

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

# TVweek

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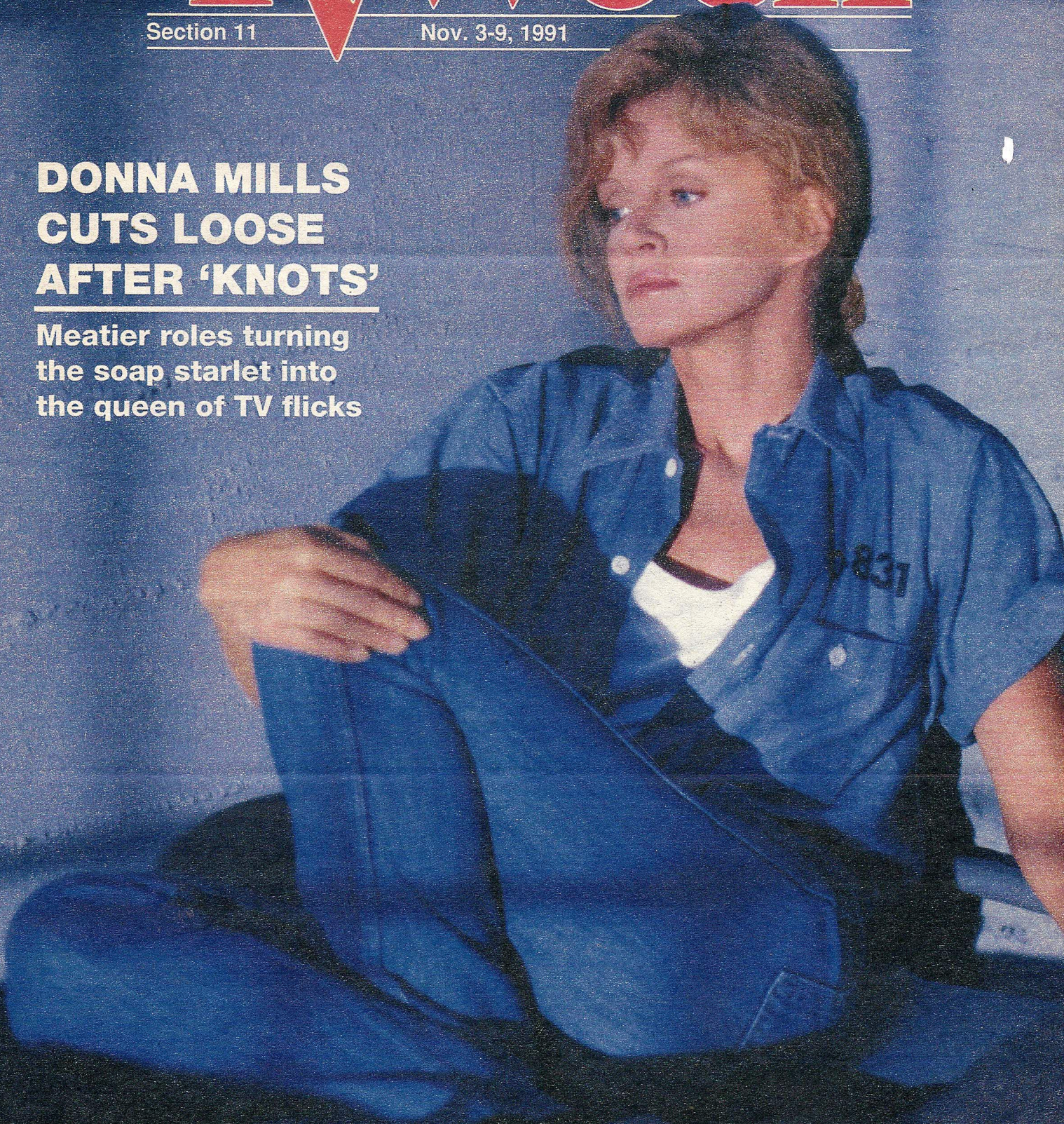
Section 11 Nov. 3-9, 1991

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## **DONNA MILLS CUTS LOOSE AFTER 'KNOTS'**

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Meatier roles turning  
the soap starlet into  
the queen of TV flicks



Donna Mills portrays a wife wrongly imprisoned for murder in "False Arrest."

# Mills shoots for impact in 'False Arrest'

By Deborah Starr Seibel

**C**ossetted in a home of elegant country charm, Donna Mills, decked out in faded jeans and a hand-embroidered shirt, completes the picture of a small, secluded Benedict Canyon estate that could fool you into believing you've left Los Angeles.

