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# I LIKE Soap Opera!

Written for "The Listener"  
by R. MORRIS

MUCH criticism has been levelled at those women — mainly housewives — who are addicts of the daytime radio serial. Educators and intellectuals condemn "soap opera" out of hand as being pap for feeble minds. Well, maybe from a purely intellectual viewpoint they are right. No one has a good word for women's serials, except the fans themselves. And many a pseudo-intellectual is a secret addict who indulges in surreptitious listening, although wild horses wouldn't drag the admission from her.

As for the serials' themselves most of them are, admittedly, sentimental and melodramatic nonsense. But so are novelettes, "romantic" novels, and stories in women's magazines. Yet no one bothers to criticise them. Why? Is it because the written word is acceptable as being the time-honoured form, whereas aural presentation of drama is still new?

It seems to me that "soap opera," like nylons and Danny Kaye, fulfils its own function in our complex modern life. It may be devoid of intellectual significance, but it does brighten the dull everyday of the housewives' routine. Many women look forward to the morning serials when they can put their feet up and relax with a cup of tea and a cigarette. One busy neighbour of mine does all her knitting and darning during the serial hour.

AFTER all, listening to stories while you work is nothing new, even if the manner of telling has changed. In ancient times the wandering troubadour and story-teller was welcomed rapturously by both the lords and ladies of castle and manor. But whereas the men of those times were usually away attending to sterner matters the women carried out their endless domestic tasks just as they do today. Small wonder, then, that the professional story-teller was a welcome guest. One who could weave incredible romances or chill the blood with tales of witches and ghosts to pass mid-lady's time while she and her women spun and sewed and embroidered.

"Escapism" is the word one hears often used as a form of accusation. "Real life is not like that" is the wonted criticism. Of course it's not! And why should it be a shameful admission of weakness to desire escape some of the time?

Country women, in particular, live quiet lives wherein children, animals and garden figure prominently. They are busy and, for the most part, happy in their lot. But when the older children are away at school, the baby taking its morning nap, and the breadwinner out mending the fence in the big paddock, the time comes for "mother" to be just a woman and to indulge in a little fantasy.

Radio serials are written to a formula; the appeal is to the emotions, not to the intellect. There are few women who do

not indulge in day-dreams, in secret desires known only to themselves, in a longing for drama, romance. So the radio serial supplies the vicarious thrills once gleaned only from the passion-wrought pages of Ouida or Elinor Glyn.

TO the student of human behaviour it is an interesting fact that characters of a particular serial can become very real at times, indeed so substantial that radio stations have been known to become swamped with 'phone calls, letters and even presents when a character in a popular serial becomes ill, gets married, or has an anniversary. When this happens the script writer, the

actors and the sponsor are to be congratulated. They are giving the public what it wants—and they have achieved a minor triumph in having created something living, even if it lives only in the imagination.

Furthermore, the speech and morality of the women's serials are above censure. Where a novel may wallow in prurient situations and doubtful dialogue the broadcast play is subject to the strictest censorship. Anything which ignores the rules of decency, flouts convention, or attacks the high ideals of human relationship would stand no chance on the air. For example, should a woman in a radio serial decide to leave her husband for another man she must, in some way, come to realise her folly and return to her husband. The "baddies" might have their day, just to make things difficult, but they must either reform or come to a sticky end. Wickedness is punished, virtue rewarded. That is the script-writer's "must." And it is one of the reasons why, in this era of calling a spade a — spade I like soap opera.

IF one takes an academic interest in radio plays it is rewarding to listen carefully to the voices of the actors, to catch the subtle inflections of tone to convey character as well as to express the meaning of the dialogue. It is amusing to listen with a hypercritical ear to the sound effects which, on occasion, can be unconvincing. Likewise, the dialogue itself is sometimes a little "off the beam." A society lady of 1900 is made to use modern slang by saying: "Oh, so sorry. Did I drop a brick?" instead of "I'm so sorry. Have I committed a faux pas?" or "Have I been indiscreet?" Then there was the gentleman of Old Vienna who referred to another as a "stuffed shirt," an American idiom of extremely modern vintage.

But the majority of listeners are not critical. They don't let these trifling errors bother them or detract from their (continued on next page)

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