# "I'll (Never) Tell": Emotions, Dance Numbers, and Hidden Truths in "Once More, with Feeling" and "Subspace Rhapsody"

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"Apologies, I appear to be rhyming and singing." Captain Marie Batel
"Like you were in a musical?" Buffy Summers

The musical episodes "Subspace Rhapsody"[1] (2.9) from *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* (2022-present) and "Once More, with Feeling"[2] (6.7) from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) highlight the outward performance of emotions from characters known for their stoicism. While *Buffy*, as a series, had a longer time to connect with its audience and solidify a layer of supernatural explanations for such a narrative construction, *Strange New Worlds*, in *Star Trek* style, provides a pseudo-scientific reason for the musical outbursts and, when the episode ends, leaves the music behind as ship and crew embark on the next adventure. Both shows, and in-universe explanations of the musical episodes, hinge on audience understanding of both the series or in the case of *Strange New*

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*Worlds,* the *Star Trek* franchise and American musicals in general. Richard Schechner's discussions of ritual and theater performance can further illuminate both "Subspace Rhapsody" and "Once More, with Feeling" since the emotions expressed in song are often secret feelings, wishes, or desires that, in a musical composition style, often create a connection with the audience more than with the other characters. Through a lens further focused on reception theory, this analysis of both musical episodes requires the audience to understand the rituals present in the texts themselves and musicals in general; allows viewers to ultimately embrace the playful natures of the characters even when they are faced with dire situations and unspoken needs; and enlivens the characters' (and the audience's) understanding of individual concepts of personal performance.

Richard Schechner, through his development of the field of Performance Studies, describes seven areas of interest for scholars to consider. He says that there are performances in (1) people's "everyday life, including gatherings of every kind"; (2) the "structures of sports, ritual, play, and public political behaviors"; (3) the analysis of "various modes" of non-written communication including semiotics; (4) the many "connections between human and animal behavior patterns" that are playful and ritualistic; (5) interpersonal psychology, including "aspects of psychotherapy"; and (6) ethnography that all work together to become (7) a "constitution of unified theories of performance, which are, in fact, theories of behavior" ("What is Performance Studies?"). The seven areas of interest, as Schechner discusses them, are important because they speak to the connection between people, their environment, and their relationships. It is within the realm of Schechner's theoretical framework, then, to link audience with performances in a

synergistic way because there is an inherent conversation between text and audiences. However, this connection is dependent on how well the audience understands the text and its overall message.

Audiences (or spectators) understand their roles in the production as much as the performers do. Schechner further explains: "Theater is doing something 'make believe' or 'in play.' Events are tried out that might otherwise only be imagined. At the same time, the things enacted in theatre are hedged with conventions; these make theatre safe, and in safe precincts actions can be carried to extremes that would be blocked in ordinary life" ("Introduction" xvi). It is "safe" and expected for these forms of ritual to occur. And while it seems appropriate for an actor to burst into song on stage during a musical, in "real life" people do not behave that way; thus the performance on stage, and by extension television and film productions, appear as *play* versions of *real* life.

In the "real life" versions of *Star Trek* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a musical might at first seem out of place. For *Strange New Worlds*, the construction of the musical episode took more than six months to complete, and as executive producer Henry Alonso Meyers explains, each song had to serve the needs of the characters and link to the larger plot development within the series: "Because these are story scenes. It can't be just a song that describes everything you know. This has to be a scene that reveals something" (qtd. in Vary). Meyers wanted "Subspace Rhapsody" to be an episode "that breaks your heart and makes you want to cry" (qtd. in Vary). In this way, "Subspace Rhapsody" reminds some of "Once More, with Feeling" from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* where, even over 20 years later, Buffy's sadness from being pulled from heaven expressed in the song "Something to Sing About" still brings forth great

emotions from viewers. Series creator Joss Whedon says in the DVD commentary for Season 6,[3] "It always seems like they would burst into song anyway. It seems so logical" (0:53-0:55). Arguably, both episodes bring a reimagined version of the *real* life of the iconic television shows.

While reception theory is "not a single theory," write Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds, it offers ways "to consider the response" of audiences: "[T]he ideas of Reader Reception Theory invite us to consider how meaning can change" (Taylor and Symonds 46). Changes in meaning result from the purpose of the production, the message or messages from the creator, and the understanding of the text by the audience. The shifts in audience reception are "differently nuanced" based on "our role as its witness," Taylor and Symonds further explain (45). "Witnesses" can be categorized as spectators or audiences. An audience is a more formal group of attendees, and spectators include those who have an "active" relationship with the performance; active participation often becomes part of attending sporting events, for example (Taylor and Symonds 49). In the context of television and film productions, audiences, bring a variety of experiences with the texts to the spaces in which they experience the shows or films. But there is a feeling of being transported to another world or realm of existence during a live theater production that often requires a communion of sorts between actors and the audience, and within that construction, something truly magical occurs. This can be replicated in some ways by cinemas or large-screen televisions at home depending on the audience's role as witness.