Warm and welcoming, she blends effortlessly into an atmosphere where home-grown roses grace country pine tables. Low, wood-beamed ceilings and cozy window nooks softly diffuse harsh midday light. And a treasured collection of antique teddy bears stands at friendly attention, mounted on the dining room wall.

At first glance, you might think this is a "put-your-feet-up" environment representative of a relaxed personality—until Mills begins to speak. Only then do you get a sense of the former professional dancer who seems to have transferred the requisite punishing self-discipline of dance into a determined climb up the treacherous Hollywood ladder. Only then do you glimpse her laser-like career focus and intensity—on display this week in the two-part mini-series "False Arrest" (8 p.m. Sunday and Wednesday, ABC-Ch. 7).

The four-hour drama centers on the true story of Joyce Lukezic (played by Mills), an Arizona businesswoman wrongly accused, convicted and sent to prison in 1980 for conspiracy to commit a double murder. As the story unfolds, Lukezic slowly loses the support of her husband (played by Robert Wagner), is separated from her children and is forced to call upon every inner resource to survive a terrifying three-year prison ordeal.

"She'd been set up," Mills said. "The story of how this woman coped after being brutalized in jail, how she took the bull by the horns and got herself out of it, absolutely fascinated me."

Mills was initially attracted to the role almost two years ago after reading about it in the paper. The article said that a friend of Mills, Hollywood television producer Leonard Hill ("The Long Hot Summer," "Jack the Ripper"), had purchased the rights to the story. "I called him up immediately and said, 'Len, I want to do this one. I like this story.'"

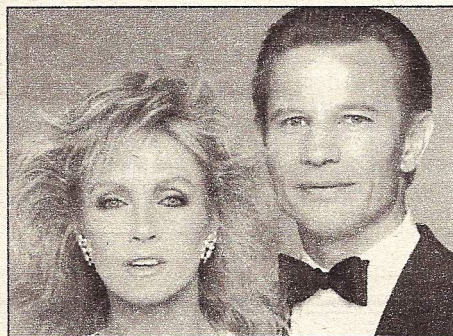
Having already consolidated her standing as one of the reigning queens of made-for-television movies, Mills was in a good position to ask for the role. But given her current contract commitment to CBS to develop and produce four (and possibly six) of her own



Joyce Lukezic (Donna Mills) and her husband, Ron (Robert Wagner), run the gauntlet of reporters as they enter the courtroom for her trial in "False Arrest."



As Abby Ewing, the men in Donna Mills' life have included J.R. Ewing (Larry Hagman, above), with whom she entered into a business deal in a second-season episode of "Knots Landing," and Michael York, who joined the soap in 1987 as Abby's first true love and the man who broke her heart.



television movies, you have to wonder why this story so captured her imagination that she asked to be utilized as "hired help."

Mills said the story plays directly into her worst fears. "I have always had a fascination and a great fear about going to jail if you're innocent. I couldn't do it."

"I'm very claustrophobic. Maybe that has something to do with it. I don't like elevators, enclosed places or small rooms."

Mills' fascination with the story also reflects her increasing desire to step into the lives of women very different from those

she portrayed during the early stages of her career.

"In the '70s," Mills said, "you played someone's wife, someone's secretary or someone's mistress. Those were the roles that were available. I was chased, raped, robbed, everything you can imagine—and some man always came to my rescue."

"That's the difference now: You can see women being abused or whatever, but the way they get out of it is through their own inner strength. It's a very different image."

It was during her nine-season run (1980-89) as Abby Fairgate Ewing Sumner on the popular prime-time soap opera "Knots Landing" that Mills said she began to understand the importance of portraying women of considerable mettle and substance. "I began to see the response from women—the fan mail that started coming in—and how positive it was."

"This character (Abby) was supposed to be a bad guy but yet they loved her because she was strong, ambitious, she got things done and she didn't cry on anybody's shoulder. It was a very positive role model."

"I've had women come up to me and say that they would sometimes start their day by looking in the mirror and saying, 'I'm going to be like Abby today,' as a way of boosting their own self-confidence. And that made me realize how influential television can be. I didn't make (the role) into a political statement, but I suppose in some respects it was. It made women feel better, stronger."

Mills herself, born and raised in Chicago's Norwood Park, is single and has always been unusually independent. She is known in the Hollywood community for her ability to combine acting with a shrewd business sense.

