

# The best series have their virtues

by Marjorie Bilbow

**S**YDNEY NEWMAN'S first and real love is the single play, and it is an open secret that he regards the series as something of a necessary evil. I reminded him of a remark he made early in 1965, when he was reported as saying that the only worthwhile series, at that time, were *The Avengers*, *Dr. Finlay's Casebook*, *The Plane Makers*, and *Z Cars*.

He looked disbelieving, and said, "I don't think I would ever have used the word 'worthwhile', in that context without going on to define the word more precisely. A series is only rarely worthwhile in terms of art, because, by its very nature, it must become involved with small untruths, with repeatable patterns.

"It must attract a mass audience, that's its *raison d'être*. It's a short cut, a means of gathering an audience for, among other reasons a subsequent programme which, as a programmer, you may feel is important. For instance, you could say that *Panorama* has a natural audience of about five million, but whenever Tom

Sloan's best comedy shows were put in just before you could be sure that *Panorama* would gain another 3.4 million. This is where clever programming comes in.

"But although I sympathise with people who deplore the proliferation of long-running series, the best ones do have their virtues. Taking the four you mentioned: *The Avengers* is delightful because it gives you a lift; *Z Cars* was good for both police and the public because it helped towards better understanding between them; *Dr. Finlay* stands on its own because it demonstrates basic Christian principles in an absolutely unimpeachable way; *The Plane Makers* was a breakthrough in this country because of the way it showed the tensions at the top and stressed that men don't get to be very rich without giving up something."

I asked him how he would rate the long-running serial in these terms.

"I think *The Newcomers* is good. Very good. It may occasionally lean a little too hard on the emotions, but basically I approve of it as an attempt to dramatise plain people and plain problems.

"My criterion is that the audience should be given value for money but whatever the level of the production it should entertain the mind by tossing up problems and letting us see which way they're going to fall."

Sydney was concerned that I shouldn't get the impression that he thought it was easy to produce good mass appeal series and serials. "Andy Osborn (Head of Series) probably has the toughest assignment of anyone in drama, because he's smack up against the most commercially hep stuff that Hollywood puts out and his directors are forced to work in a particular graphic style with no time for nuances, fading sunsets, subtle delineations—though these subtleties find their way in, God knows how! To make it even tougher, when you're committed to a series you're also committed to a vast expenditure. Whenever anything goes wrong the panic buttons gets pushed, endless discussions begin, and writers are driven mad while story editors take liberties arising out of the emergency. Yes, Andy's in the hottest spot of all.

## Luckier

"Shaun Sutton (Head of Serials) is luckier in that respect, because he has a happily balanced department with his staff rotating through a wide variety of experience covering an enormous cultural range from the classics right through to *Dr. Who*."

He believes in making as many pilot episodes of proposed series and long running serials as funds will allow because it isn't enough to have a

good idea. The execution of that idea must be tested in relation to possible better casting or a slightly different style of approach.

"Is it possible, at the pilot stage, to have any foreknowledge of the degree to which the regular characters will mature and develop as they did, for instance, in *Z Cars*?" I enquired.

"I can't answer for *Z Cars* because it had started before I joined the BBC and to my great regret I can't take any credit for it—except for having the good sense to let it continue. I can answer for *Troubleshooters*, but only by saying that, although we always had great hopes for it, I don't think anyone could have foreseen that it would still be going strong more than three years later. Nor do I think it is ever possible to see so far ahead that you can predict how a series and its characters will develop. What you *must* do, after so many months of hard labour on the part of so many people, is *plan* for it to have a long life."

## Sales

The subject of serials and series, and the cost of producing them in terms of money and man hours, led us naturally into the question of need for overseas sales to help to pay for them.

I said, "In the field of drama, there seem to be two roads to take. Either you make a 100 per cent British product, like *The Forsyte Saga*, and rely on its intrinsic quality for its sales appeal. Or you go in for the mid-Atlantic mystery thriller with the characters and dialogue mass-produced to be readily acceptable in *Oshkosh* and *Arkansas*. How far would you go along with either method?"

"To start with, you could carry this question of overseas sales so far that you would never make another serial. Audiences in the States and Canada don't like them. There aren't any in the States except for terrible things like *Peyton Place* and the occasional soap opera screened in the afternoons.

"We are virtually the only country with a big television industry that regards the serial as a major part of drama. The BBC have been trying to sell *Dr. Who* in a big way for years — Americans are charmed by it, but they won't buy it because it's a serial. *The Forsyte Saga* is a case apart, anyway, because of the tie-up with MGM who own the film rights.

"There's no doubt at all that, at present, it is the series that stands the best chance of being sold to North America."

"Is there any justification for making these mid-Atlantic filmed series, with English

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people talking about gas instead of petrol and referring to money in dollars instead of pounds? I confess that this pandering to American parochialism always makes me cringe."

"The short answer is that this type of entertainment won't build up useful long term sales unless the series is good of its kind. Nor is this treatment absolutely necessary. The continued success of *The Avengers* has proved that you can continue to make an indigenous product that will be popular abroad without too much prostitution of the content and style.

"Having said that," Sydney continued, "I accept that there are certain themes which fit in with a neutral background. Although the characters may speak English, the story

material is not intrinsically British. If you are dealing with that sort of script, I think we can afford to bend our principles a little in order to produce series which are tailor made for overseas."

He explained that, in his view, the point at issue was not whether we did or did not produce this type of neutral entertainment but how much of our output should it be allowed to represent.

"Television's primary obsession must be with our home audience and our own cultural welfare," he said. "If we hold to this, we can afford to peel off a proportion for the purpose of earning dollars.

"In fact, the BBC could afford to do this much more than they do because of the sheer size of their output. To be frank, I wish they would.

"But then again to meet in-

ternational technical standards, they would have to be done on film. And that might cost more risk money than is available."

I took his point that overseas sales would ease the Corporation's financial burden. Even if the increased licence fee is approved, the Corporation will still have to scrimp and save wherever possible. We are all aware that drama is particularly vulnerable because of the impossibility of proving to hardheaded outsiders that it is essential to carry the cost of commissioning plays which may never go into production. When I asked Sydney how far he had been prepared to go in this direction he said, in a mixture of candour and reticence, "I stopped just short of being foolish . . . I spent a very great amount."

*This series of articles  
will be concluded  
next week*