

Extravagance, Over-Indulgence and Hedonism:

DAVID SELBY

about *Falcon Crest* and the '80s Television.

**Interview by
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**in association with
SASCHA KURZ**

We were having lunch with David at the *Pinot Hollywood* restaurant at the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Gower Street in Hollywood. He arrived at 12 o'clock sharp in his black *Porsche 911* convertible.

David has not changed much since his days on *Crest* except the color of his hair, which is now gray / white. Although his physical characteristics, his particular way of moving, his features and everything else around his body, seemed to be completely Richard Channing, the real-life David Selby immediately came to the surface when the actor greeted us with a friendly hello. David is extraordinarily charming, warmhearted and intelligent. We exchanged greetings and talked about ourselves for a couple of minutes. A brief introduction to our fan club and the lunch order — David wanted a black bean soup and a mixed greens salad — led to the beginning of a pleasant conversation with the actor.

He said that he had just returned from New York two days ago, where he had been for both business and family reasons. "I have a daughter. I just moved her to New York. That was another reason why I was there. And my son is a screenwriter," David explained.

Working with the Co-Stars on the *Falcon Crest* Set

Getting started with the interview, I first asked him about how he liked doing the show and working with his co-stars.

"All of the people. I enjoyed working with all of them. Jane Wyman, Jane was wonderful,... Susan [Sullivan],... so many of the people... and I got to play with so many, like Kim Novak, some of the old stars, Lana Turner, Gina Lollobrigida, Leslie Caron. It was quite wonderful."

From what he pointed out, it was really obvious that David had enjoyed his *Falcon Crest* years very much.

"My memories of that...," he continued. "You know, I loved Jane Wyman, Susan Sullivan, Margaret Ladd. I talked to Lorenzo [Lamas] about three months ago on the phone; he was getting ready to do another series, as I recall." David did not have any detailed information on what Lorenzo's new show was going to be about, but it may be in the field of action again — a genre that Lorenzo discovered when he started his *Renegade* TV series and that still captivates Lorenzo although *Renegade* went out of production a few seasons ago.

David is still in contact with some of his former co-stars from *Falcon Crest* as he felt very comfortable on the set. "There's nothing like going to work every day in the studios," he said. "And you become a family. There's something quite special about it. I see Ana - Alicia from time to time; she has two children now, a lovely husband." David kept on going through a bunch of actors and actresses from the vineyard soap, who crossed his mind. "Billy Moses, Billy and I were fast friends... I haven't seen Bob [Foxworth] in a long time. Abby Dalton — I don't see Abby... I talked to Susan [Sullivan] about a month ago. She's fine, having a great time with her show [*Dharma & Greg*, a sitcom on ABC]. We talked about doing a show together; so maybe, we'll come up with something — we'll see," David said. I was fascinated by the idea of reuniting David and Susan on a show and told him how funny and entertaining their on-screen reunion could be, whether on *Dharma & Greg* or on another series or a TV movie.

I also wanted to know if David had a favorite producer on the *Falcon Crest* set. He immediately referred to Earl Hamner:

"Earl is not... [a producer]. You know, it's difficult — because he's a writer. Earl is a writer first... *Falcon* in some ways was not Earl," he alluded to the fact that Earl Hamner's books usually were about good-natured people or childhood memories, e.g. *The Waltons*, whereas *Falcon Crest* was full of bad persons with thirst for revenge. "But you could have fun with Earl," David added. "He could have fun with the show and these characters. So I always enjoyed very much Earl Hamner. I haven't seen him for a while."

The outdoor shootings of *Falcon Crest* are also some of the show's characteristics the star liked very much. "It's a lovely place up there," he said about the Napa Valley, where parts of the series were filmed during the first seven seasons. Although David liked the filming in the Wine Country, it was kind of a strange feeling for the actor to return to one of the filming locations for the shootings of the made-for-TV movie *Dying Young*, starring Campbell Scott and Julia Roberts, in 1991. The property, which had been used as the *Gioberti House* and the *Gioberti Winery* on *Falcon Crest*, was selected as one of the filming locations for that production as well. "Actually, I shot a movie there, with some buddies — they were all friends of mine, Campbell Scott and Campbell's mother, ...she passed away not too long after that. And it was so odd to be back," David remembers.

