

“Poor Emma”:

GARY IMHOFF

Remembers Why Curtis Estabrook Was Bound To Die

Interview by

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

In the 1987-88 season of *Falcon Crest*, actor Gary Imhoff had a key guest rôle for eight episodes as Curtis Estabrook, an investigative journalist and Margaret Ladd's on-screen love interest. I was fortunate to receive an e-mail from Gary that he was willing to do an interview.

Getting the Rôle

“How did you get your assignment?” was my first question.

“I got the job through the normal audition process. I got the audition through a slightly less normal process. My girlfriend at the time, Lisa London, was the Casting Director (or maybe technically the Associate Casting Director) for the show,” Gary replied.

Knowing the hierarchy at *Lorimar*, I knew what he was talking about. Lisa London was the person who did the casting for the series as the one coordinating the committee of all people involved, such as the executive producers, the director of the respective episode, the network liaison, etc. Her position was a series-specific one for *Falcon Crest* while the final say for all *Lorimar* shows was in the hands of the executive in charge of casting for the whole company, the late Barbara Miller, who went on doing the very same job even after *Lorimar* was folded into *Warner Bros. Television*.

Gary continued: “I believe they saw only about five people for the part. So having an insider helped my being chosen as one of the five to go to the producers. The job was cast quickly as a guest star for one episode, but I had an idea that it would recur.”

“Did you know the show before you joined the cast?” I wanted to know.

“I was somewhat familiar with the show as I was with all the shows produced by *Lorimar*,” Gary explained. “I had worked for *Lorimar* on a number of their previous shows (way before I was Lisa London's boyfriend, so that wasn't the only reason I was brought in for *Falcon Crest*, but it helped!). I had worked as a guest star on *The Waltons* and had many different parts on many years of *Eight Is Enough*. I also played the lead

in a pilot for *Lorimar* entitled *Me and Ducky* which did not get picked up for series. So because I had done so much work for *Lorimar*, I stayed a bit familiar with all of their shows.”

Working with the Cast and Crew

We now concentrated on Gary’s job on *Falcon Crest*. “How did you like working on the show in general?” I asked.

“I had a ball!” he exclaimed. “It was a terrific job! Who wouldn’t love showing up to the [studio] lot every day to play a great part on a hit series! I had a particular admiration for the respect that the producers had for the writers and their writing. If an actor wanted to change anything even an ‘and’ or a ‘but’ or whatever, there had to be Executive Producer permission to change the line. I found that unusual and remarkable for Hollywood!”

I knew from the scripts that this policy had been introduced in season 4; a note on the second page of each script stipulated that “no changes, additions or deletions will be permitted unless authorized by the writing staff”. In season 6, that rule was even changed to the authorization of the executive producers and the supervising producer in charge of the respective episode. It was very interesting to hear from Gary how thoroughly that policy was executed.

“Are you still in contact with anyone from the cast and crew?”

“Lisa London and I are still very good friends. She is married and has kids and I am married and have one son and we are all friends,” Gary said and mentioned that his son, Cassidy, is 7 ½ years old.

“Other than that,” he continued, “the only person I have kept in some contact with is Ana - Alicia. The reason for that is we studied in the same acting class together after the show and became friends.”

That brought me to my next question: “Who were your favorite cast and crew members to work with?”



“I truly liked them all,” Gary said. “There was a sense on the set that some people didn’t like Susan Sullivan, but I must say, having worked with her a lot, that I found her to be a consummate professional. She was particular about getting what she wanted, but I found that admirable not bothersome.”

Murder at *Falcon Crest*: Curtis is found by Maggie when he is just about to die.



I also knew what he meant. Susan took her job very seriously and, from what I heard in my chats with other people from the set, loved to discuss possibilities for her character and storylines and the alteration of scenes with the producers; with her very sharp mind, always being very critical, very investigative and very accurately, always turning an extremely professional eye on everything that went on — something that may have not always been the easiest way, but certainly something that was always in the best interest for the final product, of course.

David Selby, Margaret Ladd and Gary Imhoff in episode 172:
While Emma plans a murder mystery game, Curtis actually investigates a crime.

"I loved David Selby," Gary continued. "He was a joy to work with. Very easy-going. I worked with him a lot. And, of course Margaret was a very unique and lovely person. Not unlike her character, you never quite knew what to expect from Margaret. She was lots of fun!" Gary smiled.



"I also had the grand pleasure of getting to know Jane Wyman a little. She was not the most open or warm person, but I must say she was a study in professionalism! She never threw a fit or even raised her voice. She'd sit in her chair quietly and just wait for her shot. She could easily have been a 'Diva' and thrown her weight around, believe me, I have seen it with other stars with whom I have worked! But never once! If she ever threw her weight around, she did it in private. I always had the feeling with her that I was watching the training from the golden age of films. Where if you didn't mind your manners you lost your contract. I had the feeling that training never left her."



