

The Secret Service at Her Birthday Party:

JODI EHRLICH

Had More than One Special Experience on the Set

Interview by

THOMAS J. PUCHER (*German FALCON CREST Fan Club*)

Jodi Ehrlich and I got in touch through a social network on the Internet. We exchanged a few lines and agreed on an interview about her time on *Falcon Crest*. I knew from *Lorimar's* staff and crew lists in our archives that she was a *DGA* trainee from the beginning of season 3 until October 10, 1983. Due to the Covid - 19 pandemic, I have not been in L.A. for quite a while, so we decided it was best to set up a *Skype* meeting.

The DGA Trainee Program



Jodi Ehrlich on location in the Napa Valley. A *Peterbilt 352*, which was used by the crew to transport the filming equipment, is in the background.

The *Peterbilt 352* was also used as a picture vehicle in various scenes of *Falcon Crest*, by the way.

We talked a little bit about ourselves and the situation with the pandemic before we got to our key topic: *Falcon Crest*.

“How was your *Falcon Crest* experience, how did you like it?” I asked Jodi.

“Well, I had been working in film for probably five or six years. In the United States, we have film unions, and the better films are all done under the union contracts. So, I had been working on very small films, non - union, and then I was accepted in the *Directors Guild of America* which includes directors, assistant directors, you know, and their team. I had just finally been accepted to their trainee program. This was one of my first assignments as a *Directors Guild* trainee. The way *Falcon Crest* was filmed — because so much of it took place in Napa — they wrote the first twelve scripts of the season, and during the first twelve episodes the company actually had scenes shot in Napa. In episodes 13 through 21 they weren't in Napa,” she

used that number of shows beyond episode 12 as examples. "So, then they would do something called cross - boarding, which means they would schedule the twelve episodes all as one long schedule. Then they would film the L.A. part of episodes 1 through 6 in L.A. and then they would go to Napa and they would film the Napa parts of 1 through 12. Then they would return to L.A. and film the L.A. part of 7 through 12."

I was familiar with this production habit that had evolved on *Falcon Crest* during the first two years (albeit with less than twelve in those early years). Twelve episodes on distant location became eventually the standard for seasons 3 through 7.

"That's a really big task," I said, "and it must be horrifying for every script supervisor because you always have to keep track of things... And when I talked to Lee Walkling — who was the script supervisor for many many years on *Falcon Crest* — she said she had to take hundreds of *Polaroids* to match not only the hairdo or the wardrobe, but also who was first when entering the building and so forth..."

Jodi nodded: "And it was crazy for me, too, because I was responsible for the union paperwork. Part of my job was to keep track with the appropriate departments of how much film was shot episode 1 that day, how much film was shot episode 6 this day for budgeting purposes for the studio." Jodi explained she also had to take notes for the actors' payroll: "I had to put: 'Susan Sullivan worked from 9 to 11 on episode 1' — I had six reports simultaneously. 'From 11 to 1, she worked on episode 6; and from 1 to 3, she worked again on episode 1...' I had to stack all these sets of paperwork, so they could log the actor's time, so I could log the film footage, so I could log the background and the atmosphere. Everything was many many times... It was pretty onerous for me." In contrast to this particular production habit on distant location, Jodi explained: "People would complain about doing the [one] daily record, but they never had to do six of them in one day. After that, it was always pretty easy because you never had to do more than one a day. We were going from the extreme."

I summarized: "So, you basically filled out all those production reports. Did you also do these daily sheets?"

"The call sheets? There was what they call the key second assistant director. The assistant director did the call sheets, and then I did the production reports and the camera reports and the finance sheets. The division was separated, you know. Nowadays, they have more than one second AD — a second AD and a second second AD... In those days they didn't. They had one second AD and one *DGA* trainee. So, I did what's now the function of second second assistant director."

"That's a lot of work and probably very exhausting, particularly when you do a production like that with coordinating the shooting schedule," I said.

