

Soap stars eclipse Jackie O in pop culture, researchers say

Super movie stars like Redford and Streisand haven't been shoved out of the limelight by names like Jacque Courteney and George Reinholt, but they've actually had to move over some.

Courteney and Reinholt? Unknown? Not to millions of fans who tune in "One Life to Live" daily to see these popular lovers while indulging in an ever more fashionable pastime—watching television soap operas.

"Soap opera stars have begun to take their places alongside movie stars," said Doris Scarlett, a Michigan State University student and observer of the soap scene since childhood.

Mrs. Scarlett and former magazine editor Mary Hamilton, both doctoral candidates working with pop culture specialist Dr. Russel B. Nye, said that even though the basic appeal of continuing daytime drama hasn't changed in 25 years, the status of their stars has.

The stars real and fictional lives and activities now are celebrated in magazines, digests, newsletters and by fan clubs. The actors and actresses are family to viewers and somehow "attainable," the researchers said.

"Since Watergate, Americans have not only become more sophisticated about what they're willing to believe, but so bored with big scandals that make them feel powerless they want to simplify things to the level of backstage gossip," Ms. Hamilton said.

Over the years, she said, people have enjoyed the scandals, tragedies and crises of such super rich and untouchable celebrities as Elizabeth Taylor and Jackie O in mass magazines, playing on escape and the never-said-but-happens theme.

However, the former editor said that in the past five years movie

magazine circulation figures have been dropping and magazines like People that focus on more ordinary mortals and their everyday lives have grown.

As photographer of celebrities Ron Galella told Ms. Hamilton, "people want escape, but more in the way of entertainment. People is a classier fan magazine."

And just as in People, the new pulp publications, unabashedly called Soap Opera People or something similar, scandal is not the issue. Articles are about the stars' children, hobbies, accomplishments, happy marriages or backgrounds.

The characters actors portray create something that veteran star Don McLaughlin, who has appeared as fictional Chris Hughes on "As the World Turns" for 20 years, calls "more than entertainment."

"In the book-ended daytime story," he told Mrs. Scarlett, "viewers are participating with characters who are people they have known sometimes for years. Nighttime television is like going to the theater—the dramatic and often violent action brought to a critical pitch by performers who are obviously actors."

In this climate, personal, almost familial involvement is an important criterion for enjoyment. Some daytime stars have achieved a measure of superstardom.

Edson Ezion, who plays Lisa on "As the World Turns" and Ruth Warwick, known as Phoebe Tyler on "All My Children" now have nightclubs in the MSL, researcher said.

Mary Stuart, star of Search for Tomorrow since it began in 1951, sings and records albums.

One reason for the daytime stars' popularity is the increased visibility, she said. There are now 14 shows

aired daily with a combined audience of 115 million. In the 1950s, only five were on television.

"People are now willing to admit they watch them," Mrs. Scarlett said. "Celebrities like Van Cliburn, Andy Warhol and Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall get hooked like anybody else."

What the fans are hooked on are stories in which the action never ends and every installment features a plot twist and cliffhangers to entice viewers to tune in tomorrow.

Stories attempt to reflect selective real life with fantasy elements. The

characters who play the game of life are often middle to upper class people with fantastic wardrobes and beautiful homes.

In spite of a moralizing tone, each soap opera tends to involve the two or three families it focuses upon in some situations that at first couldn't be handled on night-time television. Abortion, rape, impotence and incest are plot elements in addition to romance and infidelity. Since the late 1960s, primarily, more ardent embraces between lovers, inclusion of minorities, blue-collar workers and Catholics have been innovations along with sequences designed to comment on social issues.

"This new relevance has raised the question of whether soaps have gone beyond entertainment into education and consciousness-raising," Mrs. Scarlett said. She noted three new-wave shows had story lines on the Vietnam war, single parenthood, rape, masturbation and child abuse.

Agnes Nixon, writer of two of these shows, "All My Children" and "One Life to Live," calls the new plus "contemporary public service stories." Mrs. Scarlett said that ratings and comments from producers and viewers show that the main reason soaps exist is still for entertainment.

All elements of the basic soap opera formula, including focus on families and their members' emotions, continuity and recap have remained in the same over the years," she said. "It's a formula that can't be tampered with."

Night-time shows "Beacon Hill" and "Executive Suite," touted as soap operas, both failed, she said.

"The reason they failed was simply that having to wait a whole week to see the next episode was too long. That doesn't fit in with the soap formula."

U-M extension spring classes set

The University of Michigan Extension Service will offer courses in Birmingham and Southfield during a six-week spring term beginning the week of May 2.

The seven courses offered at the new Birmingham Center for Continuing Education include such topics as Women and the Law, Low Energy Lifestyles, and Theories of Feminism, Challenging Sex Discrimination in Education.

A graduate course in public health, Health Policy and the Legislative Process is scheduled in Southfield.

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