

The Past and Future of *Buffy* Studies: A Conversation with Rhonda Wilcox

James South: When did you start liking *Buffy*?

Rhonda Wilcox: Oh gosh, I started watching at the beginning, and it was something that I at first thought was going to be sort of light-hearted witty fun. I don't know if you know J.P. Williams—she wrote an essay with me on *The X-Files* years ago. She and I were having phone calls about *Buffy* when it first came on; after every episode we would get on the phone and talk about it and I would say “Oh, it's just fun,” “I'm not going to write about it” and she kept saying “You *are* going write about it”—and of course she was right. So right back at the beginning is when I started watching.

JS: When did you and David start thinking about putting together the book, *Fighting the Forces*?

RW: He is the one that contacted me. I published one of the first articles, of about three of them that came out around the same time. You know Michael Adams had one on language, and there were two of

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us that had ones in the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. After that, David did not get interested in the series I think he said until the fourth season, and his students talked him in to watching it, because he was pooh-poohing it beforehand. It was during the fourth season that he contacted me, because I had published that article and because we knew each other from PCAS, the Popular Culture Association in the South. At that point I had had an essay in his collection on *The X Files*, the one J.P. and I wrote together. So, it wasn't until several years in—but it was still the first American collection on *Buffy*. While we were working Roz Kaveney got in touch with us and asked if she could contribute something, if we would be interested in that. And of course we were, but by the time she contacted us we were well along in the process. Before we could get her involved she had already gotten a contract with Tauris over in England. They brought their volume out before we finished *Fighting the Forces*.

JS: Wow, ok—that's interesting timing. So you started writing on *Buffy* after Season One, or...

RW: Yeah, once I saw the end of the first season—I think you know “Prophecy Girl,” the last episode of the first season—I could tell it was going to be something more serious and there was more to it. Of course after the second season it just kept getting richer and richer; I wrote on it for a conference for PCAS and sent off a submission for publication. I think it was 1999, the last century.

JS: Hard to believe, when we were still using beepers.

RW: I don't think I ever had a beeper. I wasn't that cool.

JS : You were probably lucky. So then things sort of spiraled out of control in *Buffy Studies*—so maybe talk a bit about the reception of *Fighting the Forces* and the sort of onslaught of subsequent books and the beginnings of what became known as *Buffy Studies* and now Whedon Studies.

RW: There were so many submissions to *Fighting the Forces* that David got the idea of doing a journal in addition to doing the collection. There were... this sounds like a bad joke from *The Hobbit*, I'm not sure if you are familiar with this, but when you say dozen-dozen and you call it a gross. Well, we had a gross of submissions, and none of them were gross, they were numerous. He was aware of the online journal about *Xena* and he suggested that we go ahead since we couldn't fit everything in the book, because we had so many good submissions and because we had a pattern for the book not everything would fit in—so we went ahead and started publishing the journal before the book actually came out. Because the book was going through a sort of standard style process and took a while. It came out in 2002, and we started [the journal] in 2001.

JS: So you published the journal before the book, starting in?

RW: 2001, yeah. And we started working on the book before the journal, but it was during the process of the book that we decided to publish the journal. We were able to—working with our own editing and putting it up online—bring the first issues of the journal out before the book came out. The book was very well received; lots of people were interested in it. In the meantime the folks over at the University of East Anglia were planning the first full-fledged academic *Buffy* conference in 2002. They contacted David; he suggested to them that they ask me to be the keynote speaker because David was a very generous person and he knew I'd published one of the first articles. They had me as the opening keynote speaker and Roz Kaveney as the closing keynote speaker; her book had come out by then. It was much more successful than they expected—I think they were planning for a one-day conference at first and it ended up being... I don't remember if it was 2 or 3 days but there were lots of people. Were you there?

JS: I was there. I actually gave a talk there.

RW: I thought you were.

JS: I have the poster on my office wall.

RW: Cool! I've got it in my living room; they had a wonderful poster amongst other things. You know what that experience was like: everyone was so excited that there were people from all over the world that were seriously interested in this—because I think it was just not only the quality of the text itself but a zeitgeist moment in all sorts of ways in terms of social attitudes of the program. Also it was a moment of rising television quality; this was a really great text, and something we all could dig into and pull so much out of. I know you are in philosophy; for folks in literature especially it's wonderful to have something that so linguistically exciting, narratively exciting, and symbolically exciting, of course. We had the music folks as well if you remember—Janet Halfyard is still working in the field. Did you see she had come out with a book on TV music?

