

THE GRAND OPERA

From kidnappings to tortured romances, DRAMA has always been a part of Olivia Stren's life. In fact, it's a point of family PRIDE.

*W*hen I was growing up, my friends went camping with their families or to their cottages in the Muskokas. We went to Genoa City. My sister got me hooked on *The Young and the Restless* in 1986, when I was 10. Since it was my goal in life to be as much like my older sister as possible, when I saw her watching *Y&R*, I resolved to take up the addiction immediately. I still recall my first episode: Lauren Fenmore, a singer and the heiress to a department-store fortune, was pregnant with her private-investigator husband's baby and being buried alive by her psycho stalker. Just as she was about to expire, her husband exhumed the coffin and rescued her—in another miracle, her coffin survived its subterranean sojourn without losing its volume. ▷

In Toronto, the show was, and still is, on at 4:30 p.m. every weekday. Classmates I knew (and pitied) spent their pre-dinner hours eating carrot sticks and doing homework or demi-pliés; I was busy too—learning words like “imposter,” “diabolical,” “consummation” and “annulment” and being schooled in critical life lessons. For example, legally, you can get a marriage annulled if there hasn’t been consummation. (This information is especially handy should you learn that your spouse is a diabolical imposter.) Also, when you deliver an ultimatum to your husband, or an enemy, and he

confined to the house, like Brad Carlton to his cage, for weeks and rendered hostage to my sister’s and my viewing habits. And to Genoa City. She became as addicted to those *ordures* as Nikki was to Victor and vodka.

Common sense dictates that soap operas and their melodrama serve to animate otherwise beige lives. Maybe. But my mom’s family life was hardly wanting for colour. There was a murderous cousin. (“It was a crime of passion,” she said plainly of the homicide.) And tales of her grandfather, Abraham, make Latin telenovelas seem nuanced. Abraham was a towering man with a blaze of electric-orange hair, pallid skin splattered with a storm of rusty freckles and a penchant for white linen suits. With his blanched complexion and only a lick of colour on his head, he looked like a lit cigarette. The story goes that he set sail for the Amazonian jungles of Brazil, hoping to strike it rich in the blooming rubber industry. He left behind his 15-year-old wife, Marie (my great-grandmother), and his one-year-old daughter with not the vaguest clue of when he’d ever return. Eight years later, he landed back on Marie’s doorstep, demanding they resume conjugal life. Outraged, she filed for divorce. A vexed and vengeful Abraham then kidnapped his 10-year-old daughter (my grandmother), stashed her in a dilapidated garage and hung her upside down from the ceiling, where she dangled like a piece of butcher meat. He set the place on fire and left her to die. (Mercifully, neighbours came to save her just in time.)

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asks you “Is that a threat?” you must always answer “No, it’s a promise.” And when you need to have an important conversation (like, if you have to tell your fiancé that you and he are siblings), you must speak to his back so he can stare tensely out the window of a mansion.

I was hardly the only Canadian enjoying a Genoa City education: The soap opera was, and continues to be, number one in Toronto. Another fan was my friend Toni, who moved from Shanghai when she was 10 and learned English by watching Y&R. I discovered the implications of that later on, when we were in our early 20s, after Toni called to tell me about an unfortunate run-in with a bad boyfriend. When I suggested that she was better off without him, Toni tearfully demanded, “Exactly how long have you known that Mike Wellstead has been playing me for a fool?”

“*Quelles ordures!*” (What garbage!) my mom would say as my sister and I watched Y&R, enthralled. My mom’s favourite show was *Apostrophes*, a French literary program. She’d watch, rapt, as middle-aged men with tortured hair and navy pullovers passionately held forth about Proust’s allergies or Matisse’s childhood infirmity. Then, one winter in the late ’80s, came the plot twist: My mom was felled by a flu and

When I first heard this plot line in my mom’s ancestral history, I was riveted. It seemed at least as dramatic as anything I’d seen on TV. So to my mother, Y&R seemed less like a diversion from reality than a reassuring reflection of it—cinéma-vérité rather than preposterous fantasy. When, sometime in the late ’90s, Mackenzie Browning and Billy Abbott discovered, just before tying the knot, that they were related, my mom said, “It happens.” And when Brad Carlton was kidnapped and tossed in a cage, she said, “*C’est la vie!*”

When my mom started taping the show on our VCR so that we would never miss an episode, the addiction spread to my dad. He was happy to find something we could all do together. As the only man in the house (except for our cat, Julius), my dad was frequently shut out of conversations. This was no time for sharing, though. Talking over Victor Newman was insubordinate, yet my dad >

compulsively insisted on providing mid-viewing commentary—usually on the quality of a male character’s hair. (He lost most of his own hair when he was in his 30s and was captivated by the intransigence of Genoa City male hairlines.) “I don’t know...I think Brad’s hair is too lustrous,” he’d say.

