

Introduction

Buffy at Twentysomething

Gerry Canavan and James South

The “*Buffy* at 20” conference was held at Marquette University in Milwaukee, WI, on April 1, 2017. Despite the temporal distance from the series, which ended in 2003, the event clearly struck a chord, not only in the academics who attended from as far away as Oregon, Arizona, California, and New Orleans, but also in members of the surrounding community, whose preregistrations filled up three separate university venues before we finally settled on our student center’s ballroom. With a keynote from Sherryl Vint of the University of California, Riverside, on the legacy of *Buffy*, and four panels centered on feminism, psychology, TV production, and fandom, the conference produced a dynamic (and fun!) exploration of the beloved series from both established and emerging scholars quite characteristic of the oddly vibrant interdisciplinary field of Whedon studies.

Many of the central topics under discussion are by now well-recognized flashpoints for *Buffy* fandom. Tempers flared, as they so often do, as panelists discussed Spike and his character-defining attempt

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to rape Buffy in “Seeing Red” (6.19), with anger directed seemingly equally at the character and at writing and directorial decisions made by showrunners outside-of-universe. Is the dispersal of the Slayer powers at the end of “Chosen” (7.22) the moving culmination of the series’s vision of female empowerment (the Vint position), or the toxic replication of the proto-Watcher’s-Council original nonconsensual creation and instrumentalization of the First Slayer (Canavan’s admittedly contrarian take)? Doesn’t the infamous last shot of “Normal Again” suggest this was all just the weird, tragic dream of a deeply unwell teenager—ruining, in some basic sense, the entire Buffyverse? Is the *true* “best episode ever” “Hush,” “The Body,” “Restless,” or “Once More with Feeling”? Who mourns for the Buffybot? Are vampires people too? And what’s the real deal with souls, anyway?

The conference was likewise an opportunity to explore the way the series has evolved since its conclusion, not only in its afterlife on DVD and streaming services, but in its transmedia extension to other modes of consumer entertainment. What is the proper status of *Angel*, the tie-in novels, and (most controversially) the post-*Chosen*, ostensibly Whedon-authored Dark Horse comics series with respect to how we understand *Buffy*—especially with regard to elements that seem to revise, complicate, undermine, or thematically darken established elements of the series? How can Buffy Studies, as a field, “manage” a canon that has now become so fractured and polyvalent? Where does Whedon Studies go as a field at a moment where Whedon has moved on from the initial texts that made his reputation to blockbuster success in the Marvel Cinematic Universe—and now seemingly moved on from that sphere as well? Does *Buffy* still remain for us the paradigmatic Whedon text (for good or ill?) Has the series *aged* well, in the main, and in all its particulars? What of *Buffy* do we need to reconsider, or unlearn, from the perspective of a culture now twenty years on (which with respect to popular culture at least has changed in large part due to the popularity and influence of *Buffy* and its successors)?

It was out of this latter set of questions that a somewhat funereal, or at least elegiac, mood seemed to emerge from the proceedings. It could not escape our notice that we were discussing a twenty-year-old series on a campus filled with twenty-year-olds—indeed, at a conference

whose youngest attendees were only barely older than the series, if that. Teaching and studying *Buffy* still feels “right” to us, twenty years later—it still all feels *urgent*, important—but would *Buffy* feel the same at thirty, forty, fifty? Was there a point at which we would all need to let Buffy go, whether or not we wanted to? Our discussions both in the panels and at our meals turned at times to this other question of sustaining Whedon Studies in a context so increasingly removed from its point of origin—how, why, whether we should.

This feeling was further complicated shortly after the conference, as our authors were preparing the final texts for this special issue, when disturbing #MeToo-style allegations emerged about Whedon’s behavior on set on *Buffy*, *Angel*, and elsewhere that threatened to severely tarnish his legacy. In some basic sense a cloud remains over Whedon’s personal legacy as a filmmaker that requires an honest reckoning from the organization that bears his name. Preparing this issue in the wake of that scandal seemed to us at times to be a rather strange endeavor, almost a sort of last dance—perhaps even an opportunity to reconsider and re-center the importance of women like his *Buffy* collaborators, Jane Espenson and Marti Noxon, in the corpus that usually bears only his name. In particular, Noxon’s work as successful showrunner and filmmaker has since taken on dark themes that resonate with the tonal shifts from Season Five of *Buffy* to Seasons Six and Seven, and perhaps calls into serious question the kneejerk sense of “auteurship” that has long surrounded Whedon and *Buffy*.

In the summer of 2018—this time as our texts were coming in for final proofs—we were shocked again by the announcement of a *Buffy* revival, executive produced by Whedon and helmed by writer-producer Monica Owusu-Breen. Originally reported as a reboot with inclusive, multi-racial casting and starring a black woman in the role of Buffy, it seems that the series will in fact be a sequel, set in the original Buffyverse twenty-plus years after *Buffy* and *Angel* concluded (and thus leaving open the possibility of guest appearances by Buffy, Willow, Faith, Angel, Spike, Giles, and others). “Here we are, twenty years later... And the world seems a lot scarier. So maybe, it could be time to meet a new Slayer,” wrote Owusu-Breen on Twitter.

So perhaps “*Buffy* at 20” was a last dance after all, of a sort—one of the last major academic conferences devoted to *Buffy* before its next major transformation, whatever form the new series takes, however direct or indirect its connection to BTVS:TOS, and whatever sort of long-term cultural footprint the new series ultimately turns out to have.¹ The six articles included in this special issue take up that task of understanding the “old” *Buffy* seriously, exploring elements of the series and its lasting impact that still resonate all these years later, as well open new avenues for exploration in the series and the larger franchise. Our interviews, with *Slayage* co-founder Rhonda V. Wilcox and with Sherryl Vint, likewise take up the vexed question of interpreting *Buffy* in an anniversary moment we now retrospectively recognize as transitional, even perilously fraught—the moment before *Buffy* once again became something totally, unexpectedly new. She’s grown up a bit, taken a few punches, maybe gotten a few scars, but there’s no doubt about it: *Buffy* lives.

Notes

¹Editor’s note: SCW8, the eighth biennial *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses, a four-day international academic conference covering not only *Buffy* but also other productions by Whedon and his collaborators, took place at the University of North Alabama in June 2018. See the “Report on SCW8” in this issue.