

Soaps link all types of people

By Charlie Mustachia

Battalion Reporter

Tuning in tomorrow has become the national pastime of today.

Over 55 million Americans watch soap operas on television, Joe Saltzman, associate mass media editor of USA Today magazine, said.

Soap opera viewers are evenly distributed between urban and rural areas and live in all regions of the nation. They typically have a high school education and earn annual incomes between \$10,000 and \$22,000.

Housewives, students, blue-collar workers, professors, doctors, entertainers, writers and politicians are among the soap-aholic public.

Soap operas have become more popular than ever expected. "Years ago people watched TV for entertainment and soap operas were for kooky, bored housewives," Saltzman said. Now, he explained, there is a new generation which accepts TV as part of life — soap operas included.

Soaps aren't only for watching either. They're for talking about. Soap operas are conversation stimulants and admitting that you watch them is like making a statement about yourself.

Saltzman said soap operas are a big business because they make money. The average half-hour soap brings in about \$31.2 million a year in revenue. Because it costs an average \$6.2 million to produce, the profits are big, he said.

In a time when many prime-time shows don't last six months, soap operas, most of which have been on the air at least 12 years, should be taken seriously, Saltzman said.

And the realization that soaps are here to stay is sparking changes in soap opera story lines.

Ten years ago extra- and premarital sex were enough to interest viewers. Now abortion, alcoholism, drug addiction, incest and venereal disease are present.

Not that we need a reason, but why do we watch the soaps? Agnes Nixon, creator of "All My Children," asked a group of Duke University students why they watch soaps. One male student replied, "It's the only constant in our lives."

A Northern Illinois University study showed 30 percent of soap opera viewers watch because the characters are "so dumb." Nearly 14 percent said they watch because soap opera problems make their own seem trivial.

Time magazine pointed out a few traits that separate soap opera situations from ordinary life and its problems. For instance, there are more doctors than patients to treat, amnesia is a plague, characters barely ever swear and time often stands still.

Last month on "General Hospital," Diana Taylor lay dead on her kitchen floor for over a week our time, but just over a day soap time.

Although alcoholism rates as the most highly encountered personal problem in soap operas, pregnancy is a close second. The pill is discarded in most soaps and women turn up pregnant in what seems like hours after a sexual encounter.

Then, during pregnancy, the time warp strikes again. Soap-land mothers are pregnant anywhere from four to 20 months and children, after birth, grow up to be voluptuous blonds or tall, dark and handsome men overnight.

Although soap opera plots are getting spicier, at a hint of viewer disapproval, producers change the plot immediately.

Obviously this is done for advertising purposes. As their name indicates, soap operas were originally intended to be salesmen, and this reputation is upheld by producers.

Dr. Emily Davidson, Texas A&M University psychology professor, said college students' schedules allow them to watch soap operas more often than people who work all day.

If watching soap operas is a typical student activity, then Texas A&M students are certainly typical.

Some Aggies frequently retreat to the dark confines of the TV viewing rooms in the browsing library on the second floor of the Memorial Student Center.

From early morning to mid-afternoon these rooms resemble a soap opera heaven for college soap-aholics.

It is not unusual for the group of viewers to become hostile when classic demonic characters betray good guys.

Essence magazine's B.M. Campbell said, "If you want to hear some hairy rap, just listen to a bunch of women discussing Erica ('All My Children')."

In the TV viewing rooms, Erica-types get cussed out regularly. "If I didn't get mad, it wouldn't be fun," said one soap watcher.

The students seem to care about the characters on and off the screen. When a soap opera character recently let out the secret of her pregnancy, yells shook the walls of the browsing library.

"But wouldn't you think she'd use some kind of birth control or something?" said one student.

Another replied, "Oh, she's pregnant in real life too."

Delighted sighs filled the room and a jubilant "You're kidding" came from a shy-looking guy in the back row.

"Did you hear, Beau and Pat ('One Life to Live') broke up?"

"No, they didn't?" screamed a forlorn follower.

Soap watchers are selective in accepting new characters. Gaining acceptance can be difficult.

"Look, it's Noah Drake, the new doctor," a female student said. "They ('General Hospital' producers) are trying to have him take over Jeff Weber's character — but he's NOT Jeff material."

The viewing rooms are not without the usual TV cynics. As advertisements for various

night time sit-coms flashed on the screen during a commercial break, one viewer said, "Television gets worse and worse." Then she remembered her favorite soap. "With the exception of 'General Hospital' of course," she added.

But the true test of soap opera popularity came when technical difficulties caused an interruption. Loud cries escaped from even the most composed viewers.

Television stations are accustomed to receiving calls from irate viewers when "special reports" interrupt soaps.

CBS affiliates across the country dealt with busy switchboards when coverage of the hostages' return interrupted a heated scene in "The Guiding Light" recently.

The MSC doesn't have the only public television dominated by soap watchers. Montgomery Ward salesperson Debbie Cecil said the television department in which she works is frequently a refuge for "little old ladies who come in to watch their soap while their cars are getting fixed."

Cecil said, "They ask if they can turn the TV up or if we'll turn it to their favorite soap opera."

The snack bar in Ward's is located across from the television department, Cecil said, making it convenient for soap watchers to catch a glimpse on their lunch breaks.

Friday is known as the best day of the week in soapland. It is the day when soap characters air dirty laundry. Lines like, "This is something I've been keeping from you for 15 years, Warren," or "It's time you learned the truth about your future son-in-law, Julia" are typical of Friday cliffhangers, usually resolved on the following Monday.

Tueadays, on the other hand, feature non-action events, such as dinner parties and baptisms. "Nothing ever happens on Tuesday," Campbell said. "If I weren't a dedicated soap opera watcher, I'd skip Tuesdays."

The advent of the night time or prime time soap operas has changed some aspects of daytime soaps. People Weekly magazine said "the man you love to hate" is one of the innovations brought to daytime soaps from J.R. Ewing.

Because many American soap-aholics cannot tune in every day, some newspapers and radio stations print and broadcast weekly soap opera updates.

To the truly dedicated soap watcher, Saltzman has a few words of advice: "Remember that in 'The Days of Our Lives' as we 'Search for Tomorrow,' knowing we all have 'One Life to Live' and that we all share a 'Love of Life,' we hope to find a 'Guiding Light' as we hurtle toward the 'Edge of Night' 'As the World Turns.'"

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