

It wasn't a detective show.

Our
EXCLUSIVE
Interview
with
**Robert
Butler**



It was a duet.

By Diana Maiocco

I met with veteran television director Robert Butler at Jerry's Deli in Westwood. I was excited to meet him because he directed so many classic television shows in so many genres which include *Gunsmoke*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Fugitive*, *Hogan's Heroes*, *Batman*, *Star Trek*, *Mission Impossible*, *Columbo*, *Hill Street Blues* and *Remington Steele*, just to name a few. But I will always remember him as the guy who directed the two hour pilot of *Moonlighting*, and was among the first to witness the extraordinary chemistry between its beautiful star, Cybill Shepherd, and an unknown actor named Bruce Willis.

DM: When did you first meet Glenn Caron?

RB: On *Remington Steele*. I had created that show, another writer/producer had developed it, we shot it and it sold, and Glenn became one of the top writers on the staff.

DM: Can you describe your working relationship with Glenn on *Remington Steele*?

RB: I responded to him immediately because his work was always so smart and original, as well as a bit fanciful, and he was a quick, amused, humorous guy. I was on the show for about six or eight episodes to get it going, then I moved on.

I remember one of his scripts in which Laura and Remington are fleeing some villains and they spend the night together in a parked sedan with a young buddy of theirs sleeping in the back seat. As they wake up on Saturday morning, they ponder so quietly what might have been. It was so wistful and sweet and open. Glenn and I just had a good productive relationship, but I was gone and on to other assignments pretty soon.

DM: So when did he approach you about directing the pilot of *Moonlighting*? How did that come about?

RB: Well, it was the third of the three pilots we had done subsequent to *Remington Steele*. and it was just natural because we had worked very happily together so it just kind of came to pass.

DM: How did he describe the premise of the show to you and what did you think of the script?

RB: I thought it was terrific, as well as wordy which Glenn's scripts always are, out of enthusiasm and energy. He just puts tons of color and detailing on his pages. Scripts are usually fifty-five pages long for an hour. His were eighty-five or ninety-five, something like that, so it amused me how pell-mell and verbose he was. But I was certainly tickled about his enthusiasm and quickness, and that was what made the pages full and long, and that was my reaction to the material. Yeah, the script seemed terrific.

DM: At first *Moonlighting* was compared to *Remington Steele* because of the male/female detective theme.

RB: So I'm told. I wasn't aware of that. It was mentioned to me later. The equation was different, and that's what I look at first, I think. The design of character.

DM: Can you talk about directing Bruce's screen test and your initial impression of him? I mean, you were there during the audition process, correct?

RB: Yes, yes. We had met him once in New York and the guys, Glenn and others, were impressed. I didn't really remember him and then there was a sec-

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ond interview here on the coast. He was out here on someone else's dime, interviewing for something else, and he came in and just took over. Took charge of the reading powerfully, amusingly. He had nothing to lose and just came on strong. Walked around the room as though he owned the furniture. It was great and he scored like mad! We adored him. Glenn had liked him all along and he was a home run for all of us. We took Bruce to the network and fifteen, eighteen people adored him and he was a home run there too, except the boss. Lew Erlicht was a very good, smart executive at ABC. He said, "Okay, everybody in this room adores this guy and I don't get it, so what we have to do is prove me wrong!" Very good leadership. And he said, "Here's how we do that. We shoot a little test and poll a test audience and see what the hell happens." So we said, "Ok, great." Well, we didn't do no little test. We mounted a three scene series with *Cybill*. We got some nice sets, shot this nice three-scene test with Bruce and *Cybill* and showed it, and "Bingo!" It went through the sky.

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DM: Yes, because on the pilot DVD, they show a screen test but it's not with *Cybill*. They show it with another actress.

RB: That would be the videotape test done in New York probably. I don't think he was video taped here but routinely in New York, as you know, they put actors on to tape. I think it was Bruce's second piece of work on film. He was on *Miami Vice* as a guest star and as we were shooting the pilot we broke for awhile so we could watch a lot of the *Miami Vice*.

DM: Now, the character of David Addison was and still is unique to television. Did you think the audience would get this character ?

RB: Oh yeah. The equation for the audience is solid anytime. I have this view that I'm standing between the audiences and the show entity, and it's my job to translate and present to them what the hell it is we're doing and I'm very enthused and secure with that idea. Bruce was winning, *Cybill* was gorgeous. We had a wonderful costumer on the show who helped make her look top notch in every scene, which was part of the point against Bruce's crazy loose character. I felt really good about all that and would today.