JS: I did see that, yes. I haven't had the chance to read it yet but I'm very curious because I'm very fascinated by the music and the text and the shots all fit together. I still can't hear "Full of Grace" without tearing up; it's just because of the way it matches up with the imagery and everything that's going on at the end of that season.

RW: I think that one of the things that I've said about Whedon is that—and about all of these works, not just Whedon but about television in general—it is unquestionably a collaborative work. And if you have somebody that can get the best out of all sorts of different people—the musicians and the actors and the DPs—then that's when you have someone that can do great television. And he's one of those folks.

JS: Definitely, I agree, but you bring up an interesting question. TV shows, unlike let's say movies, are collaborative. The auteur theory lives on in movies—but how do you see that relating to the way that television gets put together, especially the pressures from networks and notes on scripts and writing rooms, all of that sort of thing as opposed to a single director with a vision and a script. Except for those episodes where that Joss wrote and directed himself, he was relying on others to

sort of tune in on his wave length. How do you explain that they were able to do that?

RW: One of the meanings for the title *Fighting the Forces* was just what you've been talking about, that the people who are the central creators for the show have to fight a lot of forces, economic and social. I think that it's as I was saying a couple minutes ago: partly having someone who has a clear enough vision that they can share it with the other folks involved. Someone who is able to pull together people who are skilled enough to be able to work in what David and I call the School of Whedon, or whoever the television creator happens to be. Just like you may have a school of Rembrandt. I think it's having a central core of people, or a person who can put those skilled creators together and deal with those outside pressures. Also, I think it's partly luck, things like the fact that the network was new and needed a successful show, so they didn't give them as much pressure as they might have in other circumstances—you know what I'm talking about with the WB, right?

JS: Right, before it moved over to UPN.

RW: I think it's a combination of things. You're going in and out [on the telephone connection]. Were you saying something about Marti Noxon?

JS: Well, when they moved to UPN and Marti Noxon “destroyed the show,” as people sometimes say, as she sometimes says.

RW: I don't think that.

JS: You know I don't!

RW: But I can understand the position.

JS: So fast-forward to the end of Season Seven: did you at that time ever anticipate the show would live on in media besides let's say fan fiction or something like that—actually having the comics? Having Joss Whedon not leave the Buffyverse, even though he was moving on to other

things? Was that a surprise to you that the comics came out and did so well?

RW: No, not really. It wasn't something I was wishing for. It may wrong of me to say this, but I don't have the same feeling for comics that I do for television, personally. So they were not as important to me—but it wasn't surprising to me that people wanted the story to go on and couldn't let go of the story, and I think that's what was happening with the comics. I have read some of them, not all of them, and have by the grace of other scholars seen that there's some great stuff going on. I can understand why people appreciate those comics.

JS: This is sort of freeform, and questions are occurring to me as you talk. Going back to the series for a minute, you mentioned "Prophecy Girl." Are there other sorts of defining episodes for you that, if someone was to begin the series, but not invest in all 144 episodes (is it 144? I think it is, I'll have to look that up)—which ones would you suggest they start with, watch in the middle, and end with? What were the most important episodes for you narratively?

RW: Ah, narratively—that's interesting because I was laughing—I was going to say you know in my book *Why Buffy Matters* half the book is: "Here are my favorite episodes" and talking about them. To go through them and try to get a *narrative* selection—other folks have done that. If I do that off the top of my head, I will forget something, but I would say the pilot; I think it's important to watch the episode "Angel" because then you get the backstory about Angel. Of course, then "Prophecy Girl." I also think it is important to watch the first episode of the second season, when she is recovering from what she has done. I think one of the things the show did really well is when you kill, it affects you; it's not just stabbing and running away. That's something that happens at the beginning of the second season, and also in the second season "Surprise" and "Innocence"—I don't have to tell you what that's about, when Buffy and Angel make love and we see the supreme metaphor of a man changing after he has sex with the girl. It is so easy to convey to people when you're trying to explain how the show works

metaphorically and what so many people respond to. If you're just talking narratively and not just technique—I would have recommended “The Zeppo” as well but that's not something you absolutely have to see. Let me look at a list. Well, “Passion,” when Angel has turned and kills Jenny Calendar, and “Becoming” 1 and 2, and she has to kill Angel of course. When she returns in Season Three I would watch “Anne” and “Dead Man's Party.” Let's see, I think maybe you could jump up to “The Prom” and “Graduation Day,” although you may have to stop with “Bad Girls.”

