BELLISARIO

Standing firm against the huns and vandals of the American networks, DONALD BELLISARIO talks to STEPHEN DARK about MAGNUM, Vietnam and stylish TV series drama.

PrimeTime: How did you get involved in television?

Donald Bellisario: I was a creative director at an advertising agency, which meant I wrote, directed, produced, art directed a number of film commercials. And then I wanted to write features so I came to California. I was 21 when I came out here to break in. I shot commercials for a while, wrote some spec scripts, somebody read one, that got me an interview, and the next thing I knew I was doing television. I worked with Steve Cannell for a while. Then I worked with Glen Larson on BATTLESTAR GALACTICA and after that got involved in MAGNUM, which isn't Glen's show, but mine. Glen had written two scripts which Tom Selleck rejected, so I just started all over again. The only thing I really retained was the name. The character changed, everything was different, and I created Higgins, TC, Rick, the dogs, all the characters you now have.

PT: Why do you share a co-creator credit with Larson?

DB: That's what always has to be done, if someone starts a project, but wasn't even involved in the pilot. I made the pilot. We shared the title on the pilot as co-exec producers, but he never even looked at the script.

PT: So how did you conceive the pilot, particularly its relationship with Vietnam?

DB: Well, I don't work that way. See what happens is, I don't even do a story. I sit down with a typewriter and I start writing and it takes me some place. I'm just as much a viewer of my own shows as I write it, as the viewers are when they see it. I don't plot the story all the way through. Most writers do. They plot a story all the way through. I'll have either a beginning, or sometimes I have an ending in mind and I'll write from it, or to it. I didn't set it out with the idea that I wanted to do a show with Vietnam vets. What happened was that it went along and I was writing Magnum's character and his friends, I decided I knew how they got together, they all served in Vietnam. That's what their connection is.

PT: Looking at your first episodes for 'GALACTICA', MAGNUM, TALES OF THE GOLD MONKEY and now AIRWOLF, one perceives a continuing fascination with military characters. In fact every protagonist that you write seems to have a military background.

DB: I was in the Marine Corps for four years, 1955 to '59. That was a long time ago, but I always had an affinity for the military and it comes out in my characters. Anything I write, you're gonna find some main character is gonna have a military background and a military attitude.

PT: How did the network react to your use of Vietnam in MAGNUM?

DB: They didn't like it. It's not from a political point of view. They say people are tired of Vietnam. I get a lot of letters from vets who love the show. The main reason vets love the show is because the three characters have been through heavy Vietnam experiences. At times these experiences come back to haunt them, or to give them problems, but they handle them, and they just go on living. I get a lot of letters saying that it's terrible to see a Vietnam vet who's just portrayed as a kind of regular guy, rather than somebody who's in deep trauma or somebody who's a crazed killer — not functioning properly. If you look at any show with a Vietnam vet in it, you're dealing with a psychopath. He's gone crazy, or he's gonna go crazy.

Every fourth MAGNUM script has a Vietnam background. What we're shooting at the moment is a two hour script which has a lot of Vietnam background. It starts when they were prisoners in North Vietnam for while. It's called THE SUN ALSO RISES. This two-part episode caused something of a controversy in the States, with its depiction of a heroic figure cold-bloodedly executing a character — in this case a Russian interrogator, who had tortured Magnum and co. in Vietnam, and brainwashed TC into being a 'sleepwalking assassin'. However, the ambiguities concerning this defiant act of supposedly justified homicide — can you have a premeditated crime of passion? — become highly suspicious when considering Bellisario's latest success, the technological wonders of AIRWOLF. Again we have a Vietnam vet as hero, although this time Jan-Michael Vincent's character is wooden and inaccessible. The context is one of the most rabid, anti-Communist series produced in recent years, with its fantasies of search and destroy missions in Libyan and Russian territory. Bellisario's customary stylish production cannot compensate for such a reactionary treatment of contemporary macho fantasies, very much a romanticisation of the war hero, embodying the supposed purity of his country's ideological values in his forays abroad.

PT: The use of flashback in the Vietnam episodes is an interesting device.

DB: The network didn't want them. They don't believe in flashbacks. They really don't. They say that flashbacks are
Hamilton has a lot of panache and writes a different MAGNUM. But that's what makes MAGNUM so good.

PT: The narrative structure of the series seems to have completely different rhythms to the rest of the formula action drama.

DB: The network would prefer we did straight line type of stories. Magnum goes out—boom, solves a case and has fun. But there are two basic styles—we either do fun or serious, and beyond that it's just the normal series stories. The interesting thing about MAGNUM scripts is that when I'm trying to explain to writers how to write an episode, the only thing I can say is if you were writing another detective series, which MAGNUM is in a sense, there would be a murderer. Magnum would be called, the other characters would be called in, he would get a lead to go down to where the murder occurred, etc. In a MAGNUM, you write the story between these scenes. Somehow Magnum gets ensnared in the events through a friend, goes down to see the parking attendant but Higgins has got the Ferrari. He's got to figure out a way to get down there and that leads into a whole new escape and by the time he gets down there the guys are done.

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I don't like writing on the head. I don't like writing right on the nose, which is what most of those detective shows are. You can go from A to B. They're very straight. I love doing MAGNUM where the audience can figure it out as it goes along and Magnum just beats them to it. I love twists. Doing big twists. In fact, we did one last year called THE SHOW COULDN'T GO ON (hence DOUBLE JEOPARDY), which was written by Bob Greenberg. Dana Wynter came over from England. She plays a movie star, and there's a scene with her husband and she has a fake gun, and boom! She kills her husband. Everybody accuses her of doing it. I did it on purpose that way. I wanted the audience to say, I know it wasn't her, so