



GENERAL HOSPITAL REMAINS ADRIFT
Does ABC/Disney Care Enough to Save It and Get Viewers Invested?

In the most recent ratings week ending August 14, 2009, General Hospital (GH) only attracted 776,000 viewers in the important female 18-49 demographic—adding just 9,000 viewers from the previous week. This performance is only 3% above its low for the year and remains 26% below its highest 2009 audience in this demographic.

While General Hospital added 82,000 in total viewers last week, only 70,000, or 85% of the increase, were men—not a targeted market. General Hospital only had 2,373,000 viewers on Friday, which is only 9% above the low for the year (2,169,000 viewers on July 10, 2009) and down 27% from the highest day of the year (3,260,000 viewers on March 2, 2009).

It is clear that General Hospital remains adrift. Many soap opera Internet sites were as disturbed as viewers involved with the SOS Campaign were by ABC Daytime President Brian Frons' comments on the demise of Guiding Light. A writer on one site went so far as to speculate that "TPTB's ulterior motive for trashing soaps-on screen is so they will collectively be canceled into the off-screen. Stranger things have happened." (Carol Webber Banks-SoapZone). This only reinforces the feelings that many viewers have already had that ABC is preparing GH for cancellation.

ABC needs to get new viewers to invest, get long-time viewers to remain invested, and get viewers who have given up on the show to become reinvested. It is the job of management to hook the viewers and make them want to watch, long-term. The writers should aim to draw viewers in with characters and couples that viewers can root for with compelling storylines that have satisfying reveals and conclusions. To ABC/Disney, it should not be "just a show." Instead, the writers seem to purposely create storylines, then drop them. Storylines are started, often by destroying the history and integrity of a character, only to be dropped before there is a sensible, satisfying conclusion. Reveals are presented, but there is no emotional payoff for the viewer. In many cases, the reveals and conclusions make little sense or are so predictable there is no reason to watch the story to fruition. Therefore, not only do the storylines lack the important, defining sense of continuity, but the integrity of the character has then been destroyed for no reason.

One example is that, in an effort to feature the character of Claudia, not only has GH sacrificed many characters in an effort to keep her secret about Michael's shooting, but the many reveals have become anti-climactic because there has been no payoff for the viewers. In the process, the integrity of the character of Sonny has been destroyed to accommodate Claudia. Additionally the sudden 'reveal' that Kate took laundered Zacchara money from Trevor while on bad terms with him to start Crimson makes little sense. The fact that she was so cautious about not accepting laundered money from Sonny, along with there being no explanation as to how this all came about, has frustrated many viewers invested in Kate's story.

The Ten Remedies for GH as identified by the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital Campaign are a compilation of principles that many fans desire for a better soap opera, to return the show to one they want to watch daily. Unfortunately, although these principles have been listed, and seem to be common sense to many, there is no outward evidence that they have been implemented by ABC/Disney in a move to improve GH.

The first of these principles is promoting and re-instating **character-driven storylines**. The audience does not want to see storylines begin only to have them suddenly dropped with no sense of forward momentum or direction, with no sense of resolution--hence the word 'line' in storylines. The word 'line' infers that the story will be continuing on, like a thread being woven into a fabric. Additionally, well-crafted stories are driven by their characters and as such maintain the character's attributes and distinctive qualities, which is why they are read when written or watched when filmed. To create a storyline that introduces Kate as Sonny's first love and builds their relationship to the edge of marriage, while showcasing both of their true characters, then simply ending it by having Sonny undergo a sudden 180-degree transformation in order to justify a break-up is confusing and destructive to the character. To create a storyline that focuses on something as important as alcohol abuse along with drinking and driving, that features a significantly underused veteran character like Monica Quartermaine, then simply end it with her spending a little time in rehab with no follow up, is clearly a stunt plot and not a storyline with continuity.

