



## Higgins – not Hamlet – will be fine, thank you

With life so sweet  
on 'Magnum, P.I.'  
John Hillerman has  
no special desire  
to return to the  
Broadway stage (TEL)

By Al and  
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John Hillerman is a former Broadway actor who loves Los Angeles, isn't dying to return to the stage, thinks episodic television just right for him and does not cry himself to sleep every night wishing he were back in New York. There must be something wrong with him.

There is hardly an ex-Broadway actor in television who does not claim emotional allegiance to the stage and to the Big Apple. Play an old record of Ethel Merman singing "There's No Business Like Show Business" and half of Hollywood begins to sob. But not old John.

He is quite content to play the role of Higgins on the CBS hit series Magnum, P.I., which takes private detective work to new heights of art at least to the balmy beaches of Waikiki. (TEL)

"I would return to the New York stage," he says, eyebrows arched and →

cigarette holder angled just so, "only for an exceptional role in a short-run play. I am not one of those who yearn to play Hamlet. Higgins will do."

No wonder. At 47, Hillerman has a home with a swimming pool in the Los Angeles area, a penthouse in Honolulu where the show is filmed, a chauffeured limousine and as much imported Russian caviar as he cares to eat at \$10 an ounce.

"You might say," observes a laughing Tom Selleck, the star of *Magnum*, "that John enjoys the good life."

True. But it wasn't always that way. Hillerman left the stage in 1969 after earning leading roles but only stashing a few hundred dollars in the bank. He liked stage-acting and had honed his craft during his 15 years in the theater, but he was tired of being poor. He was tired of cold-water flats. He was tired of being hungry. And he was tired of the evanescence of life behind the footlights.

At age 35, John Hillerman decided he wanted to make money and he wanted to be imprinted forever (or thereabouts) on film. He did not want to vanish when the curtain dropped, with nothing but a critic's snarl to record what he had done.

So off he went to Hollywood.

Fortunately, Hillerman makes lasting friendships. He is small (5-feet-7), non-threatening and talented and he has a certain amiable elegance. Among the friends he had made in New York was a fellow minor player in a Central Park production of "Othello." His name was Peter Bogdanovich.

Hillerman was the kind of friend who would type scripts for the budding writer-director and who would respond to a boozy, middle-of-the-night call from Bogdanovich and listen for hours to the sad details of a failed love affair.

Bogdanovich did not forget that, years later, when he grew up to be a Famous Director. He encouraged Hillerman to come West and gave him his first part in a movie, "The Last Picture Show." There followed roles in three other Bogdanovich films: "What's Up, Doc?" "Paper Moon" and "At Long Last Love." John Hillerman

was on his way. Since then, there have been another 16 movies and more than 100 television roles, including two previous one-season series, *Ellery Queen* and *The Betty White Show*.

Then, in the fall of 1979, he was asked to read for the part of Higgins, a British sidekick to Magnum. The only reason an actor of Hillerman's stature would be asked to read at all was that a British character naturally must have a British accent; and since Hillerman was born in a sleepy Texas town named Denison, there was a modicum of doubt.

"All I had to hear was one word," *Magnum's* executive producer Donald Bellisario says, "and I knew he was the one."

Hillerman, the consummate pro, worked hard during the birth of the pilot. He learns lines easily, but he wanted the soft English accent to be perfect. "When he'd get the accent just right," Bellisario recalls, "he'd tape-record the dailies and go home and practice more.

"Some television people from England saw the pilot and said John's only flaw was the way he said 'bloody.' It should be thrown away. When John heard that, he perfected 'bloody' too."

"I have been around too long to take anything for granted," Hillerman reflects, while sitting in his comfortable San Fernando Valley home. "*Magnum* is such an intelligent show, and we all work nicely together. It's quite like repertory theater and not second-class at all. Series television is the backbone of the industry. I love it!"

Hillerman defines the character of Higgins as "a stuffed shirt who respects rules; upright and forthright with a military background." He pauses then adds: "A little like me."

Selleck laughs generously at that. "John would like you to believe he's aloof and unapproachable, but in reality he's a kind and friendly man. He helps me in many ways, laughs with me and *always* knows what he's doing. Hell, John isn't even temperamental."

Proof of his poise under distress, Selleck says, came when Hillerman, an →

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expert card player, finally cajoled Selleck and others into playing poker one night. In an awesome shift of fate, Hillerman, who never loses, lost several hundred dollars to a house of amateurs.

"I'd have cried and broken things," Selleck says. "John paid off in cash, with a smile."

It was Bogdanovich who created for Hillerman in "What's Up, Doc?" the Clifton Webb-type role that Hillerman has played more or less ever since, to his own good fortune but to the dismay of one of his best friends, actress Eileen Brennan. She plays the unyielding Captain Lewis in the CBS comedy series *Private Benjamin*. Hillerman and Brennan were together in "The Last Picture Show" and have been close ever since.

"John loves the character of Higgins and has perfected it," Brennan says. "But the problem with that is, an actor can get locked into one role and stop taking risks. In this business, you've got to dare." She and others, however, are well aware that when Hillerman makes up his mind, it is made up. Period. He made up his mind, for instance, not to marry. "I am a confirmed bachelor," he says, confirmedly, "and happy to be." It is a part of his orderly nature: without dogs and kids, secure and predictable.

"When I want to bug him," the actress says, "I tell him that if anything happens to me, I'm leaving him my two children. He looks at me in that arched, Higgins way and says, 'You wouldn't dare!'"

Hillerman majored in journalism at the University of Texas and joined the Air Force after college, a fact that helps in playing Higgins, a retired sergeant major in Her Majesty's Army. Up until then, John had no career goals. He might have remained in the Air Force, Hillerman says, but for his need to have something to do after hours in otherwise dull Fort Worth, Texas. That something happened to be joining a community-theater group, and Hillerman appeared on stage. "For the first time in my life," he says with some wonder, "I wasn't bored." And his future was laid out.

After the Air Force, he was off to New York for acting lessons and for roles on and off Broadway. It took him a year of hard study in the early days to lose the Texas accent. "If I hadn't worked at it," he says, somewhat aghast, "Ah'd sound lakh times-heah."

Hillerman likes the perfection a camera demands. "You can always cheat on the stage. Everyone does once in a while. But there's no cheating the camera."

Substituting for the intimacy of the theater is Hillerman's knowledge that he is bringing the forthright, upright Higgins into millions of living rooms.

For instance: "I have been going to one particular supermarket for years. They know me there. When I was doing movies they would call me Mr. Hillerman. But now—and I don't think they are even aware of the change—they call me John.

"It's because, don't you see, I'm in their homes. I'm part of the family. You don't get that on stage."

Hillerman's also satisfied that his series seems headed for a long run. *Magnum, P.I.* is not exactly drama in the class of "Death of a Salesman," but it has ranked high in the Nielsens since it went on the air. Hillerman is proud of the series, to the extent that he will run videotapes of the shows for guests he invites to his home. "They seem," he says, "to like it."

And Hillerman's content to let his friend and costar Selleck reap the fame that being a sex symbol confers. There are other priorities for the jaunty but always proper Texan-turned-British-gentleman. He remains in pursuit of the good life, the orderly life, the secure life and perhaps even a better life.

"For example," he says, looking off at his swimming pool, "I might try producing someday, where one's livelihood is not dependent upon one's body showing up at a certain time for work every morning." Meanwhile, however, he appreciates what he has. Straight-faced, though perhaps a bit puckishly, Hillerman can look you in the eye and say, "I lead a very sedentary life. I smoke, I drink. I don't exercise. I'm very happy." (END)