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Growing Old Together: Following *As the World Turns*' Tom Hughes Through the Years

Television is an actor's medium.¹ While budgets and schedules have often given movies a greater mastery of grand visual spectacle than television (a divide between film and television that is growing increasingly thin), the actor has always remained the currency of television fiction. Even today, with television series consistently raising the bar for production values, the actor still holds the most power in connecting with the audience. The smaller screen of (most) television sets values the close-up, the study of human emotion (and especially the human face), in a way that the grand vistas and elaborate cinematography of most Hollywood films seem to miss. The value placed on the actor and the exploration of character is more suited to the seriality of television as well. While films visit a character's life for a short time, a television series visits characters on a regular basis, over a number of seasons.

In the case of the American soap opera, the exploration of characters may not last for several years but decades. The soap opera features the power of television at its most raw, with its use of tight shots and close-ups and the camera's focus on actors instead of expansive sets. With low production budgets compared to primetime fare, soap operas instead put the focus on character instead of place. Soaps feature a cast of about 40 regulars, including both full-time stars and frequently recurring characters, and they often place special emphasis on the faces of these characters. The alternation of zoom-in close-

¹ While some alternate perspectives suppose that television is either the advertiser's medium or the mass media conglomerate's medium, this view of television as the actor's medium emphasizes content and aesthetics, with television texts containing artistic potential. For a quick summation of this viewpoint, read Thorburn, David. "Is TV Acting a Distinctive Art Form?" *New York Times*, 14 Aug. 1977, p. 85.

up reaction shots from one character to the other through the course of a conversation are the defining shots of the genre. Viewers come to know the facial movements and the voice of actors so well that the most minute change in expression or inflection are meaningful to longtime viewers who have come to know a character well when that character has been portrayed consistently by one actor.²

As I've suggested, soap operas provide not only a chance for the raw expression of character acting in American television but also the best use of seriality.³ The soap operas currently on American television have persisted through every shift in network programming (NBC's *Passions* now being the neophyte of the soap industry, having only been on the air since 1999—a full lifespan for many successful primetime shows that only air once a week and have summers and holidays off). Because of the genre's continued vitality, many viewers believe the individual shows to be indestructible. Therefore, slumps in creativity, the loss of top actors, or any other obstacle that would destroy most shows are often only a temporary glitch to soaps, as viewers feel (and in this

² This point borrows heavily on the film theory of Béla Balázs in his observations on the close-up and “the face of man,” in Balázs, Béla. *The Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*. New York: Dover, 1970, as well as Barthes, Roland. “The Face of Garbo.” *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.

Television and the soap opera have been the site where the close-up has been maximized for storytelling impact. Bernard Timberg has hypothesized that soap operas are misunderstood because critics do not comprehend the genre's use of nonverbal and nonliterary forms of communication. See Timberg, Bernard. “The Rhetoric of the Camera in Television Soap Opera.” *Journal of American Culture* 6.3 (1983): 76-81.

³ See Gledhill, Christine. “Speculation on the Relationship Between Soap Opera and Melodrama.” *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 14.2 (1992), 103-124. Gledhill finds that most scholars have conflated the melodrama and the soap opera too easily, when the extensive use of seriality in the soap opera format sets it apart from other television forms.

case are somewhat justified by history) that these shows are bigger than any particular actor or writing team that passes through.⁴

However, some actors on each soap become not just temporary stars in the soap industry on their way to “bigger” things but instead regulars in a role they go on to play for many years. Here, the seriality of soap operas exploits the power of television in a way that primetime shows cannot fully realize. The soap opera is not only an actor’s medium but especially a character’s medium, as an audience reads a character over a number of years. Because of the collective memory of the viewing audience, soaps are most powerful when they rely on the historical understanding of a character. And, especially when that character is played by the same actor for a number of years, audiences continually learn more about that character’s traits, predicting her or his actions based on past decisions and then revising their understanding of a character based on new actions.⁵ It comes as no surprise, then, that soaps—when they are at their most powerful—value character over plot, reaction over action, and relationships amongst the characters over more episodic “situation” stories.⁶

⁴ This theme of the show’s indestructibility or durability is echoed in the historical and scholarly discourse on soap operas, considering the length of time some of these shows have been on the air on American television. See The Museum of Television and Radio’s tribute book to soap operas, featuring the work of a variety of scholars from Louise Spence to James Thurber to Robert C. Allen. *Worlds Without End: The Art and the History of Soap Opera*. The Museum of Television and Radio. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997.

⁵ See Giles, David. “Soaps.” *Media Psychology*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003, 248-257. Giles provides a nuanced account of the viewers’ enjoyment of getting to know soap characters and predicting their actions.