Character growth and development is another of the Ten Remedies for GH and closely related to the aforementioned one. Fans of soap operas (daily dramas), watch the show *for the characters*. If they do not like the characters on the show, they will not watch. The audience watches these people every day for an hour (or half an hour in the case of *The Bold & the Beautiful*), and becomes emotionally attached to them. They watch them grow up, grow older, and mature. It is natural for a person to change over time, to develop into a deeper, more complex person, but not in an atypical or conspicuous way. Viewers expect the characters on a soap opera to grow and, to a certain extent, expect some of the characters to undergo personality changes or shifts, however, they expect those changes to be explained and take place in some kind of logical manner. Fans do not appreciate when characters that they feel an affinity for become stagnant and seem stuck in time, nor do they appreciate it when their favorite character and/or his or her behavior is morphed into someone they simply do not recognize. Having a character like Elizabeth Webber, who developed from a feisty teen to a mature, single parent suddenly replay the same behavior showcasing self-destructive tendencies, along with a lack of self-respect, by not only re-marrying Lucky when she knew she did not love him, but then go back to him once again when she and he both admitted they were not in love, is the absolute opposite of character growth and development. It is, in fact, worse than stagnation; it is character regression and not what fans want to watch, particularly those within the very important women 18-49 demographic, many of which are being represented by this single, working mother.

Historical continuity/integrity is another principle necessary for those at ABC/Disney to revisit when looking at rescuing GH. Simply making sure that those writing the show know as much about, and have respect for, the characters and past storylines as those who have watched it for 10, 20, or even 30-plus years would go a long way to improving the quality of the show. There is little more annoying than having watched a show for over half of one's life and suddenly everything one 'knows' about a character is being changed. Certainly surprises in characters' backgrounds are expected, but to have someone like Ethan Lovett show up in Port Charles and be revealed as Luke's illegitimate son with Holly, while he was supposed to be in love and with Laura, and while Holly was married to Robert, is completely unforgivable. The timeline simply made no sense with how the story supposedly came to pass. This story, along with similar stories like the one involving the Mayor and Alexis and that involving Kate and Olivia show the lack of respect the writers have for historical continuity, making for a show that many people do not want to continue to watch.

Obviously **respect for veteran characters** is extremely important. It is basically the ying to the yang of historical continuity because one cannot have one without the other. Writers cannot maintain historical continuity if they are not maintaining respect for veteran or long-time characters. As previously mentioned, long-time fans of GH have emotional attachments to the characters and remember the large and small details about them. They remember the emotions portrayed on-screen by characters and between characters. For example, in the previously mentioned story involving Ethan Lovett's parentage, not only was the historical continuity disrespected, but the friendship, love and emotional bonds between the characters involved has been disrespected. To have Luke be so cavalier about the 'affair' resulting in his illegitimate son totally distorts the long-standing storyline of the most famous 'super couple' Luke and Laura, as well

as the close friendship between Luke and Robert. It proves to long-time viewers that their knowledge of the veteran characters is not placed in high regard by the writers. Many fans feel as if their time and commitment has been wasted and/or they feel a sense of worthlessness in regard to their importance to those in charge.

Emotional balance for characters and storylines is necessary to let characters and the show continue to grow. Currently the writers like to write comedy only for certain characters and only dark drama for others. It is one thing for certain characteristics to be innate to a character on a soap opera and yet another to have characters written as one-dimensional, monotonous versions of people. Classic examples are the cases of Lucy Coe and Sonny Corinthos. For the most part, Lucy Coe became known as the comic relief character on GH. Most of the audience knew that if she was on-screen, there would be comedy. It was not until later that her character was shown with more depth in her relationships with Kevin and Brenda. Sonny Corinthos was the classic brooding, dark, male character, until viewers were treated to seeing him with Kate in romantic comedy scenes with more regularity than they had in the past. Viewers enjoyed watching Lucy's depth as the best friend of Brenda during Brenda's breakdown, just as they enjoyed watching Sonny smile and be flirtatious with Kate.

In addition, the storylines on the show need to be balanced. Part of the audience likes the mob storylines, but having them be at the forefront of GH most of the time has even those fans tiring of it. There used to be balance between the storylines focusing on adventure, family turmoil and business problems, while maintaining the stories focusing on the hospital itself. Instead of writing each character to be only light-hearted or darker and more sullen, viewers want to see characters that have layers and depth, in a variety of storylines that showcase the spectrum of emotion that each character embodies.

Focus on families is severely lacking on GH and has been for quite some time to the consternation of the audience. An important part of GH was the foundation on which it was built--the doctors and nurses and their families who worked at the hospital and the interactions therein. The hospital was the basis for the show and what drew hundreds of thousands of viewers that eventually grew to millions of viewers. Viewers wanted to watch these families, their members and their interactions, their trials and tribulations, their successes and solutions, and how they all interacted with each other. The Hardys, the Webbers, and the Quartermaines were all intertwined with one another. The Spencers, the Webbers, and the Scorpions were a part of each other's lives on a regular basis. There were friendships and love affairs among and between the families, along with adventures and joy.