Concerning the filming locations for *Falcon Crest*, we talked about some other facilities in Napa and Sonoma. David explained that also many locations in Los Angeles area were used for filming the series: "Oh yes, all over. There was a winery here that we used a few times. I can't remember where it was; it was a good distance away. And we shot all over L.A. At least, probably two or three days in a week, we went out to a lot of locations. I can't remember, but certainly, *Saddlerock Ranch* [Richard and Maggie's home] we used a lot during the last few seasons. And we used the *Hollywood Racetrack* [as the exterior for *Tuscany Downs*] — that's where I shot out there a couple of times before it was rebuilt."

Falcon Crest — The Rôle of Richard Channing

Going into the depths of *Falcon Crest* now, I asked him: "How did you get the rôle of Richard Channing?"

"I had been out here [in L.A.], working on another series [*Flamingo Road*]... It was a show that was in some troubles... It should have been a show that had great music, blues music, pop music at night, you know, but it got too polished," David recalled. "And after that show, *Flamingo Road*, I went back to New York. A couple of days later, Earl [Hamner] — and I've known Earl from years ago — called me and wanted me to come back out and do this show [*Falcon Crest*]." David and Earl have known each other from Earl Hamner's series *The Waltons*, where David had made a special guest appearance in the 1970s as an art teacher, who kissed Olivia Walton. David continued: "And *Lorimar* had always been, you know,... they had always been good and nice to me as an actor. That was through Earl that *Lorimar* offered me the rôle. And *Falcon Crest* was undergoing some changes, and they took a lot of the crew, like costumers and so, from *Flamingo Road*. So when I went over to *Falcon Crest*, I wasn't coming as a stranger, you know what I mean. So it was quite nice; it made things a lot easier for me."

We now came to the process of creating the character of Richard Channing and David's personal involvement in the development of the rôle.

"I had a great time. Channing was a great character," David said with enthusiasm. "The character on *Flamingo Road* [Michael Tyrone] — we tried to make him as dark as possible to see what the audience would accept. You don't ask them [the viewers] to like you, you only ask them to understand, you see. And that character was very dark. I think he had his own sister killed. So when we went to Channing, I said 'I'll just bring the wardrobe over from *Flamingo*,'" David smiled. He made a short pause, then started laughing: "But we bought some new clothes, I think. Same company..."

David continued explaining how he and the producers made up a strategy to develop Richard's characteristics. "After playing Michael Tyrone and really having a hand in that character and really having a hand in Channing — but now Earl said 'Why don't you read upon Randolph Hearst?', and there were a couple of other people that I read books on. And we took sort of a combination, and we really tried to weave in a more multi-dimensional life..., and while he would be a very strong adversary, when it came to certain times, especially with Maggie, then we would get to see another side. That was a good character. So I feel very fortunate that I've been able to play him."

I also wanted to know how the idea of Richard's love for milk came up.

"Part of that started because they were always writing scenes 'Channing goes to the bar,' and I thought... 'Well, I don't want always be drinking!'," David said. "So... and I like milk, and I thought 'Let's just drink milk!'"

Besides, drinking milk was an excellent way of portraying the devious and merciless-seeming Richard's inner vulnerability. So it became apparent that Richard's preference for milk is based on David's idea, which led to the question if the actor himself brought any other characteristics to the rôle.

"I think what happens in any series," David said, "after the first season or so, the writers get to know you. And they start writing to that, whatever aspects of your personality you brought to that character." He smiled: "Well, I think the good parts of my personality are Channing, the bad parts — I don't know where they are..."

Falcon Crest — Marvelous Storylines

"How did you like the storyline with Angela discovering that Richard was her own son?" I asked.

"Well, I think, the writers get in the [conference] room, and they have done so many stories... That [storyline] seemed like inevitable,... and I thought that was terrific," David said.

I told him that I personally think it actually was the very best storyline the show ever had because it opened up such a great number of possibilities to continue the plot, especially considering that the revelation of Richard's identity would not only influence the relationship between Angela and Richard, but also Richard himself as well as all the people around Richard, including his children, his sisters, and all other relatives, even Chase Gioberti, who was just written off the show when the truth came out.

