

*Once More, With Feeling:*  
The Hellmouth in Postmodern Heaven

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Why Buffy? How are we supposed to *take Buffy the Vampire Slayer* seriously? The Academy of Arts and Sciences cannot remember to put it on Emmy ballots. Film students rebuff the notion of good TV let alone something with that moniker. It is the stuff of pure pop culture with minute ratings on a fledgling network (first the WB and then UPN). Then again how can we ignore the consistent genius of narrative by it's creator Joss Whedon? Now into season seven (it's last), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS) has consistently entertained, it's characters grown, and its form challenged the conventions of standard TV fare. The sheer irony of the title should have hit us earlier. Maybe the bitter taste of the Joss Whedon self-reviled movie version lingered with us too. In the following I will plot out how BtVS works as postmodern television and storytelling, crossing over from pop culture phenomenon to high brow entertainment and culminating in the tour de force musical episode, *Once More, With Feeling*.

In case you have been missing out, here's a brief history of Sunnydale, CA. Buffy Summers(Sarah Michelle Gellar) is the chosen one-

*"Into each generation a Slayer is born. One girl in all the world, a Chosen One. One born with the strength and skill to fight the vampires, to stop the spread of their evil and the swell of their numbers."* <sup>1</sup>

Buffy is tutored in her skills by her assigned Watcher, Giles (Anthony Stewart Head) and assisted by her closest friends and what comes to be known as the Scooby Gang. The latest version of this gang consists of Willow (Alyson Hannigan), Xander (Nicholas Brendon), Anya (Emma Caulfield), Spike (James Marsters), Dawn (Michelle Trachtenberg) and the recently departed Tara (Amber Benson). Willow and Xander are her closest friends that she has been with since High School and the beginning of the series. Willow has taken on the supernatural powers of a witch, growing increasingly strong over time as she matures as a woman. Xander remains the 'normal' one, and, without going too deep into the seven year dynamic, he prevails as the conscience and glue for their friendships. At the time of "Once More, With Feeling," he is engaged to Anya, who was formerly a vengeance demon and is now getting along as a human. Keeping up? It gets really tricky now. Spike was her Vampire nemesis at one time whose sole purpose was to kill Buffy. He now has a government implanted chip in his head that keeps him from hurting humans and has fallen in love with Buffy to the point where he ventures out on a quest to regain his soul. (He has since lost the chip and gained a soul.) Now that's character development! Dawn is Buffy's sister, but not really. She was a meta-physical "key" to power that was hidden in the form of Buffy's sister, with memories of a human history as a Summers girl only a few years

ago, despite being 15 years old. It is easier at this point to just know her as Buffy's sister as she is accepted as such. Tara is Willow's girlfriend and is also a witch, who introduced Willow to her powers. How can we not take this seriously? Slayers, Vamps, librarians, demons, geeks, and lesbians. Now that's entertainment!

Maybe that's the problem. How can this much fun be worthy of our attention and study? Is there guilt in such enjoyment when there is so much to be commended in form? James B. South, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Marquette University states that "after watching "Prophecy Girl," [Season One finale - 06/02/97] a television show became something different for me: no longer a form of entertainment or relaxation, but something worth my thinking about." <sup>2</sup>

Getting past the fact that it is on TV, which carries its own stigma, let's start with the title, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The name *Buffy* is what has gotten in the way. It suggests California valley girl with all the superficiality it can muster in a stereotype. *Vampire Slayer* is a different story. If it were called *The Slayer*, would it suggest a more serious tone? Even *Vampire Slayer* at least lends itself to classic tales of *Nosferatu* and the legend of Vampyrs and Dracul. It is, however, the full title credit that sets up the post-modernity of its narrative. Critic Robert Bianco agrees that it

is "[a] title that so many adults seemed to find off-putting: Buffy slays vampires. But if you look at the title again, you'll see the show isn't about what she does, it's about who she is. She was called to this role, which allowed Buffy to explore issues of responsibility most other series ignore."<sup>3</sup> It is both fun and venerable, but don't call it campy!

