



# 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 I 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 41 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 in 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 out. 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 sit and plot it out with the idea that I wanted to do a show with Vietnam vets. What happened was that as 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 continued 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've 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 attitudes.

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

**DB:** They don'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 terrific 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 psychotic. 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 a 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

things that people aren't interested in, because they know that whatever jeopardy the character is in in a flashback, it has been resolved, because you're in the present and the guy is ok. My argument is that even in the present you do not seriously expect that anybody thinks Tom Selleck is going to die. You know, it's **MAGNUM**, it's not gonna happen. I wanted the flashbacks and I pushed on it, to keep them in.

PT: The relationship between the supporting characters, TC and Rick, and Magnum is quite complex in terms of their friendship.

DB: Yeah, but I don't like to have characters who play scenes where it's "Hey buddy, hey buddy". I love to do character relationships where there is conflict between them or where their caring for one another is shown through their actions, rather than their words. So they're constantly on each other's butts. That's just the style of the show, but they would obviously do what would have to be done if they were in trouble.

PT: So what about the pompous English domo Higgins who is always giving Magnum a hard time?

DB: You will notice, Higgins is also a military character. When I was writing the script, I had seen a film shortly before on TV called **THE GUNS OF BATISI** with Richard Attenborough. I loved the Attenborough character and I thought what happened to that character when he left, for his world collapsed, and he became the sacrificial lamb. Well, I think he went back. He retired and he became Higgins. I wanted a military man who could understand Magnum as an ex-soldier, but would be the absolute antithesis of Magnum. You know Magnum is laid back, he doesn't care about time, working, responsibility. There's a line in the pilot that explains Magnum. Pamela, the sister of his best friend, said to him "Why did you

quit?" (he had been at military school, then ten years career navy), and he said "I woke up one day aged 33 and realised I had never been 23". So Magnum had probably been a pretty stiff regulation Naval officer, and suddenly, boom, Vietnam, 3 tours, and he realised, I'm 33 years old and all I've been is this military kid and it's time I started enjoying life a little bit. He meets Robin Masters, and he gets invited to stay on the estate and he ends up there.

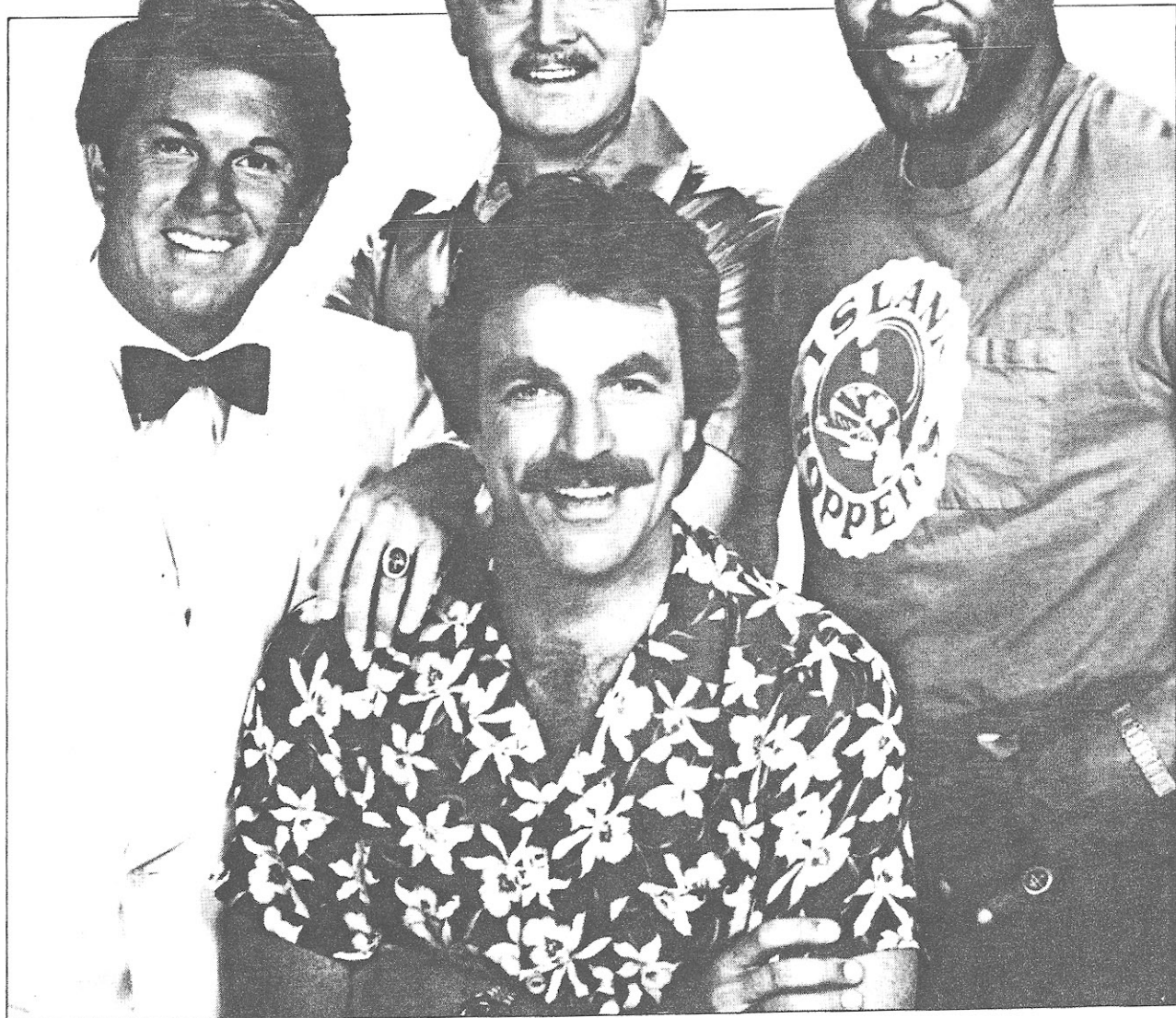
PT: There is a definite accent on the sensitivity, or possibly vulnerability of the Magnum character. Was that something that you started out with, or developed as the series became successful?