Jodi nodded: "And they were such a huge cast. There was never a day with three actors. I think there were like 15 actors in all those episodes, and some of them were only in one episode, but all the regulars were there almost every day, especially with this system... I mean we would film everything at a certain vineyard in a day... So sometimes it was like so - and - so's house and not everyone was there — we didn't move from vineyard to vineyard, we stayed on location, but it was still pretty complex."

"So, your typical workday then was to do all that paperwork and to coordinate those things" I summarized.

"In addition to that," Jodi continued, "it was my responsibility — which is the responsibility of the *Directors Guild* department — to give the work calls the night before to

confirm with all the actors and then to make sure all the actors went through Make - Up and Hair, in and out of the trailer and were ready at the appropriate time to come to set... So, I had a big interaction with the cast because I saw them when they arrived... I mean, the director saw them when they were ready for filming, but as a *DGA* trainee or what would now be the 'second second', my job was to make sure the cast arrived on time, make sure they got their breakfast, make sure they got in and out of Make - Up & Hair & Wardrobe and all of that so they would be ready on time to go to the set... So, the first couple of hours of the day, it was me and the cast. People would, of course, arrive on staggered schedules, so it was managing all the cast getting ready, and then, in addition, once the actors were on the set, it was my job to set all the extras, the background actors. So, you know you have a scene with the vineyards and there's all these people working in the vineyards for example. Or there's a party, all the non - speaking parts. That's the job of the assistant directors," she referred to coordinating the atmosphere persons.

"Well, that sounds really exciting," I said.

"It was," Jodi confirmed. "I had a lot of interaction with all the cast." Speaking of the cast, the special guest suddenly came to her mind: "That was the year of Cliff Robertson! He was the only like 'not - every - year person', I think. So basically, I got the actors ready; I did all the background; I also interacted with the crew, collected their time cards, turned in paperwork, and I was friends with a lot of the crew... But the first thing in the morning was pretty much Make - Up, Hair, Wardrobe and the actors. Then during the day, I'd be on the set and I'd interact with everyone else. More than most people, I had the most interaction with the cast other than Make - Up, Hair and Wardrobe."

"How long did you work on *Falcon Crest*?" I asked.

"It was at the beginning of season 3, and it was for twelve episodes... Several months, I think we spent five or six weeks just in Napa. I would say twelve, maybe fourteen weeks, something like that. The nature of the *Directors Guild* trainee program is that you are assigned to work on many jobs to get familiarity... They don't put a trainee on somewhere and you have to work 400 days in this program, so it's not like you spend 200 days on one show. You move from place to place, so everyone gets different training and different responsibility, you know. You might do a feature on location, you might do a cop show, you might do *Falcon Crest*... So, it was normal the trainees would be rotated. Actually, I stayed longer than a normal rotation just because they couldn't change me out in the middle of that lump," she referred to the complicated show - specific production manners in Northern California.

"Well, that sounds very interesting. Did you have any influence to get particularly on that project or were you just assigned?" I wanted to know.

"Just assigned," Jodi explained about the *DGA* program. "No one is ever allowed to pick. No one is ever allowed to choose where they go, and none of the shows are allowed to choose what trainee they have."

"And how was your experience compared to the other projects you were assigned to later?" I asked.

"Well, they were all different. You know, I worked on *CHiPs*, that was like cars on a freeway with stunts, so almost completely different. They're all different. This one," she referred to *Falcon Crest* again, "was fun because it was my first time working on location with the whole company up in Napa, since then I have done it a lot. There's a certain comradery

when you're all staying in the same hotel and you hang out with each other a little bit on your days off and in the evenings..."

The Comradery on the Set

The comradery Jodi described was the key word to bring us to another topic: her relationship with the cast and crew.

"The producer was a man named John Perry; I guess he was maybe the line producer or the producer; at least that season — I think he did more than one season — and he was really nice," Jodi said. "So, we stayed at the one hotel in Napa and, at night, we would go to the bar in the hotel, and he would just walk into the bar at night and say: 'Buy a drink and put in on the tables, buy one drink for all those tables!' He was a very nice guy; producers don't have to do things like that. He was such a nice man, charming and friendly and nice. He made the whole experience much better by his personality. And not every show has someone like that in charge."

