



American Television, Soap Operas

by Tina Gianoulis

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Treatments of gay relationships on network soap operas have always been limited; recently, however, gays and lesbians have created their own soap operas to tell the convoluted stories of lesbian and gay entanglements.

Serial dramas have been a part of American popular culture since the early days of radio, when they were labeled "soap operas" because their sponsors advertised detergent and other household products to the housewives who tuned in. Even then, the audience was more diverse than was widely admitted, and today those addicted to a daily dose of their "soaps" include college football players and retired businessmen as well as the stereotypical housewife.

In fact, although many still ridicule the melodrama of soaps and mock those who watch them, much of network programming has taken on a serial format, from the Fox network's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to NBC's *ER* to HBO's *The Sopranos*. In 2001, MTV introduced its own take on the soap opera with *Spyder Games*. The reason behind this evolution is simple: cheap to produce and liberally saturated with commercials, soap operas are the most profitable of all network programming.

Early Programming

Although they usually have largely white casts and politically and socially conservative viewpoints, soap operas have traditionally enticed viewers with racy potboiler story lines featuring love triangles, scheming villains, and convoluted plots. However, more than any other television genre, soaps have also traditionally been written and produced by women and have revolved around the family and emotional issues that are of interest to women.

In 1968, ABC introduced a new kind of soap, which, while containing plenty of old-fashioned soap action, added a focus on relevant social issues of the day and a few recurring characters of color. The show was *One Life to Live*, and its success over the next decades encouraged other soap operas to tackle more serious issues. Along with abortion, homelessness, and domestic violence, soaps began to deal with homosexuality.

However, soap operas have remained largely white, and their treatment of serious issues has been marked by a certain facile shallowness. Accordingly, treatment of gay relationships on soaps has always been limited.

Although soaps began to feature the occasional gay character, most notably Hank Elliot on CBS's *As the World Turns* in 1988, these characters were always set within a finite story line and they disappeared after the conclusion of that story line. AIDS story lines became popular in the 1980s, but they almost invariably featured white women who did not contract the disease through gay sex.

More Recent Programming

The stars of Logo Television's *Noah's Arc* at the 2006 GLAAD Media Awards. Left to right: Christian Vincent, Rodney Chester, Douglas Spearman, and Darryl Stephens. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Image courtesy Angela Brinskele. Copyright © Angela Brinskele.

Stories with a liberal point of view on the subject of homophobia appeared in the mid-to-late 1990s on *One Life to Live*, *General Hospital*, and *All My Children*--all involving good gay teachers falsely accused of bad things.

All My Children not only introduced the first lesbian character in 1983 (played by Donna Pescow), but is also the first soap where a member of a major cast family has come out as gay. Bianca Montgomery (played by Eden Riegel), sixteen-year-old daughter of long time soap diva Erica Kane (Susan Lucci), came out as a lesbian in December 2000.

Although bringing ultra-femme fatale Erica's daughter out as a lesbian while still a teenager is a courageous act of soap opera plotting, giving Bianca romantic happiness has been more problematic. Her coming-out relationship took place off-screen, and ended unhappily, and her next involvement was a hopeless crush on a straight woman. While these are not unrealistic stories in the life of a teenage lesbian, they do not paint a picture of a fulfilled life for lesbians on the soaps. In a medium where steamy sex scenes are the norm, gay characters are rarely allowed even to touch.

In 2006, Luke Snyder (played by Van Hansis), a teenager on *As the World Turns*, came out to his parents. Soon afterwards, Hansis and Martha Byrne, who plays his mother, appeared in a Public Service Announcement (PSA). The PSA, part of GLAAD's (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination) "Be an Ally and Friend" public service campaign, urges viewers to take a stand against the discrimination and prejudice faced by glbtq people, and directs them to GLAAD.org where they can find resources for parents, youth, families, and friends.

Camp Soaps

Camp has always been an arena where gay characters are allowed to thrive. The 1977 satire *Soap* included one of the most beloved gay characters ever to appear on television. Billy Crystal's Jody brought a sweet humor and ironic dignity to his role as a gay man in a burlesque on soaps that was both campy and sharp.

The late 1990s has seen the introduction of science fiction/fantasy soaps (*Xena*, *Warrior Princess*, and *Dark Angel*, for example) that combine lesbianism, martial arts, and high camp. Many lesbians follow these soaps cultishly, creating web sites and attending gatherings of fans.

Gay Soaps

There are many who claim that gay life is like a soap opera. Tight communities that are always at least partly secretive may naturally inculcate complex webs of relationship that rival anything on network television. It is then, perhaps, no surprise that gays and lesbians have created their own soap operas to tell the convoluted stories of lesbian and gay entanglements.

In 1988, Boston filmmakers Laura Chiten, Cheryl Qamar, and Rachael McCoullum made several episodes of *Two in Twenty (Because One in Ten Sounds Lonely)*, a soap about lesbian housemates and their friends interspersed with satirical commercial interruptions.

In the late 1990s, writer Russell Davies created the sexually graphic gay soap *Queer as Folk* for British television's Channel 4. The Showtime cable network remade it for American television, where it has received mixed reviews from gays and straights alike. Other soaps, with titles like *Pink Soap* and *Gay Daze* can be found on the internet, where fans can participate interactively, voting for their preferred plot twists.

Showtime also produced *Leap Years*, which debuted in 2001. The series follows the trials and tribulations of

gay and straight metrosexuals in New York. Featuring an attractive and interesting cast of five friends, the soap's gimmick is to flash backwards and forwards. Within each episode the characters appear as they were in 1993, as they are now, and as they will be in 2008. *Leap Years* is currently run on Logo, MTV's new digital network.

Logo also presents *Noah's Arc* (2004), which follows the adventures of four African-American gay men in Los Angeles. Written and directed by Patrik-Ian Polk, the series has been described as a black *Queer as Folk*.

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About the Author

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