

Behind the Scripts:

LISA SEIDMAN

From Fan to Story Editor

Interview by

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

Lisa Seidman and I got in touch through a social network on the Internet. I was pleasantly surprised when she sent me her e-mail address so we could communicate directly, and it did not take too long until we agreed on an e-mail interview. "I'm a much clearer writer than speaker — for the obvious reasons," Lisa explained her preference for a questionnaire instead of a phone interview. I loved her being straightforward so it was all set.

Back in 2011, I had done a research of old production documents of *Falcon Crest* at the *Earl Gregg Swem Library* at the *Special Collections Research Center* of *The College of William and Mary* in Williamsburg, VA. There I discovered some of Lisa's scripts along with letters she had sent to her former professor, Louis E. Catron, who passed away in the meantime. From what I had read there, I had reason to believe that Lisa would make a wonderful interviewee because it seemed to me that she had a fresh, direct and honest way to address things. As usual, I was not interested in chatting with someone who would merely gloss over his or her Hollywood experience so I felt Lisa would probably fit perfectly into the kind of interviewee I liked the most — and I was not disappointed.

Getting to Work on *Falcon Crest*

"Your first writing assignment of *Falcon Crest*," I began the interview, "was *Obsession, Possession* (episode 157 <7.02>). As a story editor, you received credit for the whole 7th season. Could you please tell me how you came to write the second episode of the season?"

"Jeff assigned our scripts in rotation," Lisa referred to executive producer Jeff Freilich. "I have no idea why he gave me the second show to write, unless it was because it was in the order we were hired: Howard Lakin, me, Jim Fritzhand and Cynthia Darnell," she referred to the other key writers of the season: Howard (with whom I am still in contact

after we had met in 2007), the supervising producer; James Fritzhand, who served as executive script consultant; and Cynthia Darnell, who, being a story editor, held the same position as Lisa.

I knew that being a story editor meant that, as a member of the writing staff, she had to help the executive producer and the supervising producer develop character arcs and plotlines for the entire season. But aside from that abstract definition, I wanted to learn what this meant specifically for the series: "Could you please describe the job of a story editor?" I asked.

"I attended all story meetings, which took place in Jeff's office, with the other writers. I was responsible for making changes to my script, talking to the actors about the script, attending script readings. In the summer I went on location to Napa and supervised the location scenes. If a location differed from what was written for the scene two or three months ago at the studio, my job was to rewrite the scene on set to make it work for the location."

I was sure that this must have been a very big task for the writing staff because — unlike an entirely L.A. based show — *Falcon Crest's* particular habit of filming the first twelve episodes on distant location was a challenge for everyone involved. The writers had to finish the first two six-episode blocks at an early stage in the production, without knowing most of the new locations the scouts would pick in Northern California — except the recurring ones, of course, such as *Spring Mountain*, *Stags' Leap* and *Silverado*, just to name a few. This is certainly a lot different from shows entirely filmed in Greater L.A. where many of the heavily filmed locations are well known among staff and crew members.

"When you joined *Falcon Crest*, the show was in its 7th season," I introduced my next question. "Was it difficult for you to work on an established show?"

"I was probably nervous but don't remember it being all that difficult," Lisa said.

"Was that because you knew the show before?" I asked.

"Yes, I was a fan before being hired," Lisa began to explain how she knew all the necessary background about the characters and the story. "I am very fortunate in that I have a memory for voices so I could capture characters and voices easily. But I was even more fortunate in that I worked with a terrific bunch of writers, like Howard Lakin and Jeff Freilich who were extremely helpful to me."

The Overall Experience of *Falcon Crest*

It was interesting to hear that Lisa came as a fan to the staff because it explained her knowledge of the characters, something that many other staff members — later in the series, particularly in the final season — did not have. It is always a big advantage if writers do not only know their job, but also have an emotional connection with the material they have to deal with.

"How did you like working on *Falcon Crest* in general?" I asked, almost knowing the answer already as she was so enthusiastic about the show.