Having known John from my previous meetings, I knew exactly what Jodi meant. I told her how our 2004 interview at his home turned out to be a five - or six - hour meeting



The official season 3 cast group photo being taken on the driveway of Spring Mountain's Villa Miravalle.



because we enjoyed chatting so much.

"Yeah, and he was there for a really long time," I added. "He officially started in season 3 when you came aboard, but he actually did some location scouting even for *The Vintage Years*, which was the original pilot for *Falcon Crest*, and then for season 1. He was kind of on and off for the first two seasons, but he came to work as a regular line producer in season 3 and he stayed until the end of season 7, so that's a pretty long time."

"So, he was one of the things that was the most fun about being on that show. He created some wonderful atmosphere," Jodi confirmed.

Cast, staff and crew members on the driveway of Spring Mountain's Villa Miravalle.

"What was also funny was when I saw that picture with you among cast and crew," I referred to the season 3 cast and



Mary Kate McGeehan in a studio portrait from episode 51 and Ana - Alicia on location at the pool at *Spring Mountain* while filming episode 41.

crew group shot taken in front of *Spring Mountain's Villa Miravalle*. "It looks like Margaret Ladd and you were having the time of your lives," considering that Margaret has her hands on Jodi's shoulders and is laughing really hard.

"Well, I got along with all the cast. We were all friends," Jodi recalled. "But she wasn't actually the one I was closest to. Actually, Ana - Alicia and I were close. On one Sunday day off, the two of us and a bunch of the drivers, the teamsters, went white-water rafting together for the day. We went down the American River outside of

Sacramento and then Mary Kate McGeehan and I became friends. Even after she show ended, I saw her for a while — I mean I don't know what happened with life and travel and work, but even when the show ended, we got together multiple times. Those were the two I was closest to."

"That's funny," I laughed. "Actually, we kind of reunited them both. In 2013, my wife and I were in Los Angeles, and we tried to meet with Ana - Alicia and then we tried to meet with Mary Kate, and so we came up with the idea of reuniting them both — it was really fun!"

"They're both just really nice people!" Jodi smiled.

"Absolutely! They're really great. So, what was it like to work with Jane Wyman?" I wanted to know.

"She was lovely! She was very nice and she was a lovely woman. I have a story about Jane Wyman!" Jodi said with enthusiasm. "My family is from San Francisco, and I had a birthday party. So, my mother threw me a party at the hotel [in Napa], and I invited the cast and I invited the crew. We had a big room and we had a cake and all of that. The only member of the cast who came was Jane Wyman. When the party got closer, she said to me: 'Jodi, I want to come to your party, but you may not want me there because my daughter Maureen is visiting this weekend and because she's visiting, we have the Secret Service with us and you may not want the Secret Service at your birthday party,'" Jodi referred to Maureen, as President Ronald Reagan's daughter, always being protected. "And I said:



Writer Suzanne Herrera McCullough (left), director Harry Harris (right behind her), Jane Wyman, hair stylist Laura Lee (pink blouse) and others during a cast and crew party at the *Holiday Inn Napa* in the summer of 1983.

'Bring the Secret Service, that's fine!' So, Jane Wyman came to my birthday party with the Secret Service! She was lovely, she was so nice. I invited everyone; it was an open invitation. I didn't really expect Jane Wyman to come — she was elderly, she was more of a movie star than a TV star."

"What a very lovely thing to do of her!" I said. "Lots of people I spoke to always said how professional she was and that she was actually a very down - to - earth person and very friendly all the time."

"And that proves it! She came to my birthday party. And I wasn't the producer," Jodi laughed. "I could see her coming to the producer's birthday party or another actor's birthday party but on a scale, I was a lower employee, I wasn't a status employee."



Director of photography Frank Raymond (left) and John Perry (in front) plunging in the pool at *Spring Mountain* during a break from filming.