⁶ Many of the earliest scholars who granted soaps with the legitimacy to be examined in a critical manner identify these characteristics. For example, see Newcomb, Horace. “Soap Opera: Approaching the Real World.” *TV: The Most Popular Art*. Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1974, 161-182.

Procter & Gamble Productions (PGP) produce the longest running soaps still on the air in 2006. The soap opera got its name on radio because of the sponsorship by soap companies of the short drama programs that aired, targeting females. PGP is the only direct involvement a “soap” company has in the soap opera genre today, producing the shows *Guiding Light* (CBS, 1952-present) and *As the World Turns* (CBS, 1956-present). *Guiding Light* has been on the television broadcast airwaves now for 54 years, but the show is even older than that. *Guiding Light* was originally a radio soap opera that made the transition to television in 1952, aired in 15-minute episodes.⁷

As the World Turns

However, *As the World Turns* changed the conception of the television soap opera. Under the supervision of Irna Phillips, one of the “auteurs” of television rarely discussed in “mainstream” accounts of television history, *As the World Turns* (ATWT) popularized many of what are now considered defining elements of the genre. The program aired daily for 30 minutes, breaking away from the shorter 15-minute increments of shows like *Guiding Light*. Slow pacing, an emphasis on dialogue, and the now-stereotyped camera angles were all part of the ATWT conception. For that reason,

⁷ See Cassidy, Marsha F. *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s*. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2005. Cassidy provides details of the transfer of soap operas from radio to television, particularly *Guiding Light*. Because of its being the oldest soap opera and the only soap still extant as a transplant from radio, a lot of scholarship has reflected on this particular series. See Allen, Robert C. “*The Guiding Light: Soap Opera as Economic Product and Cultural Document*.” *Television: The Critical View, Fourth Ed.* Ed. Horace Newcomb. New York: Oxford UP, 1987, 141-163. Originally published in *American History/American Television*. Ed. John O’Connor. Frederick Ungar, 1983; Cantor, Muriel G. and Suzanne Pingree. *The Soap Opera*. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983; Intintoli, Michael James. *Taking Soaps Seriously: The World of Guiding Light*. New York: Praeger, 1984; Rapping, Elayne. “Daytime Utopias: If You Lived in Pine Valley, You’d Be Home.” *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*. Ed. Henry Jenkins III, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002, 47-66.

many soap historians would consider *ATWT* the most significant soap opera in American television history.

From 1958 until 1978, *ATWT* was unchallenged as the top rated soap opera, until growing competition in the 1970s unseated it. Throughout its now 50-year run on CBS, *ATWT* has survived important changes—the switch to color, the conversion from live to taped television in the early 1970s, the shift from 30 minutes to an hour in the late 1970s, and fluctuating ideas about what topics the genre should cover, oscillating from family drama to romantic escapist fare to tackling controversial social issues or some combination of the three.

Today, *ATWT* remains an award-winning soap, often recognized with writing and production awards at the Daytime Emmy awards. While *Guiding Light* has phased out many of its long-term characters (most characters considered “veterans” on the show today debuted with *Guiding Light* in the late 1970s or early 1980s), *ATWT* has retained not only the greatest number of long-term characters but also many of the actors who have defined those characters. The most impressive acting career may be Helen Wagner’s, with her long-time portrayal of Nancy Hughes. Wagner is listed by the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest portrayal of a character by a single actor in history.⁸ Wagner spoke the first words on *ATWT*’s debut episode on April 2, 1956, and her character was recently recognized on the April 3, 2006, episode with a lifetime achievement award by her women’s club, an episode that also served as recognition of Wagner’s contributions to *ATWT* over the past 50 years.

⁸ See “Longest Time in a Television Role.” Guinness World Records Web site, <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/content_pages/record.asp?recordid=52631>. Accessed 06 April 2006.

Wagner is joined by several cast members who have also been a part of *ATWT* for decades. Don Hastings was the third person to play the role of Bob Hughes, taking the part in 1960. However, he has portrayed Oakdale Memorial's most famous doctor for the past 46 years. The same year, Eileen Fulton originated the role of Lisa Miller (now Lisa Miller Hughes Eldridge Shea Colman McColl Mitchell Grimaldi) and has likewise been on *ATWT* consistently for the past 46 years. These accomplishments are backed by eight other actors who have been with the show over 20 years and several others who have been on *ATWT* over 15 years. Actors may have left for temporarily due to an illness, a contract dispute, or a film or primetime television role, but these stars have become associated with their characters, portraying them for decades.

