

Preface: At Sixes and Sevens in Sunnydale

In May 2001, Buffy the Vampire Slayer sacrificed herself to save the world (again) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ended its fifth season on the WB television network. Buffy's death in "The Gift" would have been crushing to the show's most devoted fans if they had not known that *BtVS*, and presumably Buffy herself, would rise again on another fledgling network, UPN — United Paramount Network. In one of his rare but always memorable postings to the WB's *BtVS* online discussion board, "The Bronze," Joss Whedon wrote about the transition from Season Five to Season Six and the change in networks:

How will we bring her back? With great difficulty, of course. And pain and confusion. Will it be cheezy? I don't think so.... The fact is, we've had most of next season planned before we ever shot this ep.... Different network. But we've never been controlled by the network — WB was great about that, UPN has already shown they will be too. The only difference is that Marti will share exec prod credit with me, and it's about time she did. I'm in charge.

Whedon also promised the Bronzers that there would be a musical in Season Six. Fans buzzed with excitement and speculation throughout the summer.

And then, finally, it was October, and *Buffy* Season Six opened on UPN with the two-part "Bargaining." We saw how grim the consequences of a Sunnydale — or a world — without the Slayer could be, not to mention Sunnydale without Giles, and just how far Willow would go to bring Buffy back to life. Where were Buffy's smiles and puns? Controversy increased when the fourth episode, "Flooded," unveiled the season's theme, "life as the big bad," with three hapless villain-wannabes and home-repair bills as Buffy's worst nightmares. Doug Petrie, who wrote and directed this

episode, insisted that nothing had changed with the move to UPN: "I'm told ... that the censorship is lighter, but we've gotten away with *unbelievable* things on the WB. I don't see that we've ever done anything gratuitously, so I don't see any change at all. I think the good news for *Buffy* fans is that we're doing exactly the show that we wanted to be doing all along." Easily said, but Season Six was already more controversial than any event in the Buffyverse since, perhaps, the departure of Oz (Seth Green) in Season Four.

Many of the contentious issues raised by fans and scholars during Seasons Six and Seven and in the years since the series ended may be found in the essays collected here: Are these seasons too dark? Why doesn't Buffy love Spike? What about Tara and Willow? Are the villains lame? Are we even sure who the villains are? Why is Dawn still such a "young, delicate pain in [the] butt"? ("Blood Ties," 5.13). Is "Once More, with Feeling" (6.7) the best episode ever? Do these seasons lack structure and thematic coherence? Can everything be blamed on co-executive-producer Marti Noxon? Is Joss Whedon really the only "genius behind *Buffy*," or can we give some credit to other *Mutant Enemy* staff writers such as Jane Espenson as well?

We wanted to explore all these questions and more, because, honestly, the three of us actually liked *Buffy's* UPN seasons a lot. We thought they deserved some special attention, while also, perhaps, demonstrating how they remain, in some ways, at least "exactly the show we wanted ... all along" (Petrie). We met and began talking about this project at the first Slayage Conference on *BtVS* in 2004, a year after the end of the series. At that time, we agreed that among the elements that made the final seasons both fascinating and controversial were the intensifying contrasts and conflicts in the narrative and character arcs, and in the viewers' responses. At the same time, these elements, surely, had always been essential to the series. At the heart of *BtVS* from Season One has been the use of metaphor to explore the conflicts of growth, power, and transgression: characters have dual identities or shadow characters, the show's style, setting, and plots lend themselves to thematic dualities, and, at last, fortuitously, to the program's network duality. After moving from the WB to UPN, however, *Buffy* became so intense and provocative that fan response split as well.

Ordinary viewers or fans often rank Season Six (and less frequently, Season Seven) among their favorite seasons, or they hate it. It has become commonplace to refer to Season Six as "dark." Entire fan-sites became

largely devoted to disappointed discussions of *BtVS* and *Mutant Enemy* writers and producers or revisionist fan-fiction during the original broadcast years of Seasons Six and Seven. Two examples: (1) Membership in The Kittens, the Witches, and the Bad Wardrobe, "the only and largest exclusive Willow and Tara Message Board," grew explosively in 2002, evidently coinciding with the last half of Season Six, but the board's rules currently forbid discussion of anything beyond episode 6.19 "Seeing Red" — the episode in which Tara was killed (xita). (2) The Web site BTVS-Tabula Rasa — "We believe in Spike's redemption" — includes an FAQ "to respond to criticisms that have been made of Spike or of Spike and Buffy's relationship" ("Bunker"). The UPN years polarized *Buffy* fans, in many cases. Web sites or discussion boards dedicated to praising the final two seasons of *BtVS* are much rarer, if they exist at all, but defenses of the show during these years came from media critics such as Stephanie Zacharek and Emily Nussbaum, or some of the fans known as Existential Scoobies of the All Things Philosophical on *BtVS* & *AtS* discussion board (Shaffer). Although Thomas Hibbs of *National Review Online* found the Season Seven finale, "Chosen," disappointing, he concluded that it "does not diminish the remarkable dramatic achievements of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* over seven seasons."