I loved Jodi's story about Jane and was curious if she had more anecdotes from her time on the set: "Is there another specific aspect or a funny incident that really stands out in your memory?"

"Well, we would be in Napa and it would be 110° F — it was so hot! And we were like farm

workers in the heat. So, at lunch time, we would take off our walkie - talkies and jump in the pool and get wet during lunch. That was fun!"

I realized she spoke of the pool in front of *Spring Mountain's Villa Miravalle*.

Working with the Cast and Crew

Since we talked so much about the cast and crew, I was interested if she is still in touch with anyone from the set.

"It's hard to say — I mean I worked with some of these people before. I'm still *Facebook* friends with the boom man who is now a sound mixer: Kenn Fuller. I haven't seen him, but *Facebook* allows a lot more. I'm sure there are others, we all worked on various projects together, he comes to mind because I have not worked with him since then. It's hard to remember everyone that was on that show — working freelance is just too difficult, so only he comes to mind because he's someone I have not seen in real life. It's possible there are others — not the cast; sometimes you work with a cast member on more than one show, and I've done that with various people — I have not worked with any of those actors... They're more memorable — you remember when there's a scene with them."

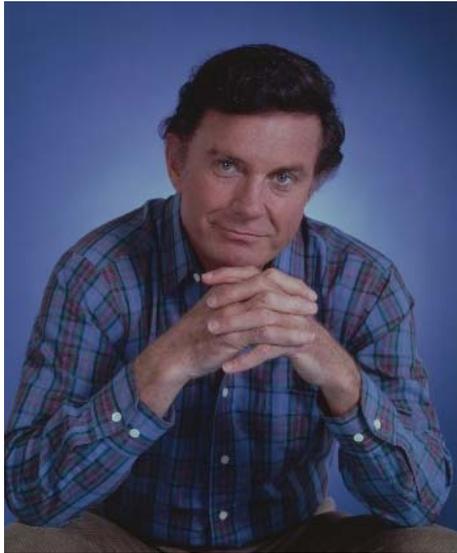
"Did you have any favorite cast or crew members or staff members to work with?" I wanted to know.

"John Perry," she spontaneously said, coming back to her earlier reference. "He was so outstanding, you know."

But Jodi also remembered Cliff Robertson: "He was an *Academy Award* winning method actor. So, most actors are not method actors, at least in TV. He and I got along. I have a story to tell you that has stayed with me ever since. So, there was a day when there was a scene of Cliff Robertson walking away from a tennis court, having finished a tennis game. And so, it's my job to get the cast ready when they're ready for the set..., to come and get them and bring them to the set. Anyway, this day I went to get him... Have you ever been in a honey wagon room?" Jodi asked.

I shook my head.

"They're very very small, they're like a meter and a half by two and a half meters," Jodi pointed out. "Many shows have big trailers but, on that show, everyone had a honey wagon room. So, I was in this very small room with



him, and I said: 'Cliff, we're ready for you to come to the set.' And he started out by saying: 'Yes, but how am I supposed to do a scene about walking away from a tennis game if I haven't played tennis and there's no tennis coach here?' 'Well, you don't need to play tennis to walk away.' But he was a method actor and he felt he needed that and then it just evolves into him, ranting and raving about everything! You know, more than that: 'The drivers never show up on time...' I was sure the drivers were arriving... You know, this whole litany of everything bottled up. The whole time that he was ranting, I hear in my ear: 'Is Cliff on his way to the set, is Cliff on his way to the set?' And I can't answer 'cause you can't just talk across someone who is that upset.

Finally — it felt like hours, but it was probably 15 minutes later, which to production is like eight hours of waiting — finally, he stopped because if you don't say anything, people are not going to yell forever. You know, if you just sit there, they will just finish. So, he finished and I said: 'Cliff, I understand that you're really really upset. But I'm wondering: Do you think that any of this is my fault?' And he said: 'Of course not, honey! I'm just yelling at the gods and you're there!' And it's a thing I've taken with me the rest of my life, whether on film or not on film... If you have done something wrong, of course, you should feel horrified, people are yelling because you made a mistake, but sometimes people are just yelling at the gods and you're there and you don't take it personally and you move on and you don't let it rattle you! It was a life lesson. I'm sure it happens all the time, and he was just the only one who actually said it! It was one of the more memorable life lessons that I use all the time. It was of huge value! It was an amazing thing that he said and so valuable."

