

Classic Hollywood For Bruce Boxleitner, a personal code shaped by Marshal Dillon



Actor Bruce Boxleitner at Hallmark Channel's Studio City headquarters. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

By **SUSAN KING**

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You might say Bruce Boxleitner owes his career to Marshal Dillon.

As a young actor in Hollywood, Boxleitner was taken under the wing of TV superstar James Arness, who had played the heroic marshal on "Gunsmoke."

"He changed my life," said Boxleitner. "He was my biggest influence."

But Boxleitner, 64, really didn't know the extent of Arness' influence until decades later. In fact, it wasn't until after Arness died in 2011 that Boxleitner learned the actor has been instrumental in having him cast as his nephew Luke Macahan in the 1976 ABC western movie "The Macahans."

"Jim Arness had the final say on who was going to play his nephew," noted Boxleitner, who had had a small part in a 1975 episode of "Gunsmoke." "ABC was pushing another actor. But he saw my screen test."

"The Macahans" led to the 1977 spinoff miniseries "How the West Was Won" and a 1978-79 TV series. Boxleitner would later team with Arness on the 1988 remake of "Red River" and 1994's "Gunsmoke: One Man's Justice."

"I learned a great deal from him," Boxleitner said during a break in production of his latest series, the Hallmark Channel's "Debbie Macomber's Cedar Cove."

Not only acting lessons, he said, but also life lessons such as how to behave when you are a star of a TV series.

"What is your responsibility?," noted Boxleitner. "How is the day going to go if you are throwing fits and being an idiot and how to be prepared to show up and have a personality everybody wants to work with."

It's a code Boxleitner still tries to live by.

Two years ago, Boxleitner received the Western Heritage Award from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. (Boxleitner's even written two sci-fi novels with Western themes, "Frontier Earth" and "Searcher.")

"I have known Bruce for quite some time," said Wyatt McCrea, chairman of the museum's Western Heritage Committee and grandson of actor Joel McCrea. "He hearkens back to the era of some of the great western actors like my grandfather. Aside from being a great actor, in my opinion, he epitomizes the Western value system standards. He comes from the old school. You can count on him by his word alone."

Old school maybe, but he embraces the digital world too. He has a devoted Twitter following thanks to his popular TV series "Scarecrow and Mrs. King" and the sci-fi adventure "Babylon 5" as well as for his role as Alan Bradley and Tron in the 1982 classic sci-fi thriller "Tron" and the 2010 sequel, "Tron: Legacy."

And his fans are now tweeting about the drama series "Cedar Cove," which kicked off its second season July 19. Based on the popular book franchise by Macomber, it stars Andie MacDowell as a municipal court judge in a bucolic town. Boxleitner plays stalwart Bob Beldon, who owns the local bed-and-breakfast Thyme and Tide with his wife, Peggy (Barbara Niven).

Though Beldon's one of the town's good guys, the first season hinted that there may be a darker side to him.

"This season, everybody goes through a major transformation," the tall, rangy actor said while relaxing in Hallmark offices in Studio City. "We find out a lot about Bob. He has some deep issues that are going to be resurrected."

Noted executive producer Sue Tenney: "Around Episodes 4, 5 and 6, there are some quite interesting twists and turns for Bob."

The actor jokes that he was a punk at Prospect High School in Mount Prospect, Ill. A poor student who had failed to get on the basketball team, Boxleitner wandered into the fall play auditions his sophomore year. "I got the lead in this play, 'Agatha Christie's Ten Little Indians,' and from there I was bit."

He also found an early mentor in English and drama teacher Patricia Lukowitz. "She was a marvelous woman — tough, but she needed to be with all of us punks," he said, laughing. "She saw something in me that nobody else did."

Through her influence, Boxleitner got into the drama school at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. He landed the leading role in "Status Quo Vadis," a popular comedy-drama that had been a long-running hit in Chicago, when it opened at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., in 1972. He made his Broadway debut in the play in 1973. The production, which also starred Ted Danson, closed after one night.

"It gave me one of my biggest show business lessons," said Boxleitner. "I would say to any young actor with any modicum of success to take a deep breath and sit back and don't go buy that new car."

"Status Quo Vadis" is his only Broadway show. But he did do summer stock, including a tour of Ohio and Atlanta in a comedy called "My Daughter Is Rated X," which starred the wisecracking Paul Lynde, who had a huge fan base from the game show "Hollywood Squares,"

"Three thousand people turned out to this play in Atlanta because of him being the center square," said Boxleitner.

Because he "really wasn't burning down New York City," Boxleitner decided to try his luck in Los Angeles.

"I got enough money to come here on a one-way ticket," he said. "I had four or five phone numbers of friends and an agent. Slowly, but surely, I got little parts."

And then he met Marshal Dillon.

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