

TELEVISION EUNY HONG KORAL

On a soapy road to rapid insanity

We know soap operas are so called because they were originally sponsored by soap advertisements. But what if the housewife audience were to become more influenced by the soap ads than by the soap operas – is this not in fact the whole point?

This, more or less, was the premise of the soap opera parody *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (1976-77), which ran five nights a week at 11pm. It was US television's finest hour, yet it is perhaps the only major show of the 1970s not to be in syndication.

Your only chance to catch any of the 325 episodes is at the "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman Marathon", at the Los Angeles and New York branches of the Museum of Television and Radio (until September 3).

The series appeared in an era when consumer advocacy groups were beginning to vocalise concerns of media saturation.

Louise Lasser (who played Hartman) said at a museum-sponsored discussion in New York: "The [mid-1970s] was when everything started to [homogenise], like the Gap. Because of TV, people who previously didn't know what they were missing suddenly saw what they didn't have."

The Hartman character was written as "the perfect consumer housewife". She was swept up by television commercials, believing them to contain important information about being a good wife and mother.

Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman was the first television programme to be so subversively cynical about the dangers of television, without being heavy-handed.

The plots, which included UFO landings and axe murderers, were so surreal that the underlying moral existed only as a subtext.

Soap and cleaning products, both literal and symbolic, were critical to the programme. The first episode began with a scene that was set up to resemble a floor-wax commercial.

Hartman is with her sister, boasting about her shiny kitchen floor. Her sister comments: "As your sister, I have to tell you there is a waxy yellow build-up." Hartman is unable to accept what she has just heard.

"I'm looking at a label that says that can't be. These people sell millions of cans of floor wax a week. Who'm I gonna listen to, YOU?"

Does Hartman ever get rid of her waxy yellow-build up? Does it even exist, or is it manufactured by Madison Avenue? These cliffhangers would not ordinarily keep an audience tuning in, yet

the formula worked – primarily because of the tortured, brilliant Lasser.

As Woody Allen's second wife, she stole the show in his early films, such as *Take the Money and Run* (1969) and *Bananas* (1971). Long after their 1969 divorce, Allen seemingly continued to model his female characters' speech patterns after Lasser's repetitive, circuitous fashion.

Part of her hilarious mystique lay in the fact that she seemed never to laugh or smile, delivering lines like a fugue in D minor.

As often with naturally funny people, Lasser's comedy was for the benefit of others; she seemed unable to derive pleasure from it.

A famous recluse, she reportedly delayed the episode of *Saturday Night Live* she hosted in 1976 because she was too timid to leave her dressing room.

Yet her attempts at a hermetic lifestyle failed when she had her spectacular mental breakdown before our eyes. Lasser always admitted she became so absorbed by Hartman that both went off the deep end simultaneously.

Toward the end of the

series' first season, the Hartman character appeared on a talk show, for which she was to represent the typical American housewife.

A panel of experts – thinly veiled clones of Ralph Nader, Gloria Steinem, and Marshall McLuhan – badgered her with questions such as: "Do you feel television commercials undermine women's liberation?" Her response: "No, women can leave the house more if they have products like Tidy-Bowl."

Within seconds, she was defending television commercials, muttering: "I wish I were a plant," and she was carted off to a mental hospital. There she discovered this particular asylum was a member of the Nielsen ratings family: the inmates' viewing habits were tracked to determine future programming.

Lasser became unable to work. The series was cancelled that year, and Lasser has since appeared on-screen only sporadically, as in last year's Todd Solondz movie *Happiness*.

Watching these final episodes was particularly disconcerting for me, given my occupation. I often feel like Hartman on the talk show, beleaguered with questions I can't answer about the salutary effects of television.

I can't decide which path would lead to more rapid insanity: succumbing to television's hypnotic lull (like Hartman) or struggling to make detached and ironic remarks about the programming (like Lasser).