"I hate when people talk about Buffy as being campy. I hate camp. I don't enjoy dumb TV. I believe Aaron Spelling has single-handedly lowered SAT scores."<sup>4</sup>

"Camp" is defined as something self-consciously exaggerated or theatrical or something so outrageously artificial, affected, inappropriate, or out-of-date as to be considered amusing (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

There is no doubt that BtVS is consistently amusing and can be startlingly funny, but it moves past the cliches of camp to which the movie version seemed to cling. While the fantasy element of gothic horror (demons, spells, vampires) is certainly seen as an artificial or purely fictional element to the plot, there exists both a metaphor for real life issues and real life itself. In the episode 'Innocence' (01/20/98) when Buffy initially sleeps with her first true love, Angel, a spell removes his soul once again turning him evil. This is a change

Buffy cannot understand and her pain of the situation reflects the very real situation teen age girls deal with when sexual partners turn on them with stunted emotions. There is a big picture here which is not mocked, inappropriate, or out-of-date. Her boyfriend literally becomes the bad guy.

Again, Robert Bianco: "At heart, the vampires Buffy and her friends fought were metaphors for the monsters we all face – particularly in high school, where every decision seems like life and death, and every problem seems like the end of the world. The unexpected bonus in *Buffy* was the kids were right. They were facing down the apocalypse. And they did so while chatting in a slangy appropriation of pop culture references that was amusing without ever becoming forced or annoying." <sup>3</sup>

Outside of metaphor, BtVS also portrays the grave reality of life, death and evil in the world. In 'The Body' (02/27/01), Buffy finds her mother has suddenly died of natural causes. The emotional impact of 'real' death and its consequences was another turning point in the show, which consciously did not use music to play with emotion. Formulaic camp would play into the melodrama of the situation.

Yet another consistent motif in BtVS is the break from suspenseful melodrama to stark humor in any given scene. One way has been the development of 'Buffyspeak' whereby a language particular to the show effuses an element of humor to define the

current "big bad" or grave situation. This language can be seen as a kind of sub-cultural semiotics whereby the knowledgeable viewer has developed an understanding of such terms and has become part of that universe. Wanting to "get pelvic" with some "muffin" or "lunchable" on your "maiden voyage" is intrinsic to this world of BtVS.<sup>5</sup> Then there are the intertextual references to pop culture which relate directly to the sci-fi/horror audience.

BUFFY

I cannot believe that you, of all people, are trying to Scully me.<sup>6</sup>

This is an intertextual reference to the ever-doubting character Dana Scully of *The X-Files*. Both types of language are yet another element of postmodernism which weaves its way into the structure of this series.

Another element of humor and intertextuality is the irony of the text that pops up unexpectedly. This can be seen again in the latest episode 'Touched' (05/06/03). There is a long speech by Spike to Buffy trying both to motivate her at a time of apocalypse and declaring his love for her because of how special she is.

SPIKE

You are the One

BUFFY

I don't want to be the One.

SPIKE

I don't want to be so good looking and athletic, but we all have our crosses to bear. ("Touched" 05/06/03)

Also, when the First, being pure evil, appears to Faith as the principal from Season Three, he suddenly makes his case for his favorite character in *Little Women*, being his favorite book despite being from Hell. The irony, language, scripted intertextuality, and displaced humor all have a part in the postmodern structure of what could be a typical vampire show with all of the standard conventions. BtVS breaks these conventions and innovates a form of storytelling not seen anywhere else on television.

This reinvention of formula pertains to the series as a whole rather than just these individual episodes creating a mixture of form and content that pulls from the past and creates something new. There is a layering of genres that comprises the body of BtVS.

