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Tim Matheson Is Mr. Wonderful: Even His Mother Says So.

BY SUSAN FILE

Every girl I know who saw *Animal House* wished she had been laid by the inimitable Otter. This is probably because no one I know ever encountered such a master of the art of seduction on any college campus in America. "Mr. Thoughtful, with a dozen roses for y-o-u," cooed Otter as he stepped blithely into the room at the one-shot motel where the neo-Nazis of the Omega House were waiting to give him his comeuppance.

It's hard to believe a character like Otter ever existed, but he most definitely did. Chris Miller, one of the three writers of *Animal House*, knew a guy called—you got it—Otter, back at Dartmouth in the Sixties and wrote him into the script as the definitive rush chairman of the Deltas. Finding someone to play the part in the movie was another story. Where is the young Cary Grant, now that we need him, to uplift the spirit and deface the moral fiber of the women of America?

Director John Landis almost puked when an 8x10 glossy of Tim Matheson showed up on his desk when he was playing his own version of pledge director in casting the Deltas for his first major studio picture (*Kentucky Fried Movie* was his first big-screen effort). His reaction to the photo of a smiling hippie cowboy was, "I don't want *this* guy," remembering Matheson in hackneyed television series and movies-of-the-week. *The Quest* was supposed to be a hip, updated version of John Ford's classic *The Searchers*; even though it was voted the "most violent" show of the 1976 fall season by the National Citizen's Committee for Broadcasting (usually a sure sign of killer ratings), NBC slotted it opposite the debut season of *Charlie's Angels*, and Tim Matheson riding across the wide open spaces week after week in search of a lost sister kidnapped by savage Indians was no competition for the Farrah

phenomenon, and the show disappeared after 13 weeks. So much for Tim's first really big shot at the small screen, and this year he's thanking his lucky stars for such small favors.

Landis is the first to admit his mistake. Despite the horror of first impressions, he allowed Tim to read for the part of Otter and found him to be exactly the combination of cocksman, looks, charm and intelligence he wanted. As a relative neophyte to the world of studio-financed pictures, the 28-year-old director needed to assemble a little repertory company of outstanding young actors to help him pull off the right blend of reality and absurdity he had in mind. "I wanted a good actor who was good looking and could give me that bullshit sincerity and maintain that twinkle in his eye," Landis recalled. "And, Tim is a very professional actor. He's grown up in film and television, so hitting his mark was no problem." The two have become each other's biggest fan.

Tim Matheson really made it with *Animal House*. He'll be 31 in December and can finally admit it. No longer having to lie about your age to producers, directors, casting agents and reporters is a good early indication of success for an actor—it means that people who hire you finally know who you are and want you anyway. Only big stars, like Jane Fonda and Jack Nicholson and Warren Beatty are allowed to act their age or any fraction thereof if the part is pleasing enough to them. It's all a matter of box office appeal. Aspirants on all other levels are forced into fibbing or forging new dates on drivers licenses and resumes for the mere opportunity of auditioning for the current rage of 18- to 24-year-old John Travolta types. Coming out of this closet must be a kind of relief for a guy like Tim, who's been carrying the cross of "child actor" and "professional juvenile" for the past 18 years across TV and movie screens.

He's been acting since the age of 12 and has actually been making a decent living at the game since high school. I must have seen him a hundred times on my favorite kid TV shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Twilight Zone* before I noticed him in *Animal House*. Maybe it has something to do with coming of age.

When I first spotted our matinee idol, he was wearing a bowling shirt. He had just finished making a film called *The Dreamer*, in which he plays a Rocky of the pin set, and he was still putting a few hours in at the lanes every now and then to improve his high score of 224. Not quite the Ivy Leaguer I had expected to sweep me off my feet, but he was certainly charming.

"Mmmm, Yeah. I'm like that sometimes. I've got a lotta that stuff," was the response when I asked him if he's a lot like Otter. By this time we had consumed a six pack of Heineken's (light), and our minds were drifting on to respective obligations. He's building his own solar home out in the mountains above Malibu and is really excited about getting some work done out there before he starts his next project, which he's *really* excited about. (Tim gets *really* excited a lot.) No wonder—it's Steven Spielberg's new film, *1941*, in which Los Angeles thinks the Japs are attacking them instead of Pearl harbor and goes nuts. Tim gets to do another kind of Cary Grant in this one—he's a reckless Lothario whose attempt to score with a girl who gets hot in airplanes triggers an air raid alert. Details on *1941* are still a little sketchy (Spielberg likes to surprise people; he won't be uttering a word on the subject until 1980), but with John Belushi already set as a kamikaze pilot, Toshiro Mifune operating a submarine lurking somewhere off the shores of Santa Monica and Tim tackling the