“There’s no such thing as ‘too lustrous,’” my mom would counter, without averting her eyes.

“I disagree. I think his hair is just too thick and luxuriant,” he’d reply. “And what about Tucker’s hair? It’s too fluffy.”

A professor of third-world politics and urban development at the University of Toronto, my dad never seemed able to comprehend that *Y&R* itself was too fluffy for his colleagues. “I’m the only one in the whole department who

watches!” he told me one day. “It seems hard to believe.” He’d even reference storylines in his lectures. In a graduate seminar he taught about African politics, he analogized political corruption by saying “These are countries that are often governed by two warring families. Much like the Abbotts and the Newmans.” Afterwards, my dad, dispirited, told me: “My students pretended not to know what I was talking about.”



The show will be celebrating its 40th anniversary in March. And I don’t know a world without Victor and Nikki—“Nictor” to some—in it. Although I’ve probably

spent months just watching characters lift their eyebrows, I have occasionally strayed. When I was at university, I determined that it was high time for horizon-broadening experimentation. So I started watching *All My Children*.

“AMC might be more of an acquired taste,” my roommate told me, as if she were talking about Ethiopian cuisine. “But it’s exciting. You should try

it.” And so, for a while, I succumbed and paid occasional visits to Pine Valley.

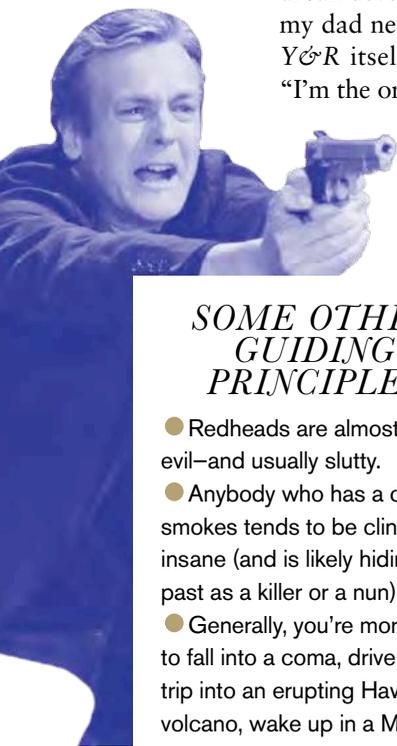
But during those promiscuous collegiate days bouncing around the daytime dial, I’d get homesick. It felt like I was being forced to squat at a Motel 6 when I’d grown up at the Ritz. Everything in Pine Valley felt wrong: The lighting was too bright, hairstyles weren’t as vertically inclined and the pacing and dialogue were too quick, too natural. Characters didn’t spend enough time squinting out of windows. I longed to go back to Genoa City. And I did.

But I never imagined that I’d have the opportunity to visit Genoa City. When the invitation presented itself this past summer, it seemed that fate was finally treating me to the kind of far-fetched storyline the show has taught me to crave. I was nervous, though: The truth could only let me down. Worse than that, I worried that witnessing reality might threaten my future viewing pleasure.

I arrived at CBS studios in downtown Los Angeles, home to Genoa City—consoling, tenderly lit province of my childhood—cached in a squat, featureless building on Beverly Boulevard. Like Alice through the looking glass, I found myself on the other side. Everything looked tiny, dusty and shabby. All the landmarks—the Newman Ranch, the athletic club, the police department, the city’s only café, Crimson Lights—were lined up like toy rooms in a Fisher Price village. Even more discomfuting was the Chancellor Estate, scandalously dismantled and packed up in boxes in the hallway between the bathroom and *The Price Is Right*’s stage doors rather than perched on some verdant acreage, like *Downton Abbey*, as it was supposed to be.