"I loved working on *Falcon Crest*. It was my first staff job so I was very excited to be part of the show every day. I was a huge fan of Jane Wyman as well as David Selby so it was a treat writing for them."

About her experience on location in the Wine Country, she added: "I wrote earlier that I was on location in Napa. It was great fun, visiting the *Falcon Crest* house, which was beautiful. And being in Napa, which, of course, was gorgeous."

The Collaboration on the Set

From the distant location shooting, which was one of the show's hallmarks, we came to the cast, crew and staff members.

"Are you still in contact with anyone?" I wanted to know.

"I worked with Howard Lakin on *Dallas* after our stint on *Falcon Crest* and we stayed in touch for years. In fact, you've reminded me I owe him an e-mail," Lisa said. "I met one of my closest friends when I worked on *Falcon Crest*: Donna Goldberg. She was Joanne Brough's assistant, was the first person to read my *Cagney & Lacey* script and liked it so much she brought it to Jeff and Joanne's attention. They, too, liked it and called me in for an interview. I waited in Donna's office for a while, and as we talked we realized we had a lot in common (we both grew up on Long Island, NY; she went to school in East Meadow where my mom was a fifth grade teacher; we had mutual friends; went to the same summer camp). We have remained friends ever since and we're having lunch next week! Cynthia Darnell, alas, died several years ago. We stayed in touch for a while until she moved to Vermont. Every once in a while I'll cross paths with someone who used to be in production."

My next question was inevitable: "Who were your favorite cast, staff and crew members to work with?"



"Jane Wyman," was her spontaneous reply. "I was in awe of her. She won an Oscar! She once called me at home, read a scene I had written, and asked if she could change a word. I wanted to say, 'Jane, you won an Oscar for *Johnny Belinda*, you can change whatever you want!' But I kept calm and said that she could change the word. I also loved working with David Selby because he was Quentin in my all-time favorite soap, *Dark Shadows*."

Jane Wyman and David Selby on the set of *Falcon Crest* (episode 157).

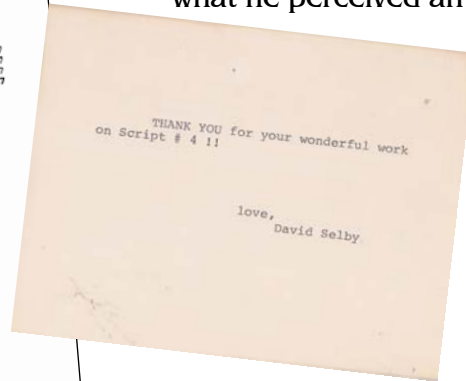
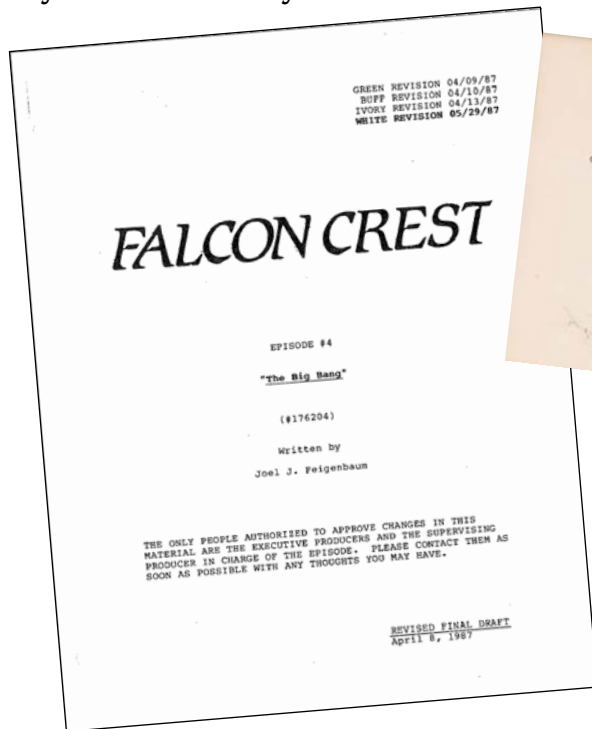


David Selby as Quentin Collins (I) in *Dark Shadows*.



