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**Bringing the Pain: An Examination of
Marti Noxon's Contributions to *Buffy
the Vampire Slayer***



[1] Though Joss Whedon has always spoken highly of her talents, there was a great outcry from fans when he named Marti Noxon *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* (1997 – 2003) showrunner for seasons six and seven. In fact, at the time of this writing, a Google search for the writer gives the second autocomplete option as “Marti Noxon ruined Buffy.” Ten years after the end of the series, these fans are still quite upset. Noxon has a good sense of humor about all of it, though: her Twitter bio reads “I ruined Buffy and I will RUIN YOU TOO.” While some saw—and still see—Noxon’s ascent to the showrunner’s chair as detrimental to the series, it was a necessary change; Whedon was getting *Firefly* (2002 – 2003) off the ground and could not run both shows, so he turned the day-to-day running of *BtVS* over to someone he trusted, someone whose work throughout the series had shown she truly understood what Whedon was doing.

[2] Marti Noxon’s potential for leadership must have been obvious. Her sensibilities are not only right in line with Whedon’s—particularly in terms of their shared interest in chosen families, something she also explores in her work in serial drama—but she shines in the area of character development as well, something that can suffer in mythology-heavy years, like season seven, and had come to the forefront in season six, which traces the horrors of both Buffy’s return to the mortal world and approaching adulthood. Still, many critics—including Lynne Y. Edwards, Elizabeth L. Rambo, and James B. South, the editors of *Buffy Goes Dark*, a collection focusing entirely on the series’ last two broadcast seasons—have asserted that the season is problematic in many ways; particularly, they claim that under Noxon’s direction, the series takes a bleak turn that is not in keeping with the history of the show. However, this argument does not hold up. *Buffy’s* characters always had a dark side—they simply had not reached their breaking points until the end of season five. Buffy’s death opened up a number of possibilities for the writers, and Noxon was able to meet the challenge. In fact, her contributions to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* cannot be underestimated. With close attention to the series, certain hallmarks shine through that can be attributed to Noxon’s involvement, particularly her interest in soap opera-style storytelling and

melodrama and her talent for the emotional and romantic conflict of teen drama, all of which helped cement the series' style.

[3] Marti Noxon joined the *Buffy* writing staff in season two; this also marked a change in the series' direction. While the first season featured a number of "monster of the week" episodes, season two saw a move toward arc-based, serial storytelling and more in-depth treatment of Whedon's signature themes, particularly the darker, more adult side of Buffy's life as the Slayer. Whedon had also noticed that "the soap opera, the characters, the interaction between them is really what people respond[ed] to more than anything else [. . .] it was clear that the interaction was the thing that people were latching onto" (Bianculli 4) and worked on emphasizing those aspects of the series, putting Buffy and her friends in emotional as well as mortal danger. Noxon fit in quite well for this transition. As she has pointed out, her interests and talents skew more toward darker themes and the melodramatic, and Whedon was glad to have her on board for the change: "I've been accused of being sort of the pain and chains girl. My episodes are often about dark issues and nasty sex. Joss would say that until I got this show, it wasn't quite as nasty, and I take that as a compliment" ("Marti Noxon Online Chat"). (Lest we assume that Noxon is all gloom and high drama, she is no slouch at writing jokes, as Whedon has also noted in DVD commentaries.)

[4] Noxon's early episodes show how well she fit in with the established Whedon writing model, particularly when it comes to emotional realism, something Rhonda Wilcox has called "Whedon's watchword" (8). This devotion to emotional realism is very important in the serial drama; it helps the audience connect with the series. Cultural theorist Ien Ang introduced the concept of emotional realism in her groundbreaking study, *Watching Dallas*, noting that the series feels "taken from life" (44) for many viewers because they could see their own experiences being replicated in the show. While one might wonder how a lower-middle class viewer could relate to characters with millions of dollars in the bank, Ang makes it very clear that the connection is about connotation. Bobby Ewing and his family are massively wealthy, but they struggle with the same emotional issues as the audience. Divorce on *Dallas* is between multimillionaires and involves trading stock options, but that does not change the pain involved. These high-class problems are "regarded as symbolic representations of more general living experiences: rows, intrigues, problems, happiness [,] and misery" (44-5). The issues presented in *Buffy* may often be supernatural in nature, but, as Richard Campbell has pointed out, they are grounded in things that young people often face: romantic troubles, conflicts with parents, friends who disappoint, and teachers who

just cannot understand (3). Teen drama-loving Noxon addresses all of these things, but she does so in a way that encourages viewers to stay tuned to gain some narrative resolution.

[5] Consider "Surprise" (2.13). A companion to Whedon's excellent "Innocence" (2.14), the episode ties together a number of narrative threads that had been dangling for the past few episodes: the looming threat of Drusilla's plans, Willow and Oz's flirtation, and most importantly, Buffy and Angel's increasing physical intimacy. Joss Whedon is no stranger to writing multiple episodes when they are important to the overall narrative; why, then, would he turn "Surprise" over to Marti Noxon? The answer lies in Whedon's typical self-awareness. In an interview with James Longworth, he says, "I've struggled with my ability to write women. My whole life I've wanted to make sure that I didn't idealize them, that I just didn't sort of scratch the surface. And sometimes I don't get it right. When I don't understand, I go to Marti Noxon . . . and ask, 'What did you go through?'" (58). In an episode that is, at its core, one that deals with Buffy the Teenage Girl rather than Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Whedon turned things over to someone who had more direct experience with Buffy's position in this episode. Noxon's treatment of Buffy's confusion over whether or not she and Angel should take the next step in their physical relationship rings with emotional truth.

WILLOW: "I like you at bedtime?" You actually said that?

BUFFY: I know, I know.

