





HERE IS A COMPLEXITY about Hollywood that is staggering, that disallows the visitor to trust the senses he developed in a less mobile suburbia. The struggle is between accepting the often gaudy luxury of this place, or buying into the profusion of actors, producers, directors and crew who labor tirelessly to bring classics and camp to television and cinema. There is the thought this happy fraternity can't be bothered with lawn mowing on a Saturday morning; they have someone cut it for them. Then, one wonders how that can be after finding men and women working together on a Fox soundstage for 16 tiring hours at a stretch. The irony forces a search for a status quo, a speck of normalcy amongst the people and methods.

Perhaps Donna Mills, the quite cool, husband-stealing Abby Cunningham of CBS's *Knots Landing*, is that speck—or at least one of them.

Although she is in her own right a star, it's difficult to equate Donna with the word. The desire is not to speak with her over cocktails in a limousine nor haltingly between takes on a set. Rather, there is the wish to casually chat with her while sipping coffee in a sitting room. If you lived next door to Donna, you would call her the *next-door neighbor* who happens to be a star.

She speaks of time as most do, in terms of how little there is to accomplish all that's in mind. And those things she would do with that surplus of time are far from abnormal.

"There are so many things I'd like to do. If I had more time I would travel more. I love to travel. I've been to many places in the world, but there are so many I haven't been to. I want to go to India, I want to go to China—I very badly want to go to China."

China, at first reference, would seem a rather innocuous place to spend spare time. But her explanation for visiting the land brings out Donna's simplicity, a simplicity that shows in her wood-festooned home, in her quiet speech and in her very structured way of thinking. It's not a shallowness, it's efficiency.

"China fascinates me for some reason. I want to go there before it becomes too easy. Now, you go there and you don't stay in a luxury hotel, you stay in a hotel that is a Chinese hotel. It's not

very luxurious—that's the way it is there. I don't want to go when there is a big Hyatt or a big Holiday Inn that you can stay in. It would look just like the buildings do here. That isn't interesting. I want to see it now."

Donna's explanation of finding an easier pace occasionally is indicative of a woman tested by the rigors of production schedules, long hours and laborious rehearsals. Time is frequently the unwelcomed bedfellow of the actor, the force that subdues the artist to produce a less than superior product. As Donna sees it, there is either too little or too much time.

"The problem with television, basically, is time. There's not enough time to do something as well as you would like to do it. That's why we work 16-hour days. We try to do it with as much quality in the script as we can with the amount of time we're given, with as much quality in the production

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as we can with the amount of time we're given, and with as much quality in our acting with the amount of time we're given. It's hard, it's frustrating sometimes because there isn't enough time.

"I, on the other hand, think features sometimes take an exorbitant amount of time that's not necessary. To take a year to shoot a film, you really don't need it. It isn't warranted, it's self-indulgent. Television, unfortunately, is the other way; you don't have enough time."

Donna wreaks with self-containment, an admirable quality for those who work the studios of Hollywood. When she works, she does so with a fervor that testifies her years of stringent dance study. But, too, there are times after lengthy work days stacked on end when the body says, "Let's pack the bags and

go." It's what runners call "The Wall", and they're often times disciplined enough to climb that wall. Donna says she scales it herself, but also knows when to quit.

"I usually push myself," says the diminutive Donna. "I think it's from the dancing. When you dance, seriously, I think like a lot of people do now in running: you push yourself past a certain point. You find you have more than you thought. In dancing, it's that way all the time. You have to go beyond that point where you would normally say, 'Wait a minute, I've got to rest.' You go past that and you find that you can go past it. You find you know what that point is and you get by it.

"I think I do the same thing now with acting. I go past it. The body can do it, and I think the psyche can do it, too."

On the face of it, you could call Donna an idealist. In fact, she considers herself an idealist. But there is no denying that regardless of its extent, idealism won't save the body from the wet-towel state if pushed too hard. Donna recognizes that, too.

"There is another point, a second point, that you shouldn't go beyond, because if you go beyond that you'll make yourself nuts. But you can do more than what you first thought."

Donna's first thought, when she was battling the blustery streets of her home town Chicago, was to be a dancer. She worked fervently at it, saying she feels like "I spent my entire childhood with my foot on a ballet bar." But it was that foot on the ballet bar that planted the seed that would find Donna dancing at Chicago's Melody Top Theatre. For the University of Illinois drama student, it was her first act. Yet, it was her appearances in *Come Blow Your Horn* and *The Reluctant Debutante* at Chicago's Drury Lane Theatre that told Donna to put dancing on the back burner, and to invest a little more heavily in acting.

Says Donna, "Once I started doing that (acting) I really sort of was hooked on it."

Then, Donna became bold. She left the cold confines of Chicago to tackle the bustle of New York. And while performing in Broadway's *Don't Drink the Water*, a casting director from that city on the

Donna Mills

west coast saw her and asked her to play in *The Secret Storm* soap. Donna agreed.

Television now had Donna Mills. It was during a guest appearance on *Dan August* that she met Clint Eastwood who invited her to co-star in the hit *Play Misty For Me*. Donna's career proved to be perfect Darwinism; she evolved from dancer, to small-repertory actress, to the co-star of *Knots Landing*.

For Donna, the role of calculating Abby Cunningham is icing on the cake of her career. She had spent years playing the vulnerable woman who was, somehow, always plundered. Donna was becoming tired of being the inflictee instead of the inflictor.

"I got real sick of playing those victims. I think maybe 95 percent of the roles I played in television movies or all kinds of things like that, were victims. Somebody was chasing me, somebody had done me wrong, somebody was going to rape me. I got real tired of that. It gets to be all the same after awhile, after you do it a lot."

