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Life On Abby's Road: HOW DONNA MILLS COPE WITH BEING TELEVISION'S BAD GIRL

By Neil Feineman



PHOTOGRAPHY: PHILIP DIXON HAIR & MAKEUP: JEFF JONES/H.M.S. BOOKINGS

SHE'S SLEPT WITH ONE OF her next door neighbors and has made advances to another. She has double-crossed her brother, confounded the Mob, and had an affair with J.R. Ewing. She has been held hostage and watched as her children were kidnapped. All in all, not bad work for one television season.

The woman in question is Abby of "Knots Landing," played for all she's worth by the talented actress Donna Mills. Although Mills has "performed everything from a lawless fugitive to a nun," she was reluctant to take on a new series role—until she found out about Abby. "I have a hard time with most of the characters on television; either they are all bad or they are so good you could throw up. But when the part of Abby

came up, I knew I had found the best of both types; she is naughty, conniving, and scheming, but, thanks to her kids, she is also very vulnerable. In fact, when the season ends with her husband having stolen the kids and her breaking down in tears, it is just marvelous, giving me a real chance to give Abby some dimension."

Initially a spin-off of "Dallas," "Knots Landing" has become popular in its own right. That popularity, Mills thinks, is at least partially because of Abby. "It has nothing to do with me in the role, but with the character herself. The strength of the show, I believe, is in its believability. They needed someone like Abby to brew trouble from within the group."

"In one episode, for instance, the five women who live on the cul-de-sac that the series centers around were supposed

to be in a restaurant that was overtaken by armed gunmen. People might have believed that, but it became too expensive to rent a restaurant for a whole week, so the script was revised and we were taken hostage during a party at one of the character's houses. We sacrificed all credibility. Why would burglars pick the one house on the block that had all the lights on when they could have taken one of four other completely dark houses?

"In any case, Abby provides the necessary ingredient to bring trouble into the neighborhood and does so with a credible, human element. The producers always knew they would have to bring someone in, which is why they kept the last house on the cul-de-sac vacant during the first season. They wanted to establish the other characters first."



J.R. (Larry Hagman) may have the upper hand in this scene, but Abby (Donna Mills) is about to give him a run for his money.

DURING THE FIRST SEASON, they worked on all the other characters, establishing personalities, strengths, weaknesses, and references for audience identification. It would seem almost natural that the first-season veterans would resent the meaty scripts and scenes that Mills, the newest member of the cast, received. But she has seen no jealousy or resentment. "There are so many characters," she says, "that everyone wants to be on more; in fact, the desire to have more time on screen has become something of a standing joke. It's not a problem, though, because we are a company made up of actors, not of stars."

"I don't worry about it, because the cast is so compatible and I respect them all. I'm more concerned about the people I meet off the set. Some are standoffish,

as if they are waiting to see if I really am a bitch. I'm not, or at least I don't think I am, but I find now that I have to prove myself.

"Even if I do, that goes with the territory. I waited a long time for a role like this and taking it was a conscious decision. I had been playing victim roles for some time and knew that I was getting pigeonholed. I wanted to develop a broader range as an actress and knew that I would have to turn down roles along the way. So, I rejected parts for a year."

Holding out paid off. She was once remembered for running through parking lots and hiding from psychopaths and criminals in *Play Misty for Me* and 21 made-for-television movies (including *Young Maverick*, *Doctors' Private Lives*, *The Black Dahlia*, and *Haunts of the Very Rich*), and she now has bested J.R. Ewing in front of millions of viewers. After her work as Abby, it will be hard to think of her as a victim again.

"Working with Larry Hagman was one of the easiest and most enjoyable

experiences of the season," she says. "We may be television's scoundrels now, but we were once a sweet, innocent couple working as a maid and a butler for a wealthy household in a series called 'The Good Life.' It premiered opposite another new show, 'All in the Family,' and, as you can guess, did not last. But from the first scene, Larry and I hit it off because we work the same way. We play our roles with a sense of comedy, simply because we are having fun. That's why you're able to enjoy the characters and accept all those terrible things they do."

