



GENERAL HOSPITAL IS A WRECK!
ABC-TV Invests Millions in Sets and New Contracts
Instead of Improving Storylines

The General Hospital (GH) ratings wreck has persisted for several months and there is no sign of recovery in sight. The A.C. Nielsen Ratings Corporation reported that in January 2008 and January 2009, GH started each new year with a total viewer (HH) rating of 2.3 (i.e. GH was viewed by 2.3% of the available viewing audience). The rest of 2009 has been anything but smooth sailing for GH. In January and February 2009, over 70% of the daily ratings were over 2.0, with a ratings high of 2.3. But, by April, only 9% of days had a rating greater than 2.0 and 50% of days had a rating of 1.9 or less. The real proof of the ratings wreckage came in June as there were no days above 2.0, and 82% of days were rated 1.9 or lower. In fact, 27% of days were 1.8 and another 27% were 1.7 or lower. Obviously, this is a very disturbing trend, since Guiding Light was canceled with ratings of only 1.6.

In 2008, GH's ratings increased due to solid storylines and balance for fan favorites. Examples include Sonny's Bensonhurst marriage proposal to Kate, the building of a real friendship between Diane and Alexis, Laura's return and interaction with Scott, Luke & Tracy, along with other romance and angst storytelling for Jason and Elizabeth, Sonny and Kate, Patrick and Robin, Jax and Carly, Lucky and Sam, Johnny and Lulu and other characters on the canvas. Ratings did hit a low point of 2.0 in August 2008, as storylines played out and actors took and returned from summer vacations. In September, however, GH rebounded, achieving weekly 2.3 ratings. This year has been a totally different story as GH has broken apart favorite couples, corrupted core characters, rid the show of veterans, continued to replace romance with sleaze, and in numerous instances, actually changed the screen history of many characters. As a result, ratings have steadily declined with no rebound in sight.

Interestingly, Douglas Marland, now considered a successful soap opera writing legend, was hired by ABC Daytime in 1978 to work with Gloria Monty on General Hospital when it was near cancellation. In what is now considered a classic interview, Marland explains his rules on "How Not to Wreck a Show."

Watch the show.

Many viewers wonder if anyone involved in the writing or production process is really watching what ends up on the air. The lack of continuity is jarring to most viewers. Storylines constantly shift and change, are started but not finished, or suffer from prolonged gaps. Currently the character of Kate Howard has been off-screen for over four weeks, while viewers have been left wondering what Giselle from Couture Magazine could be blackmailing her with, causing her to leak her own Crimson layouts. By not seeing Kate on-screen for weeks at a time, the storyline has lost momentum and fans have not been able to see a favorite character.

Learn the history of the show. You would be surprised at the ideas that you can get from the back story of your characters.

Mr. Marland obviously felt that there were many storyline opportunities available to writers by being faithful to the history of the characters. He would not suggest that a writer learn the history if he thought it wise that the writer would simply change it to try to make an implausible storyline more plausible. Sadly, Management has not honored the history of the show in recent months. This lack of integrity has been purposeful. The more viewers complain that the show is making little sense due to revisions in its history, the more revisions viewers have been subjected to.

Viewers often tune in to soap operas because they feel connected to the characters and their history. A glaring example of how history has been revised, and not for the better, is the introduction of Ethan to the canvas. It has damaged the epic love story of Luke and Laura, a pairing whose wedding was the highest rated episode in daytime history! In the process, the character has also damaged the integrity of the relationship between Robert and Holly as well.

Olivia Falconeri was first mentioned as Kate's cousin and someone Sonny seemed to only have known slightly more than casually. Over time, her backstory has changed so much that we are to now believe she was a close childhood friend to Sonny, knew more about his secret home life than he ever allowed even those closest to him know, and had his child. Many of the endearing aspects of the popular Sonny and Kate love story have been changed to accommodate this less than favored character. Viewers learned throughout Sonny and Kate's courtship that Connie/Kate had been a loving, calming influence for him, a port-in-the-storm so to speak, when they were teenagers. Based on shared memories, she was the one that had been there for him, made him happy and taught him how to love. Viewers learned that they had never had sex as teens. In a recent episode, Olivia told Johnny that she was the one who was there for Sonny when they were younger, but then he went and nailed her cousin. Confused viewers are left to wonder if this is just Olivia's warped take on things, an irresponsible or uninformed rewrite, or Olivia being just being plain crazy and obsessed over Sonny.