DM: There were some really memorable scenes in the pilot, the first one being when Maddie meets David. Can you recall directing that scene and the mood on the set?

RB: Yeah, we were up in a building

downtown. Something was thrown through the window in another scene.

DM: Yes, yes, towards the end.

RB: That had been on my mind because we needed an office that would allow that to happen. But the initial scene you mention was just a crazy, a great entrance for Bruce. Glenn wrote him bouncing the toy basketball on the desk and sitting in the chair, just totally solo, crazy, farcey. Not exactly realistic, I'd say. I mean, here's this guy pretending, tripping, talking to himself in an office, not even talking to the camera! He's just having this big, glorious, goofy time. Well, that's a strong entrance for a character, and a somewhat unreal one and Bruce did it wonderfully. And as incredible as that all is, it was a basic to the show. Not really to be taken as though "Once upon a time, something happened like this." It was to be more "Pretend with us that once upon a time something like this might have happened." That was the tone of it all, and the tone of the entrance when Cybill came in. She was stern and peeved and she fired him, setting up immediately that she's the straight man on the show and he's the free-spirited crazy one.

DM: Right.

RB: The joke with the basketball in the wastebasket over the door was good solid comedy fare and very "farcey." The ball bounces down and the wastebasket falls over Ms. Dipesto's head, and then she says, "duh duh" under it. Well, wait a second. Why does she

say "duh duh?" Was there trash in there? Well, no. We didn't see any fall so, wait a second, we're not doing reality, are we? We're doing pretend with us. Have fun. What if? That's what we're doing.

DM: Yes, it was Glenn, in his interview with us, who said that people on the set said, "Why are you doing this? This is crazy!" Because they felt that they were going to have some kind of real detective show and it turned out to be something else.

RB: Nah, it wasn't a detective show. It was a duet. It was just this frosty duet in which the frost came from Cybill, of course.

DM: Right, and the fact that David had the gall to insult her by saying that she was a Miss March, as in a centerfold.

RB: Yes, yes. A kind of low life observation from a freewheeling character. That was what he was. More intentional cheesiness was

I think we'll wait for the next elevator. David thought as the mohawk guy made his appearance with a huge knife in his back.



when he mentions her favorite movie and her favorite book.

DM: Jonathan Livingston Seagull.

RB: Yes.

DM: It's sort of like a little bio from Playboy.

RB: Yeah, absolutely.

DM: The other memorable scene was when Maddie and David are dancing in the bar.

RB: Yes. That scene was very dear and sweet and the music was wonderful, that very sad music under the two of them agreeing to disagree. Very bluesy, the whole scene, and we shot it in that bar from that Mickey Rourke movie...

DM: Bar Fly?

RB: *Bar Fly*. That's the bar we used, yes. A real dump, now torn down, gone.

DM: In that scene, there was such incredible chemistry between them. Can you go into some details on filming that scene?

RB: That lift, that quality and honesty, often happens in pilots, when everybody so badly wants the damn thing to succeed. I mean, pilots are like oil wells. Actors on pilots can become millionaires, like we're all drilling for oil. So there's a lot of hope and a lot of belief. And there's a willingness to work, to be directed, to pitch in and put

the shoulder to the wheel and all that. That's normally the mood on a pilot. That's why pilots are very good gigs largely, and the pettiness is not there, the self-orientation, the angling and the selfish competition. That develops later, I assure you. Sadly. But the overall mood working tone on the show was very sweet, very light, enthusiastic as hell. I think Bruce and Cybill really dug each other and just had a very, very good time doing to each other what those characters were supposed to do to each other. He enjoyed taunting her and being light when the world's falling apart and she enjoyed being frosty and peevish. Good working climate always.

DM: Now, the other great sequence was at the end when Maddie and David find the diamonds in the clock.

RB: Yeah.

DM: And you have them do stunts.

RB: Yeah.

DM: How difficult was it

I need to figure out some way to keep her from leaving. David thought before he swiped the watch she was going to give to the police.



for you to talk Cybill into hanging off of the clock hand?

RB: I was experienced enough at that point so I could manage it all very handily. What you do in a complex sequence is just break it into tiny pieces, solve tiny problems, put it all together and that's the scene. I mean, for example we hired circus people to do the high work. You must always hire the very best trick people who know what they're doing. When an actor has to hang off a hand of a clock and then two men hang off a ladder on the side of a building, you get circus people to do those jobs because they know about being high and being in danger. Everything is done safely and sensibly and you just solve all the problems an inch at a time. When the actors know they're being cared for, they respond in kind. So when Bruce and Cybill are out on that ladder and he's trying to go out and rescue her, they know it's good old Harold Lloyd time! There were platforms and pads and safety, absolutely. The camera angle made it look like they were

high over the city and indeed it was a little hairy for them, which helped the scene. Even if you fall eight feet, that's no fun.