After meeting Donna, you don't doubt her ability to act. For she is a diminutive, fragile looking, yet beautiful woman portraying the equally beautiful, yet deceiving temptress who finds hobby in stealing the male side of a marriage. There is the feeling that if Donna and Abby met, they'd punch it out. Yet, Donna relishes playing Abby.

"It's just much more exciting to play the bad guy. The bad guy is always the person that makes everything happen. He's the focal point of the drama, usually. He stirs up the trouble and makes it happen. Rather than have things happen to you, you're making them happen. That is a lot more energizing, a lot more interesting to play. It's a much more active role."

Says Donna of her character: "One of the things I like about Abby is that I love playing the villainy of her. It's wonderful. They have created her in such a way over the past year that she's much more three dimensional than most villains on television. That can get boring playing *just* the villain, too," says a practical Donna. "Abby has some vulnerabilities, so she is a pretty well rounded character. She's not the heroine, but she's well rounded. She has a lot of strengths and she's great fun to play because of all that stuff."

Knots Landing is the offspring of the

parent of nocturnal soap operas, ABC's *Dallas*. And it is the nighttime soaps that are now drawing closet soapers out of hiding. It is the new genre some sociologists say legitimize the male viewer as a soap fan. All three of the nighttime soaps—*Dynasty*, *Knots Landing* and *Dallas*—have consistently run in the top 10 of the Nielsens. Donna theorizes it is a shift in viewer taste that explains the success of P.M. soaps.

“I think to some extent, viewers are tired of car chases and shootings. There is a place for that, but it's not as prominent as it was. I think people have always liked human drama, what happens with interrelationships with people. That has always fascinated them, and that's why day-time soaps have been on for 25 years.”

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“It has not just fascinated the ladies. It fascinates men, too. There are infinitely intricate human conflicts and relationships, and there is an infinite variety in those conflicts. There isn't an infinite variety in police chases.”

Perhaps the migration of viewer taste is paving the way for sweeping changes in television content. Since the inception of television, the three networks have held the reins of programming. But now that grasp may be loosening. Television content seems destined to enjoy a broader scope.

Theorizes Donna: “There has always been, basically, the three networks, and they sort of dictated what the country was going to watch. Now with cable and all that, if you want Shakespeare—if you want that on a constant basis—you can have it. If you want the *Dukes of Hazzard*, you can have that, too. But there are different types of people who want those things.

“I think television should offer all those different avenues. I think it will do that. It didn't before. The network

Donna Mills

programming, for the most part, I think caters to the lowest common denominator of the American public, rather than the highest."

Because she is rather outspoken about the state of television fare, you feel you've started something when you query her on the topic. Give her a soap box, and it appears she will gladly stand on it. Her conversation about television evolves, somewhat predictably, to the actor. And while she doesn't admit to many pet peeves, a spark cuts loose inside her when the treatment of actors pops up.

"In the scheme of things, while doing a television show, the last consideration is always the actor," says a disdainful Donna. "Unfortunately, the business has sort of been designed that way because of the unions. The money is the first consideration, and then what's going to be the most expedient thing to do, and the last thing they think about is the actor. It doesn't matter the actor doesn't have any time to prepare for a scene or has to do it in a way that's not

good for him. The actor is supposed to do it no matter what. That bugs me."

She reports it to be a battle that is difficult to win, and concedes it is, at best, something that can only be tolerated.

"You can't win. The money considerations will always take precedence. They just will."

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But if Donna's future—the way she has it mapped out—has anything to do with it, things will be different. For it is popular in Hollywood

these days for actors and actresses to break free from the parental, network-producer-actor bond. It is perhaps the state of "the actor is the last consideration" coupled with the cumbersome appendage of endless car chases and predictable plots that forces actors to open up shop for themselves—to produce projects they've always wanted to do.

In that sense, Donna's desire is to follow the same design. She wishes to produce, picturing an outfit where the actor is the consideration above all else, and where money is given, say, a lower billing.

"Hopefully, when I produce things, my first consideration will be the actor. Now a lot of other things are going to come into play and try to drag me away from that and say, 'Well, what about this consideration and that consideration?'"

There is no question in Donna about the importance of the greenback in producing, however. It's the industries' life blood. But the necessity of money

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isn't, to Donna at least, rationalization to put round-the-clock guard on the budget.

"There are producers and people in this town who have become very wealthy. I wouldn't mind becoming very wealthy," concedes Donna, but counters, "I would put the money that I get, on the screen. So many producers nickle and dime. They just don't use the money wisely. I hope that I won't do that. I hope that whatever I put up on the screen is going to look like a lot of care had been taken with it, and a lot of time and effort."

There is neither a liberalism nor conservatism about Donna. She rides a strict keel of walking the straighter line. In nearly every topic she speaks about, Donna presents both extremes of the issue, and then tells you her philosophy is a product of the two. It's never one or the other, it is a little bit of both.

She carries "the little bit of both" philosophy, it seems, when considering a project she's been asked to do, or when talking about a future "Donna Mills" production.

"A good project has a strong story, something that combines character and plot. I don't like things that are totally character, and I don't like things that are totally plot. You have to be interesting. There is something about interesting people doing something interesting while something interesting is developing in the story."

It can be confusing trying to figure out Donna's character, her motivations. For you can spend hours struggling to find the convoluted path she took to arrive at a certain statement, and

suddenly realize she followed the straight path. There is a deceptive simplicity that seeps through even when talking about weekend vacation spots to visit.

"I would just love to rest and go somewhere like Lake Arrowhead, just sort of get some nice clean air and pine trees, and just experience a different, different environment.

It is this simplicity—in living a very ordered, logical life—that must be, for the people Donna knows and works with, like a weekend in Arrowhead. **Q**

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