

Oprah Buffs

The first lady of US television, Oprah Winfrey, enlivens millions of lives with desperate concern for other people's tragedies and perversions. Paul Norley explains why she could only happen in America

I know four things for sure about Oprah Winfrey. 1) Spelt backwards, her first name is Harpo. This might be a cheeky, affectionate reference to her exploding hair, or an ironic, cheeky reference to the fact that she's at her happiest when she's talking, whether it's about Liz Taylor's drug problems or how the size of your feet relates to your sex drive. 2) In the *Forbes' Magazine's* top forty entertainment earners for 1988, Winfrey was 11th, earning \$25m; the top female, just behind Bill Cosby and Eddie Murphy and way ahead of Paul Hogan and Frank Sinatra. 3) Despite her wealth, Oprah is firm that she is unspoilt: 'When I get home after a hard day at work, I do just what everyone else does.' This means, of course, slipping into the towelling robe, slopping into the old slippers, and crashing on to the settee with a cocoa to watch *Dynasty*.

Oprah has defined what the common American is about - soaped up to the eyeballs, furiously fascinated with other people's love, drug and diet problems, passionately serious about looking and feeling good, obsessed to the point of condescension with people who live their lives a different way to what is accepted as the American way, fond of a good freak story, very vaguely aware that the USA is not alone in the world, worried more than anything about Bruce Willis's erection and Cher's bizarre love triangle. Oprah was so common, so vulgar, so in tune with the way that America decides to mix up cheap psychology and simple solutions to 20th-century collapse with expensive, extravagant *enjoyment* that her fame was fated and probably even necessary.

4) As successful as she could get, rich to the artifi-

cial point of immortality, she then proved her common touch by dieting, publicly and proudly. Along with *Bush v Dukakis* and *Tyson v Tyson*, Oprah's diet was one of the most important things that happened in America in 1988. Not only had she made it, changed what she was, now she had changed how she looked. She lost 67 pounds in four months. A nation of commoners was inspired, Oprah was saying - anything is possible! As long as it's to do with taking off weight, or getting off drugs, or eradicating premature ejaculation, or leaving your husband because he beats you ... What else is there?

We have similar shows to Winfrey's in this country: the early morning battering of the senses meant to alert us to the world's quirks and terrors, group discussions meant to make us feel less alone and even a little useful. These are hosted by plain white men, failed politicians or failed Michael Aspels like Kilroy-Silk and Michael Scott. We have these worry shows, these vicarious, topical, let's-find-out shows, because they have them in America. Because America speaks a similar language to us, it's usually decided that our tv shows could be similar to their's. America may speak a similar language to us, but it's the most *foreign* country in the world. America has shows like Winfrey's because the commoners there are happy to share - their fears, their opinions, their obsessions. The audiences demonstrate a kind of furious, willing, debased confidence that British audiences could never display. Oprah is always at the centre of a group of people who want to take part.

A Kilroy show is half an hour of hesitancy and half-



Oprah Winfrey: The spirit of Liz Taylor crossed with Joan of Arc

hearts, whether they're discussing air crashes or pornography. *The Time, The Place* is invariably giggly mildness, there's genuine intention from the host, the guests, the audience, to be reasonable, to come to informative conclusions. It's all very nice, but nothing really happens, not even as entertainment. Everyone's scared to be *themselves*. Kilroy-Silk or Scott could never become famous out of these shows, because their audiences don't have this unashamed drive to be famous *themselves*. Oprah's fame comes out of the combined greed of everyone who has ever appeared on her show to be noticed as something different, unique - she has taken it all for herself and channelled it into \$25m a year. Fame and glamour because of her audience's fantasy.

Watching a show like Oprah Winfrey from inside our consistent meekness, we probably feel that we are watching a nation burning up with responses to itself. The people who make many of our programmes are jealous of this mental,

emotional self-absorption, seeing a place where tv truly is at the centre of things. As we move into the cabled 90s there will be many attempts to match the tempo of this American life. The trouble is, we are just not made for it, we don't have the urge to make ourselves into anything. We're happy just to sit and watch, to feel that we're not really involved, hoping that troubles might just pass us by. We're embarrassed when we appear on television. Oprah Winfrey could never have invented herself in such a climate, so really I suppose I know five things for sure about Oprah Winfrey. 5) She could never happen here. *Caution* would have denied her. Not even if she were a cross between Cilia Black, Thatcher and Gloria Hunniford would we allow her to be so exposed, so exaggerated, so *created*. Although, funnily enough, if you did mix up Black, Thatcher and Hunniford, you'd find that the hair would be exactly as exuberant as Oprah's. This is what's known as a minor 20th-century miracle. Just like Oprah herself. •