

Relaxing in the paneled den of his \$250,000 home on its \$50,000 hilltop acre overlooking the San Fernando Valley, Dennis Weaver says--with just a trace of Gunsmoke's Chester in his voice--"I don't think any less seriously about Chester than I did about King Lear in college."

But he says it as if he would prefer to be playing Lear-or almost anything else-rather than the Dodge City deputy he has portrayed for eight

years. Dennis Weaver's problem is that so far he has found no other role which provides an actor with \$250,000 homes and \$50,000 hilltop acres.

It isn't that he hasn't tried. Twice he has let it be known that he was leaving Gunsmoke for good-once to emcee a variety show called *TV Tonight* and again to star in a dramatic program called *The Giant Step*, in which he would play the vice-principal of a high school. Pilot films were

made of both these proposed programs under auspices which seemed to guarantee their going on the air. Between times, Weaver had visions of himself as the young Abraham Lincoln in a television series based upon the Civil War President's early legal career. But when these projects disappeared into the dark land where unseen TV programs go, he came limping gratefully back to the familiar warmth. security and bad coffee of

the Dodge City bastille, where, it should be noted, he is always welcome, usually on his own terms.

Those terms include a limited number of appearances-15 last season, 12 next-in which he has a leading role, at a six-figure salary comparable to the one he received in the days when he did 39 shows a year. Thus, 'where Jimmy Durante used to proclaim, "I can do widdout Broadway, but can Broadway do widdout me?"' continued

it appears that neither Dennis Weaver nor *Gunsnoke* can do without the other, although the program has taken out insurance in the bulky form of part-time deputy Burt Reynolds, and Dennis Weaver keeps right on looking for something else.

This season, Weaver wants to be through with all his *Gunsnoke* appearances by late October, so that he will be free to make another pilot--this time for a series called *Kentucky's Kid*, about a horse trainer and a Chinese orphan, which NRC hopes to get on the air in the fall of 1934.

Wants to be top man

"I've exhausted the potential of Chester," he says, and after eight years this is undoubtedly true. But Norman Macdonnell, producer of *Gunsnoke*, sees more to it than that: "Denny wants to be the top man--the star of his own series, and he won't be happy until he finds out whether he can make it or not."

James Arness, who is not the talkative type on screen or off, is reluctant to discuss Dennis Weaver and his plans for the future. The two men are friendly on the set, but Weaver says, "We don't socialize otherwise. My wife and I socialize mostly with our Little League friends." (Weaver is manager of the Encino Cubs, for whom his 10-year-old son plays left field.)

Weaver has always been a tough competitor--which makes Chester's limp one of the ironies of television. In high school in Jopliu, Mo., where he was born on June 4, 1924, Dennis set track-and-field records which still stand. During two years in the Navy in World War II, he set a speed-and-agility record. After the war, at the University of Oklahoma, he became a decathlon star and tried out for the American Olympic team in 1943.

If his interest in drama, in which

he majored at Oklahoma, had not exceeded his interest in athletic, he might have done better than sixth in the Olympic trials. He recalls, "The tryouts were in Bloomfield, New Jersey. As soon as I got there, I headed right for New York to see a friend of mine. He had graduated from Oklahoma the year before. I walked around all day watching rehearsals and ended up staying in New York all night, sleeping on somebody's couch. I got back to Bloomfield in time to suit up. My legs were dead from walking on concrete all the day before."

His New York friend was Lonny Chapman, who played the part of Turk, the young javelin thrower in "Come Back, Little Sheba," starring Shirley Booth. Dennis Weaver's first professional job was understudying him, and eventually he replaced Chapman when the "Little Sheba" company went on the road. At the end of the tour Dennis returned to New York and enrolled at The Actors Studio, where actress Shelley Winters saw him and brought him to the attention of Universal-International Studios.

A Jimmy Stewart type

He saw no immediate future for himself on the Broadway stage, and he had a wife, Gerry, whom he had married in 1945, and a child, born in 1943. Thus, when Universal offered him a contract in 1952, he grabbed it. "They had a training program for young actors," he says. "They saw me as a James Stewart type."

However the studio may have seen Weaver, they put him in a series of minor roles in undistinguished Westerns and let him go at the end of a year. By this time his wife was expecting their second child. He freelanced during 1953 and 1954--small parts in movies and TV and a little-theater production of "A Streetcar Named Desire," in which he played Kowalski to Shelley Winters' Blanche.

When he could not find work acting, he sold vacuum cleaners and worked for a florist. He says, "The day the director called to tell me I'd be Chester, I was out delivering flowers."

He got the part as a result of his performance in a motion picture--called "Seven Angry Men" which was directed by Charles Marquis Warren, the first producer-director of *Gunsnoke*. Today Weaver says, "I don't know what he saw in me that suggested Chester. In the pilot script Chester was almost dimwitted, and I thought they'd made a mistake--that I was supposed to read for the part of Matt" Disabused of this impression, he first did Chester "straight" and immediately realized that he had not done well. Then recalling an Oklahoma accent he and a college friend had worked up, he asked for five minutes to rehearse. "I had been trying to get the regionalism out of my speech, so it was hard for me to get it back in," he says. "But after five minutes I came in and read again." Weaver was hired. Chester's limp was added later:

Charles Marquis Warren says that Dennis Weaver got the part simply "because he is such a fine actor. In 'Seven Angry Men' he had to go insane, and he did it so well that I knew he could do anything."

Probably Dennis Weaver can do anything. And therein lies his problem. Discontented with the limitations of Chester, he continues to look for something more challenging. But then he considers the million dollars he reportedly received for his residual rights in *Gunsnoke*, and he looks about him at the home that Chester built, with its tennis court and swimming pool; its "children's wing" of three bedrooms and two baths for the three boys, Rick, 14, Rob, 10, and Rusty, 4; its luxurious master suite with king-size bed and sunken bathtub; its show-curved living room, where the giant curved couches are kept

covered with plastic and there is a narrow strip of carpet to walk on so that the white wall-to-wall carpeting won't get soiled.

Concerning Frankenstein's monster, Boris-Karloff once-said, "He is a very dear old friend." That is the way. Dennis Weaver feels about Chester. But the monster was known to overwhelm a lot of people. Dennis Weaver doesn't want to be overwhelmed by Chester, but perhaps he already has been and refuses to admit it.

-Leslie Raddatz