A theater performance itself contains elements of ritual and play for the audience and cast alike, including the physical seating in a theater, the audience clapping when appropriate,

the audience's suspension of disbelief, some quick mingling in the foyer during intermission, or even the cast's final bows and waves at the conclusion of the show. Schechner argues, "In all entertainment there is some efficacy and in all ritual there is some theater" ("From Ritual to Theater and Back" 218). All this is part of a theatergoing experience that audience and cast members repeat regardless of production. The fun of such productions is, in part, the shared experiences, or the rituals present.

Shared experiences can still occur with television and film productions and are audience dependent. For film and TV musical productions, the idea of access allows for more diverse audiences to enjoy these sorts of narratives if they are unable to attend live productions in their local communities, and people still clap and sing in movie theaters during special performances. For example, "Once More, with Feeling" is regularly celebrated at *Slayage* conferences through a sing-along. Audiences can also watch the productions with unobstructed views or take comfort breaks when needed. Furthermore, the development of television and film allows for the movement of theatrical "dramatic actions" on "location" or in settings that many audiences can relate to, and these images become images of "real life," Schechner writes ("From Ritual to Theater and Back" 202). For the supernatural and science-fiction realms of *Buffy* and *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, this reality is thematized as exceptional within the context of the musical episodes but the familiar settings and relationships within remain. While the theatergoing rituals might be different when watching a favorite program at home or viewing a film in a cinema, the basic tenets of reception theory can apply to the musical episodes from *Strange New Worlds* and *Buffy* because both adhere to basic constructs of musical theater, and

both series have audience expectations (beyond singing and dancing) of their own.

The history of musical theater offers much to consider, and it is important to understand how such texts as "Subspace Rhapsody" and "Once More, with Feeling" fit into the overall narrative of musicals themselves. *The Black Crook* ushered in the American musical in 1866, according to Frank Ries. However, there are many links to opera, burlesque, revue, minstrel shows, and vaudeville, among other forms of entertainment, within the confines of the musical that audiences know today, argues Edith Borroff (101-102). What is clear, though, is that the American musical like America itself has a layered history containing problematic attitudes about race and oversimplified versions of rags-to-riches stories (i.e., class) set to emotional music. Warren Hoffman writes, "the Broadway musical is one of the few art forms, aside from jazz and film, that is homegrown in America," and this fact "complicates" the construction of the shows since the musical is "a mélange of influences of styles," some of which are built on racist histories (4). Acknowledging some of the underpinnings of the musical's history runs counter to the genre itself since as Hoffman adds, "Musicals are often utopic" (5). In addition to the happy ending provided by most musicals, the structure of the genre is both important and formulaic to a degree. As American television productions, "Subspace Rhapsody" and "Once More, with Feeling" contain trace elements of the historical musicals that came before.[4]

An element of the musical formula, unsurprisingly, includes the idea that characters will break out into song and dance as part of the production. These outbursts of song are integral to the classic musical be it film or Broadway-style, but in the case of "Subspace Rhapsody" and "Once More, with

Feeling," the numbers are unexpected. For a musical to work well, audiences must suspend disbelief. Because *Buffy* and *Star Trek* are inherently fanciful, most audience members for the respective series master this skill quickly. Sam Baltimore notes that "Like similarly devalued genres of popular entertainment  science fiction and fantasy, horror, romance, children's literature musicals support a thriving fan community despite critical disapproval…" (24). The connection between the audience and the performance is important, since, in musicals, characters use song when emotions run high and when innermost feelings need expression, and song, in this way, (generally) does not happen in "real" life as Schechner discusses.

Since this conceit occurs on stage and in film versions of the genre, musicals rely on the audience's willingness to support big dance numbers and memorable tunes as integral to the message of the text. "In the full-scale film musical," Jennifer Jenkins writes, "the audience finds itself repeatedly waiting for the next song or production number to appear, and when it arrives it is neither a disruption nor a distraction but rather the fulfillment of a collective anticipation" (318). The anticipation, as Dr. Frankenfurter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) might emphasize, partly comes from the type of musical as well. For both "Subspace Rhapsody" and "Once More, with Feeling," a basic understanding of a book musical is needed.

A book musical differs from other types of musical theater because the form requires an original story, music, and lyrics. Sophie Thomas explains the two key elements to a book musical thus: "A book is the script, made up of dialogue between characters as well as stage directions for how lines should be delivered" and "the music and lyrics form the score." Other musicals might contain "jukebox" or "autobiographical"

themes where a mixture of songs come together to create a narrative.[5] For the most part, book musicals "will feature songs or musical accompaniment, with music developing a character's storyline or offering audiences a chance to find out more about a specific character. […D]ialogue can be spoken over the top of musical accompaniment to form a song," Thomas writes. This construction is present in both episodes.