Fans watched as these families and the children of these families grew and became characters with more depth, adding to the fabric of the show. Now, there are families like Robin and Patrick and Emma, who rarely interact with other families unless there is a crisis. Nikolas has a son that has only been seen once in months. Meanwhile, his Aunt Alexis' family is going through turmoil that he has not been a part of until recently because he has been chasing the 'twin' sister of Emily, other wise known by many as the re-incarnated Emily, whom he has been trying to get to move in with him, though he barely knows her. Sadly, while many of the Quartermaines have been killed off, the reveal of baby Jake as a Quartermaine, a family member they know nothing about, could create many possible interactions and storylines that could include Jason (the last of Alan's children), and Elizabeth, the only Webber on the show. All of these families could be and should be intertwined with one another. Each of them has a connection to one, if not more, of the persons in one of the other families, yet GH and ABC/Disney have failed to emphasize those connections.

Enduring couples that fans can root for play an important role on any soap opera. The term "supercouple" was coined during the 1980s when GH was hugely successful, making couples a staple of the genre. Many GH couples over the years had problems, including Alan and Monica, Steve and Audrey, Luke and Laura, Robert and Holly, Duke and Anna, and Frisco and Felicia, but viewers were glued to their TVs to see how they would work through their problems and remain together or reunite. These couples not only had a sense of commitment, but were written with layers and depth that made the audience root for their success. Today successful, viable couples on GH have become disposable, including Johnny and Lulu, Lucky and Sam, Sonny and Kate, and Jason and Elizabeth. They are often simply dropped without explanation, usually to set up nonsensical or questionable pairings. There becomes less and less reason to

become attached to or root for a couple because many feel that in a few months they will be torn apart for some other pairing, which in turn makes it less likely that one will be attached to the show as a whole.

Many viewers have been, and still are, crying out for **less sleaze**. Watching Nikolas bounce back and forth between drunken kisses with Elizabeth and his supposed love for Rebecca, or watching Sonny having (hate) sex with Claudia and then run over to Olivia's apartment to slam a kiss on her, or watching Lulu flirt yet again with the newest guy in town, has become downright disgusting. The frequency with which female characters are brought onto GH who are loose, manipulative, duplicitous and conniving is ridiculous. For a genre with its most important demographic in the women 18-49 age group, one would think that there would be some balance as to the number of sleazy, tawdry women it showcases in front line storylines. Certainly there is a place for these characters and certainly the audience expects to see them, but to introduce one after another while completely ignoring the other, more positive female role-model types of characters is absurd. Obviously not all 'bad' or 'evil' characters need to be men, but they also do not need to be perverted, classless con-women willing to use any means to get what they want, who later are totally changed by the writers in an attempt to make them more likable.

One case in point is the highly loved character of Helena Cassadine. There is no doubt that she is a maniacal, sociopathic character, however, there is no sleaze or debauchery in her character. She embodies a certain and constant charisma and class that makes her the female character you simply love to hate. One always knows she is up to no good and one welcomes it. The idea of changing her into a loving, doting grandmother is ridiculous. It would be welcomed and refreshing to have storylines focusing on the successful women, the independent women, the women who have matured over the years while on GH. Fans want good and bad characters, but they want a more realistic and acceptable ratio. Mothers want to watch GH with their daughters and while doing so, do not want to teach them that sex is not meaningful, that getting pregnant is a means to an end, or that manipulating someone, no matter the reason, is acceptable.

As opposed to sleaze, viewers are crying out for **more romance and humor**. Back in the day, when Alan and Monica were a prominent and sometimes estranged couple, their squabbles were often offset by romantic moments and humorous fights, resulting in passionate reunions. Long-time viewers remember Duke and Anna's romance amidst his dealings with the mob and her position as police chief. Both worked hard to work through their issues on the opposite sides of the law until he faked his death trying to protect Anna and Robin. His later attempts to watch over Anna were discovered just before his untimely death. Sean and Tiffany have had a fun, enduring relationship. Many viewers will remember the "big reveal" on their wedding day when they found out that actress Tiffany Hill's real name was Elsie Mae Crumholz, a reveal that caused all in attendance at their wedding to break out into laughter. It was heartwarming to see this couple, who left the canvas together, come back to visit Robert on General Hospital: Night Shift, a show that demonstrated respect for GH's veteran characters and history.

