

IN STEP WITH:®



BY JAMES BRADY

Melissa Gilbert

BORN: May 8, 1964, in Los Angeles.
PERSONAL: Married Bo Brinkman in 1988; one son, Dakota.
TV SERIES: Include *Little House on the Prairie*, 1974-82; *Little House: A New Beginning*, 1982-83; *Stand by Your Man*, 1992.
TV MOVIES: Include *Little House on the Prairie*, 1974; *Christmas Miracle in Caufield, U.S.A.*, 1977; *The Miracle Worker*, 1979; *The Diary of Anne Frank*, 1980; *Choices of the Heart*, 1983; *Little House: The Last Farewell*, 1984.
THEATER: *A Shayna Maidel*, 1987.

IT HAS BEEN 18 YEARS SINCE *Little House on the Prairie* went on the air, starring Michael Landon and a crew of other talented actors, including a 9-year-old kid named Melissa Gilbert. "I grew up with wonderful people," Melissa said as she spoke about another TV series just begun and recalled her nine years on *Little House*.

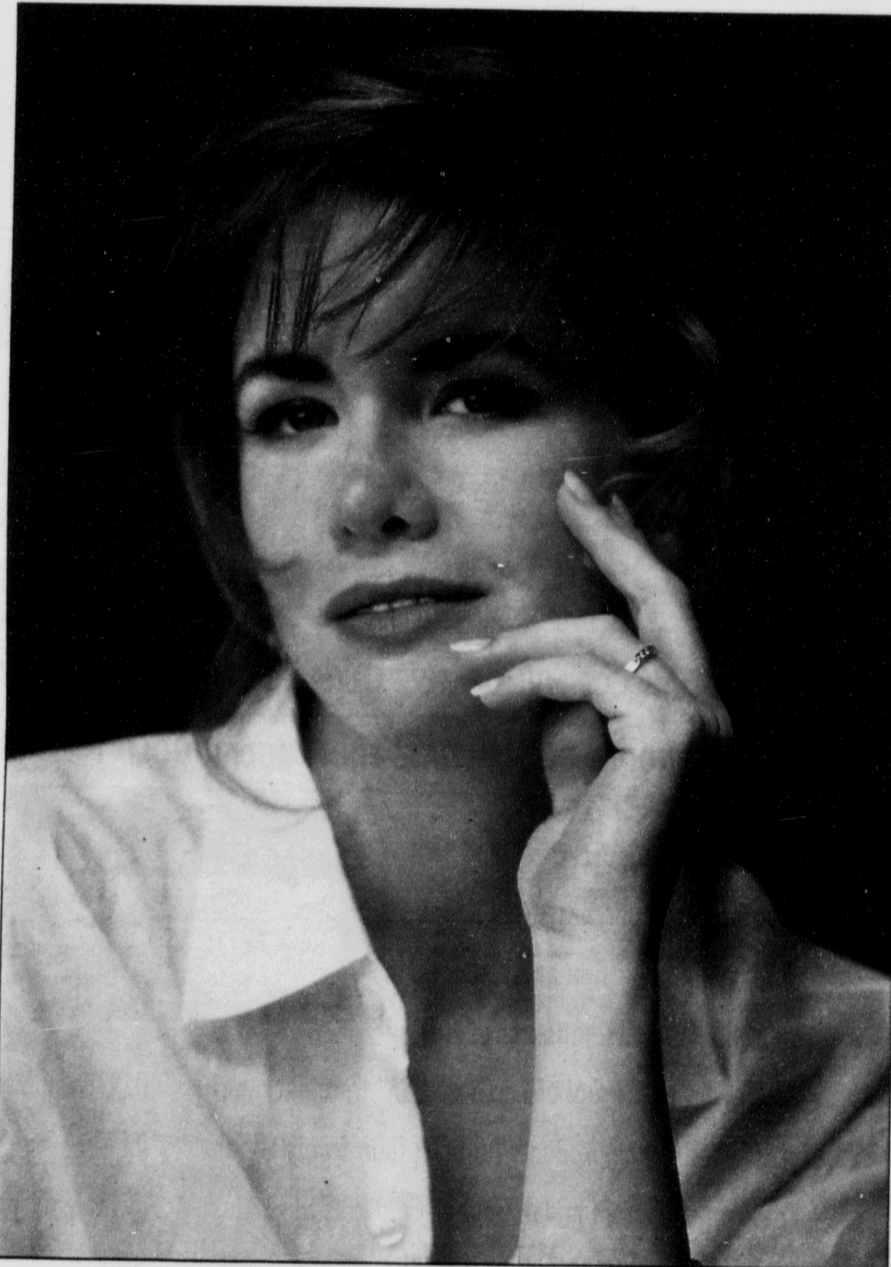
The new show is *Stand by Your Man*, on Fox TV, which began broadcasting in April and which, when we talked, had not yet been okayed for a second, full season.