Jane Wyman in her Oscar awarded rôle as Belinda, the deaf mute, in *Johnny Belinda* (1948).

Also regarding David, Lisa sent me the scan of a note, in which he thanked her for revising *The Big Bang* (episode 159 <7.04>). From my research at *William and Mary*, I remembered that Lisa had once written her professor she had done a “monster rewrite” on this script, which had been turned in by freelance writer Joel J. Feigenbaum. Among the notes I took at the library, I found quotes from her letter: “While the supervising producer wrote four or five new scenes, I completely rewrote the old scenes to give them the ‘texture’ and humor the actors asked for. The rewritten script went out yesterday and David Selby sent balloons to Howard (producer) and me as a thank - you for what he perceived an excellent rewrite.”



The cover of the revised final draft of *The Big Bang* (left) and David's lovely note to Lisa.

Now Lisa came back to the other people she enjoyed working with: “Loved Ana - Alicia. We shared lots of girl talk.”



Interestingly enough, she added: “Susan Sullivan scared me — but she’s a terrifically talented actress and I have a lot of respect for her.”

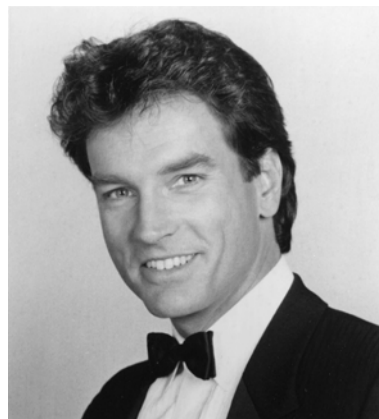
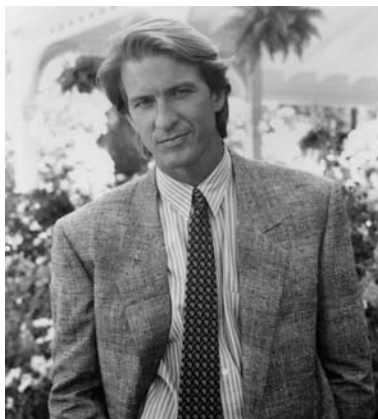
Having known Susan personally for many years, I felt I probably knew what Lisa meant because Susan, due to her professionalism and talent, is certainly a very demanding actress, but I wanted to know if that actually was what Lisa was referring to. “Could you describe a little more in what way she scared you? Are there any specifics you can share with us?”



“Susan didn’t suffer fools gladly and I was determined not to fail in her eyes. She knew her character, Maggie Gioberti, better than anyone, and I was always afraid I’d write something that Susan felt Maggie wouldn’t say. When we were building up to her marriage with Richard Channing, Cynthia Darnell and I approached her and asked if she wanted to remain a ‘Gioberti’ or become ‘Maggie Channing’. Susan replied that she (Maggie) had a terrible time as a Gioberti and would of course move forward and become Maggie Channing. I had a nightmare once where I

was on location and Susan told me all the changes I needed to make in her scenes right then. I woke up sweating. I told a friend who reminded me that wasn't a nightmare, that was actually true!" Lisa said. "Years later, I became friends with Kathryn Leigh Scott, another star of *Dark Shadows*. (We wrote a spec screenplay of her first novel, *Down and Out in Beverly Heels*, which we're currently showing to producers.) Kathryn and Susan are very good friends and at Kathryn's booksigning I ran into Susan. I must admit I got weak-kneed again but of course she was lovely."

She continued about other cast members: "Loved Lorenzo Lamas. Nice guy," Lisa continued. "So was John Callahan. Brett Cullen was great. Loved the young hunky guys, obviously," she added.