GH currently has the opportunity to present more romance and humor, if only the writers would write it. Carly and Jax find time for romance, even while Carly is pregnant. Many have been entertained by Carly's need to get a note from her doctor to present to Jax stating it was permissible and appropriate for Carly to have sex during this time. Spinelli and Maxie are a couple that have a unique romance, but many feel that the writers are going overboard in having Spinelli resort to his quirkiness, instead of letting him mature a little and letting the humor be more natural. Patrick and Robin have overcome many obstacles to be together, but many feel that now that they are married and have a baby, they are being slighted in the romance department, while the sleaze of many current nonsensical pairings is given more screen time. Many are able to relate to the realness of their relationship and want to see much more of this couple. Jason and Elizabeth have a timeless quality that has been cultivated for over ten years. Though they have been paired with others throughout the years, they keep coming back to each other when times are rough, and now have a child together. Their relationship is based on friendship and love with both being loyal and supportive of each other. Sonny and Kate came together with smart writing that capitalized on the actors' ability to play romantic comedy along with a feeling of classic movie romance. Many have noticed that these two can say so much with their eyes and have a connection that is very natural and real. These two have been forced apart to allow for Sonny to be placed in dark, sleazy relationships between two unrootable women.

Viewers crave an **enjoyable escape** when they tune in to GH. Many fans have stated that, before November of 2008, not only did they watch every day, but with options such as SoapNet or online viewing available, they would often watch more than once a day. Many of these same viewers, some who have watched for decades, now hardly watch or are not watching at all. One fan stated that she has watched GH since the early days of Scotty Baldwin and Laura Webber. As she became more involved with the characters, she began to relish her one-hour of escape more and more. As a married, working woman, she had a difficult time watching sometimes, but found ways to keep up and watch as often as she could. She was such a fan that when she found out she was pregnant and having a boy, she decided to name her son, Scott, after her favorite GH character. In late 2004 she used GH as an escape when she had lymphoma and was undergoing chemotherapy. It truly was one hour a day she had to leave her life behind and enjoy the characters she had watched for so long. However, over the last couple of years she has become less and less interested in watching as the show's quality has declined. Now, she not only no longer watches GH at all, she has stopped watching AMC and OLTL, feeling the person in charge of all three is leading them down the same path. How sad is it that someone who named her child after Scotty Baldwin and used GH to get through a difficult time now no longer watches any of ABC/Disney's daytime lineup? More and more viewers like this one, who have watched for years, are stating that they are no longer invested nor do not feel they want to become invested in GH or other soaps anymore. Additionally, the lower standards at GH are now causing viewers to not only discontinue watching daytime soaps, but also nighttime programming as well. At what point will these same viewers quit watching other Disney offerings?

Changes are necessary, yet management seems to be making changes on a more superficial level. Taping the show in HD may make the show look great, but is not enough to get viewers to tune in if those viewers cannot even stomach watching the characters or storylines anymore. One fan stated, "Not only can I not stomach watching General Hospital anymore, I feel like I have to take a bath after I watch it. I feel dirty, like I have done something wrong. I'm not sure how much longer I can continue to watch." For many viewers, GH is no longer an enjoyable escape.

It is time for GH to let the characters grow and develop, and in essence, grow up. Viewers are frustrated watching their favorite characters being "thrown into corners and made to run in circles" just to rehash the same stories over and over again, often with some of the very same characters involved. Truth be told, GH needs to "grow up." The writers need to "think outside the box" by writing storylines that allow the characters to grow and change naturally or logically, not by suddenly hijacking their personalities and causing 180-degree transformations and character regressions that do nothing to move the characters or storylines forward, but rather force the characters into repetitive situations or nonsensical and often perverse new situations. The time has come for ABC/Disney to step in and make changes to save GH!

Every week, more fans of GH are joining together with fans of Sonny and Kate, Jason and Elizabeth, Patrick and Robin, and Jax and Carly as part of the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital Campaign. **All share in a common goal of asking ABC/Disney to listen to the viewers and help GH right itself by making the changes needed through the use of the SOS Ten Remedies to make GH the quality show it once was and can become again.** Viewers are hoping GH can be a viable program that not only stays afloat, but has smooth sailing ahead. For more information regarding the campaign, contact Dana L. Meyer or Kecia K. Picard at saveoursoapgh@gmail.com, visit the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital page on Facebook or visit the new the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital website at www.saveoursoapgh.com.