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CALENDAR

ELLEN JASKOL / Los Angeles Times



Michael Murphy, standing, as Jack Tanner, greets Tennessee Gov. Ned Ray McWhorter in

Nashville. Far right, State Sen. Milton Hamilton, D-Tenn.; left corner, lobbyist Bill Williams.

TANNER

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The particular scene at the Bullpen bar—intended for the second episode, "Tanner '88: For Real" airing in March and April—was the actual taping of the Easter Seals telethon last Tuesday night. The event was attended by a host of country music stars and Tennessee pols, including Democratic Gov. Ned McWhorter.

A "Tanner" camera crew was also present. Murphy, who looks as if he played in one of those Kennedy miniseries but didn't, was doubly anxious. He wanted to do his improvisational scene and have dinner with his girlfriend, actress Wendy Crewson, who also plays the divorced Tanner's girlfriend.

As Tanner, the actor also wanted to hand out buttons and brochures and shake hands with the governor.

"Guess it's time for some guerrilla theater, and my little speech," said Murphy, who played the campaign manager in "Nashville."

"I'll give you my best Nancy look," quipped Crewson.

After an hour's wait, Murphy/Tanner was introduced as an actor playing a politician. He wasn't given time for the speech. Instead of speaking, he got to auction off Hank Williams Jr.'s vest and boots, and a drawing of Waylon Jennings' wife.

As Tanner, Murphy declined to try on the vest. Kennedys never did that, he confided later. They "never wore silly hats."

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The Making of a 'Candidate'

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Standing in the wings of a smoke-filled cellar nightclub here, the tall, splendid-looking man with a thicket of graying sandy hair is a study in coiled tension. He rocks on his heels. He does deep knee-bends. A muscle twitches in his right jaw.

It is actor Michael Murphy playing former Rep. Jack Tanner, who has become the eighth Democratic presidential candidate in the new

By JUDITH MICHAELSON,
Times Staff Writer

HBO limited series, "Tanner '88." The series begins tonight at 10, deliberately timed for the eve of the New Hampshire primary. (See related Howard Rosenberg story on Page 12.)

Written by Doonesbury cartoonist Garry B. Trudeau and directed by Robert Altman (the movies

"MASH" and "Nashville"), who are co-producers, "Tanner" tracks the candidate who goes from being "the dark horse" to being "for real."

Mixing fact and fiction, tonight's episode, "Tanner '88: The Dark Horse" also contains the real-life GOP candidates, Pat Robertson and Kansas Sen. Bob Dole, and Democrat Gary Hart—all of whom interact with Tanner.

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TANNER: A Trudeau and Altman Presidential Creation

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The Making of the President, 1988 is one thing. The making of a series about a fictional presidential candidate is something else. Or is it?

"Foremost," Trudeau said in a late-night interview from New York, "this is an examination of the political process: What happens to a decent man subjected to the indecent pressures of a national campaign."

"It's the most extraordinarily grueling ordeal any public figure who wants to be President has to put himself through," Trudeau continued, "having to reinvent oneself in terms of 30-second sound bytes . . . and preparing to think and speak to the tune of pushing people's hot emotional buttons. . . ."

"It's almost like we're asking what Robert Redford says in the last line of 'The Candidate': 'What do we do now?'"

The first "Tanner" episode was taped mostly in New Hampshire. "Tanner" crews also taped Reps. Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) and Jack Kemp (R-N.Y.).

No candidate appears without consent, both production and campaign officials say. Paul Jacobson, Dole's press secretary in New England noted that when Dole was approached, "the senator kind of chuckled and said, 'Why not?'"

That was the first time Dole used his pun—"We're beating the bushes"—on camera, Jacobson said.

Like a smart politician refusing to tag himself with labels, Altman won't describe "Tanner" as either reality theater or sitcom or even docudrama. "You can tell the truth more by using fiction. It may not be the facts, but it's the truth. . . ."

"It's not a lot different than Garry Trudeau does with Doonesbury or Edgar Doctorow did with 'Ragtime,'" Altman noted. "A lot of fiction has been done throughout history like this. This is the first time we've ever done it in electronic media."

A Hemingway-esque figure, Altman said he used videotape "to give it that edge. If you're going to satirize the singer, it helps to know the song."