Another blight on the historical knowledge base of the writing is exemplified by the current storyline featuring Alexis Davis having sex with the mayor during one of the most pivotal nights on GH in 2006. That night, Alexis supposedly witnessed her husband, Ric, having sex with her daughter, Sam, allowed Jason to take her to the hospital since she was suffering from symptoms of lung cancer, went to the Metro Court hotel where she sat with Sonny and Kristina, who were sharing ice cream, then took Kristina back to their room and supposedly had sex with the mayor at some point. Viewers are still trying to figure out exactly how she would have had the time, drive or stamina to have sex with the mayor on that particular night.

Read the fan mail. The very characters that are not thrilling to you may be the audience's favorites. Fans now have several different means by which to communicate their feelings to those in charge at ABC Daytime. Viewers may call the ABC and GH comment lines, e-mail the ABC/Disney executives, write letters, fill out ABC comment forms, vote in polls in *ABC Soaps in Depth* (an ABC publication), and/or post on ABC Insider Access (an ABC/Disney affiliated message board which professes to send its transcripts to the ABC research department and the ABC executives).

Through these avenues, many fans have been clamoring to see more of Kate, Elizabeth, Alexis, Diane, Monica, the Quartermaine family, Mac, Matt, and Robert and Anna Scorpio. In addition, many want to see more of Jason and Elizabeth, Sonny and Kate, Lucky and Sam, and Johnny and Lulu. The characters/actors involved in these four pairings are rarely, if ever, allowed to share scenes together. Obviously, someone is not paying attention to this rule.

Be objective. When I came in to ATWT, the first thing I said was, what is pleasing the audience? You have to put your own personal likes and dislikes aside and develop the characters that the audience wants to see.

The SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital Campaign is focused on this very rule. Though fans have been pleading for months to see more positive, independent female characters such as Kate, Elizabeth, Alexis, Diane, and Monica; more familial, romantic, and humorous bonds; and simply more scenes with Mac, Matt, Max and Milo, they have had to endure the personal agendas and backstage politics resulting in the focus being placed on such characters as Claudia, Olivia, Sam, Rebecca, and Ethan.

Viewers have stated over and over again the need for more balance between the hospital and the mob, and more balance between interesting, yet intriguing, family interaction versus sleazy, manipulative sexcapades. They long for romance and humor instead of continual mob doom and gloom, along with a balance of characters, new and old, instead of the same five or six characters being in the forefront at all times. When the canvas is balanced and personal agendas are put aside, and when viewers feel empowered and that their voices are being heard, ratings increase. □

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Talk to everyone; writers and actors especially. There may be something in a character's history that will work beautifully for you, and who would know better than the actor who has been playing the role.

Many soap operas currently on the air have been on for many years. Many of the actors on those soap operas have been on them for 10-15+ years and know more about their characters' pasts than some of the current writers do. Mr. Marland's emphasis on the history of the show and the characters demonstrates how important he felt history is in regard to the success of a soap opera.

Much story material could be gleaned by going back into the history of the Cassadines with Alexis, Nikolas, Stavros, Stephan, Mikkos and Sam. Many viewers have wanted to know more about who Sam's father really is. Additionally, many are intrigued about what really happened the night Sonny and Connie/Kate were to run away together as teens. (This is a soap opera; of course there is a story.) There has been much speculation throughout the past two years about the possible involvement of Deke and Scully concerning that night. Stories, such as these, that dig into the past of characters and how that past affects the present can be intriguing to viewers. The actors and the audience become much more invested when the historical references are accurate. More often than not, the actors have greater insights than anyone since they have actually "lived" their characters' histories.

Don't change a core character. You can certainly give them edges they didn't have before, or give them a logical reason to change their behavior. But when the audience says, "He would never do that," then you have failed.

