

Q&A

With
MELISSA GILBERT



It's been a long road from the 'Prairie'

By HARVEY SOLOMON

BEST known for her 10-year stint as Laura on "Little House on the Prairie," Melissa Gilbert comes from a long line of entertainers. Her grandfather Harry Crane co-created and wrote "The Honeymooners," her mother Barbara is a former actress and her late father Paul was a comedian.

She made her TV debut at the tender age of 2 modeling baby clothes and later appeared in more than 30 commercials. Since her "Little House" days, Gilbert has appeared on stage and in numerous TV movies, including "Shattered Trust: The Shari Karney Story" that aired last month and the psychological thriller "House of Secrets," premiering on Monday, Nov. 1, on NBC and co-starring her real-life beau Bruce Boxleitner. Set in and shot entirely on location in New Orleans' French Quarter, this voodoo-drenched drama is based on the same hook that inspired a classic 1955 Simone Signoret film, "Diabolique."

Q: How does this picture differ from the earlier version?

A: It's updated. Well everyone in it is except me. I'm the one who was raised on the plantation with no exposure to the outside world so I look like something out of "The Great Gatsby" in wispy dresses and floppy hats. It's a real gothic thriller.

Q: Was this the first time you met Bruce?

A: No - everybody thinks we met on the picture but they're wrong. The first time I met him was when I was 17 at a "Battle of the Network Stars." Then we did not see or hear from each other until last September when we were reintroduced by friends.

Q: How are things going now?

A: We just got back from a vacation in Maui. The kids (she has one son, a 1-2-year-old Dakota, and Boxleitner has two) had a wonderful time. No fighting! I was shocked. My brother and I used to beat the living daylights out of each other. ... Mostly my life is pretty boring, the stay-home mother of one, semi mother of two, hanging out with my grown-up boyfriend, going to movies and cooking dinner.

Q: Do you get a little tired of people continually asking you about "Little House on the Prairie?"

A: There's only one thing I get often that really bothers me, and



Melissa Gilbert (seated) grew up in front of our eyes on "Little House on the Prairie."

that's when people say, "What have you been doing lately?" Coming off of five TV movies in one year I fall over.

Q: Why do you think people remember "Little House" so much?

A: It strikes me that nothing has the impact of series television. Nothing, not even features. People in features don't walk into your living room every week.

Q: What do you remember best about Michael Landon?

A: His laugh - his laugh and his big arms. He was always hugging me. He was like an upside down triangle, and I was so tiny I'd bury my head in those arms.

Q: What was it like working with Rosie O'Donnell on your short-lived Fox series, "Stand By Your Man"?

A: To be working with Rosie was a joy, and to be doing comedy too? I mean, I was raised by comics, so why am I the one that weeps? One of the most depressing times was when I found out the show wasn't picked up. ... Rosie is wildly funny. She's wicked, she really is. I haven't

spoken to her since, but of course now she's friends with Madonna.

Q: Have you given any advice to your younger sister Sara?

A: Sara is the great white hope. I don't give her advice 'cause she never asks for my opinion. I think she's doing just fine. She's the only one of us to go to college. She had the guts to say, "Yeah, I'm leaving the show, I'm going to school," and the people at "Roseanne" figured out a way to keep her in it. (Producers taped advance segments of Sara this past summer to air throughout the season.)

Q: Your home includes not just dogs and cats but horses, rabbits and cockatoos too. You must be quite an animal lover.

A: We had a dog when I was growing up that we had to put to sleep, and my mother just couldn't deal with it after that. When I was 19 and living in the guest house I decided she could no longer tell me what to do so I started bringing animals home - a kitten, a puppy, another puppy, another kitten, a bird, a bunny and it just developed from there into this menagerie.

Prime



Fran Drescher (right) is not your typical nanny.

'The Nanny' looks like a hit for funny Fran

LAST season CBS missed with "Frannie's Turn," a sitcom starring versatile British actress Miriam Margolyes. This season the network hopes another Fran gets a much longer turn when spirited Queens (NYC) native Fran Drescher stars in "The Nanny," a new sitcom getting a lot of positive pre-launch word-of-mouth.

"My handle is I talk straight," said Drescher. "I'm never talking behind someone's back. I'll say right to your face what I think you need to hear. I say what other people only think."

And so, fresh from quitting - no, make that being fired so she can collect unemployment - her ex-boyfriend's bridal shop, Fran Fine arrives on the doorstep of a wealthy widowed Broadway producer.

She's selling cosmetics door-to-door but quickly adapts after learning the household is interviewing for a nanny to handle the producer's three unusual kids.

"She brings not only heart and love and warmth into the house but a bit of chaos and an uncontrollable quality," said Drescher, "and she never follows the rules. Every conflict that is put before them she'll want to handle in a completely different way than the father."

With film credits including "American Hot Wax," "Dr. Detroit," "This is Spinal Tap" and "Cadillac Man," Drescher formerly co-starred with Twiggy and Julie Hagerty in the short-lived sitcom "Princesses."

While visiting Twiggy

(whom she calls "Twig") in London, Drescher realized that a fish-out-of-water scenario presenting her as a nanny in a proper household could be prime sitcom material.

Upon her return, she and her husband, producer Peter Marc Jacobson ("Charmed Lives") developed and pitched "The Nanny" to CBS president Jeff Sagansky who immediately green-lighted the series.

Reportedly the highest tested CBS pilot in three years, "The Nanny" was initially slated to premiere after the canceled "The Trouble With Larry." Now it will debut on Wednesday, Nov. 3, at 8:30 p.m. (ET/PT) after "Hearst Afire."

In addition to its snappy star, much of the series' charm stems from the chemistry that develops among its ensemble cast.

Soap opera veteran Charles Shaughnessy ("Days of Our Lives") plays the head of the household, while veteran Daniel Davis ("The Hunt for Red October") sparkles as Niles the butler, an unexpected ally.

The sharp-tongued actress also feels her real life counterparts should welcome her unconventional but kind-hearted portrayal.

"Yeah, yeah, you know actually they should count their blessings that I'm representing them as well as they are," she said in her trademark nasal voice, "because until this point it's been a lot of ("The Hand That Rocks the Cradle's") Rebecca de Mornay"

H.S.