The most central character in the history of *ATWT*, however, may be Tom Hughes. The son of Bob Hughes and Lisa Miller, Tom Hughes was born on *ATWT* in May 1961. Miller was, as portrayer Fulton writes in her memoir, daytime television's original "bitch," and her marriage to Dr. Bob was one of the original great stories of *ATWT*.⁹ Audiences reportedly cringed at the thought of their Bob Hughes marrying a conniver like Miller.¹⁰ For the past 45 years, viewers have watched Tom Hughes mature from birth to his current role as Oakdale's district attorney. Hughes is the only character in television history to be born on a show and to survive in the plot for this duration, with viewers able to watch each step of the character's development.¹¹ Tracing the maturation

⁹ Fulton, Eileen, with Desmond Atholl and Michael Cherkinian. "Prologue." *As My World Still Turns: The Uncensored Memoirs of America's Soap Opera Queen*. New York: Birch Lane Press, 1995, ix-xi.

¹⁰ "Tribute to 50 Years on Television: *As the World Turns*." Museum of Television and Radio event. 28 March 2006.

¹¹ The only characters to be on television longer, such as Nancy and Bob Hughes and Lisa Miller, were already adults at their debut.

of the Tom Hughes character can thus provide a lens to view both the trajectory of the soap opera genre and the changes in the audience and the culture that surrounds and supports these shows.

Shifting Portrayals: The Many Men Who Are Tom Hughes

One important aspect of daytime television is that characters, even as they become so entwined with their portrayers, are also bigger than those actors. It is quite common in American soap opera for a character to be recast if an actor leaves the show, especially when the character is linked to several others. Because the power of soap operas lies in character relationships rather than plot development, an essential character must stay on the show, whether the actor who portrays him or her does or not. The duration of actors such as Wagner, Fulton, or Hastings is impressive because such long-term performances are relatively rare.

Tom Hughes, excluding his time as a baby, has been portrayed by 13 different actors. Starting in 1963, Tom was old enough to have dialogue on the show and began being portrayed consistently by one child actor at a time.¹² The character was aged more rapidly than real time would allow, and his birth date was revised significantly as the show progressed so that the character would be aged enough to allow for certain stories.

This aging of Tom Hughes was accomplished by seven actor changes from 1963 until 1969, when Peter Galman took over the role and played Hughes until 1973 (Galman went on to play characters in several other daytime soaps, as well as act in short-term

¹² When soap opera children are babies, they are rarely shown on screen and were even more rarely shown during the early days of soaps, when the programs aired live. Today, because soaps film so frequently, really young babies are switched every few days, so that viewers have come to accept that the baby's looks will change every couple of weeks.

primetime roles). Galman was replaced by David Colson, who portrayed Hughes from 1973 until the end of 1978. After a short-term performance by Tom Tammi, Hughes was played by Justin Deas from 1980 until 1984. Deas became famous in the Hughes role, igniting the on-screen romance between Hughes and Margo Montgomery through a real-life romance between Deas and the actress playing Margo's role, Margaret Colin. Deas won a Daytime Emmy Award for his portrayal of Hughes and has gone on to win five more Daytime Emmys (tying for the most number of awards for an actor in Daytime Emmy history) as an actor on *Santa Barbara* (NBC, 1984-1993) and *Guiding Light*. After brief stints by Jason Kincaid and Gregg Marx, Scott Holmes took over the Tom Hughes role on July 3, 1987, and has played the character of Hughes for almost 19 years, becoming the actor associated with the matured Tom Hughes character.

As with any attempt to trace the textual or acting history of a particular soap opera or soap character, the description of a character's history may be in danger of either becoming too trivial or too confusing, but I have included this information to show how complicated discussions of even a single character's history can be on a show as multifaceted as *ATWT*. For some, Justin Deas or Peter Galman may be the "real" Tom Hughes, and the current portrayer not true to the "real" character, despite Holmes' being in the role four times longer than any other actor who has played Hughes.

The transition from one actor to another often creates a corresponding change in the character's personality, although both writers and actors try to make the shift as natural as possible. As I've previously mentioned, the early actor changes were used to age Tom quickly so that he could be used in more complicated stories. Later shifts in character stemmed from the departure of actors, so that each new actor had to both be

true to Tom's history while also shifting the Hughes character to become their own. Thus, Scott Holmes' current Tom Hughes character is much different from Justin Deas' portrayal, although the current Tom reflects those past performances as well.

The Study of Tom Hughes

To understand the way these character shifts are handled throughout decades of material and the ways in which soap operas develop a character, the remainder of this essay will focus on a reading of the textual history of the Tom Hughes character. An important caveat, however: with a character that has been on the air consistently for 45 years on a show that airs five days a week with no off-season, it will be impossible to trace the full details of Tom Hughes. With casts of 40 characters at one time, soap plots move slowly but involve so many interactions among characters that a comprehensive study of even one character on one show would be difficult enough to fit into a book-length study, much less an essay. This becomes one important reason why I believe scholars have shied away from attempting to understand soaps with any historically grounded analysis of the text, because soaps offer so much text that the scholar can hardly make any sense of it.

