



MARLENA DE LACROIX, "THE TITANIC JUST KEEPS ON SINKING"
GENERAL HOSPITAL CONTINUES TO LOSE VIEWERS

Marlena De Lacroix, soap critic and fan, recently despaired in her blog entitled "The Downward Soap Spiral Accelerates" about the sorry state of story telling on soap operas, stating that "we have reached the end stage of network daytime soap opera." *Those involved with the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital campaign agree with De Lacroix that solid story telling is being replaced with stunt casting as the industry rearranges "chairs on the deck of the Titanic."*

Since May of 2009, when the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital campaign was founded when fans of four couples on General Hospital joined ranks, viewers have been asking ABC/Disney to listen and make changes. In recent weeks, many soap critics, like Marlena De LaCroix, have voiced the same concerns as the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital campaign regarding the lack of character-driven storylines incorporating character growth. Sadly, the result has been the continuation of lower ratings.

General Hospital (GH), once the leading soap opera on TV, and ABC's flagship soap opera, continues to lose viewers. The ratings for the week ending October 2, 2009, marked the third consecutive week of viewer losses for GH. What is particularly disturbing to many fans is that the week started strongly with 3.0 million viewers, but dropped to only 2.3 million viewers (1.8 daily rating) by Thursday, October 1, 2009, giving GH its sixth smallest audience in history.

The ratings for the week ending October 9, 2009, marked the fourth consecutive week of viewer losses for GH. GH's total viewers dropped with HH ratings once again declining to 1.9. It is interesting to note that, one year ago, GH's HH rating was 2.2, while Days of Our Lives (DOOL) had a 1.9 rating. One year later, the two soap operas have effectively swapped ratings. In the important women 18-49 demographic, GH now trails DOOL by 55,000 viewers, while one year ago GH had 90,000 more viewers than DOOL in that demographic.

For the week ending October 16, 2009, General Hospital declined yet again. It fell to 5th place out of 7 soap operas in total viewers and received a 1.3 (-.1) rating in the women 18-49 demographic. It is important to note that over the last several months, General Hospital has had spikes in ratings with special events like the carnival, the July sweeps car crash, and the Maxie/Spinelli non-wedding. Each of these special events, however, have been followed by a return to lower ratings. For example, in the last two weeks, after the Maxie/Spinelli non-wedding, GH received a 1.9 rating for eight days whereas the lowest rating for the same weeks last year was a 2.0 along with four days with a 2.2 rating and one day with a 2.3 rating. The drop in ratings reflects a fundamental weakness in GH's storylines.

Not every soap opera has seen declines in viewers. For the weeks ending October 9 and 16, both The Young & the Restless (Y&R) (+39,000 and +646,000) and DOOL (+519,000 and +339,000) have gained viewers vs. the same weeks last year, while GH (-326,000 and -111,000) has lost viewers vs. last year for these weeks. Last year, during the first week of October, GH was not only in second place in the women 18-49 demographic, but was not far behind industry leader Y&R.

What has changed in the last year? The SOS/Save Our Soap! GH Campaign agrees with De Lacroix that for a soap to succeed, writers must "craft and pace storylines so that they are emotionally believable." Sadly, for many viewers, GH's current major storylines are not emotionally believable. Many storylines have been rushed, dropped, or changed mid-stream so that the audience cannot help but remain emotionally

distant and confused, and/or view them as pathetic and not worth the investment.

One such storyline involves Kristina Davis, daughter of Alexis Davis and Sonny Corinthos. There was a hint during the summer that a teen abuse storyline was forming involving Kristina and her new boyfriend, Kiefer. In fact, GH had Kiefer strike Kristina and, at the end of the show, did a PSA on violence against young women. Unfortunately, the relationship was rushed, and then the storyline was pushed aside to promote another storyline. Any empathy one might have had for Kristina or interest in the storyline itself was lost. This storyline could have led to further bonding between Kristina and her estranged father due to his own childhood abuse issues. It could have led to Alexis and Sonny becoming more involved in their daughter's life as co-parents and, for the sake of their daughter, putting aside their differences. It could have been a wonderfully educational endeavor on the part of ABC and GH focusing on teen abuse, symptoms of it and resolutions. Instead, Kristina ran off to Mexico with her half-brother, the abuse storyline was dropped; neither her father nor mother had anything to do with directly tracking her down and an opening for greatly increasing the family dynamic with an educational message for the audience was lost.

