

AFTERNOON AT THE SOAP OPERA

The Not-So-Secret Storm “It’s my party, and I’ll cry if I want to.”

The other afternoon I turned on the television. I hadn’t viewed a TV serial for six weeks, not since the day I spent in CBS STUDIO 43, observing the rehearsals and taping of the most venerable of the Old Soaps, *The Secret Storm*. In the six weeks since I’d left New York, actress Mary Stuart had not stirred from her hospital bed. She was suffering from blindness (as temporary, never fear, as everything in the soap operas); and her fiancé was dead, I think, in South America. Mary should have known better than to languish in her hospital bed. Since she first appeared in the first episode of *The Secret Storm* seventeen years ago, things have always turned out best for stalwart Mary, Queen of Soaps.

Now understand, I’m not given to watching soap serials, except in late January when I get my annual bout of winter flu. Sometimes, however, I watch *Secret Storm* out of loyalty to my friend Frank Olson who is the show’s lighting director. Frank lives in Manhattan, on 72nd Street, and if I cajole him enough when visiting the city, he can usually find a way to pass me through CBS’ tight security. Frank knows agony when he sees it. And why not? The folks on *Secret Storm* have been tortured from head to toe for years.

“You can visit the set,” Frank tells me, “but promise to stand clear. We work a tight schedule.”

I promise, and the next morning I follow Frank down the long cream-colored corridors of CBS New York. He guides me through the Telecine Film center, past the cameras that send *Tuesday Night at the Movies* out across the prairies and mountains of America. Farther down the hall the news-editors monitor the competition of NBC and ABC. In a nearby glass room stands an empty desk waiting for Walter Cronkite to inform the nation. We pass through STUDIO 41 where Barbra Streisand filmed her first specials, where Ed Sullivan aired his shows before moving to his own Sullivan Theatre, where every four years Walter Cronkite and Harry Reasoner cover the National Elections.

In the *Secret Storm* Control Room, eleven technicians bend intently to their dials, their cue boards, and their screen monitors. The preview screen is lighted. In close-up, *Storm* star Stuart’s face flashes on for a rehearsal take. Next to her black-and-white close-up, a color screen monitors what CBS viewers in Indiana and Illinois are watching at that moment on network television. A third screen is dark: when it lights, it will carry today’s color-taping of *Secret Storm* which will be canned for telecast on the network tomorrow.

“In our half hour,” Frank says, “we figure seven minutes of assorted opening titles, commercials, closings, and station breaks. Between our show and the next one comes a ninety-second break in the network for local station identification and local commercials. We tape about twenty-two minutes of plot a day. That may not seem much, but at five shows a week that’s one hundred and ten minutes or the same as your average feature-length movie. You could say we film a movie a week.”

Just then actress Joan Copeland, whose brother Arthur Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman*, walks through the Control Room. At night she understudies Katharine Hepburn’s lead

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role in the hit Broadway musical *Coco*. By day, she plays a well-intentioned crazy lady who cries a lot over her ingrate daughter-in-law. She looks very elegant because today she gets to be happy for a change, sitting on a bench, talking to her son in a park full of plastic flowers and green plastic grass. (Her park looks natural on color TV, but in the studio it looks as tacky as a discount store display window.)

Frank and I follow Joan onto the soundstage. On the back of the gray flats someone has stenciled PERMANENT “SEARCH” SET CBS. On the other side, the flats resemble the walls of four different rooms, mostly doctors’ offices and hospital rooms. Off to one side is the display-window plastic park.

Frank introduces me to Sidney Walters, the Stage Manager. Sidney is harried, but friendly. He has time for one more rehearsal before today’s taping. Mary, who is currently “blind,” keeps knocking a hospital bedpan to the cement floor. “You’re not blind until the camera starts, Mary.”

Mary smiles and rehearses her blind-bit again. The metal pan clangs to the floor, louder this time. Sidney takes it in stride. He decides to work the clumsy bedpan into the final shooting. It will increase sympathy for Mary’s pathetic situation.

A cameraman dollies his Norelco CBS color camera past me toward Queen Mary. He accuses me of being a spy from NBC. He pressures his camera slightly with a finger and the huge machine responds smoothly with a quiet vertical rise.

“You’re taking notes on this stuff?” Sidney says to me. He pretends no one could take *Secret Storm* seriously. But Sidney manages the floor with the tight aplomb of a professional. A stage manager rolls with the slick punches. There’s a cool honesty in that.

Frank makes a last minute adjustment on one of the six hundred lights that blaze down on us. Mary mops a thin moustache of sweat from her upper lip. She looks tired of

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sitting in bed for two hours practicing her scene, waiting while Frank adjusts the lights perfectly for her.

The two other cameras roll in. They dolly easily over the gray cement floor. Black electrical cords, like inch-thick serpents, coil over the gray. The three cameramen wear ear-and-mouth microphones. They are older than the two boom-mike operators. One boomman is young and hip; the other is young and Black. Frank tells me they're both new to the show. They're talented and on their way up the technical side of TV production.

A woman dressed as a nurse says to a man costumed as a doctor, "Don't you feel a terrible draft in here, darling?"

Like many viewers, she has him confused with a real MD who, like Marcus Welby, can prescribe a cure for any situation. Sidney calls out: "Hold all the talking, please. Quiet."

A man with a teleprompter moves into Mary's hospital set. He stands slightly off camera. His yellow scroll unrolls in his machine. If she wanted, Mary could read her lines from his prompter. More often than not she has them memorized. (If at times your favorite soap actors bob their heads a lot while talking to each other, what they are doing is reading their own teleprompters over one another's shoulders.)

