jody Foster and others in one way or another—was relatively painless.

the late Paul Gilbert, a comedian who made several films before his death.

They are her people, her family. And she has never felt the need to search for another.

"I was adopted when I was a day old. My younger brother, Jonathan (who also did a "Little House" stint), is adopted too, because my father couldn't have children. My little sister, Sarah, is the child of my mother and my stepfather. We're a family."

Her mother, insists Gilbert, is more than model turned actress turned wife. "She's Mom. She was never a pushy stage parent. She was never around on the set anyway, because she had two other children to raise. And neither she nor anyone in my family ever pushed me into acting. She wanted me to be a doctor. I think she still does."

Ask her about the divorce. "Paul Gilbert was your . . ."

"Father," she supplies firmly. "My parents split when I was maybe 7 or 8, for their own reasons. But it never seemed to me like they were divorced. I didn't feel like a child of divorce. I was not pulled from side to side. Daddy was always at the house. He was always visiting. He was there when I came home from school. The only difference was that he didn't sleep in the house."

Her stepfather, show business lawyer Harold Abeles, now divorced from her mother . . . What was he like?

"A stepfather," says Gilbert flatly, adding in an obvious effort to be fair. "He was very helpful with me in school, but we never got very close. I don't really talk about that very much. He was my little sister's father."

There is one undiluted hurrah for her stepfather. He and Gilbert's mother, Barbara, produced Sarah, now 10. Ask Gilbert about that and a smile as involuntary as daylight slowly spreads across her face. "Sarah is a great kid—bright, loving, warm and funny."

Brother Jonathan, the middle child who joined Gilbert on "Little House" and more than once threatened to "punch out" anyone who harmed her . . . what about Jonathan? Gilbert chuckles. "He just wants to be a billionaire businessman."

Growing up for Gilbert—despite the "baby star" syndrome that has haunted and indelibly marked Judy Garland, Jody Foster and others in one way or another—was relatively painless.

When Gilbert turned 15, her per-



All GROWN UP—Melissa Gilbert, on screen since she was 3 years old, is making a name for herself in such films as "The Miracle Worker" (which brought her an Emmy nomination), "The Diary of Anne Frank," "Splendor in the Grass," "Choices of the Heart" and "Family Secrets."

(King Features photo)

sonal manager formed Half-Pint Productions for Gilbert and her mother. The title was taken from Gilbert's nickname on the "Little House" set.

The company has so far given her five starring roles plus largely critical applause in "The Miracle Worker" (which brought her an Emmy nomination), "The Diary of Anne Frank," "Splendor in the Grass," "Choices of the Heart" and "Family Secrets."

Her portrayal of Anne Frank brought praise and a single reservation from New York Daily News critic Kay Gardella. Gilbert, she said, was "perhaps a little too strident." But Gardella added, "She's a talented young actress. Bucking Joan Plowright and Maximilian Schell isn't easy. She's in with the big leaguers, but is unfaltering and comes through admirably."

With "Choices of the Heart," an NBC-TV movie focusing on Jean Donovan, the lay worker murdered

with three missionary nuns in El Salvador, Gilbert ranged from age 9 to 29 and had the challenge of portraying a real person within the lifetimes of the people who knew her.

Better than an Emmy nomination was the accolade she received from Donovan's family. "The greatest review I got was from her parents. They sent me her crucifix."

Gilbert's latest effort, "Sylvester," the saga of a girl called Charlie (Melissa, of course), a young man and an underrated race horse christened for Sylvester Stallone, earned mixed reviews—some pans, some pats.

But Gilbert insists she liked her role playing with Richard Farnsworth and Michael Schoeffling, and she especially liked her character Charlene Railsberg, a.k.a. Charlie.

"The movie is basically a story about love, perseverance and following a dream. Charlie is tough

because she's grown up in a chauvinistic man's world."

Ask her if she is like Charlie and she says promptly, "I'd like to be more like her. I'd like to have more self-confidence, be a little less insecure, a little stronger. I'm a strong person, but Charlie has this incredible belief that when she sets her mind to anything, she can do it."

Still, there is a loyalty to family in Charlie. And Gilbert certainly shares that.

