

Melissa Sue carves a new career



LEFT: Melissa, Glenn Ford in *Happy Birthday To Me*. **ABOVE:** Birthday scene — “an acting challenge.”

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the chance to show that I could do some acting, and then my part in the series was increased.

“I was very lucky, too, to be in a TV show with Michael Landon (the producer and star of *Little House*). I was only 11 then. When I was that young and needed protection, he was there.

“He understood me when nobody else did, because I was very quiet and reserved. It takes time for people to get to know me. Michael understood me because he had been very much like me when he was younger.”

Things were a little more difficult for Melissa Sue Anderson than for Melissa Gilbert because Melissa Sue wasn't outgoing and Melissa Gilbert was.

However, unlike many actresses who have acted since they were children and weep about their lost childhoods, Melissa Sue has no complaints.

“People sometimes ask me if I'd like to do what Jodie Foster has done — go away to college, like she went to Yale. I don't want to do that. Why should I go away to school and try to learn those things out of books when I'm really learning them by the work I'm doing, the work I love?”

“The way I found out acting is my niche was kind of funny.” Born in northern California, Melissa and her parents moved to southern California because she had asthma as a child and they thought the climate was better for her in southern California.

“I continued taking dancing lessons. I had been going dancing and swimming

— anything doctors suggested in the hope these things would develop my lungs. My dancing teacher in Hollywood had once been hired by Paramount in the hope that he'd become their big dancing star. Although he was a fine dancer, he couldn't act — he didn't take to it.

“He thought I had potential as a dancer and maybe as an actress, so he wanted me to get some acting experience. My parents said, ‘Absolutely not. That's ridiculous.’”

Then about a year after, a next-door neighbour was having his house painted by an unemployed actor, who also thought that Melissa had some acting potential and suggested an agent she could see. Her parents reluctantly agreed.

“My parents figured I'd do one commercial and realize that it was not as glamorous a career as everybody thinks it is, and that it is hard work. They thought I wouldn't like it and that I'd quit. But I did like it, so I didn't quit.”

Gradually, under the fatherly guidance of Michael Landon, Melissa grew less reserved. “People used to think I was standoffish, because sometimes I'd walk by them and, if I was thinking about something, I wouldn't be smiling. Even to this day I don't understand why people think you should be smiling all the time.

“On *Little House* I got to know a lot of people who accepted me for what I was and didn't want to change me. That was a relief; I was comfortable. When the camera was going, I could do whatever I was told and what I felt was right, and I wasn't nervous.”

She laughs today about the many

traumas she has gone through on *Little House*. She's had more traumas than most of the great soap opera heroines — illnesses, appendicitis, an early marriage, two miscarriages and lasting blindness. The more she suffered, the more audiences loved her and the higher the ratings of the show went.

She prepared for playing a blind adolescent very carefully, going to the Foundation for the Junior Blind and studying there and also spending time with some young blind girls, to learn how they handled things. She even learned to read Braille.

She's a girl who knows exactly what she wants to do, and has no regrets about anything she's done or not done. She was offered the role Brooke Shields played in the smash hit, *The Blue Lagoon*, but turned it down.

“It wasn't just the nudity that made me turn it down. I did not feel that *The Blue Lagoon* called for enough acting for me to do it. I felt that the part was one-dimensional, that it wasn't enough of a challenge.”

Asked if she plans to concentrate on marriage or a career, she replied, “Well, I think I can do both, depending on the person I'm involved with. If my future husband didn't want me to work, knowing myself, I probably would give it up. But I don't think the person I have my mind would ask me to do that.”

And asked what she considered to be her happiest and saddest moments of her life, Melissa said, “I haven't hit a saddest moment yet. It's got to get worse. It's too good right now.”

“As for happiness, I'm always very happy when I feel I've done some good work. Naturally I'm elated when my entire life is going right personally and work.”

With that Melissa, the girl not known for her smiles, broke into a grin which lit up her face.

— DORA ALBERG