That fun crops up at the most unexpected times. "In the scene where I make love to J.R.," she says, "we are in bed when Michele Lee (Abby's virtuous sister-in-law) comes knocking. When we were rehearsing the scene, they told me I had to have the sheets pulled up to my armpits. I made them show me the memo that said that network policy dictated that. As I read it, I realized that the memo said nothing about my back and my legs, so as the camera was rolling, I turned around and showed that I was not wearing anything. It wasn't really any more physically revealing, but it seemed to me more in character and more fun."

ALTHOUGH DONNA MILLS is much less flamboyant, more accessible and genuine than her television persona would indicate, she has gained insight into Abby's need for a more visible profile. "I used to have a real New York actor's mentality about publicity," she says. "I used to think that you simply do your work and then go home to your garret. Doing interviews and becoming



Abby has more on her mind than food in CBS's "Knots Landing."

because he is totally unaware of how good looking he is. Most of the beautiful men I meet are boring.

"I can sympathize because I understand how time consuming a beauty regimen is. One doesn't wake up with beautiful hair, nails, and makeup. It takes me at least an hour. When I'm working, my hair is set daily and there is a 45-minute, full makeup session. Of course, there are days when I get to do absolutely nothing. I pray for those days, and then I spend those days praying that nobody recognizes me. Still, if you don't give your face rest occasionally, your lashes will fall out and your skin will break out and, yes, I do long for those lazy days."

IF SHE CAN FIT IT IN HER schedule, Donna tries to get away on those off days. "I love driving to Lake Arrowhead (about 100 miles east of Los Angeles) and feeding the squirrels. The canyons of Los Angeles offer a more rural existence than most people realize, so those urges to get away are minimized. And there are times when I feel the need to return home to Chicago (where she grew up and made her first appearance in front of an audience as a dancer and later as an actress in *Come Blow Your Horn* and *The Reluctant Debutante*). More often, I'll want to go to New York, where I lived and worked for a while. As soon as I step off the plane, things get hectic. I dig up my old theater friends (she appeared in the original cast of Woody Allen's play, *Don't Drink the Water*) and see as many

shows as I can—plus the ballet, Off Broadway, the Lincoln Center, the Village, Off-Off Broadway, Bloomies, and the Met. I'm an Impressionist freak, so I rush first to the Monets and the Degas, and then on to the Russian costumes."

Even in mellow, laid-back Los Angeles, Mills keeps up a good energy level and, because she's hypoglycemic, she has to pay careful attention to her diet. "I don't react to the time between meals, as many hypoglycemics do. Instead I have to watch my intake of sugar; if I indulge, even on a small scale, I feel the effects for a day or two. So I've pretty much eliminated sugar and refined flour from my diet and have tried to stick with fish and chicken, rather than red meat. Every so often I crave an ice cream cone. Because I get tired, testy, and cranky the next day from it, I have pretty much lost my taste for sweets."

As important as watching what she eats is getting the proper amount of sleep. "I can go with less than seven or eight hours of sleep once in a while," she admits, "but not for more than a day or two at a time. I've never been a night person, but when I'm working and have to get up at 4:45 A.M., I have to get to bed very early."

With all these restrictions, Mills has had to phase out all but the most fulfilling relationships. "Friendship," she says, "is very important to me. I have been independent and living on my own for a long time, and I like that. But I've also had some long-term friends, most of whom are in the industry and who understand

that though you think about them a lot, you're often too busy to say more than a few passing words. Those friends really mean a lot to me."

THE DEMANDS ON HER time not only limit her personal life, but affect her political involvement as well. "I am not too political," she says, "partly because I believe there is a time to be vocal and a time to quietly and financially back causes. But most change is so rapid that it's difficult for me to have opinions that I'm certain enough of to go public. The one issue I am absolutely clear on is nuclear power, so I donate money to the Union of Concerned Scientists. Because I'm so sure nuclear power is wrong, my mind boggles at the thought of anyone being for it. The thought entered my mind that by contributing I was putting my name up there for everyone to see and that I was placing myself in a position of vulnerability should there ever be a blacklist associated with it. But the issue seemed important enough to risk it, so I began to support the Union and I'm proud to be affiliated with it.

"Being totally honest," she continues, "I would have to admit that it is more important for me to be considered a good actress than a good person. That's what I've studied and worked hard for—to be good at something. People I've worked with in the past have told me that I've improved so much. I hope to keep improving, and I'll keep studying and fighting to be taken seriously. In an environment where seven lady truckers in cut-offs and halter tops seem to typify the ideal, that is anything but easy." □