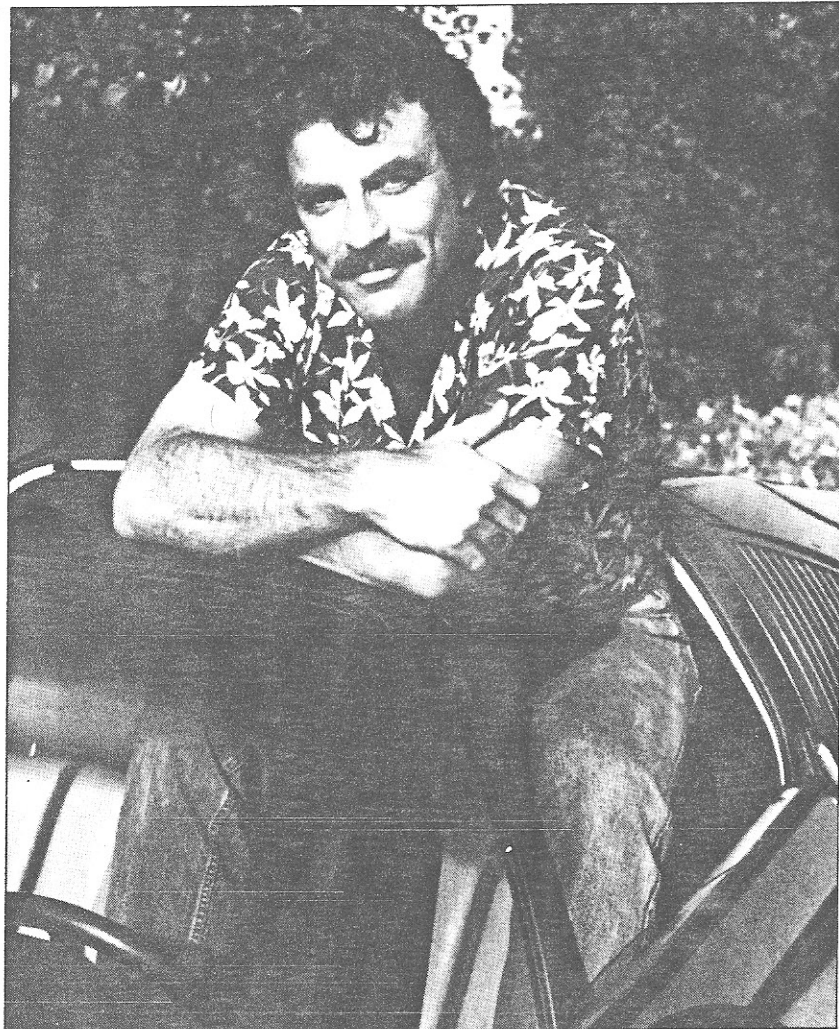
DB: That's something Tom and I talked about. We talked about the kind of character he wanted to portray. You see Glen Larson had written two scripts for him, and there's nothing wrong with what he was doing - Glen's a very successful producer who is obviously very, very good at what he does. We had created a show where the character was kind of an 007, a very macho hero. Tom didn't want to play that. He wanted to play against that and that's how I got involved, and started again writing the character as a kind of vulnerable, laidback guy. The thing about **MAGNUM** that people don't understand is that it's a very hard show to write. I've got tons of writers who think they know the show, and they either write macho or they write him as a fool. Magnum is vulnerable, Magnum makes mistakes, right up to where it really counts. When it really counts he's very macho, he's very good at what he does.