DM: Right.

RB: So there's a little anticipation, a little extra adrenaline flowing, a little anxiety, which helps pump the moments, but they knew they were on a well-organized

gig and that they were being well-cared for, and so they could relax and do their work which is what happens under those circumstances.

DM: Can you share any other memorable moments while filming the pilot or any scenes that were filmed that were edited out?

RB: I think of Cybill tied up by the villain in that kitchen where he's going to sear her face.

DM: Right.

RB: There's a thing in staging that when one character wants to be pointed or energized or make a particular impression, that character moves towards the second character, making a cross. But Cybill couldn't cross because she was tied up in a chair, and both of us knowing this, I just said, "Hey listen, cross to him on that speech," and she knew I was kidding in the spirit of the show because she couldn't do it. She knew I was being ultra-straight and mock-dramatic so on that speech she began to clump ahead in her chair to reach the other actor and make a bigger point, and it was funny and tickled me because she knew instantly that the staging was dumb and literal and clumpy. She had gotten that the dumbness and the impossibility was the point of the thing and she did it and it was indeed silly and amusing. That sticks with me. And when Bruce was on the ladder after it has fallen and slammed against the building ten stories up and he's on it crawling up it to rejoin her, that was hairy for him. I don't remember how far down the pad was at that point and that wasn't easy, but he just did it. Cybill's costuming too was delicious-by Robert Turturice, a guy whom I had

worked a lot with and who also just gets it. He knows how to make people look convincing and appropriate, and I'm thinking Cybill particularly because that was where a lot of our energies went, into the way she looked and as the beauty-straight man, and he did a terrific job with her look.

DM: So what was your gut feeling while working on this project?

RB: Fun. Good job. Good people. We all were getting it done. We were doing the right things.

DM: Did you also get the feeling that this was going to work?

RB: You never know about that, because that's the biggest mystery of them all. I mean, you can be blindly in love with what you're doing, know convincingly it will make the time capsule and then nobody cares and it never sells. I mean, that can just happen, so you don't think in terms of, "Wow! This is going to be a hit!" At least, I don't. I think of in terms of, "Wow! This is cooking." "These two people are entertaining and believable and they're getting it done." "Wow!" "Terrific!" Those are the terms I think in.

DM: What it was like for you to work with Glenn on this pilot?

RB: Really enjoyable, as it always was with him. He and I were close and I could tease him about some of the short cuts he took in his writing, because structure just doesn't interest him much. It bores him, I think. He's more interested in character. And when David Addison is discovered having been up all night at the computer with

a big monologue to Cybill so we can launch into the big clock sequence at the end, it was just crazy and short cut and compacted, and only in this kind of material can you take those kinds of gleeful short cuts. You remember Bruce said, "Look, I've been up all night. I've been figuring it out. Does the word "poopla" mean anything to you?" It's just delightful nonsense, and I teased Glenn about it. But it's so well written, and light, it's irresistible nonsense! Also, the finish was written originally on top of the Capitol Records building in Hollywood but they wouldn't let us up there. Our location manager, a very sharp guy, thought about the clock building downtown and of Harold Lloyd and he said, "How does that sound to you guys?" We went down and looked at it and just said, "Wow!"

DM: The Eastern building still exists?

RB: Very much so. Its clock tower is four-sided and we used the southern non-street side to work, with our platforms and production, and in the story it was the supposedly one-and-only clock that worked so perfectly for us.

DM: Tell us how it was working with Cybill.

RB: Terrific! She's what all men would call a great dame. Raunchy, profane, tough, funny, just a great Southern dame. That's what she is, and that's the way she approaches herself, her work and everything else. She tells a story about asking Orson Welles what she should do about her career and his answer was "Let me think about that." He came back and said, "Forgo everything and dive into theater

and get some experience there." And she did. And she talks openly about it and about being a beautiful woman from a young age, which put her in a certain flight zone with very strong top-drawer friends like Orson. So that was the way she was very comfortable with herself, and very amused about herself too. She doesn't treat herself like a beautiful woman. She treats herself like a great Southern dame. You don't see that in the work in this show so much because she's supposed to be frosty and classy so you don't see much of her great Southern dame in this particular material.

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DM: And how about working with Bruce?

RB: Just real easy. He was a novice and admitted to it. And he too was very solid about himself and his character David. He wasn't that familiar with filming technique, and so he was willing to be pliable.

DM: Right, with working in television.