"We wanted to make a sort of short-attention-span, *The Simpsons*, cull-from-every genre all the time thing. You know, if we take this moment from *Nosferatu*, and this

moment from *Pretty in Pink*, that'll make this possible. A little *Jayne Eyre* in there, and then a little *Lethal Weapon* 4. Not 3, but 4. And I think this'll work" <sup>2</sup>

It is a self-aware, intertextual narrative that combines the teen beat with action, sci-fi, and gothic horror all the while continuing to surprise us. We become as much a part of the Scooby Gang in that we can never let our guard down. Twists in plot, sudden deaths of main characters, and continual growth make it far more involving than campy.

So then, what is there to sing about? That was the trick for Whedon. How to avoid the pitfalls of *Cop Rock* (1990). The function of a true musical is to further the story with song, not to add a little song after the primary scene like a tag along or stunt.

"I think stunts take you out of the narrative and they become more important than the show. I would never do something like a black-and-white episode that's just about the film and not about our guys and what they are going through." <sup>7</sup>

It is this concept of avoiding the "stunt" that lays the foundation for creating "Once More, With Feeling" and allows it

to reach for the pinnacle of post-modernism in BtVS. A musical exists as musical entertainment for its own sake. We do not question why Julie Andrews, Zero Mostel or even Nicole Kidman begin singing and where the music is coming from when not associated directly with a performance within the narrative. Of course, there are those examples of intertextuality wherein the very narrative is about making the music or musical, thus setting the stage for the post-modern musical. Joss Whedon takes the story and makes it about where the music is coming from in a kind of bricolage; re-creating the musical through the setting and history of BtVS.

The notion of meta-fiction is taken to a new form in "Once More, With Feeling" that we could call meta-*horror* fiction or perhaps meta-gothic horror given the encompassing vampire theme.<sup>8</sup> (Given the many layers of genres it may be hard to label specifically, but I will continue to utilize the term 'meta-gothic horror here in relation to the common term 'meta-fiction.')

In this case it is not about the making of the musical or the show, but about why they are in the musical. Why they are singing and dancing their way through the narrative becomes the narrative itself and it is due to a demonic threat directly related to character development and the history of BtVS. After the opening sequence and very 50's title cards with musical overture (see *The Donna Reed Show*), Buffy breaks into

the first number, "Going Through the Motions" describing her lack of passion lately, which has been indicated in earlier episodes. OK, so we are watching a musical. Normally there isn't any singing by the main characters and dancing demons. In scene #5, we return to normal as Buffy enters the Magic Box shop and greets her friends with the usual banter. Then, the question...

BUFFY (cont'd)

"... so, did anybody, um... last night. Did anybody, oh... burst into song?"

Everybody stops. The couples exchange looks.

XANDER

Merciful Zeus.

Ahead to...

TARA

We were talking, and then... It was like...

BUFFY

Like you were in a musical?

GILES

... of course that would explain the huge backing orchestra I couldn't see and the synchronized dancing from the room service chaps... <sup>9</sup>

(Every further script quote will come from endnote #9, unless noted otherwise)

This is then followed by one of many intertextual references to music, movies and pop culture regarding an argument about the film *Monkey Trouble*, which suddenly breaks into "harmonies and a dance with coconuts..." A follow up song soon follows referring directly to why they are singing and how to discover its origins. This is not only about the musical as narrative object, but about the context of the very narrative we are witnessing.

Taking a step further the gang wants to know if this is just a spell they are under or if everybody is affected. Going to the front door Buffy witnesses a man (Co-executive producer, David Fury) belting out the praises of a dry cleaner who "got the mustard out" with background singers and dancers.

BUFFY

It's not just us.

This will later be repeated with more supporting characters and extras trying to sing their way out of parking tickets (also, co-executive producer Marti Noxon) and dancing in sync while sweeping, while our main cast ignores them as background. The musical form is now completely self-aware. Just as the pages of the post-modern novel reflect the act of writing it and reading it, "Once More, With Feeling" reflects the acts of watching it

and performing in it. Each character is fully aware of their performance and comment on it, even while the performance is in direct keeping with the characters, their history and the ongoing narrative of the series and not just the episode.