Further, because soaps are not commonly replayed or reaired, much of the history of a soap opera is hard to find in the first place, except among some tape traders, but this is hundreds of hours of programming per year. Analyzing a primetime series with a comprehensive view is difficult enough, and these are programs increasingly available to be viewed and reviewed in full on DVD. Mastering the seven-season run of *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006) is difficult much less the 50 years of *ATWT*. While *ATWT* may contain somewhat more redundancy than *The West Wing*, it also has a much more

complex history and character universe to draw off of. Even though soap writers try to make the texts open to new viewers, characters are constantly referred to who have not been on the show for years, references that can only make sense to those with a greater understanding of a show's history.¹³

As a scholar who has a long history with *ATWT* and who is tapped into the knowledge of the collective intelligence of the *ATWT* fan community, however, I feel that I have the historical grounding needed to delve into a character's past.¹⁴ I have personally watched most of the years of Scott Holmes' portrayal of Tom. In addition, through discussion groups, online character guides, and friends and family who have watched the shows many more years than I, my own limited understanding of *ATWT* history is aided considerably. Furthermore, I feel that a historically grounded textual reading of soaps provides a more nuanced study than most of the extant literature. This is not to diminish the majority of work done on soaps, much of which comes from feminist theory with an eye toward reception studies. The writing by scholars such as Tania

¹³ For instance, characters will refer to off-screen illnesses of other characters who have not been around for years or phone conversations with characters who have not been shown for a while. These moments are as rewarding for long-term viewers as they are confusing for newcomers. While soaps may not seek out the complexity of many primetime texts, the size of the *ATWT* universe makes it automatically a complex text to master. The various family relations often require the mentioning of characters who are off the canvas but who remain integral as a family link between multiple characters, even if they are referred to off-screen. In soaps, these complex references are often not central to the plot but become a reward for long-term viewers while intended not to get in the way of viewers who may not understand the significance of these references.

¹⁴ This knowledge is greatly aided by Julie Poll's handbook of *ATWT* history that is comprehensive in following plotlines although a next-to-impossible read for anyone who does not already have some familiarity with some of the characters, as the book attempts to summarize 40 years of the show's history in one volume. Poll, Julie. *The As the World Turns Scrapbook: Special 40th Anniversary Edition*. Los Angeles: General Publishing, 1996.

Modleski,¹⁵ Ien Ang,¹⁶ Charlotte Brunsdon,¹⁷ and Christine Geraghty¹⁸ have been essential to the growth of the field, but they provide only limited observations and are also primarily focused on soaps in a European context, which misses some of what I see as key observations in examining American soaps in an American context.

Many writers—notably scholars such as Robert C. Allen,¹⁹ Mary Ellen Brown,²⁰ Jeremy Butler,²¹ and Nancy K. Baym,²² among others—have put that focus on American soaps and American audiences but, in attempting to establish a field of study for American soap opera, have shied away from delving into textual analysis, looking instead at audience reception. Again, this stems from the massive amount of text for a soap. Because of the unique style and features of the soap opera, many scholars diminish any artistic power of soaps simply because they have not invested the time in understanding

¹⁵ Modleski, Tania. “The Search for Tomorrow in Today’s Soap Operas: Notes on a Feminine Narrative Form.” *Film Quarterly* 33.1 (Autumn 1979), 12-21. Reprinted in Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*. Routledge, 1984.

¹⁶ Ang, Ien. *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. Trans. Della Couling. London: Methuen, 1985.

¹⁷ Brunsdon, Charlotte. *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*. London: Routledge, 1997; Brunsdon, Charlotte. *The Feminist, The Housewife, and The Soap Opera*. London: Oxford UP, 2000.

¹⁸ Geraghty, Christine. “The Aesthetic Experience: Soap Opera.” *Television Times: A Reader*. Ed. John Corner & Sylvia Harvey. London: Arnold, 1996, 88-97; Geraghty, Christine. “The Study of Soap Opera.” *A Companion to Television*. Ed. Janet Wasko. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005, 308-323.

¹⁹ Allen, Robert C. *Speaking of Soap Operas*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1985; Allen, Robert C., Ed. *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1987; Allen, Robert C, Ed. *To Be Continued...Soap Operas Around the World*. London: Routledge, 1995.

²⁰ Brown, Mary Ellen. *Television and Women’s Culture: The Politics of the Popular*. London: Sage, 1990; Brown, Mary Ellen. *Soap Opera and Women’s Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994.