In addition, the final two seasons of *BtVS* aroused more intense scrutiny from viewers who perhaps had previously considered a show called *Buffy* too frivolous to be a threat. In 2000, Kathleen McConnell examined one of the earliest examples of this kind of response in her study of the repercussions of the Columbine High School massacre on *Buffy*, particularly with respect to the Season Three episodes "Earshot" and "Graduation Day, part 2." The increased attention the show garnered from these coincidental events was followed, two years later, by the entertainment media and fan frenzy accompanying the shift from WB to UPN (P. Graham, par. 30). Conservative media watchdog groups and even the Federal Communications Commission turned on the show they had earlier ignored, decrying it as "sacrilegious," "violent," and even "flirting with kiddie porn" (Bozell), suggesting that the uproar about Seasons Six and Seven was actually a real world response to the same kind of dualities that *Buffy* has always been about.

The first episodes of Season Six premiered in October 2001, less than a month after the stunning September 11 terrorist attacks on New York City and the Pentagon. Although Joss Whedon had stated that plans for *Buffy's* sixth season were mapped out as the fifth season ended, viewers may have been expecting their favorite show to provide an escape or antidote to the

real world horror and devastation the daily news brought closer every day. In a 2007 interview, Marti Noxon acknowledges the impact of these events even as the Mutant Enemy writers had already planned a less “fanciful” sixth season:

I'll never forget the day, 9/11, going down to the set and telling people to leave and driving through the streets. I mean we'd been joking about the apocalypse for years but suddenly it felt more real than a joke.... We did know, for instance, that in season six we wanted to explore that post-collegiate, toxic taste of adulthood where you kind of try all of the bad stuff to see if that's you. I mean the darkness and the nastiness was definitely a reflection of our own fatigue and we didn't feel the need to be quite as fanciful. We'd done that.

Although some viewers found their escape in identifying with Buffy's attempts to regain her difficult balance in a hellish world after being torn away from heavenly peace, and others reveled in seeing Spike and Buffy tear various places apart with passion, vocal numbers were not pleased with the story as it unfolded.

Similarly, Season Seven disturbed some viewers' expectations as they watched from the real-world context of the period leading up to and following the U.S.–UK invasion of Iraq. Helen Graham argues that “in this new context *Buffy's* once polysemic representational cycle was shifted, creating explicit, and unpleasurable, ideological signification.... Buffy's fighting and rhetoric start to signify ideologically as a result of the newly felt ‘real contradiction’ between leadership and democracy.” An alternative perspective on this question is Chambers and Williford's “Anti-Imperialism in the Buffyverse: Challenging the Mythos of Bush as Vampire Slayer,” which argues that the moral world-view of *BtVS* turns out to be more “sophisticated” than the “mythos of Bush as vampire-killer” in which “the horror of 9/11 and its complex history is reduced to a stock horror story where paladins arrayed in white defend American life from soulless parasites shrouded in black” (par. 38).

Although scholars of popular culture certainly began taking good hard looks at *Buffy* early in the show's history — Susan A. Owen published “Vampires, Postmodernity, and Postfeminism: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” in the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* in 1999, and a University of Toronto Ph.D. dissertation was registered in 2000 (Byers)—“*Buffy* studies” or “buffyology” may be said to have coalesced as a specific focus within pop-culture studies with the debut of *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* in January 2001 (coinciding with the last half of Season Five), the 2002 publication of *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer (edited by Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery), and the first international scholarly conference devoted to *Buffy*, “Blood, Text and Fears” at the University of East Anglia, in October 2002. Initially planned as a one-day local event, BT&F made headlines when organizers received more than 100 paper proposals from the UK, USA, Europe, and Australia, and were obliged to expand to two days for sixty presentations. The academic interest in *Buffy*—and *Angel* and *Firefly*—which followed these events may be related to their coinciding with the controversial UPN seasons of *Buffy*.

We wish this collection could cover every issue that set fans, scholars, and media pundits at sixes and sevens in *Buffy's* final two seasons. But, of course, that is impossible. Readers interested in additional analysis of *Buffy's* UPN years may wish to refer to *Slayage* for Claire Fossey's “Never Hurt the Feelings of a Brutal Killer: Spike and the Underground Man,” Richard S. Albright's “‘[B]reakaway pop hit or book number?': ‘Once More, with Feeling’ and Genre,” Caroline Ruddell's “‘I am the law’ ‘I am the magics’: Speech, Power, and the Split Identity of Willow,” Angie Burns's “Passion, Pain and ‘bad kissing decisions’: Learning about Intimate Relationships from *Buffy* Season Six,” Elizabeth Rambo's “‘Lessons’ for Season Seven,” James South's “On the Philosophical Consistency of Season Seven,” and Arwen Spicer's “‘It's Bloody Brilliant!’ The Undermining of Metanarrative Feminism in the Season Seven Arc Narrative.” When Joss Whedon heard about the “Blood, Text and Fears” conference, and noticed that it included papers about Season Six, he said, “I'm psyched, because [Season Six] is the bastard child that everyone's mean to. We had a purpose. And for people to take it seriously and not just to say, ‘That season was depressing and the villains were nerds,’ makes me feel good” (“*Buffy* 101”). We take Season Six and Season Seven seriously, and hope this book will encourage more thoughtful consideration of *Buffy's* dark seasons. As Thomas Hibbs says, “‘*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* saved TV, a lot” and she's not done yet. In 2007, *Time* Magazine named *BtVS* among its Top 100 television shows of all time, and Marc Berman of *Media Week* noted that college students named *Buffy* as the show they miss most. The Dark Horse “Season 8” comics have been amazingly successful. So the only question is, “Where do we go from here?”

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