Xander and Anya break into a RKO/MGM musical number, "I'll Never Tell," declaring their hesitations at being married in a future episode. This time it is performed directly to the camera and we the audience. Often typical and unquestioned in this era of movie musical format we can roll with it as part of the entertainment value. Whedon again takes it a step further.

ANYA

I felt like we were being watched, like a wall was missing from our apartment, like there were only three walls, no forth wall and ...

XANDER

Giles, you gotta stop it.

GILES

Well, I am following a few leads, and –

ANYA

Plus, our number was clearly a retro pastiche that's never gonna be a breakaway pop hit.

By referring directly to the "fourth wall" our characters are not only breaking the illusion of the fourth wall as created

by camera during the performance but are now discussing the technique. Again, we see the narrative being about the act of watching and performing the narrative itself. Then there is the commentary about the genre of the song, which is distressing to poor Anya in the scheme of things. The type of song she sings progressing the narrative is also a subject within the story.

So how is this meta-*gothic horror*? Throw in a dancing, singing demon making it all possible and gothic horror it is. What we come to realize is that a demon, referred to in the script only as "Sweet" but never having an actual name, has been summoned by one of the gang. He inspires all the song and dance, which has caused many to internally combust when emotion runs too high with the performance as seen at the end of Act One with the man tap dancing into oblivion. This is where we first meet Sweet dressed in a retro zoot-style suit, watching the incendiary dance proclaiming in reverential and cinematic fashion, "That's entertainment..."

Moving into Act Two we see another aspect of this self-referencing the musical as narrative form when Spike will be both surprised and disgusted that he is breaking into song, speaking his comments in between lyrics. Whedon is again taking the story and making it about the musical form as well as allowing his characters to grow as part of the big picture. In "Rest in Peace" Spike is proclaiming his love to Buffy and the

torture it provides him, which has been an on-going issue in their relationship. The fact that he is singing his feelings at this point gives it emotional punch with a rock ballad number, but it is not outside the scope of the storyline. The very act of his singing is both a part of the plot and within the narrative context of his character growth.

Making a claim to postmodernism is fairly elementary at this point. We have seen how the overall structure of BtVS has been intertextual, so continuing with "Once More, With Feeling" should be a logical progression. It is certainly meta-fiction as the dialogue clearly lays out the construct of the plot to be about why they are in the musical in the first place. The significance of this postmodern form of "Once More, With Feeling" is that it is actually an extension of the series turned up a notch and taken to a new level. It also needs to meet the expectations of a sophisticated audience who counts on the twists, the layers, the self-referential storytelling, whether they know it to be postmodern or not. To make a musical episode that becomes a long music video in the vain of "Rest in Peace" alone would be cheating an experienced and knowledgeable viewer. And, as a writer/producer/director, Whedon says, "Don't give people what they want, give them what they need.. With *Buffy* we'll do French farce one week and *Medea* the next week. We try very hard structurally not to fall into a pattern either, so

there's not a shootout in a warehouse every episode. I'm very much committed to keeping the audience off their feet. It's sort of antithetical to what TV is devised to do." <sup>10</sup>

It is a certainly a conscious effort to both layer the series from week to week with a variety of stories and form and to encapsulate each episode with it's own postmodern flair. The development of BtVS has bridged the gap between pop culture viewership and what has been referred to as "the priesthood," being a more sophisticated audience. This crossover is opposite but in relation to the postmodern novel that appeals to the erudite reader, who sees the significance of form, but also brings in a mass audience of readers that can enjoy the story. Popular examples of this can be seen in "Bridget Jones' Diary," "High Fidelity," and "The Hours," which are studied as post-modern texts but reached best-seller status.

