Ten on Twenty: Personal Reflections upon Twenty Years into *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Issue 15.1, published in 2017, presented reflections by the staff and editorial board of *Slayage* on the twentieth anniversary of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). Issue 16.1, published in 2018, presents short essays written in 2017 by readers of and contributors to the journal. They touch on the personal and the political, sometimes at once; they comment on the state of Whedon Studies and give some insights about Whedon scholars. These reflections do indeed reflect us (concerns about the vampiric notwithstanding). They also reflect what we are regarding. In their variety and frankness about what happens on the other side of the page, they help to show some of the reasons that this journal continues to publish.

— Rhonda V. Wilcox, editor, *Slayage*

"So I say we change the rule. I say my power should be our power."
— Buffy, "Chosen" (7.22)

Buffy the Vampire Slayer premiered in 1997—the same year in which I was immersed in a doctoral dissertation on Hillary Clinton (a woman who—like Buffy—launched a thousand academic careers). Twenty years later, women who came of age with Buffy faced a real-life Big Bad in the form of Republican presidential nominee Donald J. Trump. Hillary Clinton was cast as the Democratic Party's Chosen One, the solitary figure standing between Trump and the White House. Unfortunately for her, women U.S. presidents are not (yet) born "in every generation."

Joss Whedon gained prominence as the scribe of "strong female characters," someone who flipped the script on the "woman in jeopardy" trope and paved the way for dozens of fictional and factual female heroes in the twenty-first century. It was an important

contribution—Buffy is an inspirational and aspirational character who has saved the world (a lot) for so many of us. That women can be the heroes of their own lives, however, is not the most important insight viewers should take from the series. What Whedon conveyed most memorably is that nobody can battle anything successfully alone.

That lesson was imparted most forcefully in the series finale, when Buffy delivers the memorable speech in which she promises that, with Willow's help, she and her allies could upend the patriarchal policies that had been in place for millennia: "I say we change the rule. I say my power should be our power. . . . From now on, every girl in the world who might be a Slayer will be a Slayer." The speech still gives me goosebumps. But as I look back on it today, I notice that the images accompanying that stirring text are of individual women standing up—alone—in daunting situations. The series narrative of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, however, is that *nobody* (not even the Chosen One) can battle anything successfully alone. That is why the eponym for Buffy's group was "The Scoobies," and why her Season Six resurrection didn't feel like a cheap bait and switch, as cliff-hanger deaths-and-resurrections often do on apocalyptically-themed series (*The Walking Dead* much?). In the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* universe, even the Chosen One has to rely on her friends to bring her back to life once in a while.

This lesson—that nobody can battle anything successfully alone—is crucial for twenty-first century democracy. Whedon knew as much when he formed his own super-PAC and deployed it on behalf of Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. Dubbed the "Save the Day" campaign, Whedon enlisted Hollywood heavyweights to convince people that, in his words, "there is this heroic act called voting." Although Whedon's, and Clinton's, efforts proved insufficient on election day, Trump's inauguration was followed by the historic worldwide women's marches, and *Wonder Woman* (both predecessor to and progeny of Buffy) was the surprise hit of the summer of 2017. Both popular and political culture, it seemed, had room for armies of fierce women warriors. Women are still often wedged into the "heroic individual" template that was forged by a "bunch of men who died thousands of years ago." Whether it is Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris,

Buffy, or Wonder Woman, we should not—we must not—rely on them alone. Their power is our power. Are you ready to be strong?

— Karrin Vasby Anderson

> *"I mean, they're lame morons for fighting, but they do. They never. . . never quit. So I guess I will keep fighting too."*
>
> — Anya, "End of Days" (7.21)

It sounds like a contradiction, but I have always had the strange feeling that I came to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* both too late and too early. Too late, because by the time I was watching the BBC 2 reruns, I had missed the opportunity to lurk on fan boards and engage with a community that was, unbeknownst to me, finding its footing—but too early because I was too young to completely understand what the show was trying to say.