David's comment on Robert Foxworth's leaving after season 6 was:

"Robert and I are friends. I don't know how it affected the show. At that particular time, I think, he wanted to leave. I can't recall, you know."

Chase leaving Maggie and finally disappearing in the San Francisco Bay in the 6th season cliffhanger, the series eventually fully came through with the love story between Maggie and Richard — a romance which had started long before, as sensitive viewers had noticed. Although Richard and Maggie were only friends during the first years of the show, it was obvious for the fans that there was always a sort of intimacy and special affection between the two of them. The romance of Richard and Maggie, which flourished by the time when Chase walked out on Maggie after she had been raped by Jeff Wainwright, was — to most fans — inevitable. Maggie's and Richard's love continued to grow during the 6th and 7th season, but was often exposed to severe tests, especially during year 8. What I wanted to know from David was his attitude towards the romance of Richard and Maggie.

"I think Richard truly loved her," David said about Richard's feelings for Maggie. "And I think that was obviously the good aspect of his life. That was something good in his life, and he was smart enough to realize that... I mean he was going down a dark trail otherwise, and so she [Maggie] was a light. He was smart enough, you know, to be attracted to her..."

Talking of that storyline, which apparently also fascinated David, the star also referred to his co-star: "I liked very much working with Susan Sullivan. She is wonderful, and we got along quite well. We were friends before, and we have maintained a great friendship."

At that point, it was clear that my next question had to be about how David felt about Susan's leaving the show.

He really was not happy about Maggie's death in the première episode of season 9, but he understood why it was not possible for Susan to stay on a show she was not content with any longer: "I think what happened in this show is there were too many changes of producers and writers. Now that is my opinion. And they lost focus. Another person comes in and has an idea: 'Well, I think the show should go in this direction or in that direction...' — whatever. I don't know; maybe, the ratings of that time demanded changes. Of course, now they [the network] would love to have the ratings [of that time]! I obviously did not like her [Susan's] being written off the show. And there were several instances like that. So in a way, I thought the show lost focus the last season, maybe the last couple of years. Especially the last season went into a totally different direction," David regretted and left no doubt that the many changes in the plot, cast and crew during season 8 and 9 were Susan's reason to quit.

Falcon Crest and the Zeitgeist of the '80s

That brought us to analyzing the background of the dramatic changes *Falcon Crest* (and the other *Lorimar* soaps) underwent towards the end of the '80s.

The show had once started as posh and glorious. David said: "It's just an interesting slice of time... And I think it's sort of interesting that the show ran during the '80s because the '80s — at least in this country — had to do with extravagance, over-indulgence, hedonistic types of pleasures..."

David's characterization of life in the 1980s hit the bull's-eye. The elements he described were just the things pictured on *Falcon Crest* as well as other TV shows of the '80s, such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*.

"And that's the '80s!" David continued. "It's sort of a... an example... — no, I think 'example' is not the right proper word... — it is 'of its time',... and it says something about the '80s, you know." The actor explained that it is of his own personal interest to find out what particularly influenced the '80s lifestyle and television, what contributed to that special zeitgeist. "That's what I'm interested in, you know — what that is," David said and paused for a moment. "There's something else that I'm interested in..." he continued. "And it has to do with history,... the kinds of stories that were told, the kinds of pictures, the kinds of clothes that they wore, how the women looked, that sort of thing."

The '80s were the age of the classic prime-time soap, but towards the end of the decade, the glory of these shows faded. On *Falcon Crest*, new trends started beginning with the 8th season; although the show was still posh and had a serialized mode of story-telling with episode cliffhangers, there was a tendency towards a different kind of

series genre, which culminated in a more than shocking climax to the loyal viewers when the 9th season premiered with a falcon's death in the opening scene.

"That was an omen!" David said. It definitely was an omen — not only a symbol that the old stories were gone, which was the new producers' idea, but also an omen for the result of the new producers' work: the death of the series itself, which, however, they definitely did not have in mind when they started.