WILLOW: Man, that's like . . . I don't know, that's *moxie* or something.

BUFFY: Totally unplanned. It just . . . came out.

WILLOW: (*giggles*) And he was into it? I mean, he wants to see you at bedtime, too?

BUFFY: Yeah, I, I, I think he does. Well, I, I mean h-he's cool about it.

WILLOW: Well, of course he is. 'Cause he's cool. I mean, he would never . . . you know . . .

BUFFY: Push.

WILLOW: Right. H-he's not the type.

BUFFY: Will, what I am gonna do?

WILLOW: What do you wanna do?

BUFFY: I don't know. I . . . I mean, "want" isn't always the right thing. To act on want can be wrong [. . .] But . . . to *not* act on want . . . What if I never feel this way again? ("Surprise" 2.13)

Unlike the heroines of so many other teen dramas, Buffy is genuinely confused about whether or not she wants to have sex with Angel. This entire conversation is conducted with giggles and shy smiles and is punctuated with stammering, through which Noxon and her actors remind us that Buffy is just seventeen, unsure about physical intimacy and what it might mean for her relationship with Angel. This is emotional realism, and it resonates with its audience.

[6] Fan-scholar Nikki Stafford is one such audience member. In her blog, *Nik at Nite*, she chronicles her responses to a number of series, *BtVS* included. In 2011 she embarked on what she called "The Great *Buffy* Rewatch," in which she and other critics detailed their responses to individual episodes and consider how they play into the overall narrative and thematic content of the series. Like many fans, she constantly tries to introduce *BtVS* to new viewers. She maintains that by the time the audience gets to "the Surprise/Innocence duet [. . .] they'll know if *Buffy* is for them" ("Buffy Rewatch Week 9"), and in her blog, she painstakingly explores the reasons *Buffy* should be for everyone. Stafford is a careful viewer, often making notes of aspects of the series that conflict with others, but she is also a loyal one—her blog entries are just as likely to chronicle how the episodes make her feel. "Surprise" makes her feel a number of things; for example, when Willow and Oz banter and make plans for their first date, her "heart melts with joy" ("Buffy Rewatch Week 9"). Her fellow viewers find other things in the series; in the comments section for the entry on "Bad Eggs," "Surprise," and "Innocence"—two of which were penned by Noxon—"Page48" explains that, for her, these episodes are so affecting because "*BtVS* [*sic*] is at its best when the pain is unbearable" ("Buffy Rewatch Week 9"). Stafford also invites other critics to guest blog, and their entries tend to follow her model. In her guest post, Stacey Abbott says that "'Surprise,' in classic Marti Noxon fashion, is a darkly disturbing episode about pain, sex, and death masked behind the veneer of teen romance" ("Goodbye Sweetheart"). Whether comments are from everyday fans or scholars who have built their careers around *Buffy* (and *Angel*), one thing is clear: viewers have strong reactions to Noxon's work.

[7] Another thing that must be remembered is that sometimes audiences react to what they perceive to be an actor's choice when in reality, those moments that so affect fans are scripted. In his blog, *Critically Touched Reviews*, Mikelangelo Marinaro writes extensively about his reactions to the series. He finds "Surprise" to be the "climax to

everything the season has been building towards from the start” (Marinaro), and gives Sarah Michelle Gellar a great deal of credit for how the episode affected him emotionally, explaining, “I have to commend Sarah Michelle Gellar for pulling off such a believable ‘girl experiencing first love’ routine—it makes it much easier for me to try to put myself in her shoes and have some empathy and understanding for what's going through her heart and head” (Marinaro). I do not mean to say that Gellar is not a talented actress—she has proven that she is—but I would like to complicate his statement a bit. Gellar makes some wonderfully affecting choices, but without a good script that looks at the experience from the inside, her performance could be lacking. Marinaro appears to be omitting the episode’s writer entirely. In fact, in his piece on “Surprise” does not address Marti Noxon’s contributions other than in a throwaway line about the “fabulous writing” that is immediately followed by a mention of “visual storytelling” (Marinaro); beyond listing her as the writer, she appears nowhere in the essay. In the scene Marinaro mentions, the script shows that Gellar and David Boreanaz stuck pretty closely to Noxon’s instructions:

ANGEL: I should go the rest of the way alone.

BUFFY: Okay...

Buffy tries to smile, be the brave little soldier. Can't. [...]

BUFFY: I don't want to do this.

ANGEL: Me either.

BUFFY: (small) So – don't go.

They both know he has to. He takes her into his arms and they kiss. The potentially last kiss kind of kiss. (“Surprise Script”)

When one compares what is on screen to what is in the script, there is little difference. Noxon has created the material to guide fan reactions; while Gellar and Boreanaz say their lines and enact stage directions with great emotion, the effect originates in the writing. Marinaro is so easily able to identify with a teenage girl because the actress playing her has been given the words and directions by which to make that connection. Clearly, this is honest writing.

[8] It is not just fans that Noxon educates about the teen girl experience—often, it is her boss. As noted above, when Whedon needed to know the truth about how things work for teenage girls and young women, he turned to Marti Noxon (Longworth 58). This is evident throughout the series; in “I Only Have Eyes for You” (2.19), Noxon has Buffy face

her conflicted feelings about her part in Angelus's reawakening¹, and when Buffy runs away after sending Angel to hell, it is Noxon who is tasked with writing the episode in which Willow confronts Buffy for abandoning her during a time in which she really needed her best friend ("Dead Man's Party" 3.2). In season six—divisive though it is—showrunner Noxon deftly explores the fears and concerns that come with young adulthood, particularly through Buffy's exploration of non-normative sexuality with Spike (previously insightfully examined by Dawn Heineken) and Willow's addiction to magic and subsequent separation from Tara. Quite simply, Marti Noxon writes stories that feel real; the audience can connect and identify with these characters.

