

A journey through Western history



Photos by Julie Graber/The New Mexican

Christopher C. Coverdale, left, and Alfred James, both of Albuquerque, wait Tuesday on the set at the Bonanza Creek Ranch off County Road 45 south of Santa Fe.

New series, star slowly find their identity

By **HOLLIS WALKER**
The New Mexican

BONANZA CREEK RANCH — It had been a long time since anyone asked actor Robert Urich to play a hero. That's one reason why he took the lead role in *The Lazarus Man*, a new television series being shot in Santa Fe.

But the job called for real heroics Tuesday; the temperature on the rustic Western film set south of Santa Fe was only 9 degrees when shooting started early in the morning.

"Why am I doing a one-hour show, when I could be doing 30 minutes where you sit in a warm studio?" Urich joked, sitting near an electric heater on a porch during a break on the set late Tuesday afternoon.

Best known for his lead roles in *Spenser: For Hire* and *Vega\$*, Urich, who turned 49 Tuesday (celebrated with cake on the set), has starred in 10 TV series and acted in several films and made-for-TV movies, most of them set in contemporary times. But he said he had been hoping another Western role

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Actor Robert Urich, playing the title role in *The Lazarus Man*, studies a script in between takes.

LAZARUS

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would come his way since he played Jake Spoon in the miniseries *Lonesome Dove*.

Recently, he said, "I've been playing a lot of husbands who have their wives killed (referring to made-for-television movies he's starred in) and turned down a lot of cop and detective shows."

When he saw the script for *The Lazarus Man*, he was impressed. "I said yes immediately."

In the pilot, the man Urich portrays has been buried alive and claws his way from the grave. A boy dubs him Lazarus, after the Biblical character Christ raised from the dead. The twist is that this post-Civil War Lazarus has a serious case of amnesia.

In ensuing episodes, Lazarus searches for his identity, using as clues fuzzy shards of memory.

As in the popular series *The Fugitive*, a bad guy is after him and a mysterious woman from his past haunts his memories.

Lazarus can't tell friends from enemies.

But in what Urich described as a "Forrest Gump sort of thing," the character interacts not only with the good guys and the bad guys, but also with real characters from Western history.

In the sixth episode, "The Conspirator," being shot this week, Lazarus runs into Ulysses S. Grant. In the next episode, he will meet a young George Custer.

Urich said he has been reading Western history, including the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the American West*, to better portray his character and understand the nature of the times.