The new crew certainly did not want to destroy the series. Their new way of story-telling and their change of the plot may not have been driven only by their (different) idea of creativeness, but also by the new spirit of the age. David was wondering what other factors may have influenced the new writers, story editors and producers: "Thinking what happened during the '80s and going into the '90s, what do you think...?" he asked rhetorically. Then, he went on: "Is there anything there which might suggest a social... change... or... some kind of change happening at the end of the '80s going into the '90s... that would allow... subconsciously a writer to change a different direction for the last season and a half so that it became a different kind of animal? — I mean, Gorbachev is leaving Russia. What do we have today?! We have a huge Russian mafia, I mean different things. I mean the '90s are a little bit... tough. And the '80s were extravagant and, you know, wasteful. I don't know... And the periods of the show,... the people who did it and the people who were in it somehow mirrored society as we moved through the '80s into the '90s."

David was not sure if that transition led to the changes in the show, but it certainly might have been one of the factors.

"It wouldn't be consciously because the writers weren't doing that [on purpose], they wanted desperately to come up with stories."

From David's understanding, the problems were also caused by the situation of the writers itself and maybe their lack of creativeness.

I told him how disappointed we were about how the 8th season turned out to be. "However, we could have lived with that year," I said. "But when the 9th season started, we had extreme difficulties to cope with what was going on with the show."

David confirmed: "It went into another direction. They brought in another new character, Sharpe or whatever — he had nothing to do with the show. That was not the tenor of *Falcon Crest*. It was difficult... But the changes — the new regime that came into *Lorimar* made those changes."

Fortunately, at least the final episode of *Falcon Crest* had a turning point. The last act of the episode included the wedding of Richard and Lauren as well as Angela's soliloquy, in which she mentioned many of the characters from the earlier years — a speech written by Jane Wyman herself to make a final attempt to "repair" the damage the new producers had done to the series in its last season. "What was your attitude towards the finale of the show, considering that they created a happy ending, not a cliffhanger?" I wanted to know from David.

"I liked the idea that Channing had found some kind of peace in his life and that he was able to make the turn — towards the light," David replied. He now referred to life in general: "I mean you have a choice, you have a life. We all do. And you have to pay attention to those choices — architecture, lawyer, whatever those choices come to you along the way in your life, you have to consider all right because we are all responsible for our choices." Coming back to *Falcon Crest*, the star stated: "And Channing, at that

point, made the choice. And I think his life may have not been as exciting, but in some aspects, maybe, he relished that because he knew that somebody loved him. I liked that aspect because that means that he had come full circle... He had gone through various... you know, gone through life and come out to say, well, as we all do, 'Life has its whatever,' but... he knows. So from that aspect, yes, [I liked the finale]. The other aspect of it — I think, of course, everyone knew that was going to be the last season. And it wasn't..., there was no sadness or anything like that simply because that particular show had run its course in a sense, though, that — I think — to a certain degree it had lost direction... as a way to go. Jane [Wyman] wasn't happy, and nobody was, you know. So in that regard, you know, and with the changes the company was going through, *Lorimar*..."

The Decline and Fall of *Lorimar*

Lorimar was another key word in our conversation. So I took the chance to ask David about the problems the production company had towards the end of the 1980s.

He stated that Lee Rich (a friend of David's as we know from a reliable source) and his business partner, Merv Adelson ("a very nice man" according to David), used to own *Lorimar Productions* and were extremely successful during the '70s and '80s.

"And then they brought in another company," David told. He alluded to the merger with *Telepictures Corporation* in 1986, which is where all the problems started. "You know, they [Lee, Merv and the executives from *Telepictures*] were buying several companies during that time. And then they [the newly formed *Lorimar - Telepictures*] were going through a hard time, and then they [Lee and Merv] sold it off."

Obviously, with the expansion of the business, there had suddenly gotten too many people in the executive offices, which made it more and more difficult to make unanimous decisions. "But that happens in this business," David explained. "But I think some of those changes on the executive side, the company side, filtered down into the show. I mean the unsteadiness, the lack of consistence — Earl [Hamner] was not there [after Lee Rich had left]. I was disappointed, too," David confessed.