[9] The emphasis on crafting moments of emotional honesty within distinctly supernatural stories might be a Whedonian signature, but it is one at which Noxon excels. If she had left it there, if she had only been a faithful disciple, there would be no need to study her contributions to the series; she would simply be one of a number of very talented writers Whedon has assembled over the years. However, in Noxon's time on *Buffy*, she cultivated a number of her own hallmarks, aspects of her writing that qualify her as an *auteur* in her own right. This term is borrowed from Andrew Sarris's "Notes on the *Auteur* Theory in 1962," a piece in which he addresses the ideas of the French New Wave critic François Truffaut. In Truffaut's seminal essay for the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," he explores the rise of a group of French directors who had shown themselves to be tied to similar themes and stylistic choices. Sarris, an American film critic, called this "the *auteur* theory"; his distillation of Truffaut's ideas holds that some directors "exhibit recurrent certain characteristics of style" (516) over the course of their careers. This theory began to be directly challenged by later film scholars; Richard Corliss felt the term's usage was rather limited and called for opening it up to film writers as well. Recently, critic David Kipen has extended Corliss's thoughts and put forth a radical revision of the *auteur* theory that he terms "the Schreiber² theory." Kipen believes that scholars' adherence to the *auteur* theory has devalued the writer's contribution, something that is truly more valuable since the writer is the one who creates the story itself. While the director tells the story, the writer determines how that should happen and why the story should unfold in a certain way, and this often comes about because the writer is concerned with particular themes. Because Noxon has experience directing as well as writing, the term

¹ Granted, this is a supernatural concern, but the root of Buffy's worry is the feeling of a teenage girl wondering if having sex with her boyfriend is the reason he has turned mean.

² "Schreiber" is Yiddish for "writer." Kipen drew his term from Yiddish to refer to the fact that many of America's early screenwriters were Jewish.

auteur seems more appropriate, though Corliss' and Kipen's contributions are certainly helpful in considering her efforts.

[10] All of Marti Noxon's work is preoccupied with melodrama and the highs and lows of romantic relationships. Noxon's career after *Buffy* has continued this trend; she has gravitated toward teen or serial dramas like *Glee* and *Private Practice*, where she was head writer for one season, and created her own series, *Point Pleasant*, that exhibits her hallmarks as well. In *Buffy*, her calling card is what I would like to term "bringing the pain." Whedon has noted that the series thrives on emotional conflict: "Buffy in pain, better. Buffy not in pain, show not as good" ("Buffy the Vampire Slayer: TV with Bite"). Marti Noxon truly excels at upping the emotional ante, something that is crucial in teen and serial dramas.

[11] Noxon's episodes are all tinged with a certain melodrama; they could fit quite easily in any teen drama produced today, a type which has become largely dominated by examples of the "teen soap" subgenre. *Buffy* is certainly not in this category, but the series does have aspects that would fit right in with the soap model, and Noxon took advantage of these tendencies. (Editors' note: See Da Ros.) Much like soaps, Noxon focuses on building a strong relationship between viewers and characters, not just between the audience and the series (Ford 101-3). Her writing aims for and lands in viewers' hearts. In her guest post about "The Prom" (3.20) for *Nik at Nite*, Kristen Romanelli explains that she is a special type of viewer—one who grew up with *Buffy*. She was a sophomore in high school when the series premiered, so the emotional entanglements of *Buffy* and the Scoobies particularly resonated with her; as an adult, she finds that she still feels the same. *Buffy*'s heartbreak over Angel's leaving is especially affecting:

Her sorrow spills over into her scene with Willow where she sobs, "I can't breathe, Will. I feel like I can't breathe." The loss of one's first love feels like this. It may look melodramatic and over the top, viewing it again with thirty year old eyes, but when I was eighteen, this was exactly what being blindsided with a breakup before prom felt like. (Romanelli)

Noxon knows what will resonate with the series' target demographic as well as those who skew a bit older. Heartbreak is universal.

[12] Another aspect of soap opera is its use of improbable plots; though, as scholars like Ien Ang and Anna McCarthy have noted, even if the plots are wildly unrealistic, the emotions contained within are not. "Villains" (6.20) is an excellent example. Willow is enraged at Tara's death and Warren seeks to evade capture and punishment for the crime. These are perfectly normal plot points, if a bit out of the everyday. However, things are a

little different here than in other series that aired at the same time. In other words, while *Dawson's Creek* could have potentially featured the same basic plot, it is doubtful that the murderer's associates would be in jail having this conversation:

JONATHAN: . . . You two were totally going to fly off and leave me holding the bag.

ANDREW: No we weren't! I was going to . . . carry you.

JONATHAN: No, you two were setting me up, and then Warren was going to screw you over, too.

ANDREW: That is so not true!

JONATHAN: Sure. He's a nice murderer who keeps his word. ("Villains")

As *Buffy* fans know, that is a literal use of the word fly—the Trio use jetpacks in the previous episode. Audiences also generally would not have been treated to a character on a mission to capture a girlfriend's murderer; if they had, that character would not be a powerful witch who ingests dark magic in her attempt to avenge the death, and they certainly would not flay the perpetrator. Marti Noxon is quite talented when it comes to ratcheting up the unbelievable yet compelling factor.