Encouraged by her late mother ("She loved the theater") and her now-retired oil executive father ("He once bribed a nurse into letting him out of the hospital with a picture of me"), she studied classical dance from age 5. Impatient to begin her show business career, she left the University of

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# 'Arrest'

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Illinois after one year to dance and act in Chicago-area theaters and summer stock.

A short stint as a New York stage actor (as an understudy in Woody Allen's first play, "Don't Drink the Water") led to television soap-opera stardom on "The Secret Storm" and "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing." Her popularity in those roles was parlayed—after re-negotiating her contract—into guest-starring roles in prime time. Mills explained that her strategy was based on overhearing a chance comment.

"One day Fred Silverman (then a CBS programming executive) let slip that daytime (in terms of television advertising revenues) was paying for night time," Mills said. "Once I heard that, I said, 'Okay, let me do prime time.'"

The first such opportunity came in the form of a guest-starring role on Burt Reynolds' "Dan August" in 1970. Reynolds then recommended Mills to his friend Clint Eastwood, which led, a year later, to Mills' film debut as Eastwood's girlfriend in the 1971 thriller "Play Misty for Me."

Since then, Mills has not only had an enviable run as Abby on "Knots Landing" but again has been able to parlay good ratings into starring roles in more than 20 made-for-television movies, her most recent being CBS' "Runaway Father," co-starring Jack Scalia.

"It takes a lot of work to make these things add up," Mills said. "And you've got to get very lucky, too. You've got to have a character like I had on 'Knots,' and then get good ratings on the (made-for-television) movies that you do, and then pick roles that are going to make some impact."

Mills hopes that includes such pet projects as "False Arrest." Given her fear of being shut in, she said the experience of filming in a California juvenile detention center—a setting as close as the production company could come to duplicating Lukezic's real-life prison—was scary. But not nearly as hair-raising as Mills' visit to a California women's prison to prepare for the role.

"I couldn't wait to get out of there. In prison, (Joyce Lukezic) is raped—by women—she's assaulted and they shoot heroin into her nose. I asked Joyce if it was really this bad and she said, 'It was worse.' Prison is some place you never want to be."

Asked if the role has made her even more careful to be a law-abiding citizen, Mills laughed. "Are you kidding? I don't even speed anymore."

## 'Dallas' no 'Dynasty' copycat

Don't expect "Dallas" to follow "Dynasty's" lead and do a serious reunion show, said Larry Hagman, who played J.R. Ewing on the CBS series.

"I'd like to do an 'Airplane!' version of 'Dallas,'" said Hagman, in Philadelphia co-starring with his former "Dallas" mate Linda Gray in "Love Letters." "It would be more fun than to do it straight. What can we do straight that we haven't done before? It would be 'Dallas,' only not like 'Dallas.'"

"We're a funny group of people. I know Patrick Duffy would go for it, and certainly Miss Gray and Barbara Bel Geddes. I think I could get everybody in on it."

From Tribune wire services

■ 7 p.m. (5) **Matlock.** Ben joins the case when an insurance salesman is accused of killing the marriage counselor who was having an affair with his wife. □ □

■ 7 p.m. (7) **Family Matters.** Steve Urkel fails to make it on the basketball team, but gives Laura advice when she becomes a cheerleader and is rejected by the other girls. □ □

■ 7 p.m. (32) **America's Most Wanted.** A robbery suspect flees in Tennessee, and a hitchhiker who preys on older single women is wanted for murder and arson.

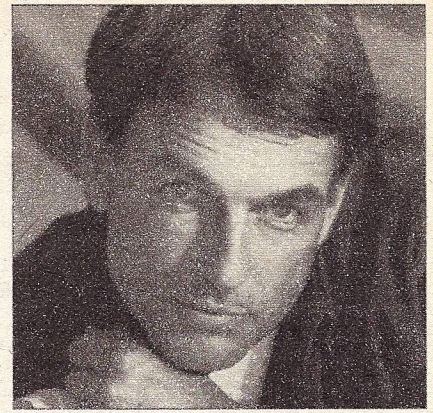
■ 7:30 p.m. (7) **Step by Step.** Frank and Carol join the melee in a biker bar, where Cody uses martial-arts skills to rescue Dana from ruffians. □ □

■ 8 p.m. (7) **Perfect Strangers.** Balki's mother demands that he return to Mypos or be drummed out of the family. (Part 1 of 2) □ □

■ 8 p.m. (AE) **Investigative Reports: Is It Safe?** This BBC program looks at the controversy of whether doctors with AIDS have an obligation to tell patients of their infection.

