

(FEE)

Larry Manetti, the guy who plays Tom Selleck's buddy Rick on *Magnum, P.I.*, is sitting in a Los Angeles restaurant, looking like a million bucks: blond, tanned, all-American . . . just the way a star on a hit TV series ought to look.

He's even telling that traditional favorite story among TV stars, the how-I-made-it-to-Hollywood yarn. Only, with Larry Manetti, it's how-I-almost-didn't-make-it. "I'd left Chicago, heading for the Coast," he says. "I was driving my 1972 12-cylinder Jaguar XKE across Texas. I stopped at a gas station, and somehow I managed to turn onto the highway in the wrong direction when I pulled out. I drove for the better part of a day, until I realized that I was in the neighborhood of a slaughterhouse. 'Wait a minute,' I thought, 'haven't I smelled this before?' And I had." He laughs. "I'd been driving the wrong way across Texas all that time. So I turned around and headed back West. Let me tell you, Texas is one big state."

Manetti's career has been a succession of almosts and not-quites. But the near misses have landed him in an enviable position, with a regular role on *Magnum, P.I.*, the successor to *The Rockford Files* as everybody's favorite private-eye show.

Manetti didn't start out to be an actor. His father owns a plastics-manufacturing business in Chicago, and the young Manetti spent his time bouncing from high school to high school. "Let's just say school and I didn't get along," the actor remembers. Instead, he tried a little of everything, including construction and driving a truck for his father. "It was when I was standing on a scaffold halfway up

a building, fixing up mortar on a winter day in Chicago, that I began to think there must be more to life than this."

What more there was was acting, and Manetti fell into the trade almost by accident. Through a girl friend, he met agent Shirley Hamilton, who got him a part in a United Airlines commercial. "It was a great job," he recalls. "All I had to do was sit there. I wasn't nervous at all."

Manetti realized that if he wanted to advance in his new profession, he'd have to learn to walk and talk. "I had a great coach," he says. "She literally put marbles in my mouth, just like Henry Higgins with Eliza Doolittle. 'Someday you're going to want to use that Chicago accent,' she told me. 'But when you don't want it, it has to disappear like Claude Rains in "The Invisible Man".'

"When I started acting with name actors, I realized I had a lot to learn. That's when I decided I'd better buckle down and start to regiment myself." Manetti, like thousands before him,

realized that his future as an actor lay in California. So California was where he went—with, of course, the slight detour through Texas.

The Manetti home in the hills above Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley is spacious; it looks like a TV star's house. The first thing a visitor notices is curly-haired Lorenzo Manetti, age 3, walking around unconcernedly wearing one shoe and one sock. "We're going to Chuck E. Cheese's Pizza Time Theater," Lorenzo says proudly. The visitor suggests that the trip might be smoother if Lorenzo wore both shoes. "Kay," he agrees, then goes to his room and brings back the other

The network said: Don't play it again, Rick

CBS didn't like his bad Bogie imitation, so Larry Manetti has had to rework his Magnum, P.I. character

By Ben Pesta

shoe—with no sock. About this time, Larry and his attractive, blonde wife Nancy enter the living room. "Daddy has to do an interview now," says Larry, and Lorenzo toddles off behind his mother.

Manetti's is a typical TV star's schedule. It's a punishing one, complicated by the fact that he works in Hawaii while his family is based in California. "I leave home on August 1st and come back on May 10th," Manetti explains.

"Of course, my wife and son fly out a lot. But I didn't see Lorenzo until he was 3 weeks old. I just had no time to fly home. When Nancy was finally able to fly to Honolulu, I hired a Rolls-Royce limousine to meet her at the airport."

Hollywood hasn't been an uninterrupted string of foreign cars and big houses for Larry Manetti. In fact, his early career was distinguished by almosts, not-quites and happy accidents.

"When I came out here," he recalls, "I met Robert Conrad. Then one day I was eating in the Universal commissary and I met a Universal casting director. 'Are you an actor?' he asked. Next thing I knew, I was on a series called *Chase*."

Chase didn't last, but a chance meeting with casting director Lee Stalmaster led to a part in the film "Two-Minute Warning." Next, Robert Conrad suggested that Manetti read for a part in the pilot of his *Baa Baa Black Sheep* (later *Black Sheep Squadron*) series. Manetti couldn't do it because he was working on the film. It looked like another not-quite—until the actor signed to play Boyle in the pilot starring Conrad dropped out.

"The producers asked me to read again," Manetti says, "and when the show went to series, I got the part." The wisecracking Boyle generated enough fan mail that the producers increased the size of Manetti's role. But *Black Sheep* lasted only two seasons. The following season, Manetti found himself in a recurring role in ABC's *Battlestar Galactica*. Then, in 1980, his really big break came.