The Kristina/Kiefer storyline is now being revisited months later, but again, certain aspects are being rushed and the build up of a relationship between the audience and the boyfriend has been neglected completely, along with any real emotional bonding between daughter and father or father and mother. While Kristina's dialogue has "dropped anvils" indicating that Kristina feels pressured to have sex, her sister Sam, currently a PI, has taken her to a clinic for birth control pills rather than picking up on Kristina's mentions that she hopes Kiefer can wait long enough for her to use the birth control pills for a month. The possibility of a teen pregnancy story is now added, however, it is also being rushed, causing many fans to fear that the abuse, possible pregnancy, and resolution will all take place before the holidays are even over, or worse yet, that the story will be dropped. If that is the case, there is no time for emotional attachment or believability and no reason to become invested in the storyline or any of the characters. Viewers are left to wonder if the lesson ABC/Disney is now promoting is that, if your daughter is being physically abused by her boyfriend, make sure she is on birth control pills so she will at least not get pregnant, though she might get beaten up.

Another storyline showcasing this lack of emotional believability includes the sudden involvement of Robin and Patrick as investigators instead of focusing on being doctors. While the concept could be an interesting direction for GH to take while allowing for one of GH's most noted couples to be at the forefront, this sudden turn simply does not make sense for Robin. She has not always been supportive of her parents' work as 'spies and/or international law enforcement' nor the similar work of her cousins' parents. As she has gotten older, she has come to appreciate what they do, but she has never forgotten what she, Maxie and Georgie missed out on while growing up and she has just recently become a mother, herself. It is inconceivable that she would suddenly become an 'investigator' and put herself in harm's way now that she is a parent. Also, she has always been very impassioned about her medical research work, but that has been suddenly dropped from the canvas and therefore the continued opportunity for research and education regarding her HIV disease and the many issues surrounding it have also been lost. To have her abandon her earlier ambitions after "investigating" a murder mystery that was never really a mystery simply rings untrue for the character's nature.

Likewise, GH has always included the Port Charles Police Department as part of its canvas. Unfortunately, over the last several years, it has been all but lost, as has the new Private Investigation firm, the creation of which was obviously a way to promote those characters directly involved with it. It is quite a lengthy listing of characters that fall within this group, Lucky Spencer, Mac Scorpio, District Attorney Alexis Davis, Det. Harper, Det. Cruz, Sam McCall, and Damian Spinelli to name a few. Neither the PCPD nor the PI firm have been the sole focus of any major storyline in quite some time nor have any of the characters involved in those 'careers/organizations' and their partners been specifically featured with regard to their profession. Not only has there been a severe lack of attention on the law enforcement and/or crime investigation aspect of GH, but when it has been a part of a major storyline, the PCPD has almost never been successful in solving a crime. This is just one more example of how GH's writers either drop or do not fully develop storylines into the layered and interesting creations they could be. It is also another reason why many fans have quit watching GH. The opportunities that are there for creative, fully developed, emotional and even educational storylines has been squandered time and time again.

GH has had much publicity lately regarding many changes taking place, mostly in regard to new actors being brought onto the canvas for guest stints and the hiring of new or re-hiring of former actors. While it appears that management may be concerned enough about the ratings to make changes, many viewers are left to wonder if the changes will deliver what they want most. Fans want storylines that are character-driven and allow the characters to develop and grow, that explain the out-of-character behavior of the male leads and other characters on the show, include storylines with a sense of direction without being dropped, honor the rich history of the show and its characters, include less sleaze and more romance and humor and creativity, integrate more characters into intertwining storylines rather than relegating them to being guests, offer a sense of emotional balance for the characters and a balance of which characters are on-screen, focus on families, include and reunite enduring couples that viewers can root for, and create the enjoyable escape that has been sadly lacking for so many viewers for months. Many fear that the changes currently being made are simply part of the “rearranging of deck chairs” that has become a pattern for GH for the past year or more.

The sudden spikes and drops in ratings suggest that viewers are interested in watching GH when stunts or events are staged, but are turned off by the lack of storyline follow-through and character development following those events, causing storylines to be emotionally unbelievable. Fans and former viewers of GH have joined 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 to ask ABC/Disney to listen to viewers and help save GH from sinking ratings by developing character-driven storylines that allow for character growth and development and make GH a soap that viewers can and will want to invest in on a regular basis. 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, follow on twitter @SOS_GH or visit the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital website at www.saveoursoapgh.com.