[13] Noxon often utilizes the basic soap narrative structure, as well. Soap operas are devoted to ongoing, open-ended storylines because—regardless of the current daytime climate—they are expected to continue indefinitely (McCarthy, "Studying Soap Opera" 47-9). Primetime soaps tend to have a season-long arc supported by smaller arcs lasting anywhere from a few episodes to half a season. Noxon is no stranger to the long story; her first writing credits for *BtVS* are for a two-part episode, "What's My Line?" (2.9, 2.10), which establishes a number of continuing storylines for the rest of the season—and the series—and marks a decided shift to dramatic arcs. After this point, the series does very few "monster of the week" episodes. As David Perry has pointed out, "What's My Line" introduces a number of narrative threads that pay off later: Buffy and Angel's passion for each other matures as Spike and Drusilla grow more threatening, Spike ups his game by sending assassins after Buffy, and the triangle of Spike, Dru, and Angelus is teased in Spike's ritual. Most importantly, the audience learns more about the Slayer mythology as Kendra is introduced. Everyone gets in on the arc creation, actually: Willow and Oz meet, Xander and Cordelia's love/hate flirtation leads to a kiss, and Buffy and Giles's arguments about the Slayer having a normal life increase in intensity (15-6). She continues this trend of setting up major life changes in her scripts throughout the series. For example, in "Buffy vs. Dracula" (5.1), not only does Buffy decide she must learn more about the source of her

power, but Xander asserts that he needs to stop “being everybody’s butt-monkey”³—admittedly, a very funny line, but one that underlies his journey throughout the rest of the series. Granted, these large character changes were decided with Whedon, but it is significant that Noxon is often tasked with these scripts.

[14] Noxon’s time with *Buffy* showcases her ability to begin and sustain compelling narrative arcs, particularly in terms of the characters’ relationships with each other. Consider how she handles “Consequences” (3.15). Noxon does not depict the killing of Deputy Mayor Allan Finch, but she does develop compellingly the fallout of Faith’s actions—all of them. It is, of course, important that Faith’s slide into the dark side begins here, but the way it is written allows for some ambiguity in Faith’s morality. She does maintain that she “did the world a favor” but also notes sadly that “[h]e came out of nowhere” (“Consequences” 3.15). This back-and-forth makes it difficult for Buffy to take a strong position on what should be done. Buffy is not the only person hurt by Faith’s actions, however; Xander’s revelation that he lost his virginity to Faith devastates Willow. Noxon layers these scenes very carefully, reaching back to Willow and Xander’s history together as well as setting up some future conflict—as Willow explains later in the episode, she has “an issue with Faith sharing [her] people” (“Consequences” 3.15), an issue that continues even into adulthood. It must also be observed that this is no simple moment of jealousy—it is significant that Xander’s time with Faith was his first time, something that part of Willow seems to believe would have involved her. Noxon has Willow choose to put up a front with her friends and break down alone, an especially heart-wrenching choice. As Nikki Stafford has put it, “Willow tears are like tiny, wet daggers, each piercing my heart and [leaving me] wanting to gather her into my arms and make her happy again” (“Buffy Rewatch Week 22”). (Noxon seems to recognize that at least part of her audience feels this way—she often makes Willow cry.) It is not just the heavy emotional aspects of character relationships that Noxon excels at, however. Her treatment of the Wesley/Cordelia flirtation—both in “Consequences” and in “The Prom” (3.20)—borders on screwball, and in “Consequences,” it is a welcome lightness in an otherwise heavy episode.

[15] Noxon is concerned with the relationships between the characters, particularly with their love interests. This is an outgrowth of her interest in soaps and primetime serials, whose key elements include “plots that hinge on relationships between people, particularly family and romantic relationships” (Brown 48). Noxon is primarily interested in the latter type of relationship, something that fans of the series also like to examine. Numerous blogs,

³ This term appears in another of Noxon’s scripts, “Villains” (6.20). It is difficult to dismiss this as a coincidence; it seems highly likely that this oft-quoted line is Noxon’s, not Whedon’s.

written by both fans and critics, are devoted to chronicling the series and spend a great deal of time parsing out the characters' romantic choices. Even *Entertainment Weekly* weighed in on the Angel/Spike debate; what began as an impartial introduction to a highly debated readers' poll ended in, "So which vamp is it, PopWatchers? Angel, the one she loved deeply, or Spike, the one she slept with begrudgingly?" (Warner). No matter which side a viewer chooses (for any of the characters—the "Buffy should have ended up with Xander" faction is still loud and proud), this investment in the Scoobies' (heterosexual) love lives fits right in with soap structure and audiences—in this genre, "relationships between women and men receive the greatest amount of attention" (Brown 55). Noxon draws from this tradition in her work on *BtVS*, though she does extend and complicate it a bit.

[16] It seems that whenever Whedon planned on creating a couple with long-term potential—and did not intend to write it himself—he looked to Marti Noxon. She wrote "The Wish" (3.9), giving us the delightful Anya Christina Emmanuella Jenkins. After Anyanka's potential for villainy is eliminated in "Doppelgängland," there seems to be no compelling reason to bring Anya back—except for her knowledge of Ascension mechanics and for comic relief as Xander's prom date. However, in "The Prom" (3.20), Noxon writes Anya in such a way that the audience is comfortable rooting for her; when Anya and Xander start dating, we hope that things will work out, and when Noxon—as showrunner—breaks them up in season six, it is as upsetting as if it happened to our own friends. However, Noxon's real achievement in romance lies in her treatment of the Oz/Willow/Tara triangle.

[17] Before Oz, Willow is unlucky in love; Xander has never realized—or acknowledged—her crush on him, and the closest thing she has had to a boyfriend was a demon living in the internet. When Oz is introduced, he is shown to be discerning and mature because he is fascinated by Willow before he even properly meets her. It is clear that Oz just might be a match for her, and when he is revealed to be the only person in school as smart as she is, it seems Willow has found her man. The series invests a lot of time in their relationship, and Marti Noxon was there for most of their important moments. She traced Oz and Willow's relationship from the beginning, introducing them in "What's My Line? Part 1" and sending them on their first date in "Surprise"; it seems only natural that Whedon would have her end their relationship, not once, but twice. During season four of *Buffy*, Whedon was launching *Angel*, so he trusted Noxon to take the reins at a crucial time, both in terms of the narrative and the series' production. This was not uncommon; he has said that during the production of *Buffy*, *Angel* (1999 – 2004), and *Firefly*, he liked to "surround [himself] with really smart people who [could] get a great deal done without [him]" because he was so busy at any given time (Longworth 60).

