***Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (USA: The WB, 1997-2001; UPN 2001-)**

Production Details:

Writers: Joss Whedon, Marti Noxon, Jane Espenson, David Greenwalt, David Fury, Douglas Petrie

Directors: Whedon, James A. Contner, Michael E. Gershman, David Solomon, David Grossman

Producers: Whedon, Fran Rubel Kuzui, Gail Berman

Cast:

Buffy Anne Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar)

Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan)

Alexander 'Xander' Harris (Nicholas Brendon)

Rupert Giles (Anthony Stewart Head)

Anya/Anyanka (Emma Caulfield)

Dawn Summers (Michelle Trachtenberg)

Spike/William the Bloody (James Marsters)

Angel/Angelus (David Boreanaz)

Faith (Eliza Dushku)

Cordelia Chase (Charisma Carpenter)

Daniel 'Oz' Osbourne (Seth Green)

Riley Finn (Marc Blucas)

Tara Maclay (Amber Benson)

Good movies have sometimes been made into good television shows; Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H* (1972), for example, was transformed into a long-running, popular TV comedy (1972-1983), the final episode of which garnered the highest ratings in American television history. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* may be the only example of a bad movie that became a superior television series. Now in its seventh season (2002-2003), *Buffy*, a hybridization of teen drama, humor, and horror (its creator Joss Whedon described it in a BBC interview as a cross between *My So Called*

Life and *The X-Files*), premiered in mid-season on the WB "netlet" in 1997 and became, despite ratings that would have led to cancellation on the major networks, one of "The Frog's" signature shows. Though *Buffy's* Nielsens generally ranked it in the bottom third of prime-time programs, it attracted a large enough share of the highly sought youth demographic to make it lucrative. About to go into syndication after one hundred episodes and embroiled in difficult contract negotiations, *Buffy* moved in Fall 2002 to rival UPN, a netlet, better known for professional wrestling than quality television. In Fall 1999, *Buffy* had spun off *Angel,* itself an excellent series, that remains on the WB. A second spin-off, *Ripper,* starring Anthony Stewart Head, was created for British television, and an American TV cartoon version of *Buffy* is likewise in development.

Buffy tells the story of Buffy Summers, a southern California post-feminist girl (Johnson), a "Gidget for the fin de siecle" (Siemann) living in Sunnydale, a town built over a center of demonic energy—a "Hellmouth." (In the show's Lovecraftian mythology demons were the original inhabitants of the earth, and vampires are demon/human hybrids.) As the series begins, Buffy has already discovered (in the movie) her chosen role as the "one girl in all the world with the strength and skill to fight the vampires." Having moved from Los Angeles to Sunnydale to escape her past, she would prefer to be a normal teenager, but her new hometown, plagued by vampires, demons, and other evils, will not permit her to ignore her calling. With the ongoing help of her "Scooby Gang" friends, Buffy continues to battle not only the forces of darkness but her own inner demons. Beginning with Season Four, Buffy and the Scoobies head off to college (at the University of California, Sunnydale) but with no let up in the enemies they must confront. With great wit, emotional realism, apocalyptic excitement, and the best special effects a small television series budget can buy, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* stands as the perfect example of what Sarah Vowell calls a "long haul" series, capable of perpetual self-renewal. Exhibiting some of the best writing on television, it has almost never settled for simple solutions, easy motivation, or superficial characters.

From the beginning *Buffy's* ensemble cast has been one of its greatest strengths. All major and some minor characters have acquired devoted fans in the United States and abroad, inspiring adoring websites and generating prolific fan fiction. So attentive has *Buffy* been to its fans that devotion to the bad guy Spike, a once-vicious, bleach-blonde, punk vampire, resulted in his elevation to major character status. Neutered by a computer-chip in his brain in Season Four ("I'm

saying that Spike had a little trip to the vet and now he doesn't chase the other puppies anymore"), Spike has been painstakingly morphed into a hero, until, at the end of Season Six, he too, like Angel, has reacquired his soul.

Buffy has generated a multitude of ancillary texts. Official tie-in books like the two *Watcher's Guides, The Monster Book,* scores of novels, comic books, and scripts of the first two seasons are available, and the series has garnered a great deal of critical attention as well. At this writing, two book length collections of essays have been published (Wilcox and Lavery; Kaveney), at least three more are on the way, and *Buffy,* like *Xena* before it, has inspired an internet scholarly journal: *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* (http://www.slayage.tv). In October of 2002, "Blood, Text, and Fears: Reading Around *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" was held at the University of East Anglia in the UK. A North American scholarly conference is planned.

