

Landon, Michael (1936-1991)

Encyclopedia Article

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Contents

Landon, Michael (1936-1991) Encyclopedia Article.....	1
Contents.....	2
Landon, Michael (1936-1991).....	3

Landon, Michael (1936-1991)

A talented and popular television actor, writer, director, and producer, Michael Landon exploited his versatility over nearly 40 years, mostly in series and made-for-TV dramas that reflected old-fashioned, small-town sentiment and traditional family values. He aimed his productions at those segments of viewers who were "hungry for shows in which people say something meaningful," he explained. "I want people to laugh and cry, not just stare at the TV."

Michael Landon was born Eugene Orowitz on October 31, 1936 in Queens, New York. He grew up in Collingswood, New Jersey, where he excelled in high school sports, and he attended the University of Southern California on an athletic scholarship. After an injury, he turned his attention toward acting. He played a number of TV roles and starred in the campy 1957 film *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* and a handful of B-grade films aimed at the teenage market.

In 1959 he began his 14-year run as Little Joe on the popular TV Western *Bonanza*. From 1974 through 1982 Landon produced the sentimental, family program *Little House on the Prairie*. In addition to performing in the lead role, he assumed the writing and directing of many of the episodes. In 1984 he created *Highway to Heaven*, an episodic series of stories about the value of love and kindness in overcoming life's adversity, and again acted in, wrote, directed, and produced the series. The Academy of Television Arts and Science presented him with his only Emmy, the Academy Founders Award, in 1982. In 1991 he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He died on July 1, leaving a wife and nine children from his three marriages. He was 54.

Further Reading:

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Ito, Tom. *Conversations with Michael Landon*. Chicago, Contemporary Books, 1992.

Wilson, Cheryl Landon, with Jane Scovell. *I Promised My Dad: An Intimate Portrait of Michael Landon by His Eldest Daughter*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1992.