"Close isn't the word. Some people think we're weird because the bonding is so strong. But for me, my family is survival, bedrock. It's what keeps me grounded. My parents and brother and sister are the only people who will be always be there, no matter who else comes and goes. My family are the only ones who will honestly say, 'That TV or movie production wasn't really good. And you were terrible in it.'"

(King Features Syndicate Inc.)

Fathers fail to see how 'awesome' punk is

By CAROL PACKER
King Features

Exactly 13 years after he was born bald as a billiard ball, the baby of our family sauntered into a beauty salon at the mall and ordered himself a spiked haircut.

Spiked hair isn't quite as flamboyant as, say, a purple Mohawk, but to two crew-cut loving patriarchs of our clan, otherwise known as Pop-Pop and Daddy, weird is weird. So naturally enough, when the kid came away from the stylist's clippers proudly modeling hair that stood a good inch straight out from the top of his scalp, I started to sweat bullets.

"Oh, ma gawd," I whispered. "What're we gonna tell Daddy?"

"Tell him the kid cut his hair with pink shears," the woman behind the salon's register chuckled. "Tell him the kid accidentally inserted a wet plug into an electrical outlet. Tell him . . ."

By the time Matthew and I reached the parking lot, I was seriously thinking about renting a motel room for a few weeks. Just till his hair grew, or decided to lay down. But as luck would have it, it was Matt's birthday and I'd already invited six people over for spaghetti dinner that night.

"Mom," he said, admiring himself in the rear-view mirror all the way home. "Can I get my ear pierced?"

"Sure! And a rusty safety pin permanently attached through your upper lip might add a nice finishing touch. Hey, if you're gonna go punk, go all the way. That's my motto."

"Awesome," he said, patting a likeness of rock star Vince Neil printed on his Motley Crue T-shirt. "Totally awesome."

Minutes after we unlocked our front door, I began brewing gallons of spaghetti sauce, and Matt headed for the place where I stash jars of magic elixirs guaranteed to improve hair, teeth and skin.

He came out of the bathroom just as I was setting the table with the remains of a 12-place dinner service that had dwindled to eight—make that seven.

Every spot on my son's skull appeared to have sprouted terminal cowlicks, and he smelled like concentrated lemonade.

"You made it worse," I cried, dropping a plate on the dog.

"Don't you like it, Mom? I used your lemon mousse stuff to make it stick up better." He was talking about my "Lemon Mousse European Styling Foam. The firm formula for extra control."

"Personally, I love it," I lied square into the eyes of a freckle-faced boy who now looked the spitting image of an hysterical Alfalfa—after he's spied a ghost.

"But you know Daddy and Pop-Pop," I said. "They're sort of old-fashioned about far-out hair styles, earrings and rusty safety pins. They think they belong on wimps, women and babies, in that order. One way or another, we've got to cement that hair flat. Use Crazy Glue, maple syrup, anything!"

"How 'bout I wear my baseball cap to dinner?"

"No way! Pop-Pop would figure we had something to hide and Daddy would give a half-hour lecture on table manners."

My husband came home from working in hot boilers, still sporting the boy's regular hairstyle he's worn since he was co-captain of Penncrest High's 1961 varsity football team. He's a meat-loaf-and-mashed-potatoes, blue-collar guy who, if you asked him, would guess Duran Duran is that little twerp who shot Bobby Kennedy and ZZ Top is probably some Western brand of canned beer. Matthew and his dad have never once discussed popular punk rock groups.

Matt came from the direction of the bathroom into the kitchen at the same moment Pop opened our back door.

"How d'ya like my new haircut?" The dumb cluck had blow-dried his entire head and now he looked ever so much like fuzzy-wuzzy staring down an oncoming train.

"Looks good, pal," my husband said, quickly glancing up from the day's mail.

"It's about time you got that long hair off your neck and out of your eyes," my father-in-law bellowed. "You were beginning to look like some of those crum-bum punk rockers."

"This is a punk spike," Matt hooted, happy as the cat licking dripping spaghetti sauce off my ankle, "and Mom says I can get my ear pierced, too."

Maybe, just maybe, I thought to myself right before the yelling started, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to safety pin that kid's lips—together.