[18] During season four, Whedon was entering his time of over-extension as his characters entered UC Sunnydale, a place that saw a number of changes in their lives. When the season begins, Oz and Willow seem rock-solid. This is why it is such a shock when, in “Wild at Heart” (4.6), Oz’s wolf side leads to a strong, visceral connection to fellow werewolf Veruca. Watching the fallout is gut-wrenching, but as upsetting as this confrontation is, it is nothing compared to the end of the episode, when Oz tells Willow he has to leave to figure out how to control the wolf inside him. As Oz packs his suitcase and Willow looks on numbly, the actors deliver Noxon’s lines with a quiet intensity that is devastating.

WILLOW: What are you doing?

OZ: I’m going.

WILLOW: Now? . . . That’s—that’s your solution?

OZ: That’s my decision.

WILLOW: Don’t I get any say in this?

OZ: No. (*then*) Veruca was what that means, I shouldn’t be around you. Or anybody.
[. . .]

WILLOW: Oz . . . don’t you love me?

OZ (*touching his forehead to hers*): My whole life . . . I’ve never loved anything else.
 (“Wild at Heart”)

[19] It would take a heart of stone to not be moved as Willow desperately tries to get Oz to stay. Noxon’s writing is powerful—so powerful, in fact, that Willow is not the only sympathetic character here. Marti Noxon understands pain on a basic level. “Wild at Heart” ends in a way that is quintessentially Noxon. Consider the stage directions for the final scene: “Oz exits his house and gets into his van [. . .] starts the van. Hesitates . . . Turns the key and stops the van [. . .] finds his resolve. He starts the van again [. . .] The van travels down the road, turns—and is gone” (“Wild at Heart—Shooting Script”). In that one moment, the audience is both thrilled and devastated; we know that Oz is leaving, but she gives a small kernel of hope that he might stay—and then rips it away in the amount of time it takes to formulate the thought that Oz will run back to comfort Willow. Instead, he simply turns the key again and leaves. Marti Noxon loves quiet pain; here, it lands silently but heavily and trickles out for many episodes afterward.

[20] When it was time to bring Oz back, Whedon turned to Noxon again—next to Whedon himself, she knew Oz and Willow’s relationship the best, having written so many of their major moments. Willow pines for Oz for a long time after he leaves, and that pain could have been enough for another showrunner, but Willow’s journey would benefit from a fork in the road to further define her character. Enter Tara. Whedon was originally hesitant to cast Amber Benson because he felt she did not embody the correct physical type; he was looking for someone “very tiny and bird-like” and Benson was “more womanly and voluptuous” (“Casting Buffy”). Noxon insisted he take another look at Benson and convinced him that she was perfect for the part. This move has proven significant in *Buffy* scholarship, primarily in the area of gender studies. Lorna Jowett has addressed the topic adeptly, noting that “Tara’s appearance contrasts conventional media femininity” (50). In a series that asks viewers to believe someone who looks like Nicholas Brendon would have trouble getting a date, this nod to reality is much appreciated.

[21] As Willow and Tara grow closer, it becomes obvious that Oz will not return until the worst possible moment for Willow; instead of having Oz work through his issues in a few episodes or simply not return at all, Whedon had Willow end that relationship on her own terms. However, he did not take the typical road and have Willow heal alone, secure in the knowledge that she is a strong woman and needs no one but herself. No, Whedon recognized that, even as a strong woman, Willow *did* need someone at that point in her life, so he gave her Tara. Whedon was primarily concerned with finding someone who would actually be able to “follow Oz,” a character that audiences had very much connected with, and creating a relationship that “would really affect people in a new way” (Miller 75). Aside from the fact that their relationship marks a significant change in Willow’s lifestyle, Tara is actually more of the same for Willow—she is familiar. This seems impossible at first glance, but Tara and Oz have some essential characteristics in common. As Jowett has asserted, “Tara’s sensitivity to atmosphere, ability to read complex situations, and willingness to allow others space are the first indications of her personality and remain strong characteristics” (49). Oz, in his taciturn way, was sometimes the most insightful member of the group; he saw and understood situations like few others could. Tara’s instinctive awareness of the Scoobies’ dynamics is generally attributed to her powers, but her kind spirit makes it clear that this is an integral part of her personality. Both Oz and Tara are incredibly perceptive, and Willow loves that about both of them.

[22] Because both Oz and Tara are compatible with Willow—and both have been able to make her happy—it is difficult when Oz returns in “New Moon Rising” (4.19). Noxon has explained that part of her goal in the episode was to address the realities of young love, at

least from her perspective. As she said in an interview given during the fourth season of *BtVS*,

I had a lot of fun writing, in particular, the Oz and Willow stories [. . .] When I was a young woman, especially in college, I felt the struggle between the need to connect and be with one person and that sort of animal need to have adventures. It caused a lot of pain, on either side of it, whether you were the person left or the one who did the leaving. I can reach back to that experience for direction. (Dumars)

Noxon's personal connection to Willow and Oz's troubles allow her to create the emotional realism so important to Whedon's vision for the series. From the moment Oz walks into Giles's apartment, Willow is uncomfortably happy. As she tells Oz later that night, "Oz, this is all so weird. I—I feel like this isn't really happening, like it's a dream or something" ("New Moon Rising"). We feel the same way; the audience is happy to see Oz, but acutely aware of what this could mean for Tara. Even the conversation Willow and Oz have about her current love life is uncomfortable: "No, no new . . . guy" ("New Moon Rising"). Noxon tweaks Oz's character a bit in this episode to make the triangle as painful as possible; she also sets Tara back a few steps as she starts stuttering again when she speaks to Oz. The signal is clear: nothing good is happening in this episode. Noxon plays up every angle, drawing out the inevitable confrontation as long as she can in order to achieve maximum suffering for both the characters and the audience, as well as keeping the scene aligned with what she calls the "deliciously overwrought" emotional tone of the series ("Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Cast Reunion").