JS: I was going to say ...

RW: How many episodes am I allowed?

JS: You're allowed as many as you want, but I don't think we can avoid the introduction of Faith as the mirror or the dark mirror of Buffy.

RW: “Faith, Hope, and Trick,” that might be the first three episodes of the season 3 and that might be a good thing to do.

JS: “Bad Girls” and “Consequences.”

RW: And then again “Graduation Day.” I think it is good to see Buffy all insecure and uncertain in “The Freshman.” I'm tempted to go back through and get some Willow things; if you get “The Freshman” you get the intro of Riley. I hate to miss “Pangs,” but maybe narratively go to “Hush” and you get the change in Riley and Buffy's understanding of each other and get the introduction of Tara. Maybe we can skip to the end of the season again and do “Primeval” and “Restless.”

JS: “Restless” is rather hard to explain.

RS: It is, but I can't let go of it. Maybe that one should be put in with an asterisk. Let me see: Season 5, gosh. “Fool for Love”—can we skip to “Fool for Love”? And “Checkpoint,” where she confronts the Council. Well, I think maybe “Crush,” because of the revelations about Spike, and

“The Body” of course. I don’t know how much of the story at the end of season 5 we would want, but do you think we should leave in a few episodes leading up to “The Gift,” or go straight to “The Gift,” or...

JS: I think you just go straight to “The Gift.”

RW: Of course, in Season Six you’ve got the return with “Bargaining,” “Once More With Feeling,” and of course “Tabula Rasa.”

JS: Oh yes.

RW: Gosh, it’s just so hard, there’s just so many that I would want people to see because they have such wonderful moments in them. But in terms of just purely pulling out basic-basic narrative strands, then maybe go to the end of the season again and have “Two to Go” and “Grave.” Season Seven: “Lessons” and the opening again. And I think “Conversations with Dead People” not only because of the quality of the episode but because you find out things that are going on with the characters, too. “Get It Done” because you find out about the First Slayer and the effect on Buffy and the fact that she has had demon elements in her—then we can skip to the last three episodes, “Touched,” “End of Days,” and “Chosen,” or if you’re really cutting for time go straight to “Chosen.”

JS: I like that.

RW: That’s like a season’s worth of episodes out of the seven seasons.

JS: There are so many episodes that sort of blend together into a kind of phantasmagoria to me when I watch Season Seven. It’s hard to tell when one episode ends, and another begins except artificially because of the credits rolling—at least that’s been my impression of season seven.

RW: No, I get that!

JS: Let me just ask a couple of the big controversial questions and see what you think about them. So: the introduction of Dawn.

RW: Oh, I was shocked when it happened! I thought that it was at first, just funny, and then I thought it was more and more significant. It caused you to think more and more about not only of course the meta, the nature of television, but the nature of reality and the nature of relationships, and blood. So, I'm fine with having Dawn introduced in the way she was. I thought that was a really interesting thing to do.

JS: Well, as you know, another controversial issue in Season Six was the murder of Tara and the furiousness that caused within a certain part of the fandom community of *Buffy*. I know in a recent interview Marti Noxon said that if she had that to do over again that they might not do it. What did you think about that? Did you think it was narratively necessary? I found it incredibly painful to watch, but did you think it was narratively necessary or did you think it was a bad trope that they accidentally fell into?

RW: I have as the editor of *Slayage* published essays on this subject and I think it's something really worth thinking about and talking about it. Yet personally my mind sort of recoils and I try not to think about it, if that makes any sense. I have not taken it upon myself to write about it. I think... I don't think that they thought about the implications of the trope. I do think if they were going to have the big Dark Willow storyline they needed to have something that was big enough to make someone like Willow go as dark as she did, so I understand how it happened. I don't know what decisions I would have made if I were in their shoes, but I also don't have the same response to it that I probably would if I were gay, right? I probably don't have that deep of a gut reaction. I think it was so important having Tara and Willow in the first place and not just titillating kisses on screen. I thought that they were so important that the fact that they, having been the first long-term significant relationship between two gay women on screen, gave it a different kind of weight. I don't have a wise philosophic response for that one, just problems.