When it comes to catching the bad guys he functions perfectly - he won't fall on his arse, make a mess of it. When it doesn't count, he does all sort of craziness. But he does the things that everybody does. He works on a locked door to pick the lock, and then realises that it was open all the time.

PT: What about Robert Hamilton? He seems to write a consistently different kind of **MAGNUM**.

DB: Bob Hamilton is a good writer. He has a sense of style and understands the Magnum character's bravery. He's the only other writer I've had who can write the show. He tends to write a more stylish **MAGNUM**. We've done one this year that he has written called **FLASHBACK**. It takes place in the thirties in a dream sequence. (**FLASHBACK** was written under the pseudonym Lance Madrid III. For 30 minutes Magnum dreams about the actual events of a case he is investigating that took place in the thirties. With Hamilton's delightful sense of irreverence for the usual macho stereotypes, he allows Magnum to translate his contemporary world and its characters into the past, moving from a satirical reworking of the Hollywood cliches of the thirties and modern day Magnum's self-conscious interaction with them, to a nightmare situation where he is actually hunted down and killed. Waking up, he uses the insight he gained in the dream to stage the same events but with a different outcome.)





let's go and see who it was... And it was her. It was obvious. She killed him and there's no other way. Boom! People are saying there's no other way. She has to be the one. Magnum's saying, no, she's not. I know she's not. And the audience... I know the audience is watching that picture and trying to figure out - Was it him? No. Was it her? No. Was it him? At the end of the picture she makes a fatal mistake and he gets her. It was her. Sometimes I put so many twists into a show, for example one where you know who the bad guy is at the beginning, and the audience just will not buy it.

At the end of each episode of *AIRWOLF*, Bellisario's production company name, Bellisarius Productions, is revealed as a gust of wind blows away the dust covering the Roman lettering. Bellisarius, as novelist Robert Graves presented him in 'Count Bellisarius' was one of Rome's great generals. To quote from the blurb on the back of the book "The sixth century was not a peaceful one for the Roman Empire. Invaders threatened on all frontiers: Huns, Vandals, Goths, Saracens, Moore, Persians. But they grew to fear and respect the name of Bellisarius, horseman, archer, swordsman and military commander of incredible skill and daring". Whether or not Bellisario is aware of this informative connection is debatable, but one cannot help but translate his role as a multi-talented (writer/director/producer) organiser/creator with an "affinity for the military" into Graves' hero. Certainly with *AIRWOLF*, with its defiant assault on all that is anti-American, and the concomitant reactionary excesses - so fantastical that there must be an element of tongue in cheek - this defender of the realm guise fits rather well. But Bellisario remains a rarity in American television, a consummate showman. He rejects many of the stagnatory structures and styles of episodic series, for a seductively stylised notion of drama, that doesn't patronise the audience or the medium. At its best - and *MAGNUM* remains one of the key drams of the '80s, along with *MTM's* produce - his style could convincingly demarcate new boundaries for episodic drama. There is a legitimate concern for the quality of writing and production, within the context of the medium's drive for ratings.

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 murder, 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 emeshed 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 escapade and by the time he gets down there the guy is done and in a voiceover we cover what's happened. That's the difference in *MAGNUM*. We spend a lot of time on scenes that have nothing to do with the story - well, they do in a way, they have to do with the advancement of the story, but in a very obtuse manner.

I don't like writing on the head. I don't like writing right on the nose, which is what most of these detective shows are. You can go from A to B. They're very straight. I love doing a *MAGNUM* where the audience has to 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* (retitled *DOUBLE JEOPARDY*), which was written by Babs Greyofsky. 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