In "Subspace Rhapsody" and "Once More with Feeling," there are full scripts and scores created for both episodes; thus, they are book musicals. Both productions even offer the soundtracks to the episodes in streaming, vinyl, and (for *Buffy*) CD versions. For audiences, however, understanding the types of musicals helps in understanding the production. "Subspace Rhapsody" and "Once More, with Feeling" offer quick musical-theater explanations within the context of the action of the episodes to aid in educating their respective audiences about musicals and the way that genre fits within the larger constructions of both series. Commander Una Chin-Riley and Ensign Nyota Uhura explain to the crew, and by extension to the *Strange New Worlds* audience, that these inexplicable explosions of song and connective narrative threads are based on the rules of a musical and add that this particular form of musical performance hails from "the great American songbook" since classic showtunes are used for the experiments that begin the episode (06:09-06:25). Michael Adams writes that *Buffy*'s musical episode is "reminiscent of Sondheim" (1). And Valerie Frankel adds, "The musical […] marks Buffy's catharsis as she finally expresses the pent-up misery she's been repressing" (165). In classic American musical form, as in "Subspace Rhapsody," the music and lyrics in "Once More, with Feeling" act as a way for the characters to explain their inner lives to

themselves, to each other, and at the same time, to the audience.

Connecting the concept of a musical to the *Star Trek* franchise, then, at first seems difficult, but the rituals in *Star Trek* are somewhat predictable, like those found in musical theater (D'Alessandro et al.). For *Star Trek,* these rituals include a mission to complete, a mystery to solve, a relationship to repair  all within the confines of science, technology, and the human condition. "When we engage in ritual, we are re-enacting prior performances," Barry Stephenson writes (91). And as any *Star Trek* viewer can attest, most of the franchise contains some familiar beats. Schechner calls this "restored behavior," meaning the behavior is "rehearsed" and "repetitious" (qtd. in Stephenson 91). *Strange New Worlds* aims to recreate *The Original Series* (1966-1969) in many ways, so the concept of ritual works well within this discussion, as do the audience's expectations and reception of behavior by beloved characters.

Admittedly, *Star Trek* has always been a bit unconventional, even from its inception in 1965. Creating a full musical episode is not technically unwarranted, but a full musical episode does not initially meet the narrative constructions (or rituals) of the franchise. However, music has been part of the franchise since *The Original Series,* thus working within the "repeated behaviors" of *Star Trek*. In many ways, audiences for the various *Star Trek* productions have seen multiple uses of music and theater within the confines of the *Star Trek* franchise. "Subspace Rhapsody" indeed appears as the franchise's first musical episode, but other live-action series including *Discovery* (2017-2024), *Voyager* (1995-2001), *The Original Series*, and *Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999) feature characters singing on screen. *The Next Generation* (1987-1994)

uses instrumental music and theatrical performances often. While other *Star Trek* series present music as plot points and forms of entertainment for crew and viewers alike, "Subspace Rhapsody" gives the music a larger role within the specific episode and needs to connect to the intended audience to forward the narratives.

The music in other *Star Trek* series serves a variety of purposes to aid in the repeated structures present on screen. *Discovery* offers a musical interlude of sorts in the episode "An Obol for Charon" (2.4) when the characters Lieutenant Paul Stamets, played by Broadway performer Anthony Rapp and Ensign Sylvia Tilly sample "Space Oddity" by David Bowie to distract a character and by extension viewers as witnesses from a dire situation (33:27-34:01; "Anthony Rapp [Performer]"). This musical break allows the audience a moment's reprieve from the anesthesia-free drill bit to the head operation happening on screen. The use of music as plot point connects the series to the larger franchise as well.

In *Voyager*, some musical numbers appear on the holodeck when Seven of Nine plays the role of a lounge singer in World War II era France to establish the conflict with the Hirogen happening about the ship ("The Killing Game, Part 1" 4.18, 4:03-6:42). Also on *Voyager*, the ship's holographic doctor, the Emergency Medical Hologram, sings as part of his character's overall arc as well ("Virtuoso" 6.13, 11:19-11:53). *The Original Series* famously features Lieutenant Uhura singing and dancing as Mr. Spock plays his Vulcan harp in the episode "Charlie X" (1.2) to provide more information to the audience about the mysterious character Charlie and to showcase Nichelle Nichols' talents as a professional stage performer (11:45-12:30; "Remembering"). *The Original Series* character of Uhura also sings in the episode "The Conscience of the King" (1.13,

24:18-26:19), "The Changeling" (2.3, 17:16 17:42, 19:53 20:36), and in the film *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (1989, 38:51-39:50).

*Deep Space Nine* offers Vic Fontaine, a holographic Las Vegas-themed lounge-act that entertains the crew. The series regulars do not generally perform on Fontaine's stage, but in the episode "His Way," Nana Visitor, veteran of the musical *Chicago* and the actress who plays Kira Nerys, sings "Fever" as a holographic character (6.20, 23:47-25:40), and Tony Award winner René Auberjonois and prolific singer and educator Avery Brooks, Odo and Captain Sisko respectively, sing a verse of "They Can't Take That Away from Me" (21:14-21:42; Jones; "René"; "5 Things"). *The Next Generation* uses plays, instrumental concerts, and Captain Jean-Luc Picard's flute, but not a combination of the genres, i.e. musicals, as part of recreation on board the *U.S.S. Enterprise D*. It is worth noting that the character of the android Data, portrayed by theater performer Brent Spiner, sings the Irving Berlin classic "Blue Skies" in *The Next Generation* film *Star Trek: Nemesis* (2002, 07:53-08:28; 01:48:02-01:48:54; "Brent"), and a snippet of "Blue Skies," performed by Bing Crosby, also appears in the series *Picard* (2020-2023) in the episode "Remembrance" (1.1, 00:12-00:55). Additionally, a few non-human characters sing as part of various plot points within *The Next Generation*.