Mary's favorite doctor enters her scene. He is costumed for surgery. His gown, like her sheets, is tinted light blue. (White, because it glares, is rarely used in a color studio.) His make-up is perfect. Camera 3 shoots his entrance from the knees up. Good thing. On his feet are a comfortably scuffed pair of old house slippers. Mary is in the foreground.

Mary and Doctor Rogers whisper their lines. I am seven feet away and I can hardly hear a word. Unlike stage actors, they speak even lower than real conversation. The boom-mike hovers like a god over their intimacy, recording dialogue so simple even Tommy Smothers could understand

it. "You have at least a twenty percent chance," the doctor says.

"Excuse me," the director's voice comes over a ceiling squawk box. He interrupts the rehearsal lines from the Control Room next door. "Excuse me. Give me a beat right before 'a twenty percent chance.'"

"You have at least," the doctor-actor pauses, "a twenty percent chance." The rehearsal continues, then breaks for lunch.

"How do you like the show?" Frank asks me in the commissary. "Okay," I say. We eat chipped beef on toast.

* * * *

But I feel less than okay. The soap opera is an anesthetized world.

As of January 1971, at least nineteen soap operas are telecast each day five days a week. That's ten hours daily and fifty hours weekly of a world completely separated from contemporary reality. How did this huge block of TV programming happen? People need escape, I know. But the soap opera is not escape; it is denial, masochistic, narcotic. If TV ever lies to us, it lies to us about our world in the afternoon.

The magnificent critic Marya Mannes, who happens to be a Catholic, points out this TV lie in *TV Guide*.

I wager teenagers would stare with hooting disbelief at what passes for their kind on daytime serials. To be sure, the girls wear long hair and the boys longer hair than they used to, and, as I said, the plotline sooner or later includes some alienated youngster with a problem. But what of the new young breed of social and political activists, what of the young idealists and draft protesters who court contempt and prison for their passionate beliefs?

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And what of the millions of city families living, or trying to live, through strike after strike, through hopeless traffic, through noise and pollution and crowds and the daily brutalities of life? ...What conceivable relation to this common reality do these neat serial shadows have?

Soap opera shows us day after day gleaming hospitals copiously staffed with impeccable doctors and charming nurses, but have they any relation to the critical shortages in our national health care, and to the crushing financial burden sickness places on the American citizen? Who do they think they are kidding—or conning?

What should I have said to Frank in the CBS commissary? That soaps can leave a dulling and distorting film? That might be suitable to Miss Mannes; but where I come from you don't smart-mouth your friends. Besides, Frank and Sidney and CBS don't make the programs. They only supply the demand.

But, if they don't make the programs, who does? In truth, you do. You are the program-maker when you stand in the check-out lane where you shop. TV programming, like democracy itself, can—unless properly disciplined—settle down to glorifying the lowest common denominator. If you object to TV being the new “opiate of the people,” if you object through the right channels to the narcotizing irrelevance of the soaps or any other program, chances are you'll be heard. (If you approve of what you see, let your approval be known too.)

To lobby effectively, send one dollar to National Television Advertisers (NTA), 3245 Wisconsin Avenue, Berwyn, Illinois, 60402. NTA will return to you the addresses and names of five hundred company presidents

who sponsor TV programming. Tell the soap company presidents that you want to see their sponsored programs as relevant to our times as are their pollution-conscious commercials.

Secondly, write, don't telephone, the manager of your local TV station. In your letter, state clearly your objection or your praise and include a copy of the letter you have sent to the local and national sponsors who keep that manager's station on the air.

The fate (so far) of the honest sudser has been interesting. In 1968, the BBC super-soaper *The Forsyte Saga* so mesmerized England, Scotland, and Wales that the churches moved the Sunday Vesper services back an hour. By 1971, however, no one of the Big Three American Networks dared telecast this critically and popularly acclaimed Continuing Story (as *Peyton Place* used to be billed). Only the courageous NET (National Educational Television) has shown *The Forsyte Saga*, and then—because of its limited network resources—only at odd hours, locally, and without nationwide coverage. Consider this. NET's daring series, *Bird of an Iron Feather*, a Continuing Story of ghetto Blacks, has hardly become a household word. *Bird* was roundly condemned in Chicago and elsewhere because it used unpretty ghetto situations and profane ghetto language. *Forsyte* tells it like it was. *Bird*, with a Ford Foundation grant, tells it like it is. *Secret Storm* tells it phoney.

Could it be we don't want TV to tell the truth? Could it be that we want TV only to narcotize us, to drug us into false tranquillity? If that is so, then TV should be as outlawed as heroin.

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Back in *The Secret Storm* studio, the organist glissands down the keyboard warming up the background music for

the day's taping. On SET 1, Mary Stuart crawls back into bed. On SET 5, Joan Copeland sits cheerily in her plastic park, hoping—I suppose—she can sing *Coco* on Broadway tonight.

Sidney waits as Frank cues one last spotlight. He calls for quiet.

The three cameras roll.

The mikes boom in.

Mary whispers her lines.

Her metal bedpan crashes to the floor.

They're professionals, all of them. They can't understand why a person from the real world would spend the day on their set. In their minds, the public has asked them for "reel" reality not "real" reality.

Earlier, Frank told me, "By union rules, we have to roll full credits at least once a week. So on days, when we're a little short of storytime, we fill in with extra credits of the entire cast and crew."

Credit must, after all, be given where credit is due. And the Afternoon Wasteland of Time and Talent is mostly the fault of the viewer who is easily satisfied when *Dark Shadows* causes *The Edge of Night* to dim not only *The Guiding Light*, but *The Best of Everything*.

Even with loyalty to Frank, I think I'll not watch *The Secret Storm* for another six weeks.

Will Mary-of-the-crashing-bedpan still be blind?

Probably.