It was always clear to me that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was *about* things; about hopefulness, and fearfulness, and the fact that helping yourself can ultimately become an act of global generosity. On some base level I understood that there were metaphors and allusions and well-worn life lessons buried underneath the nifty plot twists and genre innovations—even if they were not available to me until I was old enough to decipher them. What I did know, from the moment I saw my first episode ("The Prom," 3.20) was that it was a show about being *brave*. I realize now that so much of what constitutes bravery in my mind comes from Buffy Summers. I know that because bravery *does not* come easily to me; it is not my natural default setting, so I spend a lot of time thinking about it.

Until then, I had always seen bravery as something that belonged to heroes who were unflappable; who were not afraid to say yes, or to say no; who never questioned their own power, or worried about losing their spot in the world. It was in Buffy that I saw someone, a *brave* someone, who could be annoying and unsure, flippant and fearful, concerned with getting stuck but cautious to move forward. Our heroine

was brave *because*, and not in spite of, her battles to embrace the human flaws that made so many of her enemies write her off as easy prey. For a kid who had the nagging sense that he had missed out on his fair share of courage it was revelatory; bravery was available to those who worked for it—it was earned by stepping forward and getting back on your feet; it ebbed and flowed, and did not have to be a zero-sum game.

Each season a new Big Bad would step in, pose a threat, and eventually be defeated. Often the exact thing that Buffy did not want to happen would happen, and that, for me, makes the show one of television's most relentlessly hopeful series. It is a fantastic reminder of one of life's weirdest quirks: that the things you are afraid of now will not be the things you are afraid of next year. So when you ask yourself what Buffy would do, the answer is, almost always, keep going.

— Jay Bamber

Thanks to *Buffy,* We're Ready

"Make your choice. Are you ready to be strong?"

—Buffy, "Chosen" (7.22)

For the past twenty years, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has taught women to be strong, and to take pride in their strength. Today, when *Wonder Woman* actress Gal Gadot says that "being a woman is a strength in so many ways" (*Rolling Stone*, August 24, 2017), she is reinforcing a message of empowerment that *Buffy* has been articulating for two decades. *Buffy* has also taught men to respect and cherish women's strength, just as Xander and Giles do.

Buffy encourages men, women, and non-binary people to be proud of their identities, including their sexualities. In 1999 Willow realized that she was "kinda gay." She soon met Tara, and realized that being gay was a Very Good Thing. Ever since then, the Buffyverse has consistently taught that it is good to be gay, or queer, or straight, just as it is good to be submissive, or dominant, or just generally kinky. Thanks to *Buffy*,

these loves dare speak their names, at least sometimes. Today, comic book writers (such as Joss Whedon, Christos Gage, and Erika Alexander) and artists (such as Rebekah Isaacs, Georges Jeanty, and Jon Lam) continue to put forth that inclusive message in the pages of *Buffy* comics. These comics tell the stories of lesbians and gays like Willow, Andrew (finally out of the closet!), and Billy, the first male Slayer. They tell the stories of queer straights like submissive Xander and dominant Buffy. The sexual ethics of the Buffyverse are simple. To thine own self be true. Love whomever you want to love. Respect the limits of consent and desire. As many *Buffy* fans know, these ethics work really well in our world, too.

My gender queer kids Rory and Kate have lived their whole lives in the world that *Buffy* made, a world where anyone can be a Slayer. This is the world in which my kids could become the strong, confident young people they are today. This is the world I want to live in.

In 2003, Buffy asked us to make a choice, and we did. We decided that we were ready to be strong. We were ready to stand up for things like love, compassion, equality, diversity, loyalty, and friendship. We still are. The world that *Buffy* made is our world. Slayers, every one of us.

— Lewis Call

"Honey? Try not to get kicked out?"

—Joyce, "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1.1)

"Buffy? What are we gonna do now?"

—Dawn, "Chosen" (7.22)

In 1993, I was a Humanities professor in a small state college, teaching a 100-level survey course to first-generation high school graduates, and learning that many of them had not been introduced to most classical Western iconography found in literature, like names of Greek and Roman gods, and could not understand bestselling-book titles. I felt . . . alone.