*Strange New Worlds*, operating on solid, repeated, *Star Trek* music-using ground, expertly wields the musical scaffolding to flesh out character motivations and add closure to earlier narratives. The musical episode serves as a bridge between seasons 1 and 2 and connects the series more securely to *Star Trek* ritual, lore, and myth using music much like the soft-rock ballad that serves as the theme song for the series *Enterprise*[6] (2001-2005) does. *Star Trek* audiences, generally,

notice links to other series or films within the franchise: *Star Trek* currently boasts 12 (with more on the way) different live-action and animated series and 13 feature films, not to mention hundreds of novels and comic books.[7] According to Nick Romano, show runners from "across the active Star Trek series" participated in "closed door" meetings regarding "Subspace Rhapsody."

Undoubtedly, writers clearly did the *Trek* homework needed to connect key plot points and characterizations within *Strange New Worlds* and the history of music in the overall franchise. And in order to connect to the audience, according to Taylor and Symonds, "much of the impact of any art form depends on the context [in which] it is created" (59). "Subspace Rhapsody" gives key characters some needed humanization through the ritualistic *Trek* frame of a mysterious anomaly (eventually understood through science) encountered in space. The musical's creation connects characters to earlier episodes. In "Ad Astra Per Aspera" (2.2) it is revealed that Number One, Commander Chin-Riley, has "an affinity for Gilbert and Sullivan musicals" (31:05-31:15), and Cadet Uhura and Mr. Spock sing in "Children of the Comet" (1.2, 33:04-34:11). With this internal structure already set within S*trange New Worlds*, it is not accidental that it is the now promoted Ensign Uhura who sends "Anything Goes," the Cole Porter classic, to the mysterious space "fold" that begins the episode and the musical happenings aboard the ship (06:09-06:25). Number One subsequently explains the "rules" of musicals to the crew and to the unseen witnesses, the audience (25:33-25:38). Number One becomes a more realized character apart from her first two-dimensional incarnation in the original (unaired) pilot "The Cage" in 1965, and at the same time Uhura's character in *Strange*

*New Worlds* is forever linked to the legacy of Nichols' original version through the use of musical performance.

Other repeated storylines in "Subspace Rhapsody" focus on the relationships of the crew and interactions with non-Federation aliens. Crew relationships that are centered include the problematic romance between Nurse Christine Chapel and Spock ("I'm Ready" and "I'm The X"), James T. Kirk's love life and his on-again-off-again situation with Carol Marcus ("How Would That Feel"), and Captain Christopher Pike's potentially doomed partnership with Captain Marie Batel ("Private Conversation"). For Pike, especially, the depiction of his relationship with Batel hints at how his character eventually arrives at a point where he will seclude himself on Talos IV the canon ending of his character that begins in the first pilot for *Star Trek*.

Additionally, offering the Klingons as singing boy band members connects to the aliens' love of music but in a new way ("We Are One"). Klingons, at this time in *Star Trek*, are not members of the United Federation of Planets, but the aliens have a storied history within the franchise. As Schechner notes, "The artifact may be relatively stable, but the performances it creates or takes part in can change radically" ("What is Performance Studies?"). Klingons are known, in *Enterprise*, *The Next Generation*, and *Deep Space Nine*, to love and perform opera, so the boy-band concept was a specific choice *Strange New Worlds*, producer Meyers explains, and it further illustrates Schechner's point: a "radical" transformation based on the type of performance created (qtd. in Vary). When Klingons appear as an edgy boy-band singing the lines "one of these days we will repay you / we'll slay you," it adds to the joy of the finale moment within the musical and allows for the characterization of the Klingons to change a little with the choice of music, even

if their feelings towards the Federation remain (56:22-56:40,"We Are One"). Viewers notice Captain Pike's gentle shrug and ambivalence to the threats as the singing concludes thus telegraphing the idea that this conflict can wait until another day.

Like the *Star Trek* franchise, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* contains repetition, or "restored behavior," as Schechner discusses the concept of ritual, as well. For *Buffy*, the rituals include the Big Bad constructions that frame the seasons, the unique use of language, the isolation of the Slayer's role, the Scooby Gang, and the almost magical realism motif of Sunnydale. Ultimately, though, the rituals of *Buffy* begin with the lore of the Slayer. The opening voiceover narration states that "she alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness." This lonely position weighs heavily on Buffy Summers as she patrols the cemetery at the start of "Once More, with Feeling'," and the act of patrolling after dark is definitely repeated behavior for her. She engages with the vampires and demons who inhabit the setting much the same way as she does in previous episodes, so at an audience's first glance, the musical episode feels like any other one in *Buffy* since in "re-enacting prior performances" as Stephenson notes, the battle-like choreography of the scene also seems familiar to the series, even if the singing does not. Schechner explains in his work on the study of *kaiko* celebrations in the highlands of New Guinea: "The performance is a transformation of combat techniques into entertainment," and this observation relates to the opening scenes in "Once More, with Feeling," where Buffy dances, sings, and slays ("From Ritual to Theatre and Back" 197). The change in the ritual happens, however, as Buffy admits to just "going through the motions" in her role as Slayer (02:16-03:41, "Going Through the Motions"). The music in "Once

More, with Feeling" operates like the silence in the episode "Hush" (4:10) does by amplifying the actions and characters while centering Buffy's role as slayer in a new and unique way.

