

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax, UK

English for Life in the UK

Season 2 - Episode 27 - Soap Operas in the UK

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Mark Hello, and welcome to the podcast **English for Life in the UK**. This podcast is for those people who want to improve their English by listening to a range of native English speakers, talking in an everyday way, about a range of subjects.

Today, we're going to talk about "**soap operas**", also, often, just called "**soaps**"¹. These are dramas on television or radio, and they cover everyday life and relationships. There are many of them in the UK. Today, I interviewed Holly who works on one of the popular soaps in England.

(Music)

Mark Well I'm delighted to say I'm joined by Holly. Holly - tell us a bit about yourself.

Holly Hi - yes, it's really nice to be here. So, I work on a soap - basically - a British soap for television. I've done it for just over two years.

Mark Tell me: what do we mean by a "soap"? How would you explain to somebody from another country what a "soap" is?

Holly Well, it's .. it can be [on] TV or Radio - but basically, it's a drama² and it's normally set in like one, fairly small, location - so, usually a street or a village - and it just focuses on the lives of the ordinary people who live there, which obviously means that they have pretty big ... pretty big casts³ and lots of story lines going on, at any one time, and they can run and run⁴ for years. So, yeah.

Mark Yes - so dramas about every day life, I guess we could say, couldn't we? And, as you say, I mean, often, some of them are on, two or three times a week, aren't they? and have often been going for years,

¹ the phrase 'soap opera' comes from radio dramas in the USA in the 1930s that were sponsored by companies that made soap and other cleaning products.

² drama - this is one genre (normally fictional) representation of a serious story and distinguished from comedy, tragedy, musicals, history plays, etc.

³ cast - the complete list of actors (male and female) and on-screen characters, but not others involved in the production.

⁴ run and run - in this context, meaning "be broadcast regularly"

Holly Two or three times, at least, really. Most of them are on every ... every week day⁵.

Mark So tell us about some the most popular ones in the UK.

Holly Well, I suppose ... well, I don't know about viewing figures⁶, but, in terms of the ones that people think of - I think, *Coronation Street* is probably the main one, That's been going the longest. So that started on TV in 1960, which is pretty impressive, when you think about it. So yes. There's that.

East Enders is another very famous one - not sure how long that's been going, but quite a while. But there's loads of different soaps and they all, kind of, appeal to people, I think. So, you've got something like *Hollyoaks*, which is a bit newer and aimed at slightly younger people. And you've got things like *Doctors* or *Holby City*, which focus on hospitals - so medical soaps as well, so yes - there's all sorts.

(3 minutes: 40 seconds)

Mark Yes - and the two you mention there, particularly, *Coronation Street* is set in Manchester, isn't it? which is not all that far from where we are, when we're recording this. And *East Enders* is set in London - the East End of London - which is where the name comes from.

What do you actually do then, Holly? What's your job in relation to the soaps and which soaps do you work on, particularly?

Holly Erm ... so I'm a "storyliner" - I work on *Hollyoaks*, at the moment and, basically - there's a team of sort of between 5 and 8 of us, maybe, at any one time. And it's our job to plot out the story of every single episode, essentially, not write the script - but, yes, plot the story - and then that goes to the writers and the writers write the scripts.

Mark So, give me some examples of some story lines. I know you won't be allowed to tell us ones that are still to come, but just give me - give us - the listeners - a flavour of the kind of stories that might happen in a soap opera.

Holly Er - well there's a great variety. I think it's what's really ... really great about the soaps. They can cover all sorts of different tones. So, I suppose soaps are maybe best at more grounded kind of domestic stories that look at things like relationships. So affairs⁷ are quite common in soaps and then ... I think - maybe the most famous relationship story on a soap, one of the most famous, was probably between Den and Angie on *East Enders* - that was in the 1980s and ... it was a huge thing at the time. Millions and

⁵ week day - Monday to Friday; the traditional working week days.