[23] When Oz and Tara finally have it out, Noxon uses all the weapons in her arsenal to bring these characters to their knees, and Seth Green and Amber Benson wring every bit of emotion from her words.

TARA: (*uncomfortably, looking away*) I just—I just hope that you guys'll be very . . . happy.

OZ: You smell like her. She's all over you. Do you know that?

TARA: I can't. I—I can't—I can't talk about th-this.

OZ: (*putting his hand on her arm*) But there's something to talk about? Are you two involved?

TARA: I have—I have to go.

OZ: Because she never said anything to me like that. We talked all night, and she never—(*Tara turns to leave.*)

OZ: No, stop! Is she in love with you? Tell me! Is she . . . ? (*Panting, he starts to change.*). Run. (“New Moon Rising”)

Momentarily, we fear for Tara’s life. This is not an Oz we know, and suddenly, all bets are off. Noxon has a great talent for bringing her characters heartache, and she acknowledges that she enjoys doing so: “I like to go deeper, to tell some kind of truth, to make it hurt” (Spicuzza). For Willow, Oz, and Tara, Noxon’s time with them has been nothing but hurtful.

[24] Marti Noxon likes to spread the pain around as best she can, to create, as she has termed it, “hardcore drama” (“Marti Noxon Online Chat”). No one is safe from her pen—or computer, as it were—and our heroine is an especially favorite target. Whedon approved; at the PaleyFest panel in 2008, he mentioned that he and David Greenwalt called Sarah Michelle Gellar “Jimmy Stewart” because “he was the greatest American in pain in the history of film” (“Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Cast Reunion”). Whedon enjoyed seeing Buffy hurt emotionally, and he often asked Noxon to do the honors. “I Only Have Eyes for You” is the first time she starts to wound Buffy, and she holds nothing back. What could have been a hokey premise—a 1950s ghost couple?—becomes a space in which Noxon gets to push the boundaries of Buffy’s feelings about Angel(us). Whereas the audience has been trained to expect bad things whenever Angelus appears, Noxon puts him back in a position of sympathy. By making him say what Buffy needs to hear, even if it is upsetting, Noxon sets the stage for Angel’s eventual exit in “The Prom.” James Stanley and Grace Newman might be working out their own issues over and over, but they gravitate toward Buffy and Angel because they share a similar love—deep, messy, and painful.

BUFFY: You’re the only one. The only person I can talk to.

ANGELUS: Gosh, Buff. That’s . . . really pathetic.

BUFFY: You can’t make me disappear just because you say it’s over.

ANGELUS: Actually . . . I can. In fact—(*His face transforms into a loving sadness as Grace’s spirit inhabits him.*) I just want you to be able to have some kind of normal life. We can never have that, don’t you see?

BUFFY: I don’t give a damn about a normal life. (*then*) I’m going crazy not seeing you. I think about you every minute.

ANGELUS: I know. But . . . (*then*) It's over. It has to be. ("I Only Have Eyes for You")

Even though we know that Angelus is evil, the audience cannot help but empathize equally with Buffy and the physical body that now represents Angel. Angelus is gone, and though he reappears by the end of the episode, the residual sentiment remains, a result of what Ian Shuttleworth has called Noxon's "bare emotional directness" (242). Like Buffy, we will never really get over Angel, and his every appearance—whether actual or alluded to—destroys our fragile peace.

[25] For Noxon, Buffy is never as interesting as when she is in emotional pain, so season six must have been exceedingly satisfying. There is an aspect of the much-maligned season that is not often addressed: in terms of the narrative, it presents itself as a pause, a breather before the race to the end. This may seem a strange assertion, but consider the season's material: until the arrival of Dark Willow, there is no supernatural Big Bad—just three nerds with chips on their shoulders; Buffy deals with money problems and works at a fast food joint; Willow struggles with addiction; and it seems like everyone breaks up. (The arguments of Buffy's doctor in "Normal Again" [6.17] are certainly apropos.) These themes, as mundane as they may appear, are still capable of producing a high level of drama, something Noxon enjoys greatly. However, they also fit in with the series' goals for season six—goals that she created with Whedon but executed on her own since he was often unavailable: when season six began, Whedon was already

extremely busy, even without his showrunner duties on *Buffy*. *Angel* had just begun its third season [. . .] Joss and *Angel* cocreator David Greenwalt were executive producers on that show. Joss' *Fray* [2001 – 2008] comic book was about halfway through its eight-issue run, and his third TV series, *Firefly*, would debut the following year [. . .] in interviews, one of his favorite words was *exhausted*. (Holder 123)

Noxon succinctly explained her duties in this way: "as the years have progressed, Joss is busy with his empire, so there's a little more time to discuss and bring in other ideas" ("Marti Noxon Online Chat"). Jane Espenson has addressed the unconventional nature of Whedon's writers' rooms by noting that "[i]t all begins with Joss. But it doesn't end there" (Qtd. in Abbott, *Angel* ix). In *Buffy: The Making of a Slayer*, Nancy Holder includes a discussion of the inner workings of the *Buffy* writers' room, and it is clear that Noxon held more power than she is typically given credit for (Holder 24-5). While the evidence piles up in her favor, it does leave her more open to criticism by those who dislike her contributions to the series, particularly in terms of the events of season six.