Gary and Margaret in a scene in episode 172 in the *Falcon Crest Victorian Mansion* living room.

"It is great to hear how much you enjoyed working with the core cast members," I said. "How about the producers and writers? How much information about the development of your character and the storylines Curtis would be involved in did the creative forces discuss with you when you got the job?"

Gary admitted: "Nothing was ever discussed with me. Because I was not a contract player, I was hired for each episode separately as a guest star (it is a way to keep costs down, meaning I got paid less than the contract players) and also a way for them to try out a character and see how it develops. So other than being told that I was going to die and how, I never had any discussions about my character. I would get a call to work, read the script when delivered and show up to shoot the episode."

Portraying Curtis

I wanted to address a few details about the Curtis Estabrook character now.

"Was your eight-episode guest appearance limited to these segments from the very beginning, or were there any options discussed for you to become a long-term cast member?"

"It was never discussed with me, but as my role got rolling (no pun intended!), I thought there was a good chance for a long run on the show... until I realized that Margaret Ladd's character theme was 'poor Emma'," Gary pointed out. "Basically that meant that the whole basis for her character was that nothing ever went very right for her. If she was too happy, it didn't really work for her character. So as our 'crush' started to develop and she seemed to get pretty happy about it, I began to worry! However, I did not actually know they were going to kill me until the week before we shot that episode

[*Stormy Weather*]. The story is a funny one. One of the producers came on the set while we were shooting the episode previous to my 'last' (which I didn't yet know was my last) and he made his hand look like a gun and he kept pulling the 'trigger'. I was shooting, so I couldn't pay much attention. When we stopped shooting, he did it again and I went over to him and asked what he was doing. He said, 'Wait until you read next week's script.' They hadn't released the scripts to the actors yet, so I couldn't find out. A couple days later he came on the set again and started making movements like he was clubbing something. When we stopped shooting, I went over to him and asked again what he was doing and he said, 'Wait until you see the re-write!' Apparently, they'd originally written my death as by gunshot (as he was trying to tell me the first day), then re-wrote it as a baseball bat to the head (as he was trying to tell me the next day), which is the way I finally was killed!"

The final version of *Stormy Weather* (episode 172 <7.17>) actually never revealed that *The Thirteen's* bald man killed Curtis with a baseball bat, but it was only implied from the way the blow to his head looked that it was a blow by a blunt instrument.



Violent argument:
Curtis has come too close to Richard
and is threatened by Eric Stavros.
Shortly after, Curtis is dead...

"Speaking of your last episode," I continued, "you shot *Stormy Weather* entirely on

sound stage 10 at CBS - MTM Studios, which is nowadays called CBS Studio Center; it was the episode where all the characters are trapped in the *Falcon Crest Victorian Mansion* during a thunderstorm. You had a key scene with Eric Stavros, telling him that your character found out about Richard's illegal financial support of rebels in North Africa to lure mercenary John Remick away from Maggie. One of your lines was: 'You know that tip you gave me about the overseas funds transfer... It led to an incredible story. It even includes Chase Gioberti.' Do you know what the writers had in mind? What connection was going to be revealed in the end? We always got the impression that there must have been more to it. As you may know, Jeff Freilich, who could not exactly recall that part, was replaced as the executive producer the following season so many of his ideas were no longer implemented by the new producing staff."

Gary spontaneously said: "This is funny that you should ask me this because at the time of the shooting, the last line I said was some name (that had not been heard before on the show)."

The actor referred to John Remick — to him, a "new" character because Ed Marinaro had guest-starred in the first four episodes of season 7 just before Gary was hired.

"That was supposed to be the mystery which created the cliffhanger, which made people come back the next season," Gary explained. "And the plan was to have the search for the significance of that name (and the other references to Eric Stavros) be a major

part of the beginning of the next season, perhaps be a major thread for the entire next season. They never told me what that significance was however. It was a big secret!”

This statement confirmed our previous research: While the immediate events around John Remick were tied up when Ed Marinaro returned for the next to last episode of season 7, Curtis Estabrook’s other references to Eric were not, particularly not the involvement of Chase Gioberti. In the original concept, a few more hints to a possible return of Bob Foxworth’s character were planned by Jeff and his writers, including a key scene between Maggie and Alison in *False Faces* (episode 176 <7.21>) and — of course — the actual season 7 cliffhanger, which left the audience wondering if it could be Chase or Richard Angela was talking to in the dimly lit chapel.

Gary continued: “Obviously, the fact that Jeff was replaced caused the writers and producers to take a new tack the next season and that storyline never came to fruition!”

After our short discussion about Remick, Gary added: “Ed Marinaro, by the way, was a friend of mine way before *Falcon Crest* because we both studied together at *The Beverly Hills Playhouse*. He and Mimi Rogers, who became his girlfriend for a time!”