⁶ viewing figures - estimated numbers of viewers who watch particular programmes

⁷ affairs - romantic relationships, often conducted in secret, if they are in some way inappropriate, illicit or likely to be unwelcome to others.

millions of people tuned in on Christmas Day when Den handed her divorce papers on Christmas - that's a very famous moment. Then they're also very good at dealing with more, kind of, issue-based stories. So, things like mental health stories are usually tackled very well by soaps: depression, eating disorders, that kind of thing. Or things that are relevant to what's happening now - so *Hollyoaks* have just finished a story about "county lines"⁸ drug dealing and how kids can be groomed⁹ into that. So, there's that kind of thing, but then, also - as well as those more, sort of, realistic types of stories - soaps also aren't afraid to go into quite heightened territory - so the kind of story which you wouldn't necessarily expect your everyday kind of person to experience - so serial killers, most soaps have had a serial killer or two. And also, most soaps try and pull off like a big - a **stunt** - every year - so the famous one, for example, would be *Coronation Street* had a tram crash, in 2010, for the 50th anniversary. So yes, all sorts, as I say. There's a huge variety of tones, because there's just so much time to tell all these different stories.

(7:13)

Mark Yes - it's really interesting.

So, would you say - you kind of touched on it there a bit - would you say, that soaps that they follow what's going on in society, in real life? - do they reflect that? Or do they to some extent, even influence it, do you think?

Holly Yes - I think - I think they certainly have a responsibility to try and reflect society, where it's possible and to tell stories that are relevant, because, obviously, by their nature, they're meant to be about normal people, living in the present day. So yes - I think they do have a bit of a responsibility to tell that kind of story. So things like - as I say - *Hollyoaks* had the "county lines" drug dealing. They also had one of its best loved characters, quite recently, being drawn into far right extremism which isn't the kind of story, I don't think, that any soaps would have told, maybe a decade ago. But it suddenly started to feel incredibly relevant and I think it is important to reflect that.

Mark Yes - certainly, my reflection would be that, over time, I've seen the way in which first of all, they've reflected changes: so, for example, they've had gay characters come into them. They've had a much more multi-racial, multi-ethnic cast and story lines that relate to race and racism - as you say - for example, the far right racism and things of that sort. I suppose I think that maybe by reflecting some of those things, they also then help people to come to terms with the fact that society does change and is changing and maybe they have a positive influence, in that way. What do you think?

(9:12)

⁸ county lines - so-called, because criminal gangs coerce young people to travel into neighbouring counties or locations, to move drugs and money, without attracting police attention

⁹ groomed - normally, vulnerable youngsters lured/tricked by older members, into joining and working for the criminal gang by false befriending, given money or presents etc;

Holly Yes - I'm sureI'm sure they must to an extent, because I suppose, it's probably a big ask¹⁰ for any TV show to set out to try and change society, but - as you say, soaps: they are quite ahead of their ... ahead of other TV shows, in that regard, I think, in terms of they're always looking for the next big ... what the thing - that will become relevant as well as what is relevant, at any one time. So, as you say, gay issues, especially, I think, soaps were way ahead of any other TV shows in that regard and, yes, hopefully, because they do have such massive audiences, or certainly did, hopefully, that would sort of normalise that kind of thing. So, I think I think it was *East Enders* that had the first gay kiss on a soap and it had a huge amount of **backlash** initially, and then the second time there was much, much less because, yes, it's just about normalising that kind of thing, to an audience, who might not otherwise see it.

Mark Yes. So, why do you think they're so popular - because they are really popular, aren't they? Those ones that you've mentioned get huge audiences on a very regular basis. Why do you think that is?

Holly Yes, they do. I think a variety of reasons. I suppose one of the big reasons is that - they're all they're designed to keep you watching. So, every episode of every soap, always ends on a massive **cliff hanger**, that's designed to make you go "oh, I want to watch the next one," straight away. That's probably a big factor. But I think, I think the main reason is that, because soaps go on for years and years, you really get to know those characters, more than with any other type of TV show, I think. So there are characters on soaps who started as children and you can watch them grow up, over the years, which I think is amazing. And you come to really care about and invest in those characters and just enjoy spending time with them which I guess is ... can be quite comforting and maybe there's an element of familiarity, but also **escapism** in spending time with those characters who you have come over time to really, really love.

Mark Yes - thanks for that.

What about the quality of soap operas? I would say that, generally, people often sort of look down on them and think of them as sort of kind of lesser quality TV programmes. And yet, actually, some very good actors and actresses have been in soaps and good writers have started - you may be one of those - in a soap, then gone on to other things. So what's your reflection on that?