JS: It's a question that people debate that I think is fascinating: in the *Buffy Goes Dark* volume we have a pair of essays that address this from different perspectives that are quite interesting, and I know the debate continues. So let's move on into the present and look back into the seven seasons of *Buffy* and try to place them. You already did a little bit in the beginning in your remarks to place *Buffy* at the beginning of what people call Quality Television, or the Golden Age of TV, or something like that; what do you see as *Buffy*'s influence on television or some possible lasting influence on television?

RW: Well, at the last *Slayage* conference, Stephanie Graves, do you know her?

JS: I do know her, yes, virtually I know her.

RW: She did a paper on the influence of *Buffy* on *Supernatural*, and she was saying—of course this is just one example but *Supernatural* was still playing and she was pointing out narrative patterns and parallels and allusions and characters and shared actors. And Jeff Bussolini [has done work on this]. I forget what he worked on because I didn't watch it [*Eureka* in his earlier work and *Maharakshak Devi* at SCW8]. I think there are a lot of series that have people working on them who are aware of the work of *Buffy* so those creators have been influenced by the work that *Buffy* has done, that that series has done. All the folks that were associated with it. I also think it's a lot easier to have a strong female lead character after *Buffy* than it was before. I think that's something that keeps on going, but people don't think about most of the time. I think that the various experiments that they do in terms of technique, and in terms of the long-term narrative continuity, the fact that they were faithful to the story, didn't hop from one place to another and sort of chop it up, you know, and change things around... It was an example of what people continue to follow—I don't mean to say it was the only series to do that but I think it was a really important one, that was admired by those who are now creators.

JS: I think that's right. The series that comes to mind is *Veronica Mars*, especially.

RW: You know I wrote a book on that with Sue Turnbull.

JS: I do know that, yes.

RW: So yes absolutely.

JS: And the fact that Joss Whedon actually appears on the show.

RW: You can go through and make the connections; that's what Steph was doing with *Supernatural*. You can do that with a list of other shows as well.

JS: So the news is out about a possible reboot; we don't know much about it except that it's not going to be about *Buffy* but it's going to be a reboot of the Buffyverse; any initial thoughts, trepidations, or are you looking forward to it?

RW: I'm hopeful. I have not watched all of *Agents Of Shield*—my husband and I watched some of it and noticed the name of Monica Owusu-Breen in association with some episodes that we were enjoying and she's the person that has been blessed by Whedon as being the main writer and the person in charge of how this show is going to go. I think that's hopeful too. I remember that many years ago a friend of mine, a playwright, Jeanne Beckwith, said she would think that *Buffy* was really going to last at the point when people wanted to do a different interpretation of it. I kind of got fussy with her about that, I wasn't happy about that. I thought she was just thinking about that with her eyeglasses on as a dramatist. But I think that's what's happening here. I think it's a tribute to the nature of the story that people want to reinterpret it today. I know that it could go badly wrong.

JS: Any TV show can...

RW: But I'm very hopeful it will be something really good.

JS: We won't talk about Season One of *Dollhouse* perhaps.

RW: [laughs]

JS: Which had its moments but never quite gelled.

RW: When I watched *Dollhouse* over again, back-to-back, binge-style, although there were some bad moments in the series—it definitely had the hand of the network in its guts, like “Smile Time” on *Angel*, if you remember that—but still when you look at it, when you look at it with the flashforward episodes that they didn't show on TV, it really changes your understanding of the series. It is a much better series than I thought it was while it was happening. So I recommend looking at those all as a unit on a long weekend.

JS: I have one of those coming up, and of course the person that is going to be doing this new Buffyverse show has been tutored by, well “tutored” I assume by a very famous show runner and creator and that's J.J. Abrams. Because I believe she wrote shows for I think *Alias* as well as...

RW: I didn't realize that. Shame on me! That's cool, that's great.

JS: Yeah, she's been involved with a lot of J.J. Abrams shows including *Alias*, *Person of Interest*, I think she even wrote some for *Lost*. So she's not exactly a neophyte, and so like you I share some of the hope that this is not a mistake on Joss's part. One more thing: I don't want to take up too much of your time, but I do have to ask the #metoo question. Which is in light of some tweets that Joss made in response to his divorce to his wife Kai [Cole]. Some people have been reevaluating his work. I wonder where you stand on that.

