

THE LEAN YEARS ARE OVER FOR JOHN HILLERMAN, WHO'S FINDING A MAGNUM OF SUCCESS IN HAWAII P.I.

(file)

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"I have lived alone all my life. I really enjoy my own company," says Hillerman in his Hawaii penthouse.

When John Hillerman plays second fiddle to Tom Selleck on the CBS smash *Magnum, P.I.*, it's a virtuoso performance. As the sardonic British majordomo Higgins, Hillerman can skewer the dashing Selleck with a wry crack or grimace, and their odd-couple relationship sparkles through the show like Hawaiian sunlight on the Pacific. "There's a very special rapport between us," says Hillerman, 48. "It starts off-camera—we just like each other very much. We crack each other up sometimes when the camera is running, and we can't stop



"Selleck is unique. He will be one of our time's major stars," says Hillerman of *Magnum* co-star Tom. John reads, cooks, and motors in a '76 Cadillac when not signing autographs at home with his secretary, Ellen K. DePover.

Photographs by Dario Perla

laughing in all the *wrong* places."

Hillerman has a lot to laugh about these days. A 30-year acting veteran with illustrious stage credits, he finally has struck pay dirt with a glittering role on a hit show. "I could do Higgins happily for 10 years without getting bored," he says. "I like to play people who are bright and who can turn a good insulting line." It's also no burden to live eight months a year in Honolulu, where the show is filmed. Although he loathes the outdoors, sports and sunning on the beach, he's high on Hawaii's beauty. "I'll go back to L.A. now and I'll be on the freeway for an hour going to the most insignificant appointment and wonder why I'm wasting all this time," he says. "Honolulu is small, but also urbane—and I never get on the freeway."

Despite Higgins' impeccable British accent, Hillerman was born in Denison, Texas, about 70 miles north of Dallas. Although hardly wealthy—his father owned a service station, his mother a beauty parlor—the family nurtured John's strange obsession with opera, which began with a Metropolitan Opera radio broadcast he heard when he was 10. The Met visited Dallas for one weekend a year. From the time he was 12, John would travel alone by train to Dallas for that weekend, check into a hotel and go to the opera. Not that he missed out completely on a small-town childhood. "I used to fish for catfish in the Red River and all that Tom Sawyer-type stuff," he recalls.

A journalism major at the University of Texas, Hillerman enlisted in the Air

Force during the Korean War. Stationed in Fort Worth, he tried out for a community theater play. "I had no desire to be an actor," he explains. "I wanted to meet people." With no previous experience, he landed a plum role in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. "I stepped onstage opening night and—it sounds corny—a light went on," he recalls. "I realized that until that moment I had been bored stiff all my life. I decided, 'This is what I want to do with my life.'"

After his Air Force stint ended, Hillerman went to New York, living on homemade turkey soup in a \$31-a-month Lower East Side slum while he learned his stage trade. By 1969 he had more than 100 theater credits but only \$700 in the bank. So, seeking prosperity, he drove his Ford to Hollywood to take a small TV role—and fell \$10,000 in debt during the two years before his next part. His break came when an old friend, director Peter Bogdanovich, offered him a role in 1971's *The Last Picture Show*. Since then he has worked steadily in TV and movies.

But it is *Magnum, P.I.*—which won him a 1982 Golden Globe award—that Hillerman enjoys most. "In my humble opinion, Higgins is one of the best parts in all television," says Hillerman, who harbors no regrets about abandoning his stage career. "I'm not the kind of actor making lots of money in television while saying, 'Oh, I wish I were back in the the-a-ter,'" he draws. "They would have to offer me the whole island of Manhattan to get me to do a play in New York now." **DAVID SHEFF**