The satire also includes "jaded" primary voters and "character cop" reporters.

The second episode, airs in two parts, the first half-hour on March 15, a week after Super Tuesday and the big Southern primaries.

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The story line calls for Tanner to finish in fourth in New Hampshire

and third on March 8. So Tanner, at the point of the current taping, is into the main stretch, seeking money and support in country-music country. (Tanner had to bypass the Iowa caucuses because Trudeau and Altman didn't consummate their deal until late last year.)

"Tanner" may have further life as a series of specials. Like political campaigns, the decision whether to continue involves money and planning. Even as Iowans were caucusing last Monday, HBO executives in New York were viewing the first "Tanner."

"We liked it very much," said Bridget Potter, HBO's senior vice president for original programming. "Unless we totally fall apart from a business standpoint, we will be going forward."

If the series continues through the campaign, Altman said, candidate Tanner will arrive in Hollywood in April.

The lines between the real and the unreal blur on-camera and off. Besides the real candidates, who are treated to softball remarks by Tanner, there's G. David Hughes, professor of business administration at the University of North Carolina running an actual focus group of New Hampshire citizens.

Comments about the candidates are voiced as well. In the script, a farmer calls Gephardt a "blow-dried blowhard." A Tanner campaign aide mocks Massachusetts' economic recovery saying Gov. Michael Dukakis would be "selling elevator shoes in Boston" were it not for "Reagan's buildup." There are references to Hart's alleged dalliances and Jesse Jackson's illegitimate birth.

Trudeau pointed to the real campaign: "It's hard to imagine a presidential campaign where campaign workers don't take shots at each other."

Altman said he's "heard a lot of people in New Hampshire saying those things. We didn't make any of it up."

Rep. Joe Kennedy (D-Mass.) gets razed too in a fictional incident involving his overdependence on Tanner's female campaign manager, T.J. Cavanaugh, who tells him he's "beginning to sound like Prince Charles."

Altman said Kennedy is "part of the dynasty and that goes with the territory." Trudeau said that "in subsequent episodes there'll be more about T.J. and less about Kennedy."

Altogether the series appears to capture the look and feel of exhausting cocoon-like campaigns, although a deputy to a local con-

gressman who was an extra pointed out that the buttons were too large and bore no union label. Settings abound with used coffee and cigarettes, with walkie-talkies, phone banks and an NBC tote bag. "Garry has connections at NBC," a production assistant said, grinning, referring to Trudeau's wife, Jane Pauley of the "Today" show.

But is it too real? Is Tanner, who marched in Selma, who holds a doctorate in history, who left Congress to spend time with his young daughter when she had Hodgkins disease, too likable?

Is the voter in danger of being confused? Will "Tanner" provoke a write-in vote by citizens disgusted with the real field—the way voters wrote in comedian Pat Paulsen's name in 1968? (Paulsen recently said that Hubert Humphrey told him that the write-in of 200,000 votes cost him the election to Richard Nixon.)

"We really have gone to some pains not to present a gag campaign," noted Trudeau. "We're not Pat Paulsen."

"We want 'Tanner' to crackle with authenticity, we want to give it verisimilitude, but we certainly don't want to let 'fiction' spill out beyond the program."

Still as Murphy/Tanner talks off-camera about overcoming difficulties wading through campaign crowds in New Hampshire, or as he discusses the Reagan Administration, it's hard to tell if he's speaking as the actor or the candidate.

On the set, Murphy was asked if any of the actual presidential candidates had refused to participate in the making of "Tanner":

"The only person who we approached who was reluctant and was sort of a pain in the neck has been Sen. Albert Gore [D-Tenn.]. We'd sort of call and they'd say, 'What's in it for us?'"

Murphy paused with exquisite political timing: "I'm figuring out a way to nail him." He laughed. "Maybe I just did."

Mark Armour, press secretary for the Gore campaign, said the "Tanner" people misquoted. "I raised a scheduling conflict. I also asked viewership figures. . . ."

And Altman occasionally sounds like a campaign manager. "Oh, he's liberal," Altman said of Tanner's politics. "Each time something happens to him, he manages to live up to 'the challenge.' He's level-headed and conservative the way Rep. Lee Hamilton [D-Ind. who co-chaired the Iran-Contra hearings] is. I think Tanner's more electable."