



# SUMMER EXPOSURE

A July premiere was the first of many peculiarities for a classic CBS series

In the summer of 1990, *Dynasty's* Carringtons were done in Denver. Down in *Dallas*, J.R. Ewing had less than a year left on the air. With the dawn of the new decade, the primetime soaps that had dominated the 1980s were giving way to something new, ornamented with more quirk than glitz. And TV audiences' attentions would soon shift to the north and west, to the fictional small town of Cicely, Alaska.

Rob Morrow, who starred as *Northern Exposure's* unwillingly transplanted New York doctor Joel Fleischman, remembers that even the show's pilot script captured a surreal, spiritual tone never before seen on TV. "At the time, I was really into this

[British] director Bill Forsyth," the actor recalls. "And rather than like television, *Northern Exposure* read to me like one of his movies."

Until that spring, Morrow had worked mostly in theater and on one short-lived New York-based TV series. But from his first reading of the *Exposure* script, he knew just how to fill fish-out-of-water Fleischman's awkward snowshoes. "I felt like I knew him. He would have been someone I would have grown up with in New York. We were from such a similar place socially and economically that I knew I could inject some of myself into him," Morrow says. "The writing gave me a lot to grab on to, and I knew the alchemy would produce a really interesting character."

As producers tested the then-27-year-old against myriad actresses, "Janine Turner came in, the last one of the day. And we clicked right away," Morrow recalls.

Producers instantly noticed the chemistry between their two leads so much, Turner explains, that to prolong Fleischman and bush pilot Maggie O'Connell's will-they-or-won't-they dynamic, "they would always want us to play against the attraction, to create this multilayered intrigue. I remember them saying, 'Look, you have the chemistry. You know it's there—now just forget about it.'"

#### A CAST OF TRUE CHARACTERS

The show's full cast found a similar instant rapport as they reported to the Seattle soundstage where most of *Northern Exposure* would be filmed. With many of them far from their Hollywood home turf, the actors playing Cicely's





The cast of *Northern Exposure* quickly bonded in Seattle, far away from the usual Los Angeles soundstages.

eccentric townspeople quickly formed friendships that showed up on screen. Barry Corbin, who played retired astronaut Maurice Minnifield, had a prolific career as a character actor in TV and film, and John Cullum, as tavern keeper Holling Vincoeur, had appeared for years on Broadway. But others—John Corbett as DJ Chris Stevens, Cynthia Geary as Holling’s young girlfriend, Shelly Tambo, and Darren Burrows as Maurice’s assistant, Ed Chigliak—had just scored in *Northern Exposure* their breakthrough roles.

A few members of the large cast had done little or no professional acting at all. Peg Phillips, who played general store owner Ruth-Anne Miller, had been

a latecomer to acting in her 60s. And Elaine Miles, whose deadpan delivery made the character of Fleischman’s Inuit secretary Marilyn Whirlwind a fan favorite, had been discovered only because she had accompanied her mother to a local audition.

“Everyone’s character had a unique slant to them,” Morrow explains. “All these actors loved their characters, and took pride in the oddness of them.” Indeed, in any of its odd moments, this inventive series might mix comedic elements like Fleischman and O’Connell’s banter into a storyline tinged with Native American mysticism.

“One day I’d be an Eskimo in an igloo, in a flashback, and the next I was on top of a bed with my scarf blowing back, pretending to be Amelia

Earhart,” says Turner. “Another day, I’d be speaking Russian.”

### A SUMMER BREAK

Turner suggests that *Northern Exposure* may only have gotten away with all that because of its summer premiere. “Since we weren’t a traditional pilot for the fall, we were able to sneak in under the radar, and throw in quotes from Shakespeare or Freud that would raise the intellectual level,” she says. “We were able to experiment, to be different, without being pigeonholed into being a certain type of show.”

While its interiors were shot in Seattle, *Northern Exposure* filmed its exterior scenes in tiny Roslyn, Wash., nestled in the Cascade Mountains a few hours southeast of the city. Morrow recalls how on shoot days, tourists would crowd the remote town to watch their favorite characters come to life in a 3-D setting. “Being in Roslyn really did feel like stepping into the world of the show,” he remembers.

Morrow left *Exposure* in 1995, and later went on to a six-season run on another CBS hourlong hit. In order to embody *Numb3rs*’ FBI agent Don Eppes, the actor would have to study hard so that he could convincingly employ complex mathematical theories.

But back in Roslyn, he recalls, it had often been a lot easier to find his motivation. “In filming snowy scenes, if I was supposed to be walking down the street, freezing, I actually was freezing,” he says with a laugh. “I called it ‘no acting required.’” — *Jim Colucci*

CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE (7)



From left: Janine Turner and Rob Morrow as series leads Maggie O’Connell and Joel Fleischman; a cafe in Roslyn, Wash., was rebranded for the series; co-stars John Cullum and John Corbett.