"It's so unfair to judge a television series by its pilot," said Melissa. "The characters are still strangers, and most shows don't hit their stride until the fourth or fifth episode, when the writers relax and everyone gets to know each other."

Melissa and I were sitting at a small table in the Palm Court of New York's Plaza Hotel, chatting over coffee and tea (she's a teardrinker).

"I was such a kid [on *Little House*]," she said. "There would be a promotional trip like this to New York, and all I knew was that I got to stay in grand hotels, and I got free milk and cookies. I was 9 when it started and 19 when it ended."

I'd read somewhere how she credited Michael Landon with teaching her so much about acting. I asked about that and how close they were.



Blake Little

Melissa Gilbert now has her own "little house" in California—complete with husband, son and white picket fence.

"We were really like a family," Melissa recalled, "bickering and so on—but we really all got along. Mike [that's what she calls Landon] didn't really teach me about acting. He taught me about living and being an actor. I spent a lot of time at his home with his kids, playing and eating jelly beans. The kids were about my age, and I stay in touch with them today."

Had she seen Landon during his terminal illness? "I hadn't seen him for some time, and he hadn't yet met my baby, and then finally we solidified a weekend date. He didn't tell me he was sick—I heard it on the news. So I went over and took Cody [her son, whose real name is Dakota], and we stayed for about six hours. He was very lucid and very funny. Debilitated physically but not otherwise."

Melissa had a long-running and highly publicized relationship with the actor Rob Lowe, which she prefers not to talk about. Then she met and fell in love with the actor and writer Bo Brinkman, a Texan and cousin to the Quaid brothers. They were married two months later, and in 1989 Cody was born. Everything was swell—until Bo's drinking got out of control. He eventually checked into a California rehab center and pulled himself together. It was a rough time, said Melissa, but she hung in there.

"Everything's okay now," Melissa said. "We live in a house with a white picket fence, and I call the place 'Wild Kingdom.' We have seven dogs and three cats and two rabbits that just had five babies and two cockatoos and a pony. That was a Christmas present from my mother to her first grandchild. Bo is a real cowboy. I can ride too, and we're getting me a horse." I said it sounded pretty good.

"Yes," Melissa replied. "We have a white picket fence and a white picket life, after all the fires we walked through."

BRADY'S BITS

After shooting the first seven episodes of *Stand by Your Man*, Melissa was off to Seattle to make a CBS-TV movie, *With a Vengeance*, with the ex-model Jack Scalia. "You think, 'Oh, God, a model!'" she said. "But he's a very intelligent actor, and his family has become very close to us." I got her talking about other actors—Anthony Hopkins, for one. "I've been waiting for this man forever," she said, as dreamy as any fan. "I met [Laurence] Olivier once with his wife, Joan Plowright, and Maximilian Schell." What about Schell? "I was 15, but he'll always be the sexiest man I've ever known. Dangerous and brilliant. No, nothing ever happened."