RW: Well, at the *Slayage* conference this June [2018] there were several different sessions discussing that. Gosh, there's a whole bunch of things

I could say about that. One is that I'm a Dickens scholar—I did my dissertation on Dickens. Love Charles Dickens' work. He separated from his wife, couldn't divorce her because of course they were living in Victorian England, and had a long-running affair with an actress that was over twenty years younger than he was. I don't like that, I was not happy about that, but I haven't stopped reading Dickens' novels. I am not one of the people who has ever referred to Joss Whedon as "Joss," except in the presence of Jeanine Basinger because she was doing that and I was just reflecting what she was saying. I say that because I enormously admire his work, and still do, but I didn't feel that I had some imagined personal relationship with him, and so I wasn't as angry as some people are because they had that sort of feeling. I hope that doesn't sound dismissive. I've always got in the back of my mind that I don't know what an author is like. I also—I did admire his public stands for various social causes, for most importantly feminism. I think that you can have those beliefs even if you are yourself are failing in your personal life to completely live them. To add to all that, I don't know what is going on for sure between those two people. I'm somebody that many years ago was divorced myself, and you never really know what's going on in someone else's marriage. I tend to think it's—what I'm going to be doing is to focus on what I do know, which is the work, and react to that and recognize that I don't know what's going on completely behind the scenes.

JS: Ok, I think that's a good answer. I think that it's a very complex topic and it came at a very unfortunate time in our culture—the revelations and response came at a very unfortunate time that perhaps precipitated some judgements and some rash judgements very early on. Of course, that's the nature of social media. I can't imagine—I remember forums, I can't imagine if Twitter was around when *Buffy* was on and the kind of ways that narratives would have gotten perhaps even distorted by it. They were totally watching the forums at the time and watching that feedback.

RW: Let me add one more thing. Saying anything about this makes me feel that I may say something that misleads people or makes people

think of something that I don't really mean: We so often talk about appreciating characters that are flawed in fiction, but I think that we need to remember that each of us is flawed in real life as well.

JS: I can't argue with that.

RW: Me included.

JS: All of us included, including whoever reads this! One final question: what's next for you in terms of *Buffy* research and scholarship, or is there something else you would like readers to know about?

RW: I'm working on *Grimm*. I really, really enjoyed that series, and again it was one that I really didn't fully appreciate at the beginning, but I watched it over and over again. Are you familiar with the series?

JS: I know the premise, but I've never seen an episode.

RW: Well, it's done by Jim Kouf and David Greenwalt [Whedon's co-showrunner on *Angel*].

JS: Wow.

RW: Yeah, it's one of those rare shows my husband and I could watch together, and he too has watched it over and over again. He's one that likes dark, grim, serious literature and films [laughs], and *Grimm* is something that has a dark side, but is full of wit and humor. And I really love the way they develop the characters, and especially the women characters. The main character is not a woman but it's definitely an ensemble show, and it just went off the air last spring. I've been writing conference papers on it for quite a while, did so at the last *Slayage* [conference]—I did a paper comparing a character from *Grimm* with Illyria, and there are a lot of similarities between the two. That's what I'm focusing on now. Of course, I'm still editing *Slayage* [the journal]... I was just working on with Stacey Abbott and Doug Howard and a handful of other scholars an essay in *Critical Studies in Television* which is a

tribute to David Lavery—I hope that you will get a look at that when it comes out. It’s gone to the publishers, they’re going to be sending the final proofs back sometime soon. It’s about him, but also about his work as it relates to television studies, what he fought for in terms of an idea of a canon and the nature of television creativity. He had some interesting things to say about the way the auteur pattern works that Ensley Guffey, who wrote one [part] of the article, points out. I hope that you read that; it was an emotional thing to do but we were all really happy to be able to do that.

JS: I’m really happy to hear that there is such an issue coming out, because I can’t imagine *Buffy* Studies without you and David combined.

RW: It’s an article within an issue. Thank you. He was a big mover and shaker.

JS: He was. He is. Well, Rhonda, I really appreciate the time. I don’t know if there’s anything you want to add that I didn’t ask about—other Whedon shows? You mentioned *Agents of Shield*, but I avoided asking about others because this issue is about “*Buffy* at 20.” If there are any final reflections to add I’d be happy to hear them.

Rhonda: Well, I think it’s almost too big to fit into words. So maybe it will be the last thing I say on this subject: let me mention that we are planning to include in this issue the report on *Slayage* 8. It [the biennial conference reports] started out as something that was an evaluative report on the conference by scholars who were established in the field, but recently we have had more neophyte scholars, usually grad students, write summaries of what went on at the conference. I just thought it would go really well with what you guys are doing, I guess. So that’s a comment: it’s still going on!