²¹ Butler, Jeremy. “Notes on the Soap Opera Apparatus: Televisual Style and *As the World Turns*.” *Cinema Journal* 25.3 (Spring 1986), 53-70.

²² Baym, Nancy K. *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. London: Sage, 2000.

where the artistry of soap lies, which is in character development and character portrayal over great periods of time. The key to understanding soaps comes with understanding the importance of character development on these shows, so that the following attempt is what I hope to be the beginning of a deeper understanding of soaps and a deeper appreciation for the accretion of detail involved with the slow development of a soap opera character throughout decades of storylines.

Childhood and Adolescence—The SORASing of Tom Hughes

Tom Hughes was immediately a central focus on *ATWT* because he was born to the central couple of the show at the time, Bob and Lisa. The show's writers recognized that only a minimal amount of storytelling could be accomplished with Tom as a young child. Therefore, Tom became one of the first victims of SORAS, a disease that now regularly strikes children in soap opera towns. SORAS, which stands for Soap Opera Rapid Aging Syndrome, is a term popularized in the soap opera press and in online fan communities, in response to the trend to age soap opera characters, almost always children, much more rapidly than real time would allow.

The early development of Tommy Hughes is one of the most blatant examples of SORASing, as the character was born in 1961 and, by the end of the decade, was in Vietnam. The character's birth and early existence was largely as a plot device in the dissolution of Bob and Lisa's marriage. Bob, workaholic doctor and son of the featured family of *ATWT*, and Lisa, the ambitious social climber, separated, with young Tommy stuck in between. He was quickly aged so that he could become an active part of the divorce storyline, with young Tommy acting out because he was resentful of his father's devotion to work. The storyline was one of daytime's earliest nuanced looks at the social

effects of divorce at a time when such issues were becoming prevalent in the social consciousness. Tom grew up in the midst of this struggle between Bob and Lisa, spending periods of time with both parents and also in military school.

Tom Hughes was SORASed through these constant shifts in actor, allowing the baby in 1961 to be in college and then to return from Vietnam by the decade's end. The SORASing actually moved his birth date, if one were to try to hold fictional Oakdale, Illinois, to a realistic standard of time and aging, from 1961 back to the late 1940s, meaning that he gained over an extra decade of life by the time he had been on the screen for nine years.

SORASing has become an accepted part of soap opera storytelling. *ATWT*'s current head writer pointed out to me in an interview that all soap writers realize that, while fans may sometimes complain about this aging phenomenon, they almost always accept and even desire it, as aging characters helps create more compelling stories.²³ Fans complain about SORASing most when the aging process is either too drastic—as in this case with Tom Hughes—or when one younger character is aged while others are not, especially when younger characters get aged so that, as adults, they become older than characters actually born before them. With Tom, the SORASing was later reversed to a degree, so that the actor playing Tom Hughes for the past two decades, Scott Holmes, was born in 1952.

Vietnam and Drug Dependence

Tom continued to be aged rapidly throughout the 1960s so that writers could use his relationship with Bob and Lisa to examine the contemporary generational divide that

²³ Passanante, Jean. Personal Interview. Starbucks in New York City. 29 March 2006.

defined the decade. Tom was frustrated both at his father's place in "the establishment," emphasizing career over family, and at his mother's obsession of maintaining and elevating her class status. In his somewhat justified frustration, however, Tom befriended his college roommate, who soon got him addicted to speed and involved in several illegal activities. With his grades failing, Tom revealed to his family that he was thinking of joining the Army and going for a tour in Vietnam. He eventually did, returning from the war with self-inflicted injuries and an even worse drug dependency. That drug dependency led to Tom being wrongly convicted for the murder of an ex-stepfather, although he was later exonerated.

This period saw the solidification of the Tom Hughes character, growing from being a plot device in Bob and Lisa's story to having a story of his own. By the end of the 1960s, Tom was established as a permanent part of the show's canvas. With *ATWT*'s focus on current social issues, Hughes became an outlet through which the writers could examine aspects of the current political climate: the Vietnam War, the driving motives for young adults willing to sign up for combat, the social consequences for soldiers returning from a tour of Vietnam, generational conflicts, and a growing visible drug culture in American society. These issues are addressed through a primary character linked to the central family in Oakdale, the son of two of the show's most heavily featured characters.

Career and Marriage

Tom began the 1970s as a matured young adult, portrayed by Peter Galman from 1969 until 1973. While earlier quick shifts in actors facilitated both the rapid aging and the sense of a fractured or shifting character identification for Hughes, the relatively longer portrayal of Hughes by Galman demonstrated the character's newfound

consistency. Viewers may have been reassured to see that the effects of the Vietnam War, the generational divide, the rebellious spirit, and the drug culture that Tom Hughes represented in the late 1960s still resulted in a responsible and productive young adult, as Tom moved into a different phase of storytelling in the 1970s—personal drama and the search for love.