Then, in 1997, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* premiered on television. I had appreciated what the movie should have been—would this be it? I fell in love immediately and could not help myself; I quoted and gushed about (and explained) witty, intelligent, educated writing, empowerment, classical imagery, the import of librarians, the connections with what we were studying . . . sigh. They did not have the tools. I fell back on explaining *The Simpsons*.

By 2000, I had taught that 101 class over 85 times (including summers). I needed a new environment, and I chose to study in Israel. After the program's registrar told me that I had been accepted, one of the first things I asked about was Israeli television, and had he ever heard of *Buffy*? He thought maybe his daughter watched it.

More sighing. Two long years without cable, suffering until I got decent internet and discovered downloading (I still have that stack of DVDs), before I could afford a box set. And then, books! And—oh, be still my heart!—to find other people were interested *academically*!

I do not participate much in national or world communities, but I am one of the faithful. My binge-watching and enthusiasm have created new fans for *Buffy* who have been introduced to the rest of the Whedonverse (chronologically, to appreciate development of craft). Now I have a community in my living room discussing the joys of the writing, the possibilities of storytelling, dialogue, depth of character, and theme, and taking chances; of visuals and lights and darks and frames; of ideas that open worlds and change cultures and cause people to want to think. A group that forced the name "Buffy" on the new cat.

Mr. Whedon and I are of an age (OK, I'm a year older), and our demographic represents the beginning of the end of certain attitudes as our parents' demographic saw shifts in attitudes about race. Joss Whedon knows he and the world are flawed. Artists find their inspirations in such, but where some offer sadness, cruelty, hopelessness as humanity's given future, or wallow in their excesses as a form, others give us what they wish for, how they would like to be better, make the world better—their view of a world with their own regret removed—and if everything worked out to the good (and assuming an absence of homicidal LMDs).

Today, yes, binge-watching *BtVS* yet again, I saw a headline, "How Sci-Fi Slapped Down Geek Culture's Toxic Masculinity in 2017." Joss Whedon's 'verse helped make that possible, and everyone has resolutions to make. Think of next year's headlines.

— Yehudit Hannah Cohn

"That was then. This is now."
— Buffy, with rocket launcher, "Innocence" (2.14)

At 20 years after Buffy and a few months after revelations about Whedon's personal life, I would hope that our discipline will continue to make its fine progress towards de-centering Whedon Studies away from the person and intentions of Joss Whedon. For our purposes, Joss Whedon the artist is not Whedon the person. "Joss Whedon" is mostly an author-function, an organizing principle to discuss a body of work that stands for his own efforts, his collaborations, his collaborators' individual efforts, and the synergy of good people doing good work together (to say nothing of framing narratives produced by fans, distributors, and marketers). Joss Whedon, auteur, is a convenient fiction produced by the text and our scholarship. As Rhonda Wilcox observed in *Why* Buffy *Matters*, no single person built medieval cathedrals, but they are still an art form, a collective art work built and modified over the centuries. And, if we are to be honest about it, few viewers or academics precede their initial viewing of an episode with production research on who had power over what decisions that made what meanings. Auteurism has a truth, but it has a decades-long history of simplification that most serves the needs of the powerful in the industry. Auteurism is not a particularly accurate way to write about the creation of the work or the reception of it by mass audiences. Don't get me wrong—it has been a useful tool for organizing and legitimizing our study of this body of popular and cult texts. But after all these years, that goal has been accomplished, and we need to better understand the genius of this system of television, web serial, and film production and reception.

This discipline has made excellent progress analyzing the contributions of composers, cinematographers, actors, script writers, set and costume designers, comics artists, title designers, fight choreographers, fandoms, and multimedia conglomerates in building these works and defining "Joss Whedon," the School of Whedon, and the collective voice of Mutant Enemy. It is to our credit that some of the scholars earliest to the discipline and our most recent voices have played a role in problematizing the auteurist bent of our discipline; it has been an ongoing concern. While there has been some fine scholarship already in these fields, more work remains to be done with writer-producers, production studies that ground their history and analysis in production memos and drafts, the role of CGI artistry, the financial history of Mutant Enemy, reception histories, genre studies, cultural studies (especially the depiction of class and labor), and the close observation of the work done by the many fine actors in this body of work. I look forward to reading it.

