The best series have their virtues

SYDNEY 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 1963, when he was reported as saying that the only worthwhile serials, 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 repetitive 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 programme, 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 was followed by a later drama. This is where clever programming comes in.

I sympathise with people who deplore the proliferation of long-running series, and who feel that they are for their virtues. Taking the four you mentioned: The Avengers was good only as long as you had a stable cast; Z Cars was good only as long as there was a stable cast; The Plane Makers was a breakthrough; Richard Quine saw that the way it showed the tensions at the top and stressed that men did 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 going 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.'

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

'I was concerned that I shouldn't get the impression that he thought it was easy to provide the good mass appeal serials and series. 'Andy Osborn (Head of Series) produced that the toughest assignment of anyone in dressing an enormous cultural gap against the most commercially helpful stuff that Hollywood puts out. He also has problems to work in a particular graphic style with no time for nuances, fast-cutting, and all the conventions - though these subtleties find their way in. And how! To make it even tougher, when you're committed to a series, you'd better be in it for a vast expenditure. Whenever anything goes wrong the panic button 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.'

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 pay for them.

'So if 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 emphasise the mid-Atlantic mystery thriller with the characters and dialogue mass-produced to be readily acceptable in Oakland and Arkansas. How far would you go along with either method?'

'Ve try 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 power of 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 international 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.