But all assumed its rightful order when I saw Victor and Nikki together on the ranch set, amid saddle browns and pasture greens, gliding grandly, like royalty, around their castle. Their interminable romantic saga is the heart of the show, and so beholding these two actors felt paralyzingly surreal. I was that idiot—star-struck to the point of mute, saucer-eyed derangement.

I took a seat, hoping to pull myself together and watch the actors rehearse a scene: The couple is divorced. Nikki is engaged to be married to Jack Abbott (Victor’s arch-enemy, who became paralyzed after being shot at the altar by an insane ex-lover), and Victor is having an affair with Sharon (his former daughter-in-law) and has just >



SOME OTHER GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Redheads are almost always evil—and usually slutty.
- Anybody who has a cat or smokes tends to be clinically insane (and is likely hiding a past as a killer or a nun).
- Generally, you’re more likely to fall into a coma, drive off a cliff, trip into an erupting Hawaiian volcano, wake up in a Myanmar prison, get amnesia or get locked into a cage by a madwoman (who is also more than likely a redheaded imposter) on a Friday.
- It seems that there are more cages in Genoa City than at the San Diego Zoo.

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In Genoa City, every glance, word and hairstyle (even a horse's) is a high-stakes, emotionally vivid proposition.

bought her a Friesian horse as a gift. Nikki struts in, enraged because Sharon is clearly a poor horsewoman and has—cue the double entendres—no business riding such an exquisite creature. “That animal’s coat has lost its sheen,” she yells, eyes pooling with tears. “Sharon obviously doesn’t know how to handle the beast.”

In Genoa City, every glance, word and hairstyle (even a horse’s) is a high-stakes, emotionally vivid proposition. And nobody weeps with the satisfying immediacy, frequency and abandon of Melody Thomas Scott. “We love the spontaneity and being allowed to go for it. I didn’t know the scene was going to get that heated,” said Thomas Scott about the tearful equine-related exchange. “I didn’t know that I was going to be crying or I would have used a different glue on my eyelashes.”

Thomas Scott, who has been playing Nikki for 33 years, is warm, funny and sassy. We sat in her dressing room, its walls painted a California-girl blond to match her mane and panelled in gilt-framed photos of herself on the cover of *Soap Opera Digest*. I felt as if I’d secured a rare audience with a sovereign in her private chambers. If I’d seen Nikki through her share of struggles, she’d also seen me through mine—though she didn’t know it. She has spent more time in my parents’ living room than any of my relatives.

I breathed, and Thomas Scott told me about her inaugural storyline. “The first month on the show, I killed my father because he tried to rape me. I hit him over the head with a lamp and he died. So, I stepped right into it emotionally,” she said. “Creator Bill Bell fashioned a show about a small town in the Midwest that’s rich, elegant, *evil*.”

What Bell also created is a never-never land where people don’t grow old and death is not a deal breaker. The passage of time and its attendant losses are among the hardest things to cope with in real life. (I keep thinking that I’ll deal with the passage of time better as time passes, but that hasn’t proven to be a terribly effective strategy.) But in Genoa City, time can be stretched or collapsed like a Slinky. One day you’re in kindergarten, and the next you’ve suffered from SORAS (Soap Opera Rapid Aging Syndrome) and you’re back from boarding school in Switzerland with a six-pack. And if you die? Don’t worry: You’ll come back with your French mani intact. You may just have to wear neutral lipstick for a few days.



A couple of days after leaving Genoa City, I received an email—charming and spunky—from Thomas Scott. Seeing her name pop up in my account felt improbable and disorienting, like getting an invitation to LinkedIn from the Tooth Fairy. I called my dad to share the news. “That’s like if you were a nun and you got a direct email from the Pope!” he said.

Indeed, what keeps us believers is as much what happens on the show as what doesn’t. No matter what my life looks like, Genoa City looks the same. When I hear that theme song (more mellowing than Enya, as nostalgic as any French lullaby my mom ever sang to me), when I see Nikki pop pills and swallow them with no-name vodka, when I see her weeping and serving Victor with divorce papers for the 38th time, I feel that all is right in the universe. So I’ll be damned if I’m going to stop watching. And that’s not a threat; it’s a promise. □

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