— David Kociemba

> *"There's just a body, and I don't understand why she just can't get back in it and not be dead anymore."*
>
> — Anya, "The Body" (5.16)

My mother emigrated to the United States in 1975 from New Delhi, India. I, her only child, was born nearly ten years later, in Hackensack, New Jersey. My abusive father exited our lives early, so as far back as I can remember, it was just the two of us. While we were a team, navigating a strange American landscape together, for much of my life, we were not friends. Not only did we have the typical generational differences that afflict mothers and daughters, we had deep cultural differences. My mother loved the United States—its open roads, full of possibility—but she did not know what it was like to be the only brown kid in an American school. She did not understand why I rebelled

against her insistence to make good grades, to be a good girl who went to Hindu Youth Camp and preserved the Indianness that was slowly being lost. She couldn't get why I preferred to prioritize horny white boys and rock concerts over her vision for me: to become a self-sufficient medical doctor. In our frustration to reach each other, we fought. One night, my mother slapped me across the face. Another time, she threw her shoes at me. She didn't understand—but neither did I.

When *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* premiered on television there were no Indian-American teens on TV. So I found myself drawn to the few cool and outspoken American girls that were on screen. No character captivated me more than Buffy, who, in my eyes, had to very intimately straddle two worlds: whether it was in her romantic relationships with vampires or her in role as "the Chosen One." And no character annoyed me more than her mother, Joyce—an overbearing single parent who just would not leave her only child alone. I identified with Buffy not only because she was an outsider, but because she was an outsider with an insufferable mother. I felt my cheeks go red hot as I believed Joyce was responsible for terminating Buffy's relationship with Angel. I was dating an older white American boy when I was a teenager and my own mother did not approve. But I was most upset when Joyce forbade Buffy from her duties as Slayer. Why couldn't she understand that Buffy had a different path, one that diverged from the one she imagined?

My mother died on May 6, 2013. I rewatched *Buffy* as nostalgic therapy and wept when Joyce yelled "You get the hell away from my daughter!" when she protected Buffy from Spike early in the series. I giggled when she ate those "magic" chocolate bars and had a night off from her own duties of being a lone working mom. But it is "The Body" that struck me the most as an adult. It captures my feeling of loneliness as I now must deal with this other, very American world completely alone, without my mother in my corner. As a critical race theorist, I am quick to critique the show for its lack of diversity or its literal demonization of "others." But from a more personal, first-generation perspective, hegemonic American culture might be the vampire that my mother was afraid would suck me dry. In its pull to assimilate "foreigners," the U.S. has pushed me to speak English instead Hindi and

eat macaroni and cheese instead of saag-paneer. It has made me feel like an outsider for the color of my skin and terrorist for my Eastern religion. Like Joyce, my mother desperately tried to protect me from what she knew she couldn't. And like Joyce, my mother died proud of what I gained from the struggle of acculturation.

Since my mother died, every day feels like "The Body": quiet, as in preparation for my voice to fill the silence.

— Rebecca Kumar

Teaching Whedon After 8/20/17

"It's always sudden."

—Tara Maclay, "The Body" (5.16)

August 20, 2017

A few weeks earlier, I had received some exciting news: an offer to teach "ENGL 481: A Filmmaker 2," an upper-level undergraduate Cultural Studies course at McGill University. I proposed a twist on our department's usual film-centric approach (Lynch, Hitchcock, Haynes, et al.) and built a syllabus around transmedia auteur *par excellence* Joss Whedon. I have published and presented work on Whedon for years, and taught select Whedon material in previous courses, but the opportunity to immerse students in the Whedonverse for an entire semester seemed like a pedagogical dream come true.

Until August 20. I was nine days away from defending my dissertation. ENGL 481 was meant to be my karmic reward for completing the Ph.D.—a course borne from pure joy, guaranteed to inspire Whedony love in every student.

