Perhaps nobody was more surprised by the outpouring of displeasure than the heads of ABC. Just a few months earlier, they had made it very clear that they considered *Soap* one of the flagship programs of their new fall season. This was the impression Robert Mandan had when the cast was introduced at a gathering of affiliate heads earlier that year.

“I can remember we were back in the kitchen waiting to go on. We went on and came down the flight of stairs, but we were in the kitchen. And Marlo Thomas was standing behind me and said, ‘God, you always end up in the kitchen, don’t ya?’ You couldn’t really hear what preceded you but when you hit the top of those stairs, all of those station managers and people were on their feet screaming. Our pictures were flashed around the walls of the convention hall. You had to go whoah, these guys are looking forward to this show because it’s going to be their show of the season.

“There was a lot of false controversy that got started around *Soap*. In actuality, almost all of the scenes we did had been done on late night in *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. They’d done the gay thing, they’d done a lot of stuff. But it wasn’t in prime time.”

Not that everybody viewed the controversy in quite such negative terms. “To tell you the truth, I was 22 years old, I had just gotten out of college, I thought it was great,” stage manager Carl Lauten says with a laugh. “You wanted to be controversial, in a good way though. If you could be in something that was cutting edge and unique and well thought of in an intelligent way, I’d take that over *Three’s Company* any day.”

However, being a part of *Soap* was, in some circles, akin to being a McCarthy-era communist. Marsha Posner, who had paid her dues so completely when she moved to Hollywood, got a good taste of this when she returned to her native Phoenix her first year on the show.

“I had worked in local television there for two years as a secretary. I knew a lot of the people in local TV there, so I went back and happened to meet the president of the NBC station there who I knew. I said to him, ‘Guess what, I’m working in television in Hollywood; I’m working on a show called *Soap!* Isn’t that great?’ He looked at me and said, ‘I wouldn’t let my grandmother touch that show with a 10-foot pole.’ And I thought, Ohhhkay. I guess we got that straight. So that was the end of that relationship.”

Fortunately, other grandmothers weren’t nearly so judgmental. “I’m from Mobile, Alabama,” says Lauten. “My grandmother’s Methodist. She had friends of hers who came up and said, ‘I don’t know how your grandson can work on such trash.’ And she said, ‘Well, have you ever seen the show?’ And they’d say no. You have nothing to say to me then,’” is how she’d respond.

For years, success in television had been quantified by eyeballs; if you could cultivate a large audience, you were golden. True, efforts had been made by the networks to attract more sophisticated viewers (i.e., those with deeper pockets) in recent years, but big ratings were still a strong thing to have on your side. Yet the night of the *Soap* premiere, there was already a sense among cast and producers that high numbers weren’t going to be enough to win the day.

“I think we had a 55 share,” Johnson says of the premiere. “Fifty-five percent of all televisions were turned to *Soap* that night. We never did that again, unfortunately, but we certainly had that audience the first night. I kept thinking this is being blown out of proportion, this is just a show. Just relax and enjoy it. This is not news, this is just us.”

**A Backlash with a Subtext**

However much free-speech advocates are tempted to characterize those who led the fight against *Soap* as a bunch of narrow-minded busy bodies, the benefit of hindsight shows that there was more going on than might have been apparent at the time.

There may be no greater example of a *Soap* critic who ultimately did more good than harm than Dr. Everett Parker, director of the office of communications for the United Church of Christ from 1954-1983. Though he would be remembered by *Soap* fans for his characterization of the series in the Sept. 26, 1977 issue of *Time* magazine as “A deliberate effort to break down any resistance to whatever the industry wants to put into prime time,” Parker was no simple, out-of-touch moralist.