A flagrant change of a core character is that of Jason Morgan. The Jason Morgan that fans have watched for 10+ years, the one who loves and protects all children, would not befriend a woman who watched his son get kidnapped, stayed quiet about it, lied about it, then hired gunmen to threaten his family in the park. He would not look at that woman with anything but loathing and contempt after threatening to kill her if she ever came near his family again. He would not go to her for advice. He would not help her set up a business. He would not go out of his way to save her life. He certainly would not catch her falling off a roof in nothing but her skimpy underwear. The Jason Morgan fans know and watched grow would not allow his family to go to a cabin in the woods unguarded. He would not claim his life to be too dangerous and push his family away but remain overly active in another boy's/family's everyday life. **He would claim his family and protect them.**

Ric Lansing did numerous things to Jason and his loved ones and was forever only a step away from the possibility of death at Jason's hands. Likewise, although Jason has been against hurting women, Faith Roscoe committed crimes against Jason and his loved ones and their children that he could never forgive, so he dealt with her accordingly. That is who Jason used to be. His loyalties were evident, his choices black and white--there was no grey. As one fan said, "When all of those things started taking place in regards to Sam, I sure as hell started thinking, **"He would never do that,"** and GH lost all credibility for me and certainly failed."

Another example is the current storyline involving Sonny Corinthos, Claudia Zacchara, Ric Lansing, and Sonny's son, Michael. Sonny Corinthos has always been very clear on his beliefs about betrayal. He has not and will not allow it or stand for it. As a mob boss, he does crave power, but for him to marry Claudia Zacchara for power and continue to stay married to her once Jason signed the organization back to him when he is in love with someone else makes no sense. For him to sleep with Claudia while he continually calls her demeaning, derogatory names is ridiculous.

Sonny, though a mob boss, is also very committed to his children and his family. He, upon learning that Claudia and Ric, the brother he never trusted or got along with, had an affair under his own roof and that Ric may be the father of the baby she is carrying, would never sleep with Claudia again. Even if some self-loathing, self-deprecating situation occurred and Sonny were to punish himself by sleeping with someone he loathes, the mere fact that he and Jason suspect that Claudia is culpable for the coma Michael was in due to a gunshot to the head would prevent him from ever sharing a bed with her. **He would never do that.**

Another glaring example of changing a core character is that of Nikolas Cassadine. He professed his undying love for his former fiancée, Emily, for an entire year, even so much as having had physical relations with her, yet, he kept the secret of Claudia's culpability for putting the nephew of the love of his life in a coma from everyone. Throughout his visits with the Quartermaines and Carly, or in discussions with Jason, Nikolas never said a word about how much Emily loved her nephew. Currently he is redecorating Wyndemere to be lighter and brighter for this new Rebecca/Emily twin, a woman he barely knows, when he would never change the family home for Emily. In essence he has put Claudia's needs and Rebecca's needs over his supposed true love's needs and memory. **He would never do that.**

Although Kate has only been in Port Charles for a couple of years, her core characteristics have been pretty well defined. If she had wanted revenge after Sonny stayed married to Claudia, she would have told Sonny about Claudia's involvement in Michael's shooting when she had the chance and the proof, then told him to get lost. Alternatively, once she decided that she did not want to cause him pain because she loved him, but realized the secret would come out eventually, and because he would suffer more after finding out later, she would tell him and be there for him. Either way, she had no reason to keep the secret. Either way, the writers had her keep it, leaving viewers to say, "**She would never do that.**"

Build new characters slowly. Everyone knows that it takes six months to a year for an audience to care about a new character. Tie them in to existing characters. Don't shove them down the viewers' throats.

New characters Ethan and Rebecca were brought onto the canvas very quickly and have received much screen time. The newly aged Michael and Kristina likewise immediately received inordinate amounts of screen time. Though Olivia was on-screen sporadically at first, when viewers started to really question why this character was still even in Port Charles, she started appearing on screen more and more and then the actress was placed on contract. When the character of Claudia was first introduced to the canvas, she was immediately thrust upon viewers as yet one more femme fatale in Port Charles, while other more positive role models/loved female characters were pushed to the side. Her ill-conceived first scenes with the Sonny character did not help to establish this returning actress as a believable new character. Currently the new character of Dante is at the forefront of the summer storylines. Sadly for GH fans, many viewers' investment in the Sonny/Dante story is through Sonny and Kate, but Kate is virtually absent and her cousin, Olivia, has all but invaded the screen. Having all of these new characters receive so much screen time, while taking time away from other long time favorite characters, simply rocks the boat for many fans who view these new characters as having been shoved down their throats.

Don't fire anyone for six months. I feel very deeply that you should look at the show's canvas before you do anything.