But then, August 20. It is not that I was ever uncritical of Whedon's work (because really, the only good pedagogy or scholarship—on Whedon or otherwise—must be critical). But Kai Cole's letter shocked me. Perhaps it should not have. And just as part of me kept repeating that familiar mantra, "teachable moment," another

part of me felt immensely disappointed and disoriented about the direction of #engl481.

As the semester began, I was grappling with how the material had been made new by the revelations of August 20. Cole's letter upset me as a fan, but it gave a fresh critical edge to my teaching approach. The students clued into this critical edge and adopted it quickly. I often found myself simultaneously impressed by students' analysis and sad that they were not creating fannish bonds to the storyworlds. Some of them did—but overwhelmingly, my students concluded that Joss Whedon is just a #MediocreWhiteDude.

And they are right, of course. The Whedonverse is riddled with problems—of representation, of politics, of deep-seated auteurism that erases the labor of others (often women and people of color). Cole's letter forced me, and I imagine many other Whedon aca-fans, to stop making excuses for these problems and to contextualize Whedon more effectively within the pervasive racism and misogyny of popular culture.

Like death, a hero's fall from grace is "always sudden." August 20 did not change the fact that growing up with *Buffy* made me a feminist before I knew what that word meant. It does not change the fact that *Buffy* helped usher in a new kind of TV storytelling. But it may be a watershed moment for Whedon fans and scholars—a halting revelation that demands our critical attention. August 20, 2017 serves as a crucial reminder to check our author worship, pay more attention to other Whedonverse creators, and continue to wrestle with the messiness of pop culture in productive ways.

— Casey McCormick

Whedon As Moralist?

"Young love be damned, I've got to restore this school's equilibrium."
— Joss Whedon, *Giles: Girl Blue Part Two* (March, 2018)

In our studies *The Existential Joss Whedon* and *Joss Whedon as Shakespearean Moralist*, we defended a form of narrative ethics, arguing

that those familiar with writers such as Shakespeare and Whedon can make more responsible moral choices. Whether or not the recently publicized less than responsible moral choices in Joss Whedon's personal life count against, and/or utterly and completely invalidate, destroy, or decimate our thesis, we leave for others to decide. We do have an alternative to suggest.

In reading imaginative literature as well as real-life biographies and autobiographies as forms of narrative ethics, we have argued that choosing between narratives can mean choosing what kind of person, or monster, one is to become. Indeed in every existential choice we are deciding who or what we will become. So, through his less than responsible choices, what kind of monster has Joss Whedon become? A Weinstein Demon of course! There seems to be a lot of them in the industry, and beyond. It appears that the highest office in the land is not immune. On some level, Whedon must have been aware of the pain he was causing. In the Season Three episode of *Buffy* called "Lovers Walk" (3.8, written by Dan Vebber, directed by Richard Semel), we find an exquisite metaphorical representation of the pain of betrayal. Cordelia, searching for a kidnapped Willow in a derelict building, discovers Xander and Willow kissing. Xander at this point is Cordelia's boyfriend. She, overwhelmed with grief and surprise, falls through a hole and lands on the floor below amidst broken concrete with an iron reinforcing bar protruding from her chest. This episode was neither written nor directed by Whedon. Was someone trying to tell him something? Whedon could hardly fail to see that he was, in effect, driving rebar through his wife's chest. As difficult as it may be, redemption is always possible, as Spike and Angel have shown. Through narrative ethics, even a writer can learn from his characters. We sincerely hope that Whedon regains his soul. Until he does, he is unlikely to find his soul mate, much less his sole mate.