“What was your memorable scene?” I asked.



“There are two,” the actor replied. “One was the scene I did that you mention here with John Callahan. The reason it is memorable is because we shot it in the room I had died in. You see we shot the scenes out of sequence and I ‘died’ (meaning we shot my death scene) a few days before we finished the episode and I finished all my scenes. So while I was shooting that scene with John Callahan, I could still see the blood stains on the carpet from where I had ‘died’ the previous day. I must say it was a rather eerie and metaphysical experience!”

Then, Gary came to the second scene he remembered most vividly: “The other scene was my actual death scene in Susan Sullivan’s arms. The reason that is my favorite is because when I found out I was going to die from blunt force trauma to the head (baseball bat) I went out and did some research to make the death scene very realistic. I went to the very macabre brain trauma ward at *Los Angeles County Hospital* and also visited the paramedics in the Rampart Division in L.A. This is the neighborhood with the most violence in L.A. The paramedics were very helpful. They told me that when they have a head trauma case and are rushing to the hospital, they know the patient will die before they reach the hospital if the patient has an epileptiform seizure. I was very excited because now my death scene would be realistic and different! However, I had not yet read the final script. When I did, I knew there was a problem because they’d written my dying words to be said in Susan Sullivan’s arms. I knew it would be in a close-up and I quickly realized saying my last words and then having a big seizure would look rather odd and possibly comical. I knew that would be really the wrong choice for a night time soap opera! So, after much soul searching, I decided to die the simple way and that is to just let the life go out of me and let my head fall to the side and my eyes close. A much less spectacular choice, but I believe the correct one!”

“Was it carved in stone that your character would die that episode?” I asked. “Or were there any other options, particularly since Curtis had a crush on Emma, which he finally

admitted in front of the fireplace early in that episode, and she obviously shared his romantic interest?"

"I think I have already answered this above. It was set at least from the week before. I believe it was perfect for Margaret's character that the moment she realized she was going to be happy, something dreadful happened. I believe a previous boyfriend of Margaret's character on the show had also had an untimely end," Gary said and, from my understanding, referred to Daniel Greene's Dwayne Cooley. "Perhaps if I had been associated with any character other than Margaret's," Gary went on, "I would have lasted longer on the show!"

General Impressions of the Series

"If we leave the topic of your character on the show now and focus on a more general level of the series, what would you say was your favorite storyline — not necessarily during your time on the show, but also before and after you participated?"

"I hate to admit it," Gary began, "but I was not a regular watcher of the show. I'd watch it to check in from time to time, but really did not follow the show that closely. It is a funny thing in Hollywood. Many of us in the business don't have the time to watch that much TV!"

"So I guess there is not much to say about a storyline you really do not like," I said.

"Same answer," Gary smiled.

I also wanted to know if the actor kept any memorabilia, such as props, photos, scripts, shootings schedules or call sheets, etc.

"I will be happy to keep you in mind whenever I go into my storage. I know I kept some things, but also a while ago had to get rid of some stuff. I used to have all my scripts but I don't know if I kept them. When I go through the storage, I will alert you if I find any *Falcon Crest* stuff."

Other Projects

Finally, we came to speak about Gary's other projects, both before and after *Falcon Crest*.

"You mentioned a couple of *Lorimar* shows earlier," I said. "While you never worked with Earl Hamner on *Falcon Crest*, you mentioned that you worked on another of his previous series, *The Waltons*, which was based on his life story. What kind of experience was that?"

"*The Waltons* was one of my earliest jobs in Los Angeles," Gary started. "I had a ball again. It is so much fun to do what you dream all your life to do. And doing *The Waltons* was doing a show that I was very aware of before I ever came to Hollywood. It was a fun role, a very mischievous boy in high school cutting up and dancing in the aisles of the classroom. I played Roland Piper in the episode entitled *The Valediction*. I must have loved the experience because I don't recall the names of all the characters I've ever played and certainly not the episode titles!"

"So what comes to your mind spontaneously if you compare it with *Falcon Crest*?" I wanted to know.

"Lush!!! Television in all its grandeur. Lush and grandeur in terms of drama, lush and grandeur in terms of the beauty of the settings, the stories, the money, the fun!!!"

"One of our website editors, Shaun K. Chang, who is a real movie buff, would like to know how it was to work with Priscilla Barnes in the movie *The Seniors*," I said.

"Priscilla was very professional," Gary began, "but I can't say I got to know her very well. There is an amusing anecdote about the moment we first met. It was a cold morning in Dallas and the first scene I was to shoot with Priscilla was the shot of us in bed together being rolled out of the house and into the van, I believe. It was something like 7 am and we said hello and got into bed. She leaned her head over (as if I asked) and said, 'I don't date men under 35!' But I hadn't asked. In fact I hadn't even had the thought! I guess that was her way of keeping men at a distance for her own protection. After all she is a most beautiful woman!"