■ 8:30 p.m. (5) **Dear John.** Kirk faces a shotgun wedding. □ □

■ 8:30 p.m. (7) **Baby Talk.** Maggie starts dating Dr. Duck, a children's TV



Mark Harmon stars in "Reasonable Doubts" (9 p.m. on NBC-Ch. 5).

personality who turns out to be a real turkey. □ □

■ 9 p.m. (5) **Reasonable Doubts.** In the first of a three-part episode about the issue of date rape, Kay Lockman (Nancy Everhard) faces the humiliation and trauma of rape and its after-effects as a date with popular police officer Andy Cromyer (James Acheson) becomes a nightmare. Mark Harmon and Marlee Matlin star. □ □

## Friday evening

- 6 (2) News □
- (5) News □ □
- (7) News □ □ □
- (9) Cheers
- (11) MacNeil/Lehrer News-Hour: Available in Spanish. □
- (20) Marketing
- (26) Alcanzar una Estrella II
- (32) Cosby
- (38) America's Backyard
- (44) Manuela
- (50) Star Trek: The Next Generation
- (66) Matlock: Ben defends a fashion photographer accused of murdering the head of a modeling agency. □
- 6:30 (2) Entertainment Tonight: Robert Stack. □ □
- (5) Married... With Children: Thieves strike Steve and Marcy's house while the Bundys are watching it. □
- (7) Wheel of Fortune
- (9) The Golden Girls
- (20) World of Chemistry □
- (32) A Current Affair
- (38) News
- 7 (2) To be announced. □ □
- (5) Matlock □ □
- (7) Family Matters: The basketball team rejects Urkel, then needs him. □ □
- (9) MOVIE: "Weird Science"
- (11) Washington Week in Review □ □
- (20) Travels in Europe □
- (26) En Carne Propia
- (32) America's Most Wanted: Robbery suspect flees in Tennessee; hitchhiker who preys on older single women is wanted for murder and

- arson.
- (38) The 700 Club
- (44) Los Anos Perdidos
- (50) MOVIE: "Good Guys Wear Black"
- (66) MOVIE: "The Telephone"
- 7:30 (2) To be announced. □ □
- (7) Step by Step: Cody displays martial arts skill in rescuing Dana from bikers. □ □
- (11) Wall Street Week □ □
- (20) Sociological Imagination
- (26) Al Filo de la Muerte
- 8 (2) The Carol Burnett Show □ □
- (5) Flesh 'N Blood □ □
- (7) Perfect Strangers: Balki's mother (Bronson Pinchot in a dual role) orders him home. (Part 1 of 2) □ □
- (11) On the Waterways: Lake Michigan & the Illinois River: Midwest Riviera. A 1715 Michigan fort; an open-air preserve; a Soviet technician trains workers. □
- (20) Race to Save the Planet: It Needs Political Decisions. Zimbabwe, Thailand and Sweden use politics to protect the environment. (Part 9 of 10) □ □
- (26) Dona Bella
- (32) The Best of the Worst
- (38) Jerusalem On-Line
- (44) CINE: "La Sombra del Negro"
- 8:30 (5) Dear John: Kirk plans to disrupt Kate's wedding. (Part 1 of 2) □ □
- (7) Baby Talk: Maggie

- regrets dating a children's-TV host. □ □
- (32) Totally Hidden Video: Brian Austin Green ("Beverly Hills, 90210") poses as girl's date.
- (38) Diane Bish
- 9 (2) Palace Guard □ □
- (5) Reasonable Doubts: Tess and Dicky counsel Kay, victim of date rape by a cop. □ □
- (7) 20/20 □
- (9) News □
- (11) MOVIE: "Somebody Up There Likes Me (Color)"
- (20) Against All Odds: Strengths, weaknesses of significance testing. □
- (26) Cristina
- (32) News
- (38) Among Friends
- (50) Candid Camera
- (66) Mama's Family
- 9:30 (20) Earth Explored: The formation of oil and gas reserves.
- (32) Nine: Thirty
- (50) Family Feud
- (66) Benny Hill
- 10 (2) News □
- (5) News □
- (7) News □ □
- (9) Night Court
- (20) New Literacy: Computer Files & Databases. □
- (26) Information 26
- (32) M\*A\*S\*H: An injured colonel's showpiece gun is stolen.
- (38) James Robison
- (44) Occurri Asi
- (50) Amuro
- (66) \$100,000 Pyramid