Other important rituals in *Buffy* include the concept of the "Big Bad" and the enduring friendships of the Scooby Gang. Rhonda Wilcox in *Why* Buffy *Matters* writes that the Big Bad is the "major villain" of each season (loc. 1548). Wilcox explains further: "Whedon planned each season to be able to conclude the series, in case of cancellation" and this plan uses the concept of a Big Bad throughout (*Reading Joss Whedon* 19). The major villain or Big Bad is the one Buffy must defeat with the help of her Watcher Giles and her friends, the Scooby Gang, by season's end. The Scooby Gang, consisting of Willow, Xander, and sometimes Cordelia, Anya, Tara, and Oz "save the world again and again without recognition or even, in many cases, respect" (*Why* Buffy *Matters* 1394). The friend group is the most important ritual in the series, since Buffy relies, and ultimately as Wilcox says, "survives" because of these important characters (loc. 2826). The repetition of some season-long villains along with a variety of stand-alone bad guys, like Sweet in "Once More, with Feeling," and help from close friends and allies all appear as ritual that audiences expect in *Buffy*.

"Once More, with Feeling" connects the rituals within the series of *Buffy* to the inner feelings of the Scoobies and Buffy herself and allows the audience to glimpse these confessions. Within the musical, Buffy illustrates her exhaustion with the repeated behaviors expected of her, and she is angry with her friend group for bringing her back from the dead to continue slaying. She sings in the opening number: "Every single night the same arrangement; / I go out and fight the fight. / Still, I always feel the strange estrangement. / Nothing here is real. Nothing here is right" (02:16-02:26, "Going Through the

Motions"). The Scoobies with a newly returned Giles meet to discuss the latest threat, the fact that they are inexplicably bursting into song, and brainstorm the potential adversaries, including a potential Big Bad, with everything from witches and demons to bunnies (05:03-06:03, "I've Got a Theory"). The group meeting in the Magic Box shop visually equalizes the threat assessment through the familiar, and perceived, shared responsibility for the crisis through the ritualistic group meeting. But as the Slayer, even with help from those she trusts, Buffy must stand alone. Buffy's secret, subsequently revealed in "Something to Sing About," requires her friends to understand that bringing her back from the dead tore her from "heaven" to live in the "hell" of a Slayer's life, thus trapping her in the repeated motifs of *Buffy* (43:21-43:54). This realization is among the most heartbreaking in the series.

Both "Subspace Rhapsody" and "Once More, with Feeling" connect through a surprising call-back: bunnies. As fans and scholars of *Buffy* can attest, Anya's fear of bunnies adds to the group song that begins with "I've Got a Theory," when the Scoobies attempt to discern what is causing the real-life musical that is happening all around them. Anya takes the spotlight for a rock-anthem-moment to explain how floppy-eared bunnies might be responsible for this supernatural event. She sings: "Bunnies aren't just cute like everybody supposes. / They got them hoppy legs and twitchy little noses. / And what's with all the carrots? / What do they need such good eyesight for anyway? / Bunnies, bunnies, it must be bunnies" (05:40-06:03, "I've Got A Theory/Bunnies"). The song ends with a dramatic flourish, but the threat from bunnies is never realized regardless of Anya's fear.[8]

Released in 2001, "Once More, with Feeling" served as inspiration for "Subspace Rhapsody," says *Strange New Worlds*

series producer Meyers in an *Entertainment Weekly* interview. Meyers states that the Whedon-penned episode is "one of the best made" television musicals and provided the scaffolding for the emotional requirements of the penultimate episode in *Strange New Worlds* Season 2 (qtd. in Romano). Meyers says of "Once More, with Feeling," "It was done very well. It's really smart and thoughtful. It has big heart" (qtd. in Romano). To further solidify this tie, the concept of "bunnies" as the potential reason for the "Subspace Rhapsody" parallel reality filled with song is floated during a crew briefing during which chief engineer Commander Pelia calls the situation a "musical reality" (12:31). Chief of security Lieutenant La'an Noonien-Singh asks if the crew would "poof into bunnies" from the event (12:38-12:40), and chief medical officer Dr. M'Benga adds that he "prefers not to be a bunny either" (12:41-12:42). Mr. Spock then concludes the conversation with the droll line, "I doubt we will be bunnies" (12:43-12:44). This repeated reference to bunnies is a clear connection between the *Star Trek* and *Buffy* musical episodes and adds to the sense of play and provides pleasure to audiences who are fans of both series.