A pleasant vacation is a state of mind

By King Features

Jennifer and Chris Madsen left the kids at home and took their first vacation together in five years. They started to fight the minute the bedroom door shut behind them. Jennifer worried incessantly about the children until they boarded the plane for home.

Executive John Hendrix takes his Florida vacation as seriously as his job. He plots his golf courses months in advance and makes sure every second is spent in worthwhile activity. For two weeks he manages his wife instead of his department. She's relieved to come home.

Americans spend the dreary winter months fantasizing about vacations, but the sad fact is that for many the fantasy is better than the reality. Vacation can be anything but fun. The World Travelers Club reports that 60 percent of surveyed returning travelers report disillusionment or depression over their vacation.

It doesn't have to be that way. Philadelphia psychiatrist Dr. Philip Feldman says that a successful vacation comes from checking your expectations against those of your partner, planning and self-awareness.

"Most travelers ask themselves what to pack, where to go and how

Americans spend the dreary winter months fantasizing about vacations, but the sad fact is that for many the fantasy is better than the reality. Vacation can be anything but fun. The World Travelers Club reports that 60 percent of surveyed returning travelers report disillusionment or depression over their vacation.

It doesn't have to be that way. Philadelphia psychiatrist Dr. Philip Feldman says that a successful vacation comes from checking your expectations against those of your partner, planning and self-awareness.

much money to spend, but not their reasons for choosing a particular spot, how their needs will be met when they get there and whether they have meshed practical considerations with the facts and facets of their personalities."

You can make your holiday work for you instead of against you by comparing answers to the following questions before you're lying on a beach in Tahiti or jetting to China.

- What were your childhood vacation experiences?
- Are you able to deal with risk and challenge?
- Are you methodical or casual about arrangements?

- Are you easily satisfied or quickly disappointed?
- Is the purpose of the vacation to be together as a couple, or to do an activity?
- Can you adjust to unstructured time, or do you need a schedule to be happy?

Your vacation style may depend on values transmitted to you by your parents, according to Dr. Feldman.

If your family looked on holidays as healthy and invigorating, you'll feel the same way, but if they were a time for complaints about bad food, poor transportation or lack of friends, you may anticipate them

with a sense of doom and foreboding. You'll have a hard time kicking up your heels if your parents rejected vacations as frivolous and dissipating.

Different undiscussed expectations spoil many vacations. That's what happened to the Abbotts, who made reservations for Hawaii impulsively after seeing the movie. They didn't talk about their real reasons for coming until after their first fight. Janet expected sun and mai-tais on Waikiki beach by day and laus and romance by night. Frank planned to visit Pearl Harbor and study anthropology.

Whenever you take an unusual vacation, you assume a risk. Bags are lost, connections missed, accommodations canceled, or it rains. The rigid vacationer will sit in his hotel and sulk if he's caught in a one-day European strike, according to Feldman, but the flexible one will take the opportunity to explore the city by foot. Flexibility allows vacationers to modify vacation plans and adjust their expectations to any unplanned reality.

Most vacationers, says Dr. Feldman, fall somewhere between being impulsive planners off at a moment's notice after seeing a travel poster, or plotters who spend hours at home avoiding the obstacles in hassle-free holidays. The

capacity for being impulsive or deliberate may determine the follow through of the vacation.

Time and again, the impulsive planner chooses a holiday that is poorly suited to his needs, and the super planner discovers that his holiday is an anticlimax drained of pleasure, since excitement is the sum of the unknown and the unexpected.

If past vacations were disappointing, analyze them and modify your planning style. Impulsive planners will have to spend more time on details, considering alternatives and weighing consequences, and plotters will have to leave more to chance.

Dr. Feldman has noticed that some vacationers are so uncomfortable with the idea of taking pleasure for themselves without social responsibility that they either lock themselves into a relentless schedule of vacation activity in which the photographs of the trip are more important than the trip itself, or they sabotage their holiday by hypochondria or worry about the family back home.

It doesn't have to be that way. Take a new look at your vacation style, kick up your heels and have fun. Then that postcard saying, "Having a wonderful time" will be the truth!