"There was kind of a controversy on *Facebook* about him," I referred to someone bad-mouthing him.

"I had more interaction with him than anyone else! None of them spent as much time with him as I did."

"When I interviewed him a couple of years ago, he was really a very nice person," I pointed out.

"There was probably some incident between the two of them," Jodi speculated about the derogatory comment of *Facebook*. "These things happen. He had been before this a big hero to me because of what he did, taking down... — admitting to that whole Begelman thing," Jodi referred to the David Begelman embezzlement that Cliff Robertson unveiled. "I never brought it up to him, but that was a very brave thing! It put his whole career and everything at risk! I always admired him for that, we never discussed it. He had been a very intelligent, nice, charming man!"

"That was my impression, too," I said. "He was very intelligent and very nice. You know, it came kind of a shock to me when I realized that, because of that David Begelman scandal, he was kind of blacklisted for a couple of years in Hollywood — because he was not the one who did anything wrong. He just unveiled this scandal. Do you think when *Lorimar* hired Cliff Robertson at this point of time when he was still sort of blacklisted, that it was kind of a risk for them?"

"Well, before that, he had been doing big features. So, in a way, it was a step down, doing a TV series. Features are considered the 'gods'," Jodi explained. "But they had had Lana Turner the year before. Every year, they had a sort of a celebrity, so they were taking less risk. I don't think a feature would have hired him necessarily... But they were also an independent company, they weren't a studio. I think he added a lot to the show. I think it was just a minor risk to them because they were their own people."



Jane Wyman smoking a cigarette near the winery during a break from filming episode 52 at *Spring Mountain*.



Summer 1983: *Lorimarians* in the Napa Valley: Script supervisor Lee Walkling wearing a brown hat, Frank Raymond wearing a hat and smoking a pipe beside her.

"It's interesting that you mentioned that *Lorimar* tried to get celebrity guests for *Falcon Crest*, which they did each year," I stated. "After that, they had Gina Lollobrigida in season 4 and they had lots of guest stars in season 5, including Cesar Romero, Celeste Holm, Anne Archer, and in season 6 Kim Novak — all those big names in Hollywood. That was really a hallmark of the show, I think."

Jodi replied: "And I think after the first year, after they had Lana Turner, then other people said: 'Oh, big stars! Do this!' So the hardest was probably the first one. And then you get motorhomes! There were only two shows I ever worked on where everyone just had a honey wagon room, no matter how big you were or how little you were. The second one was *Tales from the Crypt*. They had major stars coming in, they had Elvis Presley's wife, Priscilla, and they had Lou Diamond Phillips, and they all just got a honey wagon room. Those were the only two shows that did that."

Falcon Influence on Jodi's Post-*Falcon* Time

I was eager to learn how Jodi's experience on *Falcon Crest* affected her professional life: "I saw your credit list on *IMDb* and it's really impressive! You have a lot of credits — many shows as a second and a first assistant director, as a unit production manager, as a producer and other positions. So, what do you think, how did working on *Falcon Crest* early in your career influence your later career and your later jobs in the industry?"

"Well, one of the things that I already mentioned is," she began, "it taught me so much about paperwork. And paperwork was never an issue after that. I could always help other people with paperwork, paperwork is part of the assistant job. That was really a game changer. And also doing that cross - boarding because most shows don't do that. It's much more of a challenge, and you really have to learn production. The whole twelve episodes — it's like a mini - series. Movies aren't twelve hours — they are two hours. And so being able to learn how to do — and hold in your brain — so many episodes at once was training that I used ever since. That ability to grasp the big picture and the

focusing on details on each episode simultaneously..., the big ensemble cast and the complications of *Falcon Crest* were extremely good training for any other job I ever did!”

