

Mary Hartman:

Her writer admits the soap opera borders on bad taste, bad taste

By MARY BETH BOWEN
Of the Emerald

Nearly 300 of the Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman faithful got the low down at the University Saturday night as to what makes the show go.

"We write ourselves into a situation and then we've got to wrack our brains to think up some way to get out of it," said Daniel Gregory Brown, one of the show's original writers.

A few cases in point:

- Coach Leroy Feters drowned in a bowl of Mary's chicken soup (after succumbing to whiskey and seconal) because the producers wanted to kill him off. "The budget was low and they needed to re-vamp the Feters' set to accommodate two gay men posing as brothers," explained Brown.

- Jimmy Joe Jeeter, the 7-year-old Reverend and sponsor of "Condos (Condominiums) for Christ," was electrocuted when his television set fell into his bathtub because he had a Walt Disney movie to shoot.

- Dennis Foley, the popular policeman who joined Mary in an extra-marital affair, was demanding more money and publicity from the show's producers. The scriptwriters soon had Dennis living the mercenary life in Angola, writing letters to Mary's sister.

The 31-year-old Brown, who now supervises all scripts for the show, said the writers try to be as funny as possible "without going too far toward bad taste."

He said they can get away with episodes about a car wreck of dead nuns or an incident like Charlie Haggars' testicle transplant because they have no censor.

"When all three networks turned us down and Norman Lear (the show's producer) syndicated it, we went crazy. We knew we could go as far with it as we wanted," Brown said.

Lear syndicated the show last January and sold it to 40 stations. This year it's being carried by 125, including Portland's Channel 12.

Brown, who began as a script writer for Peyton Place, said the idea for MH, MH came because he wanted to do a soap opera about blue collar, working class, "real" people.

"It's always bugged me that people on T.V. are always smiling, happy people with happy problems. All the soaps these days are about refugees from Clairol commercials. We try to mimic the ups and downs of real people," he said.

What gives the show its "extra zap," according to Brown, is that the story ideas for the characters are inspired by the persons playing the roles. He says this is especially true of Louise Lasser, who plays Mary Hartman.

"Louise has a Pirandello sense of life and art; she likes to make her character and her own personality as close as possible," he said. "She also works out a lot of her anxieties through the show. I've never seen her smile so much as she did after filming the nervous breakdown scene on the David Susskind show. Everyone else was terribly depressed."

Brown says the show's writers are swamped with letters from viewers who say the show is the

closest thing to reality they've ever seen.

"Actually, the show's most brilliant moments are all accidental," he said. "Often the lines we write for laughs get a completely different interpretation from the actors. Or a gesture, a certain inflection, gives a scene a poignance we never intended. Sometimes I watch the show and think, 'God, that's awful, how did we ever let that crap get on the air?' But a few minutes later, there will be a moment so brilliant that I just want to hug everyone in the show."

As for what's to come next season, Brown gave only a few hints, "bisexuality, bed-wetting, the Mafia in Fernwood and a couple of very unusual deaths."

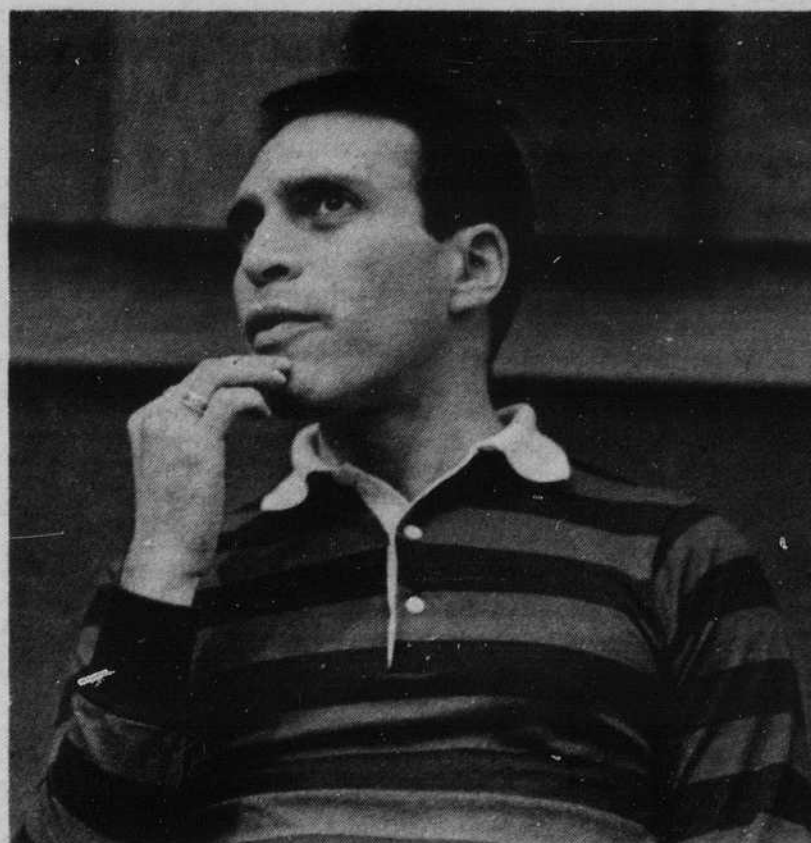


Photo by Kim Smith

Daniel Gregory Brown, a Mary Hartman scriptwriter, shows amazement over the success of a soap opera that mimics the ups and downs of the blue collar worker.

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