

TV Sunday

By MICHAEL GILTZ

The man who performed magic with 'Moonlighting' in the '80s is back for a 90s encore. —and about time. For his next prime-time trick it's ...

A SNEAKY ROMANCE

The creator of "MOONLIGHTING," Glenn Gordon Caron has heard the sweetest words an artist can hear.

"Les Moonves [the head of CBS] came to me and said, 'I want you to do television and I'll pretty much let you do whatever you want,'" remembers Caron. "And I hadn't heard that in a long time."

Few people ever do. But as the creator of "Moonlighting" — the brilliant romantic comedy of the mid-'80s — Caron has an industry cachet that only a handful of TV stalwarts like Steven Bochco and David E. Kelley enjoy.

So Caron is returning to prime time this fall with the romantic drama "Now and Again" (Fridays at 9 p.m.).

When Caron cast "Moonlighting," he plucked Bruce Willis out of obscurity and resurrected Cybill Shepherd's moribund career.

Sparks flew — sometimes even on-camera. Willis and Shepherd's legendary, infighting made headlines and turned troubled sets into a TV-reporting staple.

"Moonlighting" strove for and actually achieved the witty, sophisticated air of the classic "Thin Man" detective comedies starring William Powell and Myrna Loy. Caron's script production may have been painfully slow, but the scripts he produced were gems.

And Caron insists that "every day we did 'Moonlighting' I kissed the ground that we happened to get these two people."

Caron then turned to movies, his first love. He was certain his second feature, Wilder Napalm (1993) — starring Dennis Quaid and Debra Winger — would be a smash hit.

But the offbeat tale of two brothers who can start fires with their minds was barely released.

"The movie failed because it was too bizarre for most people, I suppose," says Caron. "But I still love it and I'm glad that I did it."

Finally, after years of phone calls and entreaties from Warren Beatty, Caron gave in and agreed to direct a remake of Love Affair (1994). It was his way out of what Caron called "movie jail."

Rumors soon surfaced on the set that Beatty and Caron were involved in a tug-of-war and that Beatty was editing the film himself. The movie bombed.

"Love Affair probably isn't my movie," says Caron politely. "Well, you know



Just friends: Glenn Gordon Caron directs Jennifer Aniston in his most recent flick, Picture Perfect, a romantic comedy.

Warren. He's a very strong personality and he had very definite ideas about what he wanted to do and we didn't always agree. I wish it had been a better movie and a better experience, but it wasn't, so what are you gonna do?"

Caron's first movie was Clean and Sober (1988), a serious drama about an alcoholic that proved Caron wasn't a one-trick pony — and gave Michael Keaton credibility as an actor that changed his career.

And Caron's most recent flick, Picture Perfect — a minor romantic comedy starring Jennifer Aniston — proves again that he's got a magic touch with casting.

Caron fought with

"Every day we did 'Moonlighting' I kissed the ground that we happened to get these two people (Bruce Willis and Cybill Shepherd)."

Twentieth Century Fox to put Jay Mohr in the lead (this was before Jerry Maguire came out, featuring Mohr in a prominent role).

Now Fox has placed Mohr at the center of the controversial sitcom "Action," perhaps the funniest, most scathing new comedy of the fall.

"Well, that's been the story of my life," says the 46-year-old Caron, who lives in Connecticut with his wife and three children.

"I very much wanted Michael Keaton to do Clean and Sober and at the time Warners was very against it. One of the big executives said, 'Michael Keaton! God, he's a year away from a television series.'"

"So of course we did Clean and Sober and Tim Burton saw it and said, 'I think he's Batman.' There are always those wonderful ironies. Same thing with Bruce Willis on 'Moonlighting.' ABC desperately didn't want him."

Maybe now the networks

will learn to trust Caron. He's starting to trust them — casting Eric Close as the lead of "Now and Again" wasn't his idea.

"To be perfectly honest, Eric was actually a CBS suggestion. He had starred in 'The Magnificent Seven' with them. I didn't know who he was, but he came in and I was just immediately smitten by him. There's a real rascally quality there and obviously he's very skilled."

Close plays Michael Wiseman, a frumpy, middle-aged insurance executive (played by John Goodman in the pilot) who's hit by a subway train, only to have the government transfer his brain into the superhuman man-

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"Now and Again" stars Eric Close (below) as Michael Wiseman, a man with a brain transplant. Picture right: The catch in the series is that Wiseman must never contact his wife (Margaret Colin, left) or daughter (Heather Matarazzo, right). Wiseman's boss is played by Dennis Haysbert (far right).



it for people. And also, there's a certain amount of 'discovery going on,' to be honest with you."

Despite a history of squeezing out scripts at a snail-like pace (some seasons of "Moonlighting" featured more repeats than new shows), Caron insists he's ready for the grind and quickened pace of prime time.

"Yeah, everything on "Moonlighting" went through my typewriter for a very, very long time," admits Caron. "But that was more than 10 years ago. It's hard for me to look back and say it was all by necessity or there was no egomania involved."

Caron also adamantly says he won't try repeating the style of his signature hit.

"I've not enjoyed the level of success that I had with "Moonlighting" and "Clean and Sober," says Caron. "And you hope to do that again. But you can't live your life chasing it because it'll make you nuts."

"What will also drive you nuts is second-guessing the decisions of studios, networks and even yourself."

"I actually turned 'Hill Street Blues' down," says Caron about one of the landmark dramas in television history.

"Steve Bochco called me in. They'd done the pilot called 'Hill Street Station.' They showed it to me and said, 'We want you to produce this show.' I was about 24 or 25. A puppy, I said, 'Well, you killed the wrong guy at the end. [Charles Haid, whose character was later kept alive for the run of the series.] And you'll never last.'"

"They said, 'Really, what are you gonna do?' I said, 'I'm going to do the TV series "Breaking Away." Caron laughs.

"I have a real golden gut for these things."

"I actually turned 'Hill Street Blues' down. I said 'You killed the wrong guy at the end. And you'll never last.'"

(Dennis Haysbert) sings the Carpenters' "Close to You" (Wiseman is falling in love with his new appearance) and they all burst into applause when he peeks down his pajamas to "check out his package."

"Made in the U.S.A.!" exclaims his boss while the others burst into applause. Despite those loopy touches, "Now and Again" is more of a romantic drama, with the triangle of Wiseman (who can't tell his wife he's still alive), his wife and her nebbishy but appealing lawyer (Gerrit Graham).

"It's really a sneaky romance," agrees Caron, who's just started filming episodes two through thirteen here in New York.

"CBS wrote one of those press releases that the networks generate where they try and sum up an experience in three sentences and they wrote action/drama. And I said, 'No, no, no, no. It's not an action/drama. God, are we making a promise we're never gonna keep if we say that.'"

"They said, 'Well, what is it?' I said, 'Well, it's an action/drama/comedy/romance. And I really believe that.'"

"I think: part of what makes the pilot work is how much is withheld. You don't watch it and go, 'Oh I know exactly what this is and exactly where it's going,' which I think is good. So I don't wanna ruin

ufactured body" of a younger man. In return, he agrees to work as a secret agent.

The catch: Wiseman must never contact his wife (Margaret Colin) or daughter (Heather Matarazzo) Welcome to the Dollhouse) again.

Two key scenes set the tone of the show. In one, Goodman falls onto the tracks and is hurled forward by the subway, moving towards the camera in surreal slow-motion that's funny and — thanks to the puzzled, confused expression on Goodman's face — touching as well.

In the second, Wiseman is standing in front of a mirror, marveling at his handsome youthful features. Behind two-way glass, a team of scientists are thrilled with his response to the body they created.

Wiseman's future boss