*Star Trek* fans delight in the often playful banter or iconic (punch) lines found in *The Original Series* and beyond. Dr. McCoy's repeated line, "He's dead, Jim," is a meme and more in the 21st Century, for example. Each series has moments of playful exploration and joy. For Schechner, participating in "make believe" or "in play" creates a sense of "safety." He writes, "in safe precincts actions may be carried to extremes that would be blocked in ordinary life" ("Introduction" xvi). *Strange New Worlds* uses much of the playful nature found in *The Original Series* as a way to link the series to the first *Star Trek* installment, generally, and to the initial pilot episode particularly. Playfulness, that allows for safety to explore

emotions, controversy, or even outlawed topics defines the mission of *The Original Series* of *Star Trek* as well, since censorship on television in the early days of the medium required creative thinking to thwart. While not the first television writer to do this (and Whedon also needed to bend around potentially problematic topics with fanciful storylines in the 1990s), Gene Roddenberry, creator of *Star Trek*, explains his position about censorship issues that existed in 1960s-era television thus:

> I thought with science fiction I might do what Jonathan Swift did when he wrote *Gulliver's Travels*. He lived in a time when you could lose your head for making religious and political comments. I was working in a medium, television, which is heavily censored, and in contemporary shows I found I couldn't talk about sex, politics, religion, and all the other things I wanted to talk about. It seemed to me that if I had things happen to little polka-dotted people on a far-off planet, I might get past the network censors, as Swift did in his day. And indeed that's what we did. (qtd. in Merinoff 93)

And almost sixty years later, the *Star Trek* franchise uses science fiction to tell insightful, important, and controversial stories in a way that audiences can relate to through this early frame of playfulness.

A *Star Trek* musical, in itself, is a playful notion, but *Strange New Worlds* also uses a bright, colorful set reminiscent of the mid-century modern look of *The Original Series* and whimsical storylines including the episode "The Elysium Kingdom" (1.8) to aid in the sense of play and make believe. "The Elysium Kingdom" centers Dr. M'Benga's character and

explains his struggle to help his physically ailing daughter by keeping her in suspended animation (i.e., a transporter buffer) so that she will not die from a condition he is unable to treat. He reads her a story, *The Elysium Kingdom*, and through a technological malfunction, the story comes to life on the ship. Each character becomes a storybook character, and the use of language, costumes, and plot changes with that conceit. "The Elysium Kingdom" with the fantasy, almost renaissance fair look, allows for the audience to accept the musical because the base layer of "play" has been established within the series.

Just as *Strange New Worlds* takes an embedded proclivity towards fantasy within the science fiction construction with the musical and other playful episodes and settings, *Buffy* revels in "play," and that was by design. While *Buffy*'s dramatic themes "center on sexuality, rebellion, generational conflict, and the rites of passage," the show generally focuses on the coming-of-age stories of Buffy and the Scoobies through a lens of play. (Schechner "Introduction" xvi). Additionally, the series turns tropes from horror movies upside down in many ways, and that inversion allows for some of the inherent variety of make-believe within the series. Like Roddenberry's discussion of the challenges and benefits of setting, Whedon displaces the world of high school, and later beyond, into that of fantasy. Whedon notes, "I was watching a lot of horror movies and seeing blondes going into dark alleys to get killed and I thought it would be interesting to see the blonde go into the dark alley and be the one who kills instead" (qtd. in Gross and Altman 23). This shift from the damsel in distress to hero makes *Buffy* unique and ultimately playful since this action of the powerless character becoming the one with power does not happen in "real life" in the way *Buffy* explores the idea. David Fury, *Buffy* producer, writer, and executive producer of *24* (2001-2014), says

"When I first met Joss, he was specifically looking for comedy writers" (qtd. in Gross and Altman 32). And *Buffy* actor Harry Groener adds, "Part of its [the series'] success is not just the vampire myth. It's the sense of humor in it" (qtd. in Gross and Altman 34). The use of play within *Buffy* makes the series relatable to audiences and allows for the supernatural explanations to feel more like real life through the early extended metaphor of school is hell.

*Buffy*'s playfulness also extends to the use of language and the boundaries between fantasy and reality within the series. Slayer speak, or the slang present in the world of *Buffy*, allows for a moment of play within even the most frightening of situations. For *Buffy*, the slang has morphed into standard American English, says Adams. He writes, "*Buffy* has introduced new slang terms and phrases in nearly every episode […]. The show incorporates familiar slang, too; the familiar and the newly coined slayer slang together compose a particularly vivid snapshot of current American teen slang" (21). This creative use of language also includes references to popular culture carefully arranged to connect the playfulness present in Sunnydale to the "real" world. So when Xander says, "Scareapolooza" and audiences understand the reference to Lollapalooza, as Adams illustrates (55), there is an idea of a "shared reality," says Richard S. Albright. Albright explains, "the world of Buffy  despite its supernatural elements  could almost be our own" and "further cements [a] bond with the audience" (par. 4). The use of a particular slang, or shortcuts in language, is not new for audiences of niche television, however. *Star Trek* has its own version of this concept known as Technobabble or *Trek*nobabble.