Several romances led to eventual marriage of Tom and the demur Carol Deming. Meanwhile, Tom had gained control of his life and had decided to use his knowledge of the court system, both through his being wrongfully accused of murder and through his parents' divorce in childhood, to become a lawyer. Tom's career choice was also meaningful to his family because his grandfather and the show's patriarch, Chris Hughes, was a lawyer in Oakdale. However, career and marriage came into conflict, as Tom's focus on law school caused a rift between he and Carol—another of the similarities between Tom and his father. This common genre theme of work/love conflict came to a head for Tom when he fell for a client and divorced Carol, becoming one of the divorce statistics he had idealistically hoped to combat when he began law school. In fact, one of the recurring ironies in Tom's story during the 1970s was the many ways in which he became the very person he was rebelling against the decade before, a social consequence in American society as hippies became yuppies.

With the shift to David Colson playing Tom, the character's relationship with his new love—Natalie Bannon—led to a second marriage, which also ended in divorce due to Natalie's infidelity. Colson's portrayal of Hughes played out these personal conflicts juxtaposed with Hughes' role as young lawyer, an important fixture in a town with as many controversial characters as Oakdale. During Tom Tammi's brief stint as Tom and

the transition to Justin Deas, Tom almost married a third time—but this bride-to-be, Barbara Ryan, dumped him at the altar in favor of an old flame.

Viewers followed Tom through the decade as he built a law practice for himself and endured several failed relationships and two failed marriages. But, with Justin Deas now portraying Tom, the creation of a soap supercouple was underway. Another central aspect of soap storytelling, the supercouple is what every soap opera producer dreams of—the partnership that viewers can't get enough of, a love story and ongoing relationship that drives ratings and fan reaction. In the late 1950s, *ATWT* had created the first soap supercouple with Tom Hughes' aunt Penny and her boyfriend and husband Jeff Baker.²⁴ For Tom, however, it was Margo Montgomery who would become the love of his life and currently *ATWT*'s longest lasting marriage and supercouple.

As soaps entered the height of their fantasy phase in the early 1980s, Tom and Margo's love story became one of the greatest examples of the action-adventure and fantasy romance of soaps during this time period. His relationship with Margo developed around a story arc that spread across the show, in which a drug king pen named Mr. Big became involved in the lives of several Oakdale residents, including Margo. Tom had hired Margo as his assistant, but she had become personally involved in the controversy with Mr. Big. The adventure with Big led Tom and Margo across the world in a series of action stories, with their romance developing through their adventures together. Tom had been dating Margo's aunt, but the adventures he and Margo went through caused the couple to fall for each other, in spite of all the social forces that would keep them

²⁴ When Jeff's portrayal left the show, his character was killed abruptly, causing a nation of television viewers to mourn. This story is often cited as one of the most powerful examples of character identification with television characters.

apart—Margo had been involved in recent controversy in Oakdale and was also resistant to falling for her aunt’s boyfriend. The popularity of this supercouple was driven by the soap press’ revelation that the actors playing Tom and Margo had fallen in love.²⁵

Tom and Margo’s adventures became the major story of *ATWT* in 1982. At the height of this escapist storyline, the supercouple ended up in Europe, at Mr. Big’s mercy, in a death trap with the only way out being clues from classic literature. Tom and Margo survived because of their knowledge of a Robert Browning sonnet and moving through a reenactment of a scene from *Alice in Wonderland*. The couple’s escape to France and their fanciful adventures there led to an engagement and eventual marriage when they returned home and Margo’s career as a police detective. The couple was married in 1983, in a come-as-you-are spontaneous wedding, with Tom and Margo arriving on a motorcycle. Deas and Colin soon left the roles of Tom and Margo, with Hillary Bailey Smith taking over the role of Margo, while a short run by Jason Kincaid as Tom in 1984 led to Gregg Marx taking the role for almost three years.

During much of this time, Tom and Margo were on the backburner compared to Deas and Colin’s versions of the characters in 1982 and 1983. However, 1986 introduced a complication in Tom and Margo’s marriage, as a shift in creative forces at *ATWT* had led to a strong focus on family and workplace drama once again. Tom and former fiancée Barbara Ryan began working with each other, with Tom acting as Barbara’s business manager. After a work night when both were drinking, Barbara convinced Tom that they had slept together. This led to Tom and Margo becoming separated and Margo’s eventual affair with fellow detective Hal Munson.