[26] However, Noxon is quick to defend herself against the backlash from fans. In the *Buffy* reunion panel at the 2008 PaleyFest, Noxon explained that while there has been a lot of negativity surrounding her first season as showrunner, the vision she and Joss were pursuing holds true: season six is about that time after high school when you sort of lose yourself. Still, for her the series as a whole is about triumphing over adversity (“Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Cast Reunion”), and few things are more difficult to handle than feeling completely lost, especially when you have a destined purpose. Buffy’s arc for season six, especially in her relationship with Spike, exhibits Marti’s love of bringing the pain, both in terms of the S&M aspect of her work that David Perry has identified and in the emotional pain that they bring to each other (18-19).

[27] Noxon really likes to make Buffy suffer in tandem—any man in love with Buffy should beware. Her fellow writers give her a lot of credit for the more painful aspects of Buffy’s relationships (Perry); as Jane Espenson has said, “Marti writes the best heartbreak scenes ever” (Qtd. in Dumars). And while some fans have mocked Noxon for what they perceive as her “crush” on Spike, it must be acknowledged that his feelings for Buffy lead to heartbreak and despair, even to death. Noxon does not give Spike his happy ending. Still, Angel and Spike—tortured though they are—have a definite competitor in Riley Finn. By season five, Noxon was no stranger to the breakup episode, so she added a new challenge in “Into the Woods” (5.10): directing. This episode is entirely her vision, and it is a pretty dark one. David Greenwalt encapsulated Noxon’s writing style when he described her methods as, “There’s nothing like taking all your pain and misery and shoving it into good-looking people with mouths” (Qtd. in “Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Cast Reunion”). Noxon has explained that she uses a lot of her own pain when she writes Buffy’s romantic relationships, particularly because Noxon’s own were not particularly stable in her younger years: “like Buffy, my love life was a mess for years and years, and I just couldn’t get it together. So I’m constantly identifying with her. Trying to be it all and failing” (“Marti Noxon Online Chat”).

[28] One has to wonder, then, what she was doing with Riley. “Into the Woods” works on a few levels, but aside from the obvious “vampire equals prostitute” perspective, the episode traces the difficulties involved in loving the Slayer, especially when her partner is not supernatural in origin. Riley, though culpable in this instance, never really has a chance with Buffy. He is not bad enough for her, as Spike so loves to remind him. In this episode, Noxon works through what it means that the Slayer is a woman—not female, but a woman, with all the societal implications that comes with that—and therefore expected to engage in a relationship in a way that she may just not be built to do. When Riley pleads

with Buffy to show him some real emotion, at least something close to the level that he has been showing her, Buffy simply cannot. Even the end of the episode, complete with Buffy's sudden realization and dash to meet Riley, rings slightly false in light of Buffy's first reaction. She loves Riley, but not the way she loved Angel. This seems to be Noxon's point—Buffy cannot have a healthy relationship; trying to do anything different only leads to pain, for Buffy and her beloved. Considering the journey that Buffy and her friends go on, that may even apply to all the Scoobies; Marti Noxon's influence reaches beyond her assigned episodes.

[29] As wonderful as Noxon's work on *Buffy* was, one cannot be correctly termed an *auteur* unless certain signatures recur throughout the body of work. After *BtVS* ended, Noxon worked as a writer and executive producer on *Still Life*, an unaired FOX series starring Jensen Ackles (star of *Supernatural* [2005-]), and as a consulting producer for nine episodes of *Prison Break*. Her time with FOX yielded some impressive results—the chance to helm her own series. *Point Pleasant* (2005) is a supernatural drama that, in Noxon's words, was inspired by the question, "What if Rosemary's baby grew up?" (Rammairone). It chronicles the events that follow the sudden appearance of Christina Nickson—a young woman who turns out to be the Antichrist—in the beach town of Point Pleasant, New Jersey. The series exhibits the same traits as Noxon's work on *BtVS* and helps to cement a discussion of her style: the structure mirrors that of a soap opera, there is a concern with the romantic relationships of the characters, and the narrative works with a high level of emotional conflict and melodrama.

[30] *Point Pleasant* is a supernatural drama, but because it is Marti Noxon's brainchild, it exhibits the same characteristics as the work she did on *BtVS*. The series lasted just thirteen episodes, of which she wrote three—and FOX only aired eight—so it can be difficult to judge just where Noxon was headed, but it is clear that she was playing the long game of serial drama. In setting up the primary antagonist, Lucas Boyd, she also starts forging the connection between the audience and her main female character—a central concern in soap opera—by showing him to be invested in keeping the teenage Christina from the mother she has never known.

BOYD: Christina's got the power now. She'll get to like it, especially after she spends some time in Point Pleasant. [. . .] No, that place is her training ground. And then . . . we unleash her on the rest of the world. [. . .] She'll take after her father, I guarantee it.

KINGSTON: How has Christina shut out the darkness in her life all these years? There is something pure in her. If she finds Anne—really finds faith—

BOYD: So we make sure that doesn't happen. ("Human Nature," 1.2)

Christina struggles throughout the series to figure out just how much of each parent is in her and whether she can ever live a normal life; her presence in Point Pleasant makes that even harder. By the end of the season, she has learned of her true parentage and turned toward it, but this reveal does not feel forced by the series' looming cancellation. Instead, Christina-the-antagonist opens up a number of new and interesting possibilities. With her powers, there is no real limit to where the storylines can go.