Scholars and critics have found *Buffy* a complex television text, rich in cultural significance, investigating its witty and pun-filled use of language ("Any Slayer can brandish a weapon," Overbey and Preston-Matto observe, "but for Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the tongue is as pointed as the stake"), its metaphoric depiction of the horrors of high school, its subversion of the traditional family and creation of substitute family units, its "self-conscious and playful inversion of the conventions of the horror genre" (Johnson), its highly postmodern intertextuality and self-referentiality, its high pop culture IQ, its energetic fan base, its religious themes (see Erickson, Playden), its depiction of lesbianism, otherness, and minorities, its status as a feminist text.

Though series creator Joss Whedon has often insisted he set out to make a feminist television series, *Buffy* is sometimes described as "postfeminist," and some on the political left have questioned the show's feminist credentials, disturbed by the sometimes sexually provocative appearance of Sarah Michelle Gellar, especially in her many extra-diegetic appearances as a model (see Dougherty, Helford, Pender, Vint). Others have been troubled by its failure to include significant minority characters (see Edwards). To the ever-recurring critical question "is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* a groundbreaking, empowering and transgressive text, or is its political potential compromised, commodity-driven and contained?" Pender offers the following tentative response: "*Buffy* is a television series that delights in deliberately and self-consciously baffling the binary; the juxtaposition of mundane reality and surreal fantasy in the lives of the Slayer and her friends evokes a world in

which the sententious morality of black and white distinctions is itself demonized as an unnatural threat from an ancient past" (35).

Its actors consistently snubbed by the prestigious American Emmy Awards (individual episodes ["Hush," "The Body"] were nominated but failed to win), *Buffy* did receive the 2000 "Founders Award" from Viewers for Quality Television. Indeed, Wilcox and Lavery argue that *Buffy* can lay claim to all the defining characteristics of quality television as catalogued by Thompson: a "quality pedigree," a large ensemble cast, a series memory, creation of a new genre through recombination of older ones, self-consciousness, pronounced tendencies toward the controversial and the realistic (see "Introduction"). In 2002, however, the conservative Parents Television Council would rank the series as the single worst series (i.e., containing the most objectionable content) on television. Until such dubious recognition, the series, despite its sexual explicitness, delicious double entendres, occult themes, and extensive violence, had for the most part flown beneath the radar of the political right, though it did not entirely escape controversy. In the wake of the Columbine massacre in April of 1999, two Season Three episodes ("Earshot," in which Buffy seeks to stop a killing spree at Sunnydale High School, and "Graduation Day, Part II," in which a gigantic serpent's attempt to consume the graduates at commencement is foiled by Buffy and her classmates working as a team, though they must destroy the school in order to save it) were postponed. (See Taylor.)

Having learned lessons about the liabilities of multiple season story arcs from the forever incomplete *Twin Peaks* and the ever-frustrating *The X-Files*, *Buffy* has sought closure in each year's narrative line. In the first five seasons Buffy and the Scoobies battled, in addition to a variety of individual menaces in stand-alone "monster-of-the week" narratives, a single multiple-episode "big bad" nemesis, defeating it in a non-cliff-hanging season finale. In Season One, it is the resurrection of The Master, an ancient powerful vampire, and the opening of the Hellmouth that must be stopped. (Buffy dies in the process, not the only time in the series' run, brought back to life thanks to Xander's mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.) In Season Two, Buffy must save the world from the evil Angelus (Angel without a soul) and send him to hell in the process. In Season Three, the Scoobies battle Sunnydale's century-old mayor, Richard Wilkins, who aspires to become an immortal demon until destroyed, along with Sunnydale High, in the final episode. Season Four's Big Bad is Adam, a Frankensteinish "kinematically redundant, bio-mechanical demonoid," created by The Initiative, UC Sunnydale's top-secret agency of military demon-

fighters, who is vanquished only after Giles, Willow, and Xander come together to summon the inherited power of "The First Slayer." Glory, Buffy's nemesis in Season Five, is no less than an evil god from another dimension, come to Sunnydale to claim a supernatural "key," now incarnated in the form of Dawn Summers—a sister neither Buffy (nor the show's fans) ever knew she had, that will enable her to open the door between dimensions and return her to power. To save the world and her sister and to stop Glory's plans, Buffy must again die in the finale. Though Season Five ends with a close up of her headstone

