

Melissa Gilbert targets a murder suspect

By JAY BOBBIN
Tribune Media Services

Her time in that little house on the prairie seems way in the past.

That's what television staple Melissa Gilbert is finding through her latest roles. She has another one Tuesday in "Murder at 75 Birch," an intriguing, fact-inspired CBS movie. Gilbert stars as a woman who suspects her brother-in-law (played by Gregory Harrison) of murdering his wife (Wendel Melndrum).

Initially, Gilbert's character can't believe the police's hunch about his guilt, nor can her husband (Vyto Ruginis). Later, she learns information that supports that allegation, but she remains careful in talking to the detectives (Jack Blessing, Judith Scott) who already have questioned her several times about the case.

"It's got some twists and turns that are unexpected, to say the least," Gilbert maintains of the film. "When I first saw the title, I thought, 'Oh, here we go. Another Melissa Gilbert-in-jeopardy movie.' It isn't really that way, though. It's an interesting study of human psychology, not the usual, straightforward movie-of-the-week."

After reading the script, Gilbert wasn't surprised to learn the story was true. "Nothing surprises me these

days," she says. "Unfortunately, in today's society, these things happen all the time. I wish I could say that it did surprise me, but it doesn't. Besides, it seems that a lot of the work I do is based on true stories."

Gilbert enjoyed the relative complexity of her "Murder at 75 Birch" role: "At the start, she comes across as your typical victim, the sort of person I've played a zillion times. Then, the plot takes a turn where you think she was involved (in the killing) and that's how she knows what's going on. Then, it takes another turn, so this is someone who is not easy to figure out. She has to be really smart in this situation, and that was great fun to play."

The movie also gave Gilbert her first chance to work with co-star Harrison, a longtime friend. "Greg and Bruce (Boxleitner, Gilbert's actor husband) have known each other forever," she reports. "When Greg met his future wife at a 'Battle of the Network Stars' taping about 17 years ago, that was when I first met Bruce. Mind you, it took me longer to marry Bruce than it took Greg to marry Randi."

It's taken a while for "Murder at 75 Birch" to be shown. "I did this over a year ago," Gilbert reveals, "but a couple of things happened (to cause the delay). CBS dropped a movie night,



MURDER AT 75 BIRCH: Melissa Gilbert and Gregory Harrison star.

then they decided to go for sweeping love sagas instead of woman-in-jeopardy stories. I did my sweeping love saga for CBS in Ireland last summer ('Her Own Rules'), and that aired less than two months after we finished it."

With her husband, Gilbert filmed a recent episode of CBS' "Touched by an Angel." The story was about a couple whose marriage eroded after their son's death, and it struck very personal chords for Gilbert. She recalls, "The show was dedicated to my best friend's son, Garrett Peckinpah, who passed away five years ago. His name is also my son Michael's middle name."

Gilbert also found it challenging to act out marital strife with her actual spouse. "It was difficult to go to the places we had to go. In one scene, I said, 'I'm filing for a divorce,' and he said, 'You've got it.' As soon as we finished, I had to bury my face in his chest and say, 'Promise me we'll never say that to each other again.'"

Now that his TNT science-fiction series "Babylon 5" has ended production, Boxleitner is getting other offers, but he's been home a lot.

"He hasn't worked in about five weeks, and he's starting to get on my nerves," Gilbert laughs.

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February 5, 1999 TV SCENE 43

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Lethbridge Herald, February 05, 1999, Pg. 138, Lethbridge, Alberta, CA

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