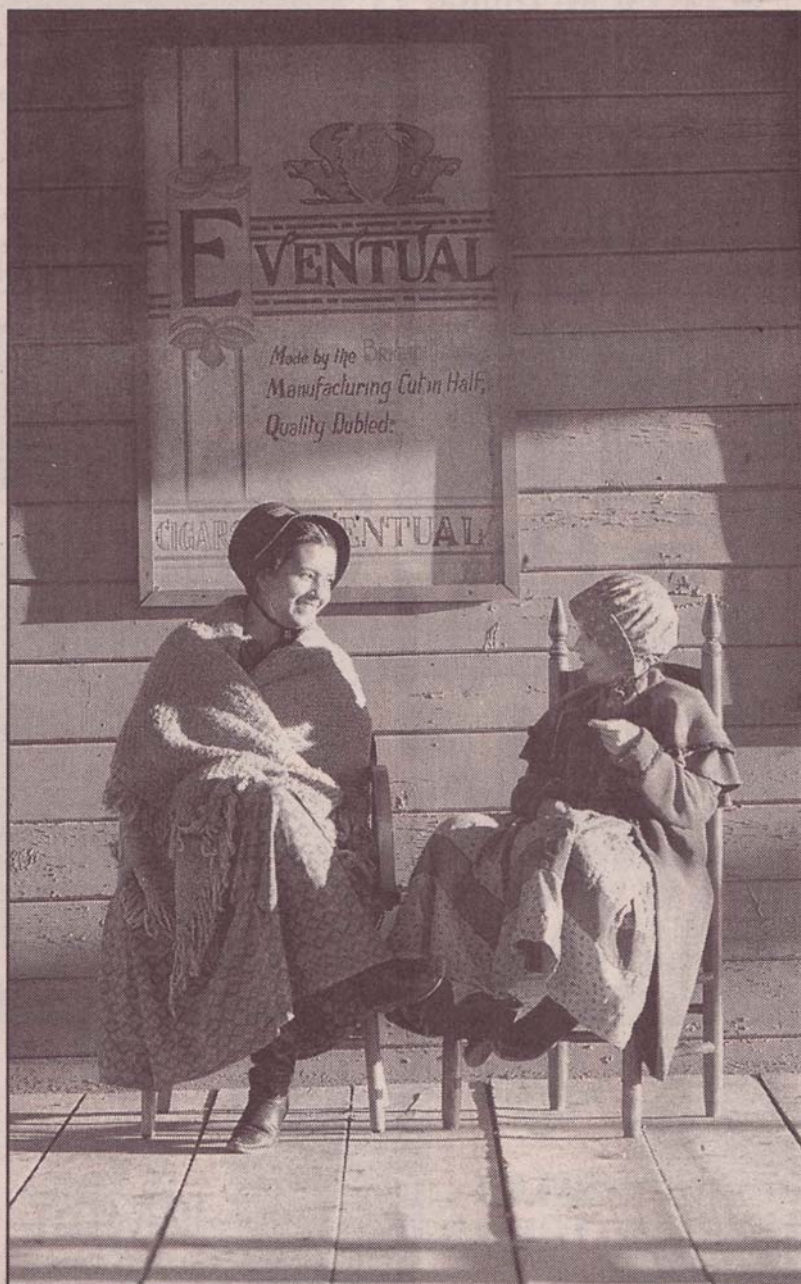
In fact, everyone involved in the series is reading, producer Harvey Frand said. This week, they're reading books on Custer.

"We're trying to depict historic events as accurately as possible," he said.

The pilot, for example, explores the possibility that Abraham Lincoln's assassination was the result of a conspiracy and not the act of one man. "Many people believe John Wilkes Booth was a pawn," he said.

Another quirk of the show is that no one working on it knows any more about Lazarus than the previous and current scripts reveal. In most TV series, actors know their characters well, though they can't predict what travails scriptwriters have in store for them.

But in *The Lazarus Man*, Urich learns about who his character is as each episode's script



Julie Graber/The New Mexican

Erica Garcia, 24, and Josseline Black-Barnett, 8, both of Santa Fe, try and stay warm during a break on the set of *The Lazarus Man*. The two young actresses are extras on the movie set.

is presented — a few weeks before it is shot. Co-creator and supervisor Dick Beebe won't tell Urich in advance, though the actor said he suspects Beebe has already created a "Bible" on Lazarus' identity.

The secrecy lends itself to Urich's ability to act the part of an amnesiac. Urich has capitalized on the technique. In shooting the pilot, Urich did not rehearse his first meeting with his rescuers so his reaction would be more genuine, Frand said.

Billed in publicity as an action-adventure-mystery, *The Lazarus Man* is being produced by Ogiens/Kane Co. with Castle Rock Entertainment and Turner Program Services, the latter two companies both part of Ted Turner's media empire.

Ogiens/Kane, an independent television group, produced *The Young Riders* and television movies including *Into The Badlands*.

THE SERIES

■ Two-hour TV pilot shot in Santa Fe in August will air on Channel 13 in mid-January, with 20 one-hour episodes to follow. Episodes also will air on TNT on a delayed schedule.

■ Veteran TV actor Robert Urich stars; among producer Harvey Frand's credits are movies-of-the-week, TV pilots and series including *The Young Riders*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Twilight Zone*.

■ About 75-80 local residents are working as production crew on the show. Up to 10 local actors and 200 extras are hired for each episode.

■ Frand said a conservative estimate of the economic impact of the pilot and 20 episodes on the Santa Fe area is \$15 million.

■ The last episode of the season will wrap in late March or early April. If ratings warrant renewal, shooting for a second season would begin in July.