(12:21)

Holly Well, you're right. They are definitely looked down upon by people who don't actually watch them. Because it's easy to dismiss something that ...I suppose, that is just popular, in a way - there's always going to be an element of "it's mainstream, so maybe it's not actually very good". But, yes, I think they're excellent training grounds, first of all for writers and actors who go on to do much bigger and better things. By their

¹⁰ a big ask - having a high expectation, demanding too much of ...

nature, they are able to do things, that other TV shows just aren't really doing, so telling those types of stories, that are relevant to today - like the far right extremism one - or really, really fleshing out and developing characters, over decades. I think that's incredible. So, an example of an actor who started in a soap is Sarah Lancashire. She started in *Coronation Street* - I'm not really sure when. She was big in *Coronation Street* for a long time, and has since gone on to being in *Happy Valley* which is a British police drama, which is hugely popular and really, really good and is written by Sally Wainwright who also, I think, started by writing on *Coronation Street*.

Mark Yes - I think that's right. And both of those, I think, have won awards at, you know, a very high level for writing dramas and performing in dramas, as well.

Holly Yes. Absolutely. I have a question ... I have a question for you.

Mark Yes - go on.

Holly Just - what made you want to do a podcast about soap operas, I suppose.

Mark Well - what we try to do in our podcast is to ... We're trying to help people to improve their English - but then, we're also, at the same time, trying to help them learn more about life in this country, because a number of our listeners are people who are seeking asylum or have become refugees in this country. We also have a number of listeners in other parts of the world, who may be interested in coming to the UK at some stage. So we want them to learn something about life in this country and I think soap operas are a good reflection. It's what you said - I think they are quite good for reflecting society.

I think somebody learning English would probably struggle with just dipping into an individual episode of a soap, to understand what was happening. But I do think if they listened - if they chose one that they were interested in - they would - over a period of time, probably ... it would probably help them to learn English, although a lot of them of course, do have a lot of local accents used, a lot of common terminology which wouldn't be part of formal learning of language but again that can, I think, be quite useful. So hopefully, it's something that would interest people.

Of course, the other thing I think we should say, most countries in the world have the equivalent of soap operas on their television stations¹¹, so many people from other parts of the world will be familiar with the idea, although quite what they'll call them - they won't call them a soap, but they'll have an equivalent, in their country, on their TV.

Holly Yes. Yes - I'm sure that's true. Yes.

¹¹ stations - an alternative word for (TV) channels

Mark Listen, Holly. Thank you very much indeed. Very helpful of you to join us and good to be talking to somebody who's actually working on soaps on a daily basis and we wish you all the best for the future.

Holly Thank you. Yes. That was really nice.

(Music) (16:49)

Language Support

Mark This is the part of the podcast where I choose some words or phrases from the episode and explain them. So today, I've picked out four words which related in some way to this episode.

So, early on - Holly talked about the fact that there had been **a backlash** against a particular story line, in one of the soaps. So a **backlash** is a strong negative reaction to something.

Later, she talked about episodes which are **a stunt or include stunts**. So **a stunt** is an unusual, extreme or difficult performance or story line. She was talking about how there would be a very dramatic crash, for example, in a soap opera. There is also the phrase - a stunt actor - a stunt actor is somebody who takes the place of the main actor. when doing something dangerous, that would lead to an accident of some kind.

Holly talked about the fact that many soaps will end each episode with what she called **a cliff hanger**. Now **a cliff hanger**, in this case, is an ending to an episode, or a part of a drama, which is full of suspense and uncertainty - so you don't know what's going to happen and the idea is that that encourages you then to watch the next episode, to find out what happened. And it comes from the idea of somebody hanging over a cliff, perhaps by their fingernails, and you don't know if they're going to survive or fall. So that word, a **cliffhanger**, is used in a general sense, to mean an ending which is uncertain and which then encourages you to watch the next part.

And finally, Holly talked about **escapism** in terms of dramas on television. So for something to be **escapism**, means it will take you away from - distract you from - your own life, in order to actually be entertained by something happening in another reality. So, during the soaps you get involved with the characters and what's going on in their story and that takes you away, to some extent, from what might be going on in your own life.

I hope that's been helpful. That's it for this week. If you want to find out more about the Charity that produces this podcast and how you can support us or make contact with us, then stay listening for details of our website and email. Otherwise we'll be back again very soon. Goodbye and take care of yourselves.

(Music) (20:48)

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I'll spell out all of those:

So, the website: -.s-t-a-u-g-u-s-t-i-n-e-s-c-e-n-t-r-e-h-a-l-i-f-a-x.org.uk

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Thank you and be back with you again soon.

Ends (23:11)