—Doug Rabb and Mike Richardson

> *"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the road less traveled by and they CANCELLED MY FRIKKIN' SHOW. I totally shoulda took the road that had all those people on it. Damn."*
>
> — Joss Whedon, "Bronze Beta VIP Archive for February 14, 2004"

When I retired last December, I reflected on what I have been most grateful for in my life. My undergraduate degree in philosophy and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ranked close to the top. But unlike Joss Whedon, I took the road with all the people on it. I left graduate school to accept a job providing public information on the Texas Legislature. I may have abandoned my study of the love of wisdom to work in state government, but philosophy never deserted me. I will always remember the moment of clarity one sunny college afternoon when I finally understood Kant's game-changing *Critique of Pure Reason*. During a job interview years later, I was asked to name my three peak life experiences. That was one of them. The rigorous analysis required to excel in philosophy prepared me for a successful career as an editor and communications director.

Philosophy taught me to think, but *Buffy* taught me to breathe. Watching *Buffy* was—and still is—inspirational and cathartic. The subtext I bring to *Buffy* as a sexual assault survivor is in all caps. My father suffered from schizophrenia and self-medicated with alcohol. In a split second, he could change from my dad into a monster. After his suicide, every night I saved him. *Buffy* prompted me to be brave and stop running. *Buffy* challenged me to be strong and let go. *Buffy* showed me how to become the hero of my own story.

Discovering *Slayage* and the academic books was such a joy. I became a huge *Buffy* studies fan. I enthusiastically gave Jana Riess' *What Would Buffy Do?* to friends and family. I kept Rhonda Wilcox's *Why* Buffy *Matters* on my nightstand to read whenever my spirits needed lifting. I trembled to read Scott Stroud's essay on Kant in *Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*.

Tamy Burnett encouraged me to come to the Whedon track at the Popular Culture Association Conference in San Antonio in 2011. I heard the first presentation and knew I had found my tribe. I have been lucky enough to attend three Slayage conferences. Bless David Lavery for

reassuring me that not everyone at a conference presents a paper and participating as part of the audience is important too.

In addition to being my catalyst for healing from trauma, *Buffy* also brought me into the company of extraordinary scholars and treasured friends in the Whedon Studies Association. This is my road not traveled, a window into my alternate universe if I had completed my doctorate in philosophy. Somehow the Powers That Be allowed me to find my way out of the woods and keep my show too. Last summer, my husband and I attended the Euroslayage Conference. A featured presentation by Stephanie Graves focused on Kant. I think I was in heaven.

—Joni ("Johnnie") Sager

New Approaches to the Works of Joss Whedon

> *"You think you know what's to come—what you are. You haven't even begun."*
>
> —"Restless" (4.22)

As a scholar who has been studying and writing on various filmmakers and authors for close to four decades, I can tell everyone from experience that there have been many filmmakers (Roman Polanski, Woody Allen) and writers (Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway) who have been less than stellar individuals in their personal lives but were still capable of making great art that deserves evaluation and discussion. In that respect, Joss Whedon is no different.

There are many different tacks we can take in approaching the work considering the allegations made by Whedon's ex-wife that will open up many new avenues of study. Scholars can choose to re-examine all of the various texts in light of the allegations, re-evaluating Whedon's status as a "feminist" writer and filmmaker. Such re-examination will also serve to reduce some of the "hero worship" that seeps into some discussions of Whedon's work. Rather than viewing him as an artist who can seemingly do no wrong and appears larger than life, such

scholars can view him as he truly is, as a deeply flawed human being capable of making bad judgments and serious moral and ethical mistakes.

There can also be further development on work relating to many of Whedon's collaborators (directors, writers, actors) whose significant contributions to the artistic quality of Whedon's television shows and films occasionally goes unrecognized. While some great work has been produced in this area, there is clearly more work that can be done.

A third possible direction to approach Whedon's work is through the use of the methods of the New Criticism in which the text is divorced entirely from the author. The texts can be evaluated through close and careful reading of the content itself without any distractions involving the identity and personality of the author. Such a method would allow scholars uncomfortable with discussing Whedon himself to evaluate the work without engaging in an evaluation of the man. Such an approach could open up important new readings of many of the texts and allow for even deeper levels of evaluation and critical understanding.

These are only three of the potential approaches we scholars can make in our evaluation of Whedon's works now and into the future. It is critical to remember that the value and importance of art will always outlive and outshine its creator. Great art will always endure regardless of the fallibility of the artist.

—Don Tresca