BUFFY ANNE SUMMERS
1981-2001
BELOVED SISTER
DEVOTED FRIEND
SHE SAVED THE WORLD
A LOT

she will be resurrected by Willow's witchcraft in subsequent episodes. Only Season Six, the darkest season so far, departs from the customary narrative pattern: instead of one enemy, Buffy has several, including her own inability to readjust to life after having been called back from the grave, three local geeks who aspire to become her "nemeseses," and Willow herself, whose evil wrath is unleashed by Tara's death.

Whedon, a third generation television writer, authored the screenplay for the original 1992 camp film, a critical and commercial failure, went on to write for other television programs such as *Roseanne,* and had subsequently gained a reputation as a script doctor—he helped rewrite such films as *Speed* (1994) and *Toy Story* (1995). *Buffy's* success as a cult hit elevated of "Joss" to rock-star status among fans of the show. Though long tempted by a career move to the movies, Whedon has demonstrated a true genius for the medium of television (Lavery 251-56).

Many of the truly memorable and innovative individual episodes of *Buffy* Whedon both wrote and directed: "Hush," in which The Gentleman, fairy-tale monsters, steal the voices of the residents of Sunnydale and fully half the show transpires without a word of dialogue; "Restless," comprised of four astonishing dream sequences in which the spirit of the First Slayer tries to kill the Scoobies after they have defeated Adam; "The Body," minutely detailing the emotional aftermath of the sudden death of Buffy's mother; "Once More with Feeling," a long anticipated

musical episode in which a visiting demon causes the Scoobies and all of Sunnydale to behave as if trapped on Broadway.

In an interview with *The Onion,* Joss Whedon admits that

> I designed *Buffy* to be an icon, to be an emotional experience, to be loved in a way that other shows can't be loved. Because it's about adolescence, which is the most important thing people go through in their development, becoming an adult. And it mythologizes it in such a way, such a romantic way—it basically says, "Everybody who made it through adolescence is a hero." And I think that's very personal, that people get something from that that's very real. And I don't think I could be more pompous. But I mean every word of it. I wanted her to be a cultural phenomenon. I wanted there to be dolls, Barbie with kung-fu grip. I wanted people to embrace it in a way that exists beyond, 'Oh, that was a wonderful show about lawyers, let's have dinner.' I wanted people to internalize it, and make up fantasies where they were in the story, to take it home with them, for it to exist beyond the TV show. And we've done exactly that.

It is difficult to imagine how anyone who has followed *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as both a television show and a cultural phenomenon could disagree. In the Season Three episode "The Wish," Cordelia's fantasy that Buffy Sommers had never come to Sunnydale is granted by the vengeance demon Anyanka, with disastrous results: Sunnydale is overrun by the creatures of the Hellmouth; vampires rule the night. If in some alternate universe *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* had never come to television, the landscape of the medium would also have been altered. The imaginative lives of its fans might seem as bloodless as a vampire's victim.

Questions to Consider:

- *Buffy* is sometimes described as "postfeminist," that is to say that it simply presumes women's equality and never argues for it. What do you think of *Buffy* as a feminist text?
- What role does language play in *Buffy*?
- Critics like Larbelestier and Zweerink and Gatson have shown how *Buffy* has responded to its fan base. In what ways does *Buffy* exhibit an awareness of its

audience? Can you pinpoint specific scenes that demonstrate its self-consciousness as a television text?

- *Buffy* is a series highly dependent upon cultural and pop cultural references in establishing its humor and its meanings. Can you give some examples?
- In what sense can the Scooby Gang be seen as a substitute family?
- Some critics have been perplexed by *Buffy's* mixture of drama and humor. Do they work well together? How do the creators of the series succeed (or fail) at mixing such diverse elements?
- Johnson speaks of *Buffy's* "self-conscious and playful inversion of the conventions of the horror genre." (42). *Buffy* demonstrates allegiances with other formulae as well. What other genres put in an appearance?

Recommended Readings

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Zweerink, Amanda and Sarah H. Gatson. ”www.buffy.com: Cliques, Boundaries, and Hierarchies in an Internet Community”: 239-249.