²⁵ Justin Deas and Margaret Colin were eventually married.

Tom's Maturity—Scott Holmes Takes the Role

At this point, Scott Holmes took over the role of Tom Hughes. Tom was out of Oakdale for some time in Washington D.C., where he was heavily involved in a massive FBI case that the Oakdale Police Force was also involved in. With Holmes portraying Tom, he returned to Oakdale to put his marriage back together and began working with Margo on the Falcon case. The couple was eventually reunited.

The central character in the defining family of Oakdale, Holmes' Tom once again became a part of several storylines that sought to renew focus on social issues through personal drama, similar to the stories Tom was part of in the late 1960s. This mid-1980s to early-1990s time period is often celebrated by *ATWT* fans as a glory period of the show, with head writer Douglas Marland blending social relevance into a strong writing emphasis on workspace tension and family drama.²⁶

For Tom, the first in this series of storylines was a surprise visit he got from Lien, who ended up being his daughter from an affair he had with a Vietnamese nurse during his time in the service decades before. The ensuing drama showed both the personal effects of Tom's discovering a grown daughter and the complications on his recently reconciled marriage, along with both the lasting social effects of the Vietnam War on American society and the racism that the Hughes family had to deal with through Lien, including a storyline where Lien's high school teacher openly showed aggression toward her because of her race, as he had been a Vietnam veteran as well.

This was also followed by Margo's discovery that she was pregnant and that the baby was not Tom's but Hal's, from the short affair she had had with her work partner

²⁶ Marland is referred to even more often than creator Irna Phillips by *ATWT* fans as an exemplar for current writers.

during her and Tom's separation. Again, questions of custody and the need for a nuclear family versus the messiness of real human relationships became the focus of baby Adam's birth. Hal eventually decided to be Adam's godfather and to let Tom raise Adam as his son.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Margo's current portrayer, Ellen Dolan, took over the role, and Tom and Margo's status as a couple cemented with Holmes and Dolan in the roles. Tom and Margo's relationship involved both police drama, with the couple continuing to solve cases together, and family drama through which the writers continued to examine major issues Americans were facing. Among these were Margo's decision to unplug her stepfather's life support after he had confided in her that he wanted to die naturally, even though he had not made a living will. After Tom and Margo weathered the family controversy surrounding Margo's role in his death, the couple had their first child together and named it after Margo's stepfather, Casey.

Later, Margo was attacked and raped while on duty by a man later found to be HIV positive. Through the next couple of years, the show explored the aftermath of her rape. While she had not contracted HIV, Margo became friends with another victim of the same rapist who had contracted the virus and who eventually died, with Margo and Tom helping raise the woman's son. When the rapist later broke back into the Hughes home, Tom killed him, and the show examined Tom's ambivalence over whether the murder was self-defense or whether he had willingly killed another human being. Through the end of the Doug Marland Era, the couple remained an important focus for such debates. These social issues were made even more powerful because of Tom

Hughes' status as the heart of the show and Tom and Margo's status as the show's supercouple.

By the mid-1990s, Tom and Margo settled into their roles of district attorney and top detective. The two continued to work together solving local crimes and raising Adam and Casey, with Lien having left town. Eventually, though, Tom hit a mid-life crisis, returning to some of the questions of his early days about his place in “the establishment” as district attorney. He decided to leave the law and begin a new job as a journalist for *The Argus*, his mother's newspaper. However, his editor at the paper, Emily Stewart, became infatuated with him and took advantage of Margo's growing obsession with a troubled youth named Eddie Silva to convince Tom that Margo was having an affair. Tom ended up having a one night stand with Emily, shocking viewers by betraying his maturity. Although he and Margo reconciled, Tom and Emily's affair led to a child born in the late 1990s, Daniel.

During this time, Adam discovered that Tom was not his biological father. Angry at Tom because of his infidelity, a SORASed Adam—now a teenager in high school—brought all the issues of Margo and Tom's separation from the mid-1980s back to the forefront, juxtaposed with Tom's current affair with Emily. Adam left Tom and Margo's to live with Hal and Hal's wife, Barbara Ryan. Long-time viewers were reminded of all the events between Hal, Barbara, Margo, and Tom over the past decade, while new viewers were given enough background information to understand the current family drama.

The couple weathered that storm and a later flirtation Margo had with a local sportscaster which led to another separation for Tom and Margo in 2004. Tom and

Margo—and the viewers—had come to realize by that point that the two had so much history between them that they could not stay apart. And Holmes, despite being the thirteenth actor to take the role of Tom Hughes, had become the defining actor for the role of Tom Hughes.