Another connection between the two musicals includes the changes in the opening credits. The set-up for the musical

episodes includes changes to the opening credits that broadcast a different tone for the episode from the start to help prepare the viewers for the change in conventions. The *Buffy* musical's credits appear within a dark background with a full moon illuminating one side. The cast appears on the moon's face while a peppy, lighthearted musical overture, distinctly different from the established fast-paced theme, plays in the background. The font and lettering also are changed from the familiar opening credits for the series. *Strange New Worlds* also has an adapted opening to complement the musical episode. Unlike *Buffy*, the *Star Trek* opening remains visually the same with only changes to the theme song. *Star Trek* themes focus on space and exploration, and *Strange New Worlds* uses that formula as well. For the musical episode, however, the theme adds vocalization along with the familiar music that is reminiscent of *The Original Series*.

The performance on screen, or stage, happens through a combination of factors including source material, casting, and more. For *Strange New Worlds*, the cast has iconic shoes to fill with the legacy characters from *The Original Series* in the minds of most of the audience. Performing those roles requires the actors to not only reflect on the source material's characters including Christopher Pike, Number One, Mr. Spock, and Uhura, but also to remake the characters based on the needs of the current audience and the actors' own strengths. For Schechner, "cultures are always interacting  there are no totally isolated groups," and this applies to the performances in *Strange New Worlds* because of the interconnectedness of the *Star Trek* franchise as a whole ("What is Performance Studies?"). And *Star Trek* audiences themselves can be considered a culture  some might argue the ultimate fan

culture so there are expectations and also innovations working simultaneously throughout the series.

"Subspace Rhapsody" adds to this kinship of legacy, fan expectations, and a new vision for the franchise on screen through the actors' performances of their respective characters, and at the same time, the actors' links to the iconic characters as well. For example, Anson Mount, the actor who plays Captain Pike, performs a version of the original Pike, played by Jeffery Hunter in the unaired until 1988 pilot, and at the same time performs the role of leader, decision-maker, partner, mediator, and so on as the current *U.S.S. Enterprise* captain publicly, and as a person, Chris, privately. "Subspace Rhapsody" highlights these performances of responsibility through Pike's character as the public version of himself breaks down as private, personal concerns are aired (and sung) on the bridge (23:36-24:33, "Private Conversation"). The performance of the song ends with Pike on his knees pleading with his love interest Captain Marie Batel on the viewscreen (24:28-24:31, "Private Conversation"). This act of supplication is beyond the typical role of a captain on the bridge of a starship in the franchise. This public display of emotional vulnerability both humanizes Pike and diminishes him at the same time as the multiple audiences, his crew and the viewers themselves, act as witnesses to this change in public behavior.

~~A~~s a series, *Strange New Worlds* must perform its own version of *Star Trek* for an audience that includes those from *The Original Series* run to those new to the *Star Trek* Universe found on streaming services including Paramount+. Mount's performance of Hunter's Pike and his performance of captain, mentor, and partner in "Private Conversation" allows for the audience to be in a unique position based on their own understanding of the legacy character himself, the universe of

the franchise, and even the musical overall. This understanding hinges on the "satisfaction of the reader's expectations, or [...] disturbing expectations and demanding a movement of self-reflection on the reader's part in a recognition of the difficulties of comprehension" (Lane). In this way, the musical episode requires the audience to not only suspend disbelief relative to the "musical reality" in which the ship and crew find themselves, but also to mediate expectations of the performance of *Star Trek* found in *Strange New Worlds* more generally through legacy characters like Pike.

As for "Once More, with Feeling," performing the role of Slayer is a moment of contention for Buffy, since she was reanimated from her death at the end of Season Five, and everyone  including the audience  is still reeling from the fallout. As the Buffybot illustrates, playing the role of the Slayer is not the same as being the Slayer. The Scoobies and the audience realize the difference as Buffy confesses the Shakespearean-like lines of "life's a show and we all play our parts" in the emotional number "Something to Sing About," when she finally expresses her anger at her friends for taking her from heaven to continue the monotonous life of slaying (40:54-41:05). This bombshell comes at the end of the episode, when Buffy faces off against the musical's villain, Sweet. Sweet is a dancing demon that uses music to force his victims to confess secrets for his own entertainment. After Buffy bares her secret and almost dances herself into spontaneous combustion (Sweet's method of punishment), she is saved by Spike, not the Scoobies, who only look on in horror (44:35). They emote through tears and worried looks but are frozen with the knowledge that they revived Buffy from the dead so that she could perform her role.

The motif of slaying as a performance begins "Once More, with Feeling" as Buffy patrols the cemetery while singing. Buffy performs the song "Going through the Motions" as she enacts the performance of a Slayer when she no longer feels connected to the part. Janet K. Halfyard explains, "Being on stage indicates an intention to perform and an intention, potentially, to pretend to be something someone is not" (par. 11). This first musical performance happens while she stands atop a burial vault, a stand-in for a stage, in the middle of a cemetery. Buffy ends the song with the line "I just want to be alive" as she stakes a vampire into dust that erupts into a ring around her (03:37-03:41). This moment visually connects the scene to Glory's tower and the abyss from Buffy's death scene in "The Gift" (5.22, 41:50-42:26). At the end of "The Gift," Buffy effectively frees herself from the constant threats and danger she has experienced for most of her teen years, but with her reanimation in "Bargaining Part 1" (6.1) she is ripped from a peaceful afterlife to return to Sunnydale in the role of the Slayer (36:39-42:41). It seems that she no longer wants this responsibility, and the lyrics of "Going through the Motions" reinforce her disenchantment.

