

New Soap Dawns

By CAROLYN HINSEY

Why would the most successful producer in television history create a soap opera? Especially in 1997, when daytime ratings are at their lowest in years?

"I'll tell you what happened," says Aaron Spelling, whose "Sunset Beach" debuts tomorrow (NBC/Ch. 4, noon). "I got a call from [NBC West Coast President] Don Ohlmeyer saying, 'Would you think about doing a daytime show?' And I said, 'What?' He said, 'I think it would be fun, Aaron. Maybe you could bring some prime-time values to daytime.'"

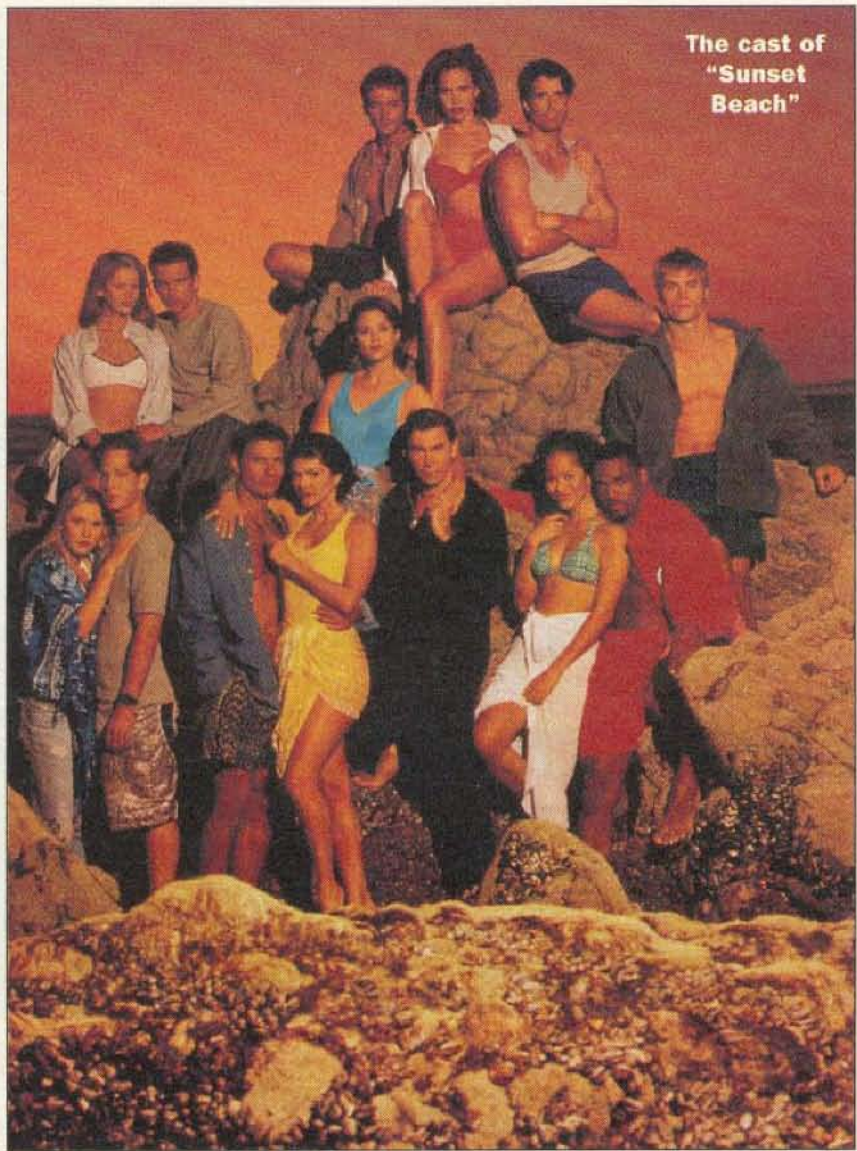
With 3,000 hours of programming to his credit — including the current prime-time shows "Melrose Place," "Beverly Hills, 90210," "7th Heaven" and "Savannah" — Spelling was clearly a logical choice.

He accepted the challenge. "I love [co-creator] Bob Guza, who's our head writer," Spelling says. "And I knew [co-creator] Chuck Pratt from 'Melrose.' Working with them again is great."

Ohlmeyer then asked Spelling to prepare a "bible," which is soap speak for long-term story outline. "I'm used to prime time," continues Spelling, laughing. "The 'Dynasty' bible was 20 pages. The 'Sunset Beach' bible is 340. We met for *days* talking about all the characters and what could happen to them. Now, here's how much I know about daytime, you mustn't laugh. Don called me and said, 'We're picking up your show.' I said, 'Don, is it going to be 13 [episodes]? Is it going to be 22? Can we get started?' 'Aaron,' he said, 'This is *daytime*. We're picking it up for 260 episodes.' I almost died."

Spelling and company then began hiring daytime veterans at every level. Executive producer Gary Tomlin came from "All My Children." Supervising producer Hope Harmel Smith was lured from "The Bold and the Beautiful." Even hairstylist Russell Latham has extensive credits, most recently coiffing the beautiful babes at "The Young and the Restless."

"Then we started casting," explains Spelling. "Our first thought was Lesley-Anne Down [ex-Georgina, 'Upstairs, Downstairs']. We didn't think she'd be interested, but she was! We had used Peter Barton [ex-Scott, 'Young and Restless'] on



The cast of
"Sunset
Beach"

'Burke's Law' and I loved him, so we brought Peter in. We heard that Leigh Taylor-Young might be interested. I talked to her, and she said, 'Sounds like fun to me.' Here's somebody who just won the Emmy last year for 'Picket Fences.' Then we brought in Gary Tomlin and he said, 'Aaron, we better get some people who've been *on* daytime so they can help those who've never *done* daytime.' So, we got Sam Behrens [ex-Jake, 'General Hospital'], Hank Cheyne [ex-Scott, 'Another World'], who is one of the handsomest guys I've ever seen, and Kathleen Noone, who I love. She's fantastic in it."

"Bette is the lost Gabor," Noone says, referring to her eccentric character, who's the aunt of scheming Annie Douglas (played by Sarah Buxton). Noone is well known to soap fans from playing good-hearted Ellen Dalton on "AMC" for 11 years, and then bad-hearted Claudia Whittaker on "Knots Landing" for another three. "Bette has had seven husbands," Noone continues. "She wears a diamond ring on each of her fingers. She has good ideas, but the execution is always messed up in some way. Her philosophy of life is, 'Always have a champagne glass in your hand.'"

Speaking of philosophy, Noone agrees with

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