The Voice of Reason

Today, Tom Hughes has taken over the “voice of reason” role more completely from his father. While Dr. Bob remains a permanent part of the *ATWT* cast, Tom has played the town’s district attorney for much of the past several years and remains the heart of the show’s traditional central family. While Lien is no longer in Oakdale, Tom is actively involved in the lives of his three sons—dealing with Casey’s transition from high school to college and the discovery a couple of years ago that Casey fathered a baby that died at birth while he was still in high school; the death of Adam’s biological father Hal and Adam’s return to Oakdale last fall; and taking primary responsibility for son Daniel while his mother has battled various legal issues. While Tom has spent most of the decade as a supporting character, his decision to step down as district attorney last year due to the stress of the workload and his recent heart attack after discovering Daniel was missing have given more focus to Tom and Margo in the past year.

Tom remains an essential part of *ATWT*’s fabric even when he is largely playing a supporting role because, in soap operas, the interaction between characters takes value over the plot-driven day-to-day activities. Tom and portrayer Scott Holmes, who has now been with *ATWT* for about 20 years, look to remain a vital member of fictional Oakdale, as viewers will likely watch Tom move into an eventual role as grandfather and watch as he continues to follow in his father’s footsteps as the show’s patriarch.

Meanwhile, Tom and Margo remain the longest running couple on the show. For longtime viewers, their relationship with each other and with most of the cast is an important tie that binds *ATWT* together and the show's past, present, and future in a way that no other television couple can achieve, due to the duration of American soap operas.

Conclusion

To trace the character of Tom Hughes is to trace the trajectory of the American soap opera and, to a degree, American television. The character demonstrates the soap opera genre's use of SORASing and the supercouple and the constant tug at soap storytelling between the three major strands of soap opera plots—family and workplace drama, tackling social issues, and escapist romance fare. A part of the soap canvas for 45 years now, Tom Hughes is, in a sense, the history of *ATWT*, and the treatment of his character marks changes in performers, changes in writing staffs, and changes in audience reception and in American society. From tackling divorce to drug culture and Vietnam to living wills and AIDS, Tom's character has been involved with many of the controversies that have defined American public discourse over the past few decades. And for fan communities with lasting memories, his current character serves as a monument to those social changes and plot turns.

Soaps are always at their best when they blend this social awareness with character development and drama, and the brief sketch of Tom's character history demonstrates the power of soaps to create coherent narratives of characters' lives. While many current viewers may not know of Tom's rich past (and there is much more omitted than included here), longtime viewers or viewers interested in understanding a show's history are aware of the way this character has developed over its 45-year history (again,

even though he is a 54-year-old character). For the fan community, Hughes' story is consistent and intelligible, and the current Tom Hughes is shaped by this history. Comments and actions Tom makes today are usually examined and weighed with those from his past, and his scenes with fellow performers are mined and supplemented in fan discussions with any history the two characters might share.

Hardcore fans have internalized this basic narrative outlined here. The fan community's consumption of the text of Tom Hughes' life for more than 45 years leads to a nuanced understanding of the current character and his complicated relationships both with the 40 characters currently on cast and myriad characters within the show's history that may get referenced from time-to-time or may return to the cast in the future. For fans, mastering this overall narrative is crucial, and several sites and online discussions are dedicated to filling in the blanks for Tom and other longtime Oakdale residents.²⁷

Within these activities surrounding Tom Hughes and the character's rich and detailed development on a daily show over the past several decades lay the power of the soap opera genre. Because soaps unfold, to some degree, in "real time," these shows and the characters in them have unparalleled abilities to create complex character development. Some critics dismiss the soap opera genre as lacking the general character coherence needed for genuine television artistry, but I hope this account of Tom does justice to the fact that, despite many shifts in creative teams and performers, the Tom Hughes character follows a consistent character trajectory, even if that development has been communally defined by the writers, performers, and fans who have followed him

²⁷ See for instance the "Who's Who" sections and the family tree sections on each soap at the Soap Central Web site, located at <<http://www.soapcentral.com/>>.

during that time. Here, more than any other place in the television medium, the power of the character to transcend plot and performer is most dramatically illustrated.

The only way to understand the power of soaps and to be able to grant the soap opera genre any level of artistry is to understand and analyze the text of the soap opera. If nothing else, this essay proves how difficult a task true textual analysis of a soap opera over time can be and why the nuances of a soap is hard to explain. As with real life, soap opera narratives evolve over long periods of time, belie neat categories, and often involve more characters than can be condensed into a short plot summary. In some ways, then, the artistry of soaps remains hidden from anyone outside the fan community. For most scholars, the genre's now stereotyped conventions and lack of visual sophistication often masks the artistry of the soap, which lies in character interaction and development that can only be completely understood and appreciated by long-time fans.