Lorenzo Lamas (left) and Brett Cullen (center) on the set of *Falcon Crest* (episode 157).
Right: A studio portrait of John Callahan (episode 158).

"The writers were terrific and I enjoyed hanging out on set, gabbing with the sound guys. We shared a similar sense of humor."

Memorable Storylines

The next topic I focused on was the storylines and characters.

I started with a question one of our longtime website editor and good friend, Shaun K. Chang, had submitted when we prepared this interview. He wanted to know which *Falcon Crest* character she particularly enjoyed writing and why?

"Angela Channing," was Lisa's answer. "I loved writing her 'quippy' sense of humor."

"What was your most memorable scene?" I wanted to know.

"I forget which show it was, but it was a final scene with Jane and Eddie Albert. His character had done something bad to Angela and was looking for forgiveness. They were heading off to the dining room for dinner and he asked what was being served. Angela: crow." She referred to the American expression "eating crow". She added: "I could tell when they shot the scene they both enjoyed that back and forth."

As I could not remember that dialog, I started a discussion with Lisa about it. I was sure I would have remembered it because it was just along the lines that I love — for all the sarcasm, something Lisa was very good at when writing Angela. After researching various script drafts thoroughly, Lisa found out that it was a night scene in Angela's study in the *Falcon Crest* Victorian Mansion in *Sweet Revenge* (episode 162 <7.07>). Unfortu-

nately, that part of the dialog was cut. My guess was that the scene had to be edited so the episode would stay in its one - hour time frame. This is something that happened many times. In my script research, I often read marvelous segments, which unfortunately did not make it to the final version for exactly that reason. It would be terrific to have them as bonus materials on DVDs at least, but this is probably a dream that will never come true since *Warner Bros. Entertainment* says it is too expensive to search for deleted scenes in their film vault.



Jane Wyman and Eddie Albert in episode 162 in Angela's study in the *Victorian Mansion*. Parts of the scene were cut.

Lisa also vividly remembered something else from the shooting of the same episode: "There's a lovely photo of me on location wearing a paper crown. You'd know better than I but I believe we were on location for Richard's son's birthday party. The little boy who played the son," she referred to Alexander Ross DeAngelis as Michael Channing, "couldn't stop crying so the director, I think it was Reza Badiyi, insisted his mother take him out of the scene, and shot around him. David Selby was quite taken aback but once the camera was rolling acted with aplomb. Anyway, I ended up with the kid's paper crown and a crew member took a photo of me. I'll see if I can dig it up and scan it for you."



A photo from Lisa's scrapbook: On the set of Michael's birthday party in the Napa Valley (June 26, 1987). Two of the picture cars can be seen in the background — Maggie's *Mercedes-Benz S-Class* and John Remick's vehicle.



She also remembered another photo the crew took: "There is also one of me in San Francisco with David Selby. I'm wearing Melissa's coat because it was cold and I hadn't brought anything warm and the costume supervisor lent me 'Melissa's' coat."

More pictures from Lisa's scrapbook (left and on the next page):

Lisa with David on Marina Boulevard in San Francisco during a break while filming scenes from episodes 164 and 165.



Lisa's earlier mentioning of *Dark Shadows* reminded me of another specific scene, the hallucination sequence from *Flying Blind* (episode 178 <7.23>), which was co-written by Cynthia Darnell and Howard Lakin. In the episode opener, Maggie is walking down the hallway, looking for Vickie. The nightmare scene was filmed in the redressed upstairs hallway set of the *Falcon Crest Victorian Mansion* on the soundstage. Maggie is running in slow motion, trying to reach Vickie at the end of the hallway, but just before she reaches her daughter, Vickie revolves out of Maggie's grasp, and Maggie finds herself facing Richard, dressed in Victorian gentlemen's clothing. The period costumes and the design of the corridor — torch lit and very gothic, with dark oil paintings on the wall, all hung askew; with low ground fog adding its eerie spell — are reminiscent of *Dark*

Shadows. It was an obvious inside joke, alluding to David's first TV series, which was basically the breakthrough in his career.

