

In This Week's Sequel...

Let George Washington Throw a Tantrum!

Actor Barry Bostwick fought to show the human side of our first President

By Doug Hill



"George Washington: The Forging of a Nation" is scheduled to be seen on CBS, Sunday, Sept. 21, 8-10 P.M. (ET) and Monday, Sept. 22, 9-11 P.M. See local listings for times and channel in your area.

George Washington apparently watched CBS's 1984 miniseries about himself and liked it.

At least, he was all in favor of actor Barry Bostwick playing him again in the sequel, "George Washington: The Forging of a Nation." The President did have a suggestion, however.

"Do you have any notes for me?" Bostwick asked Washington, through a psychic medium.

"Yes," the spirit of Washington replied. "Are you sure you want to hear them?"

Bostwick answered in the affirmative. "The only real note he had for me was that I should work on my anger. I should not be afraid to show the anger in the man," Bostwick recalled later. "I said, 'Thank you very much.'"

It should quickly be added here that Barry Bostwick is not a fruitcake. To the contrary, he comes across as an unusually intelligent, sincere and serious individual—serious to a fault sometimes, he is the first to admit. The glowing reviews he received for his initial portrayal

of Washington suggest that he is also a very talented actor.

He doesn't talk about his trips to the psychic unless asked about them directly. Nonetheless, he doesn't deny, during an interview on the sequel's set in Philadelphia, that he continues to be "obsessed" with his character (well-thumbed books about Washington litter his trailer, and pictures of the President are tacked on the walls), or that he believes the great man's spirit sometimes inhabits as well as guides him. Occasionally on the set he can be observed standing silently amidst a swirl of production people and extras with his eyes closed, a look of utter tranquility on his face, making himself available.

"All I'm really saying to myself when I meditate like that," he explains, "is 'I am him, so don't be afraid to just be me.' . . . I don't know whether that's me being raised by the spirit or me just having done my homework. You can never tell—that's the whole point. If I just breathe, relax and trust that I know what I'm doing, whatever I do will be right."

Bostwick's sense of comfort and identification with Washington, which first developed over the arduous four-month shooting schedule for the original eight-hour miniseries, is one reason he was so happy to receive Washington's tip on an-

ger. Anger is an issue with which Bostwick, a certifiable Nice Guy, wrestles in his own character.

"Washington spent his whole life trying to overcome and control his emotions," Bostwick says. "So have I. Therefore, when I let it out, it looms too larger-than-life for me, and I get scared and pull back. And I know that's how George reacted."

Unfortunately, from Bostwick's point of view, circumstances conspired to make it impossible for him in the sequel to explore Washington's anger as much as he would have liked. And Bostwick was angry about that.

Despite the surprisingly high ratings the original miniseries attracted and the prestigious awards it won, a lot of people didn't think a sequel should be made. The first, which concluded at the end of the Revolutionary War, had a number of sexy advantages: we watched a young, virile Washington evolve from a shy Virginia farmer to a charismatic Commander in Chief. In the course of beating the villainous British in exciting battle scenes, Barry Bostwick got to spend a lot of time in uniform, riding a huge white stallion, looking smashing. Jaclyn Smith, playing Sally Fairfax, the wife of Washington's best friend, was there to provide romantic distraction by dint of a long, never-consummated love affair with George, while Patty Duke played the dowdy but devoted Martha.

The focus of "The Forging of a Nation," on the other hand, is neither love nor war, but *issues*. It's essentially a four-hour cram course on Washington's two terms as



Left: Barry Bostwick as George Washington.

President: the ratification of the Constitution; budget and banking problems; diplomatic struggles with the Indians, the British, the French. We see an aging Washington vilified as a power-grabbing autocrat and beset by feuding advisers, most notably Thomas Jefferson (played by Jeffrey Jones) and Alexander Hamilton (Richard Bekins).

