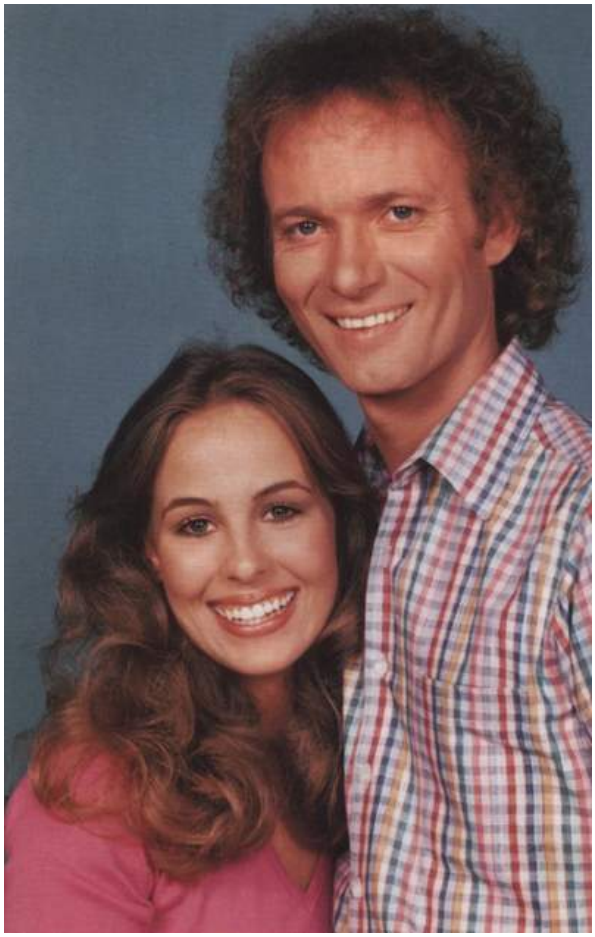

When I was a kid, my mother, a fan of soap operas generally, and the ABC brand in particular, would spend hours each day engrossed in the doings of Pine Valley, Port Charles and wherever else the ventures of Erica Kane, Vicki Lord Reilly Buchanan or Luke and Laura Baldwin Spencer took them.

Despite putting out 5 full hours of programming each day for 52 weeks out of the year, the plots of each moved with all the plodding speed of Bernie Kosar in his prime. That's another way of saying that you could miss months of a show at a time and pick up nearly where you left off without having missed anything significant.

It took my recent trip abroad and my both forced and deliberate avoidance of the Cleveland sports scene (except to see if anything else had been sold or anyone had been fired) to realize that the numbing sameness of those soaps were no match for the present day Cleveland Indians or Browns.

It's not that things don't change with these teams. It's that the changes are almost imperceptible. New characters get introduced; old ones are killed off, not literally just fired or cut. The merry-go-round of one season to the next does spin but tends to not make progress. The same tired story lines abound.

Consider the Indians. There may come a point where something dramatic will happen that makes the average fan actually start paying attention again but that day seems far off. Instead it's just the gradual wear of what turns into another meaningless season that turns into an off season of excuses that turns into another new season of misplaced hope that turns into, well, you get the idea.

The Indians having suffered the inevitable swoon of a flawed roster are playing out the string of a season with 6 weeks still remaining. Nothing's been accomplished and there's nothing to be accomplished. It's been a pointless season unless the point was to provide comfort in the familiar. We could say that it's time to "let the kids play" but that too is is the same plot point each year.

Upon my return I did get a chance to peruse an interview someone locally did with Paul Dolan. It may have been Terry Pluto though that hardly matters. I was struck by Dolan's chagrin at the Indians' 11-game losing streak and how that took the team right out of contention. More accurately, I was struck by the fact that Dolan was chagrinned by the Indians' 11-game losing streak.

No one can actually see an 11-game losing streak coming, I'll give Dolan that. But as the season turned serious, which it always does after the All Star break, flaws get highlighted. There was always going to be a stretch where the team would embrace its pretender status by enduring a stretch of games where they'd go, say, 11-22. The fact that the Indians dug this 11-game hole in one fell swoop is a tribute to efficiency but not surprise and certainly not chagrin.

No, chagrin should be saved for the fans that never get the benefit of a better or at least more interesting story arc. But then again if you don't change the producers of the show or bring in a fresh crop of writers with different ideas, why should anyone expect anything different?

I doubt that Manny Acta's job is in jeopardy just as I doubt that Chris Antonetti's or Mark Shapiro's jobs are in jeopardy just as I doubt that the Dolans have any plan on selling the franchise. It's not that any of them are particularly or unusually incompetent. It's more that none of them bring anything particularly new or fresh to the mix anymore, assuming they ever did.

For example, there may come a time when Antonetti makes a better trade or hits on a bargain basement free agent, but there will not come a time when he takes a different approach to making trades or signing free agents. The confines of his jobs have been set by his bosses and they've shown no inclination to try and do anything differently. Likewise the extent of his abilities is well established. It's not so much insanity in the sense of them doing the same things in the same way and expecting a different result. It's more like doing the same things in the same way and assuming the same result, as if the point is existence and not competitiveness.

The long view of this all, like the long view of those soaps, is that things will change but ultimately they'll stay the same.

The Browns are a different kind of soap opera but a soap opera nonetheless. Their willingness to replace leading characters has been bold if nothing else. But these changes, alas, have been in soap opera tradition, meaning that there has been some sort of disfiguring accident and when the bandages removed a new actor emerges playing essentially the same part.

Maybe you like Mike Holmgren or Tom Heckert better than, say, Carmen Policy and Dwight Clark, but fundamentally they're playing the same parts in much the same way. And that has been the real disappointment of As the Browns Turn. You'd like to think that the new actors would bring a heretofore unseen dimension to the role but ultimately they fall into the same old traps reading the same old lines and getting the same old results.

But unlike their sister show, General Indians, there is every chance that the Browns will actually take a much different direction. The impending ownership change is noteworthy because it really is the opportunity to completely re-imagine the enterprise. If the new owner doesn't do something bold then it will be an opportunity squandered.

I saw where Bud Shaw of the Plain Dealer made the point that nothing should be off the table when it comes to the Browns and I couldn't agree more. Maybe you like some of the moves

Heckert has made and maybe he is a keeper, but let's not get sentimental over Brandon Weeden or Travis Richardson just yet. The team is still deeply flawed and a complete change of direction, which is to say a completely fresh approach from how the team buys pencils to how it conducts the draft and signs free agents, isn't going to be much of a setback.

Stability is the hallmark of any good franchise so advocating for instability seems counterintuitive. But as the Indians have shown us, stability as a goal unto itself, can also be a veritable breeding ground of long-term mediocrity.

Besides, what's so stable about the Browns anyway? The fans have shown a keen ability to be comforted by the thought of football without any promise of good football. Indeed, they seem more engaged by their consensus of rage against the miserable show that is the Browns. In short, they may hate the results but they certainly love to hate those results, don't they?

You have to wonder, though, will these teams go the way of the ABC soaps, which, after decades on the air, find themselves canceled? It's hard to imagine, but eventually any business model built on delivering the same bland results is bound to fold.