"And how was your experience with the TV movie *Zuma Beach* — in general and with Tanya Roberts?" I asked.

"*Zuma Beach* is a project that I remember very fondly because we all spent three weeks on a secluded beach in Malibu called Paradise Cove. The amazing thing about *Zuma Beach* was the number of firsts for that film and the people it launched," Gary said and started to make a list: "It was Brian Grazer's first film! I believe it was Rosanna Arquette's first film. It was Tim Hutton's first film. Tanya Roberts went on to fame after that film. Michael Biehn went on to fame after that film. There may have even been more! Tanya was a very friendly, regular person. I worked less with her than I did with many others. Tim and I became very good friends. Rosanna played my girlfriend. It was a group of young hopefuls all getting together to make a fun picture and that's what we had, fun!"

After a second, Gary said: "There is an amusing story about Rosanna and me (sorry I don't have one for Tanya!). All the guys in that film got together the first day to scout the location and the cast to see who was going to be linked up with whom. We were healthy young men! I walk up to this very curvaceous young woman who has her back to me and she turns around and takes one look at me and with a bit of a curled lip says, 'Oh, you're not playing Larry, are you?' Well, I was and it was Rosanna. It was one of the more deflating moments I have ever had in my career! But we got along fine and I was proud to have helped shepherd the beginning of a rather illustrious career!"

"So of all the various things you have done, Gary," I asked, "what would you consider as the highlight of your career to date and maybe your favorite project and / or character you ever played?"

"I have many highlights!" the actor said. "But I would have to say that starring opposite Lucille Ball in *Lucy Moves to NBC*. It also guest starred Donald O'Connor, Gene Kelly, Bob Hope, Johnny Carson, Jack Klugman, Gary Coleman and many more. Other than Gary I was the only other one under 50 on the set. I was playing Fred Silverman (the head of *NBC* Programming at the time) as though he were 16 years old and Gary Coleman was my first assistant vice-president. The biggest highlight besides the show was *Lucy* and I became very close and she had me to her house many times including Thanksgiving and my mother came out to see the show and was invited to *Lucy's* for Thanksgiving with me. It was just *Lucy*, Gary Morton, *Lucy's* husband, my mother and me! The other highlight was starring opposite the only other name in TV as big as *Lucy*.

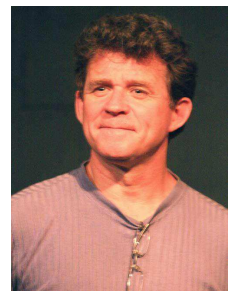
I starred opposite Milton Berle in a TV pilot called *Moscow and Vine*. Milton played an old owner of a music store at Hollywood and Vine. The music store was old and dilapidated and I played a young Russian immigrant who came in and was going to revive the store. It never went to series, but I will always cherish the opportunity to work with such a master of comedy and truly a mega-star."

The poster for *Five Mex for a Million*, which played in Hollywood on February 18 and 25, 2012. One of the stage actors was Robert F. Lyons, who played Emma's boyfriend Turner Bates in episodes 1 and 7 of season 1 of *Falcon Crest* (1981-82).

"What are your current activities?"

"I am currently an award-winning director in Los Angeles. I won three best-director awards for two plays, one for a recent production of *Sylvia* by A.R. Gurney and two for a world premiere play called *Just 45 Minutes From Broadway* by filmmaker Henry Jaglom. I also have taught acting for over 25 years. Originally at *The Beverly Hills Playhouse* (at the time I was there, one of the largest and most successful acting schools in the country) and since 2007 I have been teaching my own classes called *The Professional Artists Workshop* and *The Musical Artists Workshop*. You can check them out by going to our website garyimhoff.net. I also am a singer and

appear from time to time in Los Angeles in various venues. I recently starred in a 2 week staged reading of a new Broadway Musical in New York called, *Artaria*. If you'd like to hear me sing, there are some 'youtubes' available. One of me singing in a cabaret in Los Angeles (sound quality is not perfect) but there is also one of the animated film soundtrack of the movie *Thumbelina* in which I play Prince Cornelius and I sing the love theme by Barry Manilow, *Let Me Be Your Wings*."



Gary Imhoff in 2012.

Gary shared the links to the song from *Thumbelina* with me:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrQ9pMLryPo>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66rdJx2XX-Q&feature=related>

"The first is a bit better sound quality," he added. "The second has the original animation with it."

The link to his cabaret performance is <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tS3jl8-hOc>.

I thanked Gary for sharing his memories with us and was particularly thankful for the useful background information about his last episode on *Falcon Crest*.

"Many thanks, Thomas! This has been a lot of fun," Gary concluded our interview.