The International Success of *Falcon Crest*

Again, we went back to the successful years of *Falcon Crest*. David confirmed that the international success of the soap opera was much bigger than its popularity in the United States, especially considering the show's ratings in European countries, such as Spain, France, Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom and others. David mentioned the show has played in approximately over 70 countries up to now.

"It was hugely successful in Egypt and in Lebanon..." he added.

We also talked about the reasons for the popularity of the series, and David referred to the social background of the audience: "One of the things is: Why — and this is something to think about because it goes back to one's childhood, how one was raised,... the social situation,... the childhood dreams, when the childhood is formed, and what kind of imagination the child has, and what nurtures that imagination, and

how that child..., whether one gets into *Star Wars* or... — why — I want to know: What is it in the show?"

Since *Falcon Crest* was canceled in 1990, the show has not been on the air again in the U.S. Although *Dallas* and *Knots Landing* had their re-runs in the mid-'90s, *Falcon Crest* is still locked up in CBS' archives.

"I don't know whether it [*Falcon Crest*] will ever be re-run in this country," David said. "The time for those shows has passed," the actor thinks. "They [the networks] are not crazy about re-creating them," he referred to the idea of re-runs or even creating a reunion movie. "However, there are shows on that are serialized shows today, and they are quite successful." He named Michael Crichton's *ER* as an example, which started as a non-serialized hospital drama and, meanwhile, has turned into a soap-opera-like mode of serialized story-telling. We were discussing the *ER* example for a while and also realized that producing shows like *ER* is much cheaper and easier than the production of the classic *Lorimar* soaps due to the fact that these new shows can easily be filmed entirely at the studios with not even half of the budget that would be necessary for *Falcon Crest* or *Dallas*.

Comments on a *Falcon Crest* Reunion

Talking of the budget, the ratings and the international success of the show led us to the topic of the *Falcon Crest* reunion.

David had read some of my scripts for the new *Falcon Crest* episodes last year. "I was curious," David confessed. "I took it out a couple of weeks ago and was looking at it," he said.

Of course, I wanted to know how he liked the stories I had developed with my business partner, Ingo A. Küppers. David said he enjoyed reading the scripts. We talked about several aspects and finally came to the storyline about Maggie's return. "Explaining that it was Maggie's twin sister who had drowned in the pool and that Maggie had been kidnapped and suffered from amnesia for nine years — do you think it would be suitable for filming?" I asked.

With a smile on his lips, David replied: "Why not? Anything was possible on *Falcon Crest*...!"

Concerning the shocking cliffhanger of season 10, he said: "That's a nice book." He also supposed: "I think most of the people would probably entertain the idea of doing it [a reunion movie or a season]."

"Would you be interested in playing Richard again?" I asked.

"You know, I wouldn't mind going back and doing a show. You know what I mean — see where they [the co-stars] are at that particular time in their lives. Jane [Wyman] is still all right, she's there in Palm Springs."

However, David left no doubt that — irrespective of his personal attitude towards the project — the network unfortunately is not interested in producing a reunion.

David's Current Activities

Finally, I wanted to know what David is working on at the moment.

When I asked him about his series *SOF*, which was formerly known as *Soldier of Fortune* and then re-named *Special Ops Force*, he said that the series was canceled in the 1998-99 season. "Oh, again, that is a show where a new regime decided to make changes in the second season, and they killed the show," he explained. "They made too many changes,... and the audience couldn't accept that many changes. They changed the title, and no one knew where to find it [on TV]."



David told that he also guest-starred in one episode of *Promised Land*, a CBS drama series starring Gerald McRaney and Wendy Phillips, who played Lauren Daniels on *Falcon Crest* and is according to David "a wonderful, wonderful woman, terrific". The actor said about his guest rôle on *Promised Land*: "I did a show last season. A friend of mine was writing it — he used to write *Falcon Crest*, Ernie Wallengren; we are good friends, and he and Earl [Hamner] are good friends."

David also was a guest star in an episode of *Touched by an Angel*, a situation comedy, earlier this year.

His other present activities include stage appearances in theater as well as writing theater plays and poems.

David Selby in front of the *Pinot Hollywood* restaurant.

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