To be sure, Washington is the object of the attentions of another admiring female, Eliza Powell (played by Penny Fuller), and rides out once more, this time to quell the Whiskey Rebellion; Patty Duke

returns as the long-suffering Martha, and Hamilton's fiery neuroses keep him steeped in scandal. But these are merely interludes in the main event, which writer-producer Richard Fielder describes as "the struggle between Hamilton and Jefferson for the soul of Washington."

Barry Bostwick's managers and agents were convinced, Bostwick says, that such material would be "less than entertaining" and strongly advised him to turn down the role. CBS was similarly unimpressed. "They were scared that the Presidential years were too polemic," says executive producer David Gerber, who had submitted a five-hour script. "We were talking about assumption of rights by the states, establishing a bank of the United States. They said, 'Wait a minute! Holy macaroni!' I had a terrible time convincing them it would not be a completely dreary show."

Bostwick was anxious enough to fin-

Barry Weicher

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ish Washington's story to overrule his advisers; Gerber had less luck with CBS. After much negotiation, the network agreed to a three-hour script, but Gerber, himself impassioned by the subject matter, couldn't bear cutting that much from the story and held out. Finally, General Motors, which had sponsored the original miniseries and been delighted with the results, stepped in and put up the bulk of the \$8-million-plus production budget for four hours. Gerber and his producing partner, MGM, put up the rest, gambling that they will eventually make up their investment in cable and video distribution.

Thus, CBS wound up getting "The Forging of a Nation" for nothing except what it will cost to promote it, while Gerber came to Philadelphia for the start of production with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, wondering how much his passion for history was going to cost him.

The concerns about saving money permeated the atmosphere of the set. There were daily reconfigurations of the production schedule to avoid costly delays when spring refused to arrive; the Whiskey Rebellion was filmed in the midst of an April snowstorm. One of the costume people complained that she'd had to use what she considered to be a second-rate supplier for some of Martha Washington's gowns, and that they'd arrived with, of all things, polyester lace. "I guess they figure it doesn't show," she said, "but on television polyester lace sticks out like a sore thumb."

David Gerber tried—unwisely, he admits—to get by with less than the usual preproduction time, so that some of the early scenes went so roughly they had to be reshot. The rush to filming forced the principals, Bostwick, Jones and Bekins, to shoot many of their most crucial scenes together before they felt they were prepared—"I was flying by the seat of my pants," said Jeffrey Jones—and the script had been trimmed so much that the actors worried that their characters had lost the dimension they needed to make them believable.

No one worried more than Barry Bost-

wick. One day about three-quarters of the way through production, he was sitting in his trailer on location, still in makeup, pondering the possibility that his advisers might have been right in arguing against the sequel.

"Washington was so complicated," he is saying, "and I, as an actor and as a person, have a tendency to overdetail and get obsessed. The minute I see something and know it's a part of his character, I want to show it. And I drive people nuts around here, because I want to add this element and that, and I can't do it all. Which is frustrating—we just don't have the time."

Bostwick has struggled over the course of the production to show the anger that he, his psychic and Washington had discussed, and he's beginning to despair that it's not going to happen. He talks about a scene, already shot, in which Washington succumbs to a temper tantrum. The producers, believing Washington seems to be overreacting, want Bostwick to do the scene over, toning down the outburst. Bostwick isn't pleased.

"It *should* look a couple of times like an overreaction," he insists. "That comes out of his being overly sensitive to criticism. I really feel that he would have been that angry, and I don't know how else to play him. But to the powers that be, that makes him look petty, out of control. . . . It's everybody being protective [of Washington's image], which is the same thing that's been going on since he was alive."

Bostwick pauses and laughs. "They don't have the knowledge I have," he says. "I mean, they didn't talk to the spirit of George Washington through their psychic."

He says this half-facetiously, as if he senses that in his zeal to get at the anger of George Washington, he may unwittingly reveal too much of his own. He laughs again and ends the interview by putting a little more distance between himself, the perfectionist, and himself, the Nice Guy. "Every actor who has this kind of research to fall back on," he says, "is a dangerous man." **END**