“So from that perspective you were really lucky to have been assigned to it. That’s great to hear!” I said. “When you think of a production company like *Lorimar* which was actually a small company compared to the really big studios like *Universal* or *Warner Bros.* or so — was it different from working at *Lorimar* in comparison to bigger companies like *Paramount* or *Warners*?”

“No, because it’s sort of weird: I mean all the films are sort of sub-companies. I wasn’t the producer, so maybe from the producer’s point of view, what they dealt with at the studio level...,” she speculated that there might have been differences. “A few times, the head of *Lorimar* would talk to me because these production reports were so complicated, you know... On a normal show, on a production report, you write one day... On this,” she referred to *Falcon Crest*’s complicated on - location filming again, “I’d have to say ‘ $\frac{1}{8}$ of a day’, ‘ $\frac{2}{8}$ of a day’... So, they would call me and say: ‘How did you come up with that?’, but I don’t think that was a function of *Lorimar*, it was a function of the nature of the show,” she alluded to the fact that, as she had explained before, the various scenes shot on one day had all to be assigned to their specific episodes and their respective budgets. “If you work on a movie,” Jodi continued, “for legal reasons, each film company forms its own LLC, a limited liability corporation. And you’re actually paid by that LLC as opposed to the major studio, so they all function as this miniature LLCs. I’m sure in the ‘30’s or ‘40’s it wasn’t like that, but you don’t get your paycheck from *Warner Bros.*, you’re in your smaller unit all the time, and because *Lorimar* was a smaller unit — they had *Dallas*, *Knots Landing* and *Falcon Crest* — we were in the same smaller pot.”

Lorimar, the Production Company

That brought us to *Lorimar* itself. “It’s incredible what a successful company it was,” I said. “I mean, they had those three that you just mentioned, which were really the big hits of the era... They had a lot of sitcoms in production like *Full House* and lots of other things, so that was a fun company, I think.

“And because they were so popular that you had to sign non - disclosures that you wouldn’t give away plot points because things would air so much later. The big example was I was hired once to work just for one day — someone didn’t show up — on *Dallas*. And they figured out that someone wasn’t dead. And they were like: ‘You can’t tell anyone what happened in this episode!’ because this episode was going to air six months later — super - secrecy! And they don’t do shows like that anymore, I think.”

“What I thought was very interesting,” I added something falling in the same category: “The year before you started working on *Falcon Crest*, there was this interesting cliff-hanger of season 2. They had created a murder mystery, and in the final scene the murderer was revealed, and they created nine different confession scenes, which they all filmed because nobody — not even the crew, not even the cast — was to know who would end up as the murderer or the murderess. So, that was pretty amazing, I think.”

“Yeah, recently there was a show called *The Undoing* with Nicole Kidman, and I saw some interview and they didn’t know how it ended either. So, that is something that happens, you know... I think it would be more normal to film all those confessions the following year, but it doesn’t make sure that no one — even if *Deadline* or someone paid them a million dollars — would get the answer.”

Jodi's Current Projects

Towards the end of our conversation, I asked about Jodi's current projects.

"I just finished working on additional photography for a show that was pre - pandemic, which just came back to finish. It was a Western — I always wanted to work on a Western — it's called *The Outlaw Johnny Black* and it's starring Michael Jai White, who is a famous martial artist and who starred in many movies and directed a few. It was great to be back and working. And luckily for me, because it was a Western, it was all outside. We were on a movie ranch where they used to film *Little House on the Prairie*. It was not urban; it was on a ranch called *Big Sky*. We were there and we were on the backlot outside at *Universal*. And I have some things in the works but it's very jinxing to mention them."



Preparations for filming episode 49 at *Stags' Leap*, which posed as the *Gioberti Estate*.

It was really a pleasure for me to do this interview.

"Thank you! I hope this is useful," Jodi said.

"It's always good to get different perspectives on things. Thank you very much!"

"You're very welcome!"