

Buck Rogers' birdman

Thom Christopher flying high as 'Hawk'

By Ron Miller

Hollywood

WHAT DO YOU DO if you're a grown man, a serious actor by profession, and you wind up in a prime time TV series playing a character who's half man and half bird?

"You molt," says Thom Christopher, the predatory Hawk of NBC's "Buck Rogers" (7 p.m. Thursdays on Channel 5).

Actually, Christopher isn't being entirely facetious about that. As he explains, that feather-headed getup he wears in the show really does molt constantly, leaving a trail wherever he goes.

By now Christopher has heard just about all the bird jokes ever dreamed up and has discovered that a good sense of humor is the best defense. He has come to understand what it must be like to be Leonard Nimoy, living in a never-ending blizzard of pointy-ear gags.

When NBC decided Buck Rogers needed a worthy adversary who eventually would become his closest ally in space, the proud, lonely Hawk was created by producer John Mantley out of the same ingredients that gave birth to Nimoy's Spock on the legendary "Star Trek."

Christopher was fully aware of the close similarities between the characters, and how the role of Spock has diverted Nimoy's career down a narrow tunnel with few side exits.

"When I took the role," Christopher says, "Jack and I talked about that. We knew there would be this Hawkian-Spockian comparison."

They decided Hawk would fulfill the same function as Spock — the hero's right-hand man — but would resemble him in no other way. Spock is an emotionless, cerebral character from the planet Vulcan, while Hawk is a hot-blooded descendant of birdmen who once lived on Easter Island.

"He's consistently the noble savage," Christopher says. "He can't lose his primitive instincts. He is a hawk."

Christopher isn't the first guy you might look for to play a birdman. He has worked in several earlier series, including "Bronk," "Kojak," "Eddie Capra Mysteries," and "The Rookies," usually playing contemporary urban types. He has a strong background in theater and the aura of a cultured man. He's so serious

about his acting that he refers to his talent as his "instrument."

But he has this dark, brooding look that no doubt convinced the producers he might look tough in feathers rather than just plain silly.

"It has been an incredible acting challenge," says Christopher, who claims he had to closely study three different hawks to get his character down pat.

Now, the idea of a grown man sitting around watching hawks and practicing birdlike motions does not conjure up visions of Emmy awards. What it does conjure up is visions of Christopher at "Hawkie" conventions or signing autographs in his bird suit at supermarket openings, à la Adam West of "Batman."

That won't happen, Christopher says, and his eyes narrow to angry slits at the very thought of such a thing.

"At this point, there's no chance of a symbiotic relationship between Hawk and Thom Christopher," he says. "I know the problem you're talking about and I can deal with it. The Hawk will never appear outside the soundstage in costume. That's where I draw the line. When I say no, I mean no."

So far, the Hawk character has been portrayed as an equal to Buck Rogers. They had a deadly battle in this season's opening show, which ended in a draw. Since then, they've been getting along roughly the same as Damon and Pythias, if not Starsky and Hutch.

"There isn't likely to be a Super Fight II," Christopher says, "at least not until next season."

A couple of times Hawk has responded to Buck's cries for help like an intergalactic Tonto riding to save the Lone Ranger. The implication that Hawk might be superior to Buck seemingly hasn't upset star Gil Gerard, who has encouraged the development of Christopher's role.

At this point, there's serious doubt about another season for "Buck Rogers," who isn't burning up the Nielsen ratings this year. In the meantime, Christopher is enjoying the steady work and continuing to polish up his sense of humor.

"I'm enjoying playing somebody with a beak," he says, showing off his own hawklike profile. "That's other than my own."



Thom Christopher as "Hawk" in a recent "Buck Rogers" episode.