Don Bellisario, *Magnum's* executive producer, recalls, "I'd worked with Larry in *Black Sheep*, and I'd put him in a couple of parts when I did *Galactica*. I figured he was right for the part of Rick."

Manetti played Rick in the *Magnum* pilot—and ran into another near miss. "The role I created for the pilot isn't the part Larry's playing now," says Bellisario. "The way I wrote it originally, *Magnum* [Tom Selleck], Rick and TC [Roger Mosley] were in Vietnam together. Rick was a gunner on a chopper. He was terrified in Vietnam, but he couldn't admit it. So he began to do imitations of Bogie in 'Casablanca' to hide



his fear. He was much more off the wall than Larry's character now.

"The problem was, the network *hated* it. 'He's doing bad Bogart,' they said. 'He's supposed to do that,' I said. Ultimately, I knuckled under. It's the one thing I gave in to CBS on, and I'm sorry I did. Without that hook of the Bogart imitations, Larry's had a tough time finding his character. We're always trying to write more definition into Rick."

"It was a difficult time for me," Manetti recalls. "Suddenly I had to go from a camp character, one who was fairly easy to play, to a straight character. The new Rick was supposed to be someone →

more like me, and they say that the hardest thing in the world to play is yourself."

Manetti credits Tom Selleck with helping him work out the character of Rick. "Tom gave me help and advice whenever I was in a spot," he says. "And that first season, I was often in a spot. Don's been a big help, too. He'll call in and tell me when Rick's scenes are right on and when they're a little flat. Also, I work with an acting coach who's helped me develop my character."

Whatever the current chemistry of Rick's relationship to the other *Magnum* characters may be, Manetti's off-the-set relationship with his co-stars is a warm one. "Larry's a loyal friend," says Selleck of his co-star. "In fact, he's become one of my closest friends. He never takes advantage of that position, even though I believe he's turned down a certain amount of work because he thought people were trying to exploit the relationship."

"It's true," Manetti acknowledges. "There've been incidents where I've been

offered a great role if I could rope Tom into a project." How does he feel about these attempted end runs? He shrugs. "I wouldn't want to ride on Tom's coattails," he says.

Selleck feels that one reason behind *Magnum's* consistent success is that "we have *fun* working on the show." Manetti is the last to deny it. "Roger Mosley and I share a motor home on the set," he says, "and Tom and I go out to dinner and socialize a lot. I remember that one night we were in a restaurant, and Tom had the waiter send me a dead fish with whipped cream and maraschino cherries on it for dessert. Then there was the time that I scooped some dead bugs out of one of those ultraviolet bug-killers and sprinkled them on Tom's ice cream, like chocolate jimmies. Tom came really close to eating it, too, until he noticed that some of his chocolate jimmies had wings.

"We pull all the regular pranks: food fights, insects down the front of your shirt, exploding cigarettes. Don't get me wrong,

we work hard on the show, but we like to keep things loose."

Like any series regular, Manetti would like to have his own starring vehicle someday. He started his own production company, Lorenzo Productions, two years ago and has been working with Pegasus Group II, "trying to develop several projects—not necessarily starring myself."

Is this a sign of creative frustration after three seasons as a supporting actor on *Magnum*? "No," he says. "There was even a time when I'd look at the hours Tom works and think, 'Lord, I don't want to be a series lead.' But out of the first four shows we've shot this season, two of them featured Rick, and I was really strong in the other two. I've been getting a chance to find out what it's like to work Tom's hours, to put in between 11 and 14 hours a day, five days a week. And, you know, it's not as bad as I'd thought. So, yes, if and when the show goes off the air, I'd definitely like to be a lead in my own series."

Meanwhile, Manetti, like a sensible Midwesterner, is happy to cash his more-than-substantial paycheck and return to the good life in California each summer. "Remember, I'm just one of four guys on the show," he says. "And the show's called *Magnum*—not *Rick*."

In fact, the actor is also hedging his bets with a construction company, which he co-owns with a boyhood buddy back in Chicago. "It's something that'll always be there," he says. "A while ago, one of the makeup men on *Magnum* told me, 'Remember to save your money. The next job might be two years away.' And that's just how I feel.

"I'm really proud of *Magnum's* success. If I thought we were rated in the top 10 because we were smashing cars and swinging through trees, I might not care as much. As it is, I think one of the reasons people like us is because we're a classy show. But I still feel like I'm on a skateboard, and I know that skateboards can roll downhill, too." **END**