"Now that you mentioned your love of *Dark Shadows*, was that hallucination sequence your idea?" I asked.

"No, but I think it was done in homage to my love of Quentin and *Dark Shadows*," she replied.



Dark Shadows on *Falcon Crest*: Maggie is hallucinating, looking for Vickie (left and center). The only one she runs into is Richard (right). The whole sequence is *Dark Shadows* style.

In contrast to such outstanding scenes, I was also interested if there was a scene or a storyline Lisa did not like at all, not necessarily during her time on the staff.

"Maggie drowning when trying to retrieve her wedding ring caught at the bottom of the pool," she referred to the première of the final season.

Although Lisa misremembered about the ring, which was not Maggie's wedding band, but a later gift from Richard, she was so right about the horrific plot because killing off the show's most beloved heroine was probably the biggest mistake the new writers made; the loyal fans hated it, and the series fell to the bottom of the ratings in its final year.



Maggie drowns in her swimming pool: The season 9 producers' biggest mistake.

Season 7 Specifics

After discussing Lisa's likes and dislikes of the series, I came to the development of season 7. It was structured in a different way from the previous seasons. "It started out with stories that ran for four or five episodes — particularly with a rotating guest star policy with many celebrities, including Leslie Caron, Eddie Albert, Lauren Hutton, etc. Then later in the season, there was a much more long-term story, particularly with *The Thirteen* as the core element. Did the writers get negative feedback concerning the short-term storylines, or why did you decide to shift focus?"

Lisa said: "I don't remember getting negative feedback about the short-term storylines. I just remember Howard having the idea about *The Thirteen* and our running with it."

Not only in the aforementioned way was season 7 different from the previous ones, but also because there was no real hiatus between season 6 and 7. In the anticipation of a writers' strike, Jeff Freilich wanted to get at least the first twelve episodes, which were mainly shot in the Wine Country, in the can. "Did that cause the writers to scramble to get stories ready right away?" I quoted another question Shaun had submitted.

"Oh, yeah... I started on staff in February and we worked through the spring, summer and fall — into winter. No break. Howard and I co-wrote a script to save time."

I figured she was talking about *The Key to Angela* later in the season (episode 179 <7.24>).

"So what was the collaborative process between the actors and the writers that season?" I asked for more details.

"We had script readings for every show where the actors could give their input," Lisa described. "They would also come to the writers' offices and ask questions about motivation, ask for line changes, etc."

My next question also concerned the outline for season 7. "A few years ago, Jeff gave us a photocopy of the season 7 bible for the first 22 episodes, the original number of shows ordered by CBS," I began. "When did you learn that the network finally wanted to have 28 episodes, and how difficult was it to restructure the story arcs to extend the season?"

"I have no memory of that!" Lisa said. "It must have happened before I was hired. Unless *The Thirteen* story arc was a result of the additional episodes."

I came back to those original plans: "That bible draft ended with the episode, in which Maggie (Susan Sullivan) begins to receive anonymous letters hinting that Chase (previously played by Robert Foxworth) is still alive. When the episodes were outlined, those ideas were moved to what was then believed to be the next to last show, *False Faces* (episode 176 <7.21>). The writer's draft created a cliffhanger with Maggie, while window shopping with her friend Alison (Maggie Cooper) in Tuscany, thinking she just saw Chase around the corner. It was written by Rebecca Pogrow and Susan Estabrook, but I guess you are very familiar with it as the original draft underwent many changes, obviously made by experienced staff members. Anyway, in later rewrites, the writer's draft was totally changed, dropping any reference to Chase and any allusion that he might be alive. Was Chase's return discussed in your staff meetings, and what kind of plans did you originally have?"

"You think I have a better memory than I actually do!" Lisa said. "The decision to drop Chase from the storyline might have been made because the actor wanted too much money to come back," she guessed.