Admittedly this is a tricky rule to abide by. However, if a storyline isn't working, it may have nothing to do with the actor/actress and/or writing staff. It could be a personal agenda taking over or simply the storyline itself needs to be re-worked, albeit correctly. Those in charge need to listen to the audience and the writers before simply getting rid of a character or changing a character too soon. Some characters are introduced and may take a while to fully develop. If a character is truly not working, the writers need to create an exit that will enhance the other characters' storylines. Instead of simply killing off a character, they need to create a situation that will enhance the storyline of other characters or complete the storyline that character is a participant in rather than simply drop it.

Fans are very observant and notice when storylines are suddenly dropped or end for no reason. For example, during the Black and White Ball, Anthony Zacchara held Elizabeth captive and asked Jason if he would die for love, however Anthony never remembered their connection in all the months afterward. Obviously someone decided that arc was not worth pursuing, however, the fans never forgot such a pivotal scene.

Another example is the sudden death of Cooper Barrett with no explanation. Certainly, a death is an easy way to create an exit for a character when an actor is leaving the show, but nothing was explained, and loose ends were not neatly tied up. Many questions still remain about his family and his connection to Port Charles. Additionally, Ric Hearst departed GH and his grand exit was simply a 'Terminator' impression,

“I'll be back,” as he got into the elevator. It makes no sense, leaves holes in the show and frustrates the viewers.

The other side of this issue is keeping characters on the canvas when their usefulness is long over. Characters introduced for a specific purpose, whether as antagonists or causes for a specific effect, should fulfill their purpose and then exit the show in a creative and positive manner. The characters of Sam, Claudia, Ethan, and Olivia are such characters. They were introduced for specific reasons and have fulfilled them. Now, however, they either seem to be lost in storylines that need other characters to carry them or they have alienated so many viewers that they simply need to exit the canvas, no matter the personal agenda of those in charge.

Good soap opera is good storytelling. It's very simple.

GH seems to be completely ignoring this principle. Many storylines are contrived, short-sighted, unbelievable, predictable and/or redundant much of the time. Sonny and Alexis' daughter, Kristina, behaving as a brat because she hasn't gotten enough attention from her father is simply predictable; Carly and Claudia falling down the stairs while pregnant has been done; Dominic as Dante/Sonny's son, who is also either in the mob or a fed without his mother even knowing could not be more predictable or short-sighted; Jason working/being friends with Sam is as believable as him being friends with Faith Roscoe; Robin's leaving town and 'dating' another man because of her PPD was ridiculous; Rebecca ending up as Emily's twin sister and falling for Nik is nothing but predictable; Diego as the text message killer was not only completely unbelievable but confusing; Olivia being a childhood friend to Sonny and currently becoming his confidant is completely against the story given when she was introduced.

Good storytelling draws the viewers in and makes them care about the characters and what happens to them, whether they like them or not. A very common phrase of viewers for a favorite evil character on a soap is “the character I love to hate.” For GH, characters like Ric Lansing, Jerry Jacks, and Helena Cassadine are such characters. They are bad, even evil, and the viewers know it, yet cannot help but want them on the show to create havoc and angst. They are characters that fans love to hate. They can't imagine the show without them even though they are horrible people. Some characters are simply hated and can easily be gone from the canvas and no one would miss them in the matter of a few weeks; no void would be left. Fans of soaps don't always want good, happy stories and characters, they want stories with good and bad, that make the viewers care. That is what GH used to have, viewers that cared.

Cooper Barrett turning from Metro Court hostage-taker into a nice guy, being involved in a love story with Maxie Jones, while working for the PCPD and Sonny, had the potential to be a great story. Was he related to Brenda Barrett? Did he know who Sonny was from Brenda before he came to town? Or the Quartermaines? Or Jason? Or was it simply a coincidence that he ended up in Port Charles?

Epiphany's son was killed and Jason and Spinelli vowed to find out who was responsible. Was that ever resolved? And what happened to Epiphany's heart problems? Couldn't she have bonded some with Maxie? With Kate? Couldn't Monica have become more involved as a cardiac surgeon?

The Russian Mob came to Port Charles and it was never really discovered who was in charge. Could it have been someone related to Nikolas or Helena? Or someone hired by Helena to occupy Jason and Elizabeth for some reason? Could Robert and Anna have come to town to try to track down the link?

