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Inside *Knots Landing* My Life as a Troublemaker



By Donna Mills

I decided to leave *Knots Landing* for reasons that seem right to an actress: I had been playing Abby for nine seasons on CBS, and I had reached a point where I needed new roles and new challenges. I could have played her forever, but it was just time to let her go and say goodbye.

It may surprise viewers who see

Abby as an immoral schemer, but I like her. Her main purpose on the show, of course, was to stir up trouble. This season alone, she defrauded her partners of their land holdings, framed her future son-in-law by planting cocaine in his locker, and had someone doctor Paige's expense account so that it appeared she was stealing from the company. Still, she was always three-dimensional. She wasn't just mean. She never hurt anybody just for the sake of hurting them. When the writers wanted me to steal Val's babies, I went in and protested violently. Abby would not have done that!

She also had a lot of real strength, which women in particular like to see. Recently, a woman came up to me and said, "I want you to know Abby is my inspiration. I get up in the morning, and I look in the mirror and say, 'Okay, you're going to be tough like Abby today'." That was very gratifying for me because I tried to play her as a character with some admirable qualities. Of course, she could be devious when she wanted something and I didn't see her as a saint, but she wasn't evil.

She had some slow times, too. In the early years of the show, our stories weren't serialized, so Abby didn't have a long enough range to make much trouble. And in the first six shows this year, the writers, in a change of pace, had her pretend to be a good person. It was just a ruse; she was testing niceness as a tool. I didn't say anything for a while, but finally I went in and said, "I can't take this anymore. She's boring and in a slump!"

But most of the time, she has been a lot of fun to play. For instance, Gary and Abby getting together was a very rich, juicy story. Here was this couple—Gary (Ted Shackelford) and Val (Joan Van Ark)—whom the audience

adored, and Abby moved into the cul-de-sac and stole him away. Then, right after marrying Gary, she started an affair with Greg Sumner (William Devane), which I thought was really delicious and outrageous stuff. So, as we went along, I tried to imbue her with a sense of humor.

In the show's early days, Abby wore budget-store clothes and worked in that dreary garage. As she made money and became a successful businesswoman, I argued that her clothes and surroundings should be more glamorous. It's always been very important to me that the costumes and the colors were right. It's part of the way I created the mood. So I always went with the show's designer to shop for Abby's wardrobe. But sometimes there were unforeseeable problems.

For instance, what do you wear to bury a body in cement? For that 1987 episode when Abby buried a body under the playground, I chose an Escada outfit with a pleated skirt. The fabric must have been stain resistant—it wouldn't get dirty! I was dragging this body around and shoveling dirt, and I'd get up looking clean and fresh, with the pleats still intact!

I always felt I understood Abby, which was partly because the actors on *Knots Landing* had a lot to do with shaping their characters. Until a few years ago, we did a read-through of every script before we started, and if something wasn't quite right, we would talk about it with the writers. Because we were involved, the characters became very important to us.

I will miss those characters. Even more, I will miss the actors who play them. I just saw Ted Shackelford the other day and realized I hadn't seen him in months because we weren't involved in a storyline together. Ted and I are very close friends; we had a terrific time working together. In fact, my funniest memory of *Knots Landing* came from Ted. We were doing a scene together in which he was taking a shower and I was talking to him over the wall. He had a towel wrapped around him and, I assumed, shorts or something underneath. Then the camera was on me for a reaction shot, and I couldn't see →

continued

him for a minute or so. When I looked back, he was mooning me. I guess he had worked it out with the cameraman and just slipped off the towel. It was so funny, I couldn't continue. Now, it's kind of sad not knowing if I'll ever work with Ted or the others again.

But, being entirely honest, I'm looking forward to the new projects I have lined up and to having a personal life again. *Knots Landing* was never one of those shows that was cranked out with assembly-line efficiency. I look back on it and think, "Did I really get up all the time at 5 o'clock in the morning? Did I really work 16-hour days?" I love ballet, and I remember having tickets five nights in a row and not being able to make the first four performances. On the last night, we

were shooting late again, and I was close to tears. This time, one of our producers, Larry Kasha, felt sorry for me, and he hired a limo with a kamikaze driver. He picked me up on the set—which was out on a ranch in the north end of the San Fernando Valley—and somehow got me to downtown L.A. in 20 terrifying minutes.

But, for all its problems, *Knots Landing* is safe and familiar, while the future promises to be exciting and scary. For so long, I have known exactly what I would be doing. But part of the excitement lies in the unknown. I need some uncertainty in my life. It causes creativity. (END)

Donna Mills' first long-running role on TV was as a Good Woman on the daytime soap Love Is a Many Splendored Thing.

Tales of Donna: As Her Colleagues See Her

Donna Mills isn't the kind of actress her colleagues joke about. "We're serious people," says costar Tonya Crowe, who has played Mills' daughter, Olivia, for nine seasons. "We don't fool around." But Crowe has recently developed a mentor relationship with her on-screen mother. "I just turned 18, and I'm more involved in my own career now. My mother doesn't handle it for me." She turns to Mills, who is known as an excellent businesswoman, for advice on things like contracts, publicity, clothes and makeup. "She knows how to deal with any situation in a professional and ladylike manner."

Still, through the layers of respect, come occasional glimpses of a complex personality underneath. Joan Van Ark, who plays Valene, remembers the moment—in the early years of the show—when Mills fixed on playing Abby as a vixen. "We had just had one of those luncheon read-throughs of the script. There was a very heated and emotional discussion. Sparks were flying. Then we all flounced back to resume filming. She and I headed for the makeup mirror, and while she was adjusting that famous eye makeup and hair, she announced, 'The last thing this

show needs is another sympathetic woman.' Since I played one of those noble wives, I thought, 'How dare she!' But it came to pass that she was 150 percent right."

Van Ark continues: "I've known Donna through three different cars. When she joined the show, she was driving a cherry-red Mustang. We all had our 450SL Mercedes and thought it was kind of small town, a high-school cheerleader car, but she liked it. Since then she has had the star's classic dark green Jaguar and what we call the 'diva' car—the beige Jaguar. But, you know, all of them express a part of her personality."

And writer-producer Bernard Lechowick has a memory of Mills that shows her red-Mustang side. "She gave a party this year, and, of course, all the bigwigs were there—people like *Dynasty's* Joan Collins and CBS entertainment chief Kim LeMasters and *Knots* costars Bill Devane and Joan Van Ark. But she also invited crew members and her dialogue coach and her landscape gardener and people who once had small parts on the show. She did it quite ingenuously."

—Susan Litwin