Another hallmark of *Falcon Crest* were its many celebrity guests over the series' entire life cycle. But season 7 in particular, had more special guests than any other season. "There were many rumors of other big names being taken into consideration for various rôles," I stated. "Do you remember any names and possible storylines you played around with in your writers' meetings?"

"No, I don't. Sorry."

Lisa's Leaving the Series

All good things have to come to an end, but unfortunately Lisa's creative influence ceased untimely when the showrunner was removed.

"I know that Jeff intended to promote you to the position of an executive story editor or executive story consultant in the 1988-89 season," I said. "I assume if Jeff had stayed aboard, you would have continued with *Falcon Crest*. Were you fired by the new producers, or did you want to leave when Jeff and Howard were removed from the producing staff?"

Lisa pointed out: "The writers' strike occurred between seasons 7 and 8 and I was not asked back. If Jeff had stayed aboard, I would have continued. He was a great boss, a great guy."

I wanted to know if she continued to watch the show after she left: "How did the regime change affect the show from your point of view?"

"Once Maggie died I never watched the show again," Lisa expressed her disappointment.

"Did you keep any memorabilia?" I wanted to know.

"I have a *Falcon Crest* jacket, I saved every draft of every script I wrote, I have a *Falcon Crest* decanter." Later, Lisa added: "After I wrote that I remembered that I gave the *Falcon Crest* jacket to my grandmother, who was also a huge fan of the show. Sadly, it was stolen when she moved into a nursing home. However — and I will double-check — I think I had a second jacket which I gave to my parents. I told you I have a rotten memory but I think Mom showed me the jacket when I last visited her in Florida. I think I also have a *Falcon Crest* tee shirt that says something about surviving location at Napa."

Her mentioning the script drafts was the key word for me to explain that the late Chao-Li and his wife donated their scripts to our fan club, and we established the *Chao-Li Chi Memorial Library*. "Lots of staff and crew members have contributed to it, and we are about to establish various special collections," I said and asked her if we might get copies of production materials from her.

"Well, I do have all my scripts as well as my written notes, my outlines, the weekly ratings. If you're going to be in L.A., I'll show you everything and we can copy anything of interest to you," Lisa generously offered.

Other Projects

Towards the end of our interview, we discussed Lisa's other projects, starting with a comparison between the big drama series she worked for.

"What were the differences between writing for *Dallas*, *Knots Landing* and *Falcon Crest*?
"In part it was how the various showrunners ran the writers' room, how much control each showrunner gave to his or her writers. I was in casting sessions for *Knots Landing* but not for the other two shows. Same with production meetings. I did all my own re-writes on all three shows. Interacted with the actors, but less so on *Dallas* than the other two shows."

"Speaking of *Knots Landing*, one of our website editors heard the original concept for the reunion movie was that Don Murray would return as Sid Fairgate's twin brother," I referred to Shaun again. "Is that true? And how difficult was it to write the reunion movie, and how did they go about choosing which characters to bring back?"

Lisa pointed out: "I have no memory of considering Don Murray's return as Sid Fairgate's twin. I wish it were true. I recently met him and he's delightful. Michael [Filerman] and David [Jacobs] told Ann Marcus and myself who was coming back. The brilliant Ann came up with the spine of the movie and then we figured it all out working from her home office. Then I wrote part one and she wrote part two. Ann won an *Emmy Award* for her writing on *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. The *Emmy* was in her office and as we talked story I would stare at her *Emmy* feeling very much in awe of her and how talented she was."



Finally, I wanted to know what Lisa is doing nowadays.

"I'm currently writing for *Days of Our Lives*. I wrote a mystery novel, *Killer Ratings* (Ignition Press), and am currently writing the sequel (no title yet) about a murder on the set of a *Falcon Crest* like show. I'm not kidding!"

Lisa Seidman in 2015.

It was a great pleasure for me to interview Lisa — and one thing is for sure: On my next trip to Los Angeles, I will see her because she is wonderful to talk to and I would be delighted to finally meet her in person.

"And I you!" Lisa replied.