

The Sunday Oregonian

PARADISE

After nine years
as a TV villainess,
the actress is
showing
a different side

Why She Walked Away

In Step With:
Donna Mills
By James Brady



INSIDE: How To Lighten The Winter Blues

STEP WITH:®



BY JAMES BRADY

Donna Mills



BORN: Dec. 11, 1943, in Chicago.
DAYTIME TV: *The Secret Storm*, 1967; *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*, 1967.
TV SERIES: *The Good Life*, 1971-72; *Knots Landing*, 1980-89.
TV MOVIES and MINISERIES: Include *The Hunted Lady*, 1977; *Doctors' Private Lives*, 1978; *Superdome*, 1978; *Hanging by a Thread*, 1979; *Bare Essence*, 1982; *Runaway Father*, 1991; *False Arrest*, 1991.
FILMS: Include *The Incident*, 1967; *Play Misty for Me*, 1971.

has made on her own, the job offers don't always avalanche in. They have for Donna. She signed a four-picture deal with CBS and already has completed two, the most recent a film called *Runaway Father*, about a mother's 17-year search for the man who abandoned her and their three daughters. And there's an ABC miniseries called *False Arrest*, in which Donna co-stars with Robert Wagner and plays a woman framed and jailed for a murder she didn't commit.

"We actually shot in a prison in Lancaster, Calif.," she said, "a juvenile prison for youngsters 12 to 18. It's sad to see them, they're so young. Then I went to a women's prison and talked to them. They're so rough and have a caste system with their own rules. It's terrifying.

When you see that, you'll never get a traffic ticket again." In much of her early work, prior to becoming "Abby," Donna seemed typecast as a victim. Was that happening again in *False Arrest*? "No," she said. "This time the difference is the end—the good guy wins, taking back her life."

She's a native Chicagoan whose father was an oil company exec and whose mother taught dance, which got Donna taking ballet as a child. This led to dancing and acting in school plays. A year of drama at the University of Illinois, summer stock and stage work in Chicago got her eventually to New York, where she understudied in Woody Allen's play *Don't Drink the Water*. Then came soap operas and her big break—doing guest spots with Burt Reynolds on his *Dan August* series. It was Burt who mentioned Donna to Clint Eastwood, who cast her as his girlfriend in *Play Misty for Me*.

"You know, it's funny, but we [Burt and she] live in different parts of the country, and I've run into him only once since—at a birthday party. I see Loni [Anderson, Burt's wife] much more often. But he's so sweet." Donna does see old pal Larry Hagman. "We get together and talk," she said. "I'd love to do another comedy and work with him."

And her nine years on *Knots Landing*? "No regrets. It was a wonderful experience. There were bad times, of course, but most of it was wonderful, and I miss the [job] security." So why did she walk away? "Abby was a wonderful character to play," said Donna, "but I felt I needed a new challenge...It was time to move on."

For nine years, she was the evil Abby Ewing on *Knots Landing*. Now, in a new ABC miniseries, Donna Mills finally goes to jail.

BRADY'S BITS

Donna has never married, never had a child and plays her private life reasonably close to the vest, fencing a bit when she says her boyfriend is "not secret but private." Neither private nor secret is her work for the homeless in Southern California, where she volunteers with the L.A. Mission and talks enthusiastically about their work. Then there's the environment and Easter Seals and lots of other good causes. Me? I prefer to think of her most recent stage role, in a Los Angeles production of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. That's the drama in which her role was described by the critic Susan King as "a woman so evil, she makes Abby [Ewing] look like Shirley Temple."

TALK ABOUT CALLING LONG DISTANCE!

"I'm in Bora Bora," said Donna Mills, whom we all remember as the villainous Abby on *Knots Landing*. "I've been here five or six times. My boyfriend has a bungalow on the beach. It's an eight-hour flight from Los Angeles to Tahiti, then a 40-minute flight here. We play tennis, we snorkel, the water is pristine. This place is just incredible."

Incredible too is Ms. Mills, who was idle for nearly a year after quitting *Knots Landing* in 1989. And when an actress in her 40s walks away from a crisply defined role she