[31] *Point Pleasant's* pilot introduces a few love triangles; in this, the series is much like other primetime soaps. However, Noxon gives this a bit of a twist—the fate of the world rests on the outcome of one of them. Christina is "the child of darkness" ("Pilot" 1.1), and Jesse is the one chosen to fight her should she decide to side with her father. If Christina and Jesse cannot make things work, she will turn to the dark side and her fury will eventually lead to Armageddon. (Clearly, there are shades of Buffy and Angel here.) Even as the series concludes and Christina and Jesse head for their final showdown, Christina is conflicted; she still loves him, which infuriates Boyd.

BOYD (*noticing the flicker of electricity that indicates Christina's awareness of Jesse's presence*): Ohh . . . what's that look? Oh, don't tell me you still have a soft spot. You know why he came here!

CHRISTINA: I'm ready. I want him to hurt.

BOYD: But do you want him to die? (*the electricity flickers again; Christina is not sure.*) ("Let the War Commence" 1.13)

The series makes it clear that Christina and Jesse's relationship is fated; no matter whether they are lovers or enemies, they will constantly be pulled together. Noxon knew that the series would be cancelled around episode eight, so she and her writers decided to "just [. . .] blow it up" (Mitovich); as a result, Jesse does not survive his confrontation with Christina. One can only imagine where the relationship might have gone if the series had gotten a second season.

[32] In her discussion of the series, Noxon has explained that, as the child of Satan, Christina's presence "bring[s] out and heighten[s] all the desires and sort of basic instincts of the people who live there. Everybody's secrets sort of have to bubble to the surface" ("The Making of Point Pleasant")—and if that were not enough, those with whom Christina

becomes angry have a way of meeting with freak accidents. This is a level of melodrama met only by soap operas: characters are devoured by insects, jump out of windows, and burst into flame; some give in to their darkest desires and burn their previously happy marriages to the ground; and others are taken in by evil forces and used for nefarious ends. Even the corpse of the Kramers' daughter Isabelle shows up for family dinner. Marti Noxon clearly still needs a little soap in her supernatural drama. And, frankly, few things are soapier than the devil seducing a good Catholic girl and causing her to birth the Antichrist. This seems outrageous, but it was not all that long ago that *Days of Our Lives'* Marlena was possessed by the devil and the citizens of *Port Charles* were terrorized by a vampire intent on making one of the women in town his eternal bride. *Point Pleasant* works within the same tradition. Even putting Christina's heritage aside, the people of Point Pleasant cannot seem to catch a break, and that is just how Marti Noxon likes it.

[33] After *Point Pleasant* was cancelled, Noxon joined the staff of Shonda Rhimes's *Grey's Anatomy* in the middle of its third season as a consulting producer, eventually becoming an executive producer. She was a perfect addition to Rhimes's staff; her writing philosophy echoes the average *Grey's* episode: "I want to make people feel the extreme of every emotion. As a writer your greatest hope is that you either make someone laugh, cry [,] or shout. So that's the goal" ("Marti Noxon Online Chat"). These fourteen episodes are very much in keeping with the style of *Grey's Anatomy*—filled with high drama, both medical and emotional—but Marti Noxon's contribution is also evident. Noxon only wrote one episode during this season, and while the drama is at Shonda Rhimes's preferred level of eleven, "Some Kind of Miracle" (3.17) has Noxon's stamp all over it. Meredith falls into the icy Puget Sound and, remembering the pain of the past year, decides to stop struggling and let go. She wakes up in an afterlife populated by her most important cases—the ones she could not save. Denny Duquette, Izzie's dead fiancé, works to convince Meredith to go back and fight for her life, and his lines speak to Noxon's involvement.

DENNY (*smiling sadly*): Izzie . . .

MEREDITH: You can see her?

DENNY: No. Sometimes we'll be at the same place at exactly the same time and I can almost hear her voice. It's like I'm touching her. I like to believe she knows I'm there. That's all you get. That's it. Moments with the people you love. And they'll move on, and you'll want them to move on. But still, Meredith, that's all you get. Moments. ("Some Kind of Miracle")

[34] Marti Noxon enjoys punishing her characters—and the audience, by extension. Denny’s death occurs at the end of the previous season, though to these characters it has merely been a few months. Denny’s previous appearance led to Izzie grieving on a bathroom floor, so devastated by his death that she quit her job. To bring Denny back is upsetting enough, but Noxon’s script has Denny pausing on his ghostly walk at the end of the episode, breathing in the moment as Izzie crosses his path. With that simple acknowledgement, the characters and their audience feel their hearts twist. Noxon has accomplished her goal: in just a few short minutes, she has highlighted a fan-favorite relationship, introduced a new level of emotional conflict, and upped the melodrama quotient. Her time with *Buffy* allowed her to perfect the type of writing she loves so well, and she brings this talent with her wherever she goes.

[35] Marti Noxon is never as happy or energized as when she is putting her characters through the emotional wringer. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Joss Whedon uses her talents to add the soap opera and teen drama aspects that help to draw in an audience. Doug Petrie has said that Noxon “is so plugged into the emotional heart of *Buffy*. A lot of the *Buffy* and *Angel* stuff is Marti. She’ll say something in a story meeting, and I think, ‘What do I know? I’m just a big dumb boy! We just blow stuff up!’” (qtd. in Spicuzza). While Petrie is not giving himself and his gender enough credit—at least in terms of the *Buffy* writers—he has it right: Marti Noxon provides a great deal of the show’s “emotional heart.” Though Joss Whedon is its soul and its emotional center—since the series is his vision—Noxon is concerned with its heart and all that implies. She is at her best when working with the aspects of life that break your heart. So why has she drawn so much ire? The answer will likely always elude us, but one thing is for sure—*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* would not have been the same without her.

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