

Boxleitner is water-logged in NBC's "House of Secrets"

By John Crook

Any actor worth his salt is ready to suffer for his art. Being drowned, however, should be considered above and beyond the call of duty. Just ask Bruce Boxleitner, who stars with real-life love Melissa Gilbert in "House of Secrets," airing Monday, Nov. 1, on NBC.

In the psychological thriller, a remake of the 1955 French film "Diabolique" transplanted to contemporary New Orleans, a battered wife (Gilbert) and betrayed mistress (Kate Vernon) decide to kill a conniving doctor (Boxleitner). The plan: Drug him, drown him in a bathtub, then dump him in a garden pond.

Phoning from Tucson, Ariz., where he is filming the fifth "Gunsmoke" TV movie with James Arness, the actor says he knew from the beginning his role would involve some grueling moments.

"When this [project] first came to me, I went out and found 'Diabolique' for Melissa... a birthday present, at the time. I kept thinking as I watched that bathtub scene, 'Oh, my God, how are we going to do this?' There's no way to do it but to do it. There's no

Hollywood trickery.

"Being drowned is not fun. It goes against everything that we as upright, walking mammals who don't have gills (feel), against everything that all these years of evolution (have wrought)," he says. "Do you realize what water is in your eyes — for hours? I drowned for, like six hours, with my eyes open and... 'full eye' contact lens — and the irritation from the water getting underneath them. And, of course, it was dirty water because I was still in my clothes and my shoes. And when you go down in water backwards, the water just floods up your nose."

Things got worse when he had to be dumped into the pond. "I had a bad ear infection for a while," Boxleitner recalls, adding with a laugh, "You know what frogs do in that water."

The summer filming in and around New Orleans took its toll not just on the actor. "The scene of the initial drowning... was shot around four in the morning," he says. "Melissa fainted, she went right out that night, just dead from exhaustion, and we had to revive her with oxygen."

Despite that, Gilbert's plucky character drives most of the movie, and she takes the phone long enough to talk about her character, Marlon Ravenel. "When you're playing a Southern woman, it's a very easy trap to fall into, 'playing the shrinkin' vi'let,' very Blanche Dubois," she says in an exaggerated drawl.

"(Marlon) was sort of an amalgam of Tennessee Williams characters, but more than anything she was Maggie (from 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof'), who was very strong. If I had played it too slimping and weak, it wouldn't have worked, because somehow I had to find the strength to take what was mine and kill the man I loved, in order to save what I had."

The scene in which Marlon must serve her husband lemonade laced with sleeping powder is one of the movie's most riveting moments, and Gilbert says dryly, "That was quite a moment for us. It's one of my favorite scenes ever that I've done. Can I serve lemonade at the wedding, dear?" she asks her co-star and fiancé.

"No lemonade!" Boxleitner says firmly, as he takes the phone back. "I swear to God, it was hours of that, and my hands were so sticky!"

Speaking again of the thriller, in which virtually nothing is what it seems, Boxleitner throws in an extra wrinkle about his character, Dr. Frank Ravenel. "I don't think there is a Frank Ravenel," he says. "I questioned whether he was really a doctor. I think he (may have) killed the doctor and taken his identity."

On a personal level, Boxleitner says he originally called the recently divorced Gilbert at the suggestion of his ex-wife. The co-stars became engaged in September, on the anniversary of their first date.

"I don't know why; it just popped out of my mouth, I guess," Boxleitner says. Gilbert, 29, has a 4-year-old son, Cody. Boxleitner, 43, has two sons: 13-year-old Sam, and David, who turns 8 on Nov. 16. They live on a ranch in Hidden Hills, Calif.

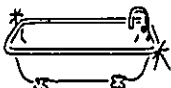
**BATHTUB & TILE
REFINISHING**
WRITTEN WARRANTY
SAVE 80% OVER REPLACEMENT

\$159⁰⁰
Standard
Tub

Appliances • Sinks • Tile • Countertop Reglazing
• Chip and Scratch Repair

TOP QUALITY

Free
Estimates



Tried and True
Sears Approved
Materials
Field Tested
for 20 Years
You've
Called the Best.
Now
Call the Best

FREE
CAULKING
EXPIRES
12-15-93
WITH COUPON



427-3838