Even the adversaries Buffy fights notice, and they sing that she is "faking it" somehow as Buffy destroys them (03:05-03:16, "Going through the Motions"). This action of "faking" her work as the Chosen One solidifies the idea of slaying as a performance rather than a calling by this time in the series run. As far as the intended audience goes, "We can't help but be reminded," Albright notes, "that Sarah Michelle Gellar is also playing a part" (par. 13). Buffy asks, "will I stay this way forever" and if she will "sleepwalk through [her] life's endeavor" (03:12-03:16, "Going through the Motions"). The choreography of the opening number also highlights not only the fighting as ritual

embedded into the show, but also the idea that the lonely work the Slayer does is on a stage no one can see, except the witnesses, i.e., the demons and vampires she kills, and the unseen viewing audience. Buffy, in her role as Slayer, patrols, kills, and sings for the benefit of the inhabitants of Sunnydale while they are all abed. It is a performance unseen for many.

Both "Subspace Rhapsody" and "Once More, with Feeling" allow for the characters to understand that they are participating in a musical. Albright adds, about "Once More with Feeling," "[T]he characters are aware of, and frequently discuss, the musical conceit" (par. 9). In this way, the musicals allow for the shows to play, in safe ways for their respective audiences, to make changes to the established worlds they exist in, and to highlight the concept of performative connections versus authentic communication. "Subspace Rhapsody" offers a plot that provides introspection about instant communication and its benefit (a clear metaphor for our hyperconnected world), while "Once More, with Feeling" desperately attempts to recreate connection that has been lost through life and death, manipulation, and personal secrets. These musicals ask if human connection, friendship, and duty are inherently performative, playful, and ritualistic. The answer is a resounding yes on all counts, and these moments depend on the context and audience understanding of the texts themselves.

The field of performance studies and reception theories can illuminate the complex rhetorical scenarios present in these musical episodes. The mode of the American musical itself further offers conversation on cultural communication and evaluation of the context within the texts and the times that they hail from. "Subspace Rhapsody" and "Once More, with Feeling" work well together as complementary texts that

explore complex feelings in deep space and other dark places from characters known for keeping emotions to themselves, thus illustrating to the audiences that it is all right to find "Something to Sing About." "Once More, with Feeling" provides viewers with inner monologues and discussions of grief, love, and even growth for Buffy and the Scooby Gang. "Subspace Rhapsody" effectively brings a sense of thoughtful play to the reimagined *Star Trek* franchise and highlights not only an idyllic version of the future but also, like *Buffy*, provides moments of spontaneous joy through the frame of musical theater.

## Notes

[1] Since there are no physical lyrics or liner notes with the digital versions of the cast recording, I am using the lyrics from the episode itself and those found via the YouTube page from the Lakeshore Records recording company as noted in the citation list. Tom Polce and Kay Hanley's songs, in order, are as follows: "*Star Trek Strange New Words* Main Title (Subspace Rhapsody Version)"; "Status Report"; "Connect to Your Truth"; "How Would That Feel"; "Private Conversation"; "Keeping Secrets"; "I'm Ready"; "I'm The X"; "Keep us Connected"; "We are One"; "Subspace Rhapsody."

[2] I am using the lyrics from the songbook as noted in the citation list. Since some of the songs contain multiple titles, I attempt to specifically note the part of the song discussed. Whedon's songs, in order, are as follows: "Overture/Going Through the Motions" ; "I've Got a Theory/Bunnies/If We're Together"; "The Mustard"; "Under Your Spell"; "I'll Never Tell"; "The Parking Ticket"; "Rest in Peace"; "Dawn's Lament"; "Dawn's Ballet": "What You Feel"; "Standing"; "Under Your Spell/Standing (Reprise)"; "Walk Through the Fire"; "Something to Sing About"; "What You Feel (Reprise)";"Where Do We Go from Here?"; "Coda."

[3] This DVD extra now appears online, as noted in the citation list.

[4] While the topic of race in this context is beyond the scope of this essay, Hinton Battle, the Black actor who plays the demon Sweet in "Once More, with Feeling" is a multiple Tony Award winner. Sweet appears in a Zoot suit (26:29); these suits, popular in the 1930s Harlem Renaissance, eventually represent racialized realities because of the perceived criminality of those wearing the garments after the Zoot Suit riots in Los Angeles during the 1940s. Resources that address race in Whedon's work include *Joss Whedon and Race: Critical Essays*, edited by Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery Woodall, and Jeffrey Middents' "A Sweet Vamp: Critiquing the Treatment of Race in *Buffy* and the American Musical Once More (with Feeling)."

[5] Editors' note: An example of a jukebox musical would be *Jersey Boys* (2005), based on the lives of members of The Four Seasons musical group and focusing on their prior hit songs.

[6] *Enterprise*'s theme song was a point of contention for many *Star Trek* fans. See the opening credits and song at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgoXrBRVu54.

[7] Memory Alpha is a great resource for the *Star Trek* franchise. Helpful sites include https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Star_Trek and https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Novels.

[8] Editors' note: Whether *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), with its killer rabbit, is an earlier inspiration is another question.

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