There are so many stories left to tell about little Jake Martin that do not include yet another kidnapping before the child is three years old. The Quartermaines do not know about him. How would the reveal impact Monica, or the overly intrusive Edward, or Tracy and Luke's scheme with Alan's will since Jake is Jason's son? Will Elizabeth's father or mother ever come to town once they hear of Jake? Will we ever find out who Elizabeth's mother is? This one child ties together two of the most historical families on the show, yet the same story is being told over and over. Elizabeth is sacrificing her happiness to settle for being with Lucky. Jason is sacrificing his family and happiness again. Lucky is being a father to the boys, knowing he is not in love with Elizabeth and she is not in love with him. Sam has almost no real interaction with her family, the Cassadines, but is instead still always being saved by Jason instead of standing on her own and pursuing a healthy relationship with Lucky, or simply working with Spinelli, her business partner.

One online viewer stated, "I'd call General Hospital a shipwreck, but that would be an insult to ships." Sadly, due to poor storytelling and sinking ratings, GH has become the brunt of many jokes. GH is void of the great storytelling for which it used to be famous. The current storylines suggest that Management has gone into panic mode. Rather than giving the storylines a sense of focus and direction, the writers continually break continuity by randomly writing storylines and dropping them, rewrite long- and short-term history, and arbitrarily break up popular pairings to create contrived new pairings. GH is spending millions of dollars on new sets and giving contracts to newer characters while fan favorites are given less screen-time or are dropped to recurring status or let go. Many of the current storylines feel like inferior repeats of earlier GH storylines, lacking the depth and direction of the originals. Basically, Management is doing the equivalent of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. They seem to be working themselves into a frenzy, but the ship is still sinking.

Though there were many writing issues already, many viewers feel the show started taking on water in November of 2008, when many popular couples, including Sonny and Kate, Jason and Elizabeth, and Lucky and Sam were torn apart. At that time, the ratings held as viewers tuned in hoping the tide would turn and their favorite couples would reunite. There is no doubt that GH has a very talented cast and is extremely fortunate to have several actors who have special chemistry with each other. Many viewers feel that these characters are not only star-crossed lovers, but the actors are star-crossed actors who work especially well together. Unfortunately, they no longer have the opportunity to even share scenes together, depriving the viewing audience of their once enjoyable escape.

The evidence of the show really starting to sink in its storyline presentation and in the ratings began with the Toxic Balls debacle in February of 2009. Several of the characters underwent sudden 180-degree transformations in their personalities, resulting in them acting totally out-of-character. This lack of integrity in characterization has caused many viewers to finally tune out.

With the present condition of the economy, many more individuals are home and looking for an escape. They are hungry for a product that ABC Daytime TV does not seem interested in delivering. ABC Daytime TV has a responsibility to its advertisers, its actors, its crew and most notably its viewers/consumers, to create and broadcast the best possible product that it can. Instead, those in charge of GH are writing the show with principles or rules that are the opposite of what Douglas Marland suggests, thus creating a soap opera wreck. To many viewers, this seems like a blatant attempt to get the show cancelled. **This raises the question, "Are those in charge at ABC Daytime TV purposely preparing GH for cancellation?"**

Flashback to the year 1978, when Executive Producer Gloria Monty was hired by ABC Daytime. Fred Silverman gave her 13 weeks to turn the show around or prepare for cancellation. Gloria Monty, with her imagination and vision, along with the writing of Douglas Marland, turned GH around and made it the top-rated daytime drama! For years, ABC/Disney has had a reputation with its viewers/consumers for creating a quality product, for being innovative and for being visionaries in the entertainment industry. **Viewers/consumers want to know when ABC/Disney will have an innovative visionary step in and save this soap, making it once again the top-rated daytime drama?**

GH needs to regain its audience quickly to keep the show from totally capsizing. Many viewers believe that if the writers go back to what was working before the ratings started sinking and make a commitment to write using the rules outlined by Douglas Marland, GH could become a quality show that viewers want to see again. Not only would GH stay afloat in the ratings, it could very well rise to the top!

Every week, many 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 make changes by delivering character-driven storylines, being true to the characters, respecting the rich history of the show, creating an emotional balance for the characters, focusing on families, promoting enduring couples that viewers can root for, heightening romance while minimizing sleaze, and creating an enjoyable escape. For more information regarding the campaign, contact Dana L. Meyer or Kecia K. Picard at saveoursoapgh@gmail.com or visit the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital page on Facebook.