Ernie Manouse loves soap operas.

"I grew up on a steady diet of 'Dynasty' and 'Dallas,'" says the ever-cordial Manouse, a familiar face on HoustonPBS.

It's that appetite for melodrama that fuels the campy fun on "Manor of Speaking," Manouse's live "Downton Abbey"-inspired talk show that airs Sundays, directly following the popular
British series.

On a set based ever-so-loosely on Downton's library, the high-energy Manouse chats with guests about the most recent episode of "Downton," reads social media messages from viewers, introduces recorded bits and fields questions from a live audience.

"He's walking a challenging tightrope," producer Matt Brawley says. "He wants to get people talking but he has to keep his mind on where he's going next. He's definitely a ringmaster in a three-ring circus."

Juliana Werlang, a Houston fan of both "Downton" and "Manor," puts it a different way:

"He's the Andy Cohen of PBS."

TV clubhouse

While other kids in his neighborhood played fantasy football, young Ernie Manouse plotted fantasy television.

Growing up in Binghampton, N.Y., Manouse created a network board at the beginning of each television season to follow the ratings of his favorite shows. He also devised his own shows to play against the real ones, giving them ratings, as well.

"Some of my shows did quite well," he deadpans.

A four-time Emmy winner, Manouse joined PBSHouston in 1996. He hosts the nationally broadcast "InnerVIEWS with Ernie Manouse," which just wrapped its 12th season, and "Arts InSight," a local show for art fans.

"Manor of Speaking," filmed in front of a studio audience, is a departure from standard PBS fare.

"I want it to be like a TV clubhouse," Manouse explains on a recent Sunday, a few hours before the show will be broadcast live from the University of Houston's Melcher Center for Public Broadcasting. "We're a family with our viewers. We interact with them."
Manouse, 44, is as chatty and jokey off set as on; there appears to be little distinction, if any, between his off- and on-air personas.

"I probably pay more attention to things when I'm on air," he offers.

He's already in costume: a black tux with a black tie and cowboy boots. And he's very much at home on the "Manor" set, which boasts architectural columns, forest green stenciled walls, burgundy sofas, a row of faux bookshelves and a portrait of a man wielding a bagel. (That's another story.) Mourners' Corner features a photo gallery of all the dead "Downton" characters - six, so far - from the handsome but unlucky Mr. Pamuk to the beloved Matthew Crawley.

Manouse holds court in a comfy, oversize leather chair that somehow walks the line between 21st-century Texas and 1920s Yorkshire.

"Ernie sitting in it makes it work," Brawley says.

The regulars

For the show, Manouse is joined onstage by his popular sidekick, "Mr. Rogers," a put-upon butler played by actor Luke Wrobel. Mr. Rogers delivers social media messages on a silver platter and ventures into the audience to take questions. Fast developing a fan base, Wrobel has been asked on three separate occasions if he's available for real-life parties.

"Tweets, m' lord," Mr. Rogers says each episode, lowering the platter before Manouse.

"That's going to end up on a T-shirt," Manouse predicts.

On this particular Sunday, the four guests flanking Manouse on plush couches include two regulars, both British: St. John Flynn, the director of classical programming at KUHF, and Helen Mann, who served for decades as vice consul for press and public affairs at the British Consulate. Mann's mellifluous laugh is worth the price of admission.

The couch crew come prepared to dish about all things "Downton" and field important questions, such as: Who's the bigger fashionista this season, Edith or Rose?

Four recorded segments each week round out the program: the Grantham Gazette, a recap of the episode in the style of newspaper headlines; History 101, a lesson on some aspect of that night's episode; Across the Pond, an interview with a "Downton" insider or fan who may or may not actually reside on another continent; and Behind the Scenes, footage and interviews with "Downton" actors.
But a lot of the energy comes from the studio audience, which mimics the habits of viewers at home.

"Downtown Abbey," which follows the lives of the aristocratic Crawley family and their servants in 1920s England, is the sort of show people gather in groups to watch. In certain viewing circles, British food and period clothing are required.

For "Manor of Speaking," the studio audience arrives early to watch the new episode of "Downton." After nibbling at a buffet stocked with fruit, cake and tea, they cheer and hiss through the episode featuring thirsty pigs, a flirty mudfight and a moment of clarity for Mr. Bates.

"OoooOOOoooh," the audience rumbles as Mr. Bates, hell-bent on finding the man who attacked his wife, turns a menacing gaze on Mr. Green.

Sometimes the audience comes in costume. Juliana Werlang put on a black Target dress, borrowed her grandmother's white gloves, tied a ribbon around her head and draped her neck with a crystal necklace from the Blue Bird Circle thrift shop.

"I'm trying to look like I'm from the Roaring '20s," explains Werlang, a member of the Lady Washington Chapter of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution. With her are 15 other Daughters.

And to think it started in Amsterdam

"Manor of Speaking" was hatched in the Netherlands.

Manouse was shooting a Celtic Thunder special in Ireland a few years ago and decided to spend a few days in Amsterdam before returning to Houston. In his bag, the first two seasons of "Downton Abbey."

"I spent the entire vacation inside, watching all 16 episodes," Manouse recalls. "When I finished, I really wanted to talk to someone afterwards. And then I thought, 'I need to do a dismount show.'"

He cooked up "Manor of Speaking" with Brawley and HoustonPBS technology director Josh Adams.

The program launched in January 2013, in tandem with Season 3 of "Downton Abbey." This month, "Manor of Speaking" will finish its second season. It also airs on a station in the Texas Panhandle.

The retention rate of "Downton" viewers is growing. Close to 125,000 people in the Houston area
watch "Downton Abbey," and as many as 50,000 will stay in their seats to watch "Manor of Speaking," say Manouse and Brawley.

The after party

After the show, audience members clamber to take selfies with Wrobel and Manouse, pose on set, or ponder the photos in Mourners' Corner.

Houston friends Patricia Lunn and Cynthia Blessman recall the moment when they realized they were both "Downton" super fans and "Manor of Speaking" devotees.

When Lunn got two tickets to Manouse's show, there was no question Blessman would accompany her.

"We're both over the edge," says Lunn, who requests to be called Lady Pat Lunn in this article.

The whole night feels like a fast party with new, like-minded friends. "Manor of Speaking" is stuffed to overflowing with jokes, insights, social media and chat. Truly, it's a lot to squeeze into a half-hour show.

But that suits Manouse fine. Best to keep the audience wanting more.

Tickets to 'Manor of Speaking'

Ordinarily, a $90 donation to HoustonPBS buys a pair of tickets for a regular episode of "Manor of Speaking." No tickets remain for Sunday's show. For the season finale on Feb. 23, a $360 donation to HoustonPBS buys a pair of tickets to the pre-show party, including dinner, the final episode of "Downton Abbey" Season 4 and the live broadcast of "Manor of Speaking." Dressing in costume is encouraged for the finale. Information: houstonpbs.org/manorspeak.