This crossover appeal can currently be seen in a proliferation of texts and references to BtVS in publications outside the mainstream demographic of the show. What started as a cute WB show with a cult following, *Teen Beat* magazine pin ups and fan based web sites now has the attention and admiration of academe. 'Blood, Text and Fears: Reading Around Buffy the Vampire Slayer' was the first international academic conference on BtVS held at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK in October 2002 (the second of which will be at Middle Tennessee

University in May 2004). This has since spawned [www.slayage.tv](http://www.slayage.tv), publishing papers on a variety of subjects using *Buffy* as a model. Books such as 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale' and 'Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer' have been published as compilations from universities the world over. *Entertainment Weekly* magazine speaks of 'Fear and Trembling' as "the latest highbrow reading of what tenure strivers call the Buffyverse."<sup>11</sup> Even Bon Appetite magazine has devoted text to the religion of the gin martini only to end with how it should be eventually enjoyed watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer.<sup>12</sup>

We have seen the meta-gothic horror aspects of "Once More, With Feeling" giving it a post-modern structure to be sure. Given its self-referential, intertextual storyline, what other texts do we find it emulates? At the moment when the tap dancing man becomes the showstopper, the script reads,

"A man is dancing, a frenetic little tap dance that he has clearly been doing for hours – he is sweaty and panicking, but, Red Shoe-like (the ballet not the diaries), he can't stop."

The Red Shoe reference comes from the Hans Christian Andersen tale, *The Red Shoes*. It is about a girl who refuses to stop wearing her red shoes to church, so an angel places a 'spell' upon her shoes that make her dance uncontrollably when she wears

them. Eventually, she cannot take them off and she has an executioner cut off her feet in spite of her vanity. This grim tale is not only an obscure reference within the script but a theme that helps define the character, Sweet, and promotes the plot. It also provides a certain kind of literary pedigree within a seemingly pop-culture show.

Briefly expanding upon this literary background within *BtVS*, we also see that there is tremendous reliance on texts throughout the body of the show. Giles is British librarian and vigorously defends the ancient text as a tool and a weapon against evil. They are always referring to research in books, even when Willow is all too easily hacking into a computer database she is finding reference to text. This balance of stakes and swords with brain power and books mixed with irony can be considered a classic balance and form that epitomizes the "quality cinema" winning awards and respect. There is the history and strength of *Gladiator*, the wit and literary reverence of *Shakespeare in Love* and the historical layering and pop culture of *Moulin Rouge*.

This comparison to *Moulin Rouge* requires us to re-tell 'Once More, With Feeling' as post-modern musical with a palimpsest of styles. Joss Whedon is a self-described Sondheim fanatic. His inspiration goes on to include Frank Loesser, Stephen Schwartz and many of the pop musicals born of the 70's

and continue with *Rent* and *It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman*. You can easily see how the 40's and 50's construct *Once More, With Feeling* from the start with the opening credits and other numbers such as "I'll Never Tell," "They Got the Mustard Out," and "Walk Through the Fire," patterned after "a sort of 'Tonight' number from *West Side Story*." (script book)

Just as *Moulin Rouge* sets itself in turn of the century Paris and uses a medley of late 20<sup>th</sup> century pop songs to provide the musical and emotional text of the story, "Once More, With Feeling" is set in the present day with a musical construct from the past. Not only does it pull from the 50's musicals, such as *The Band Wagon*, but it goes back and forth through genres providing a radical eclecticism,<sup>13</sup> mixing styles in music, mise-en-scene, and costumes while maintaining the inherent element of gothic horror.

The first number sets the 'I want' (coined by Jeffrey Katzenberg) element of the story with 'Going Through the Motions' which Whedon admits is "a pure Disney number."<sup>5</sup> This allows Buffy to explain her problems and set the stage not only for the musical but for the finale, which is a bigger part of *BtVS* and not just the episode. The vision of this song emulates *The Little Mermaid* right up to the last shot when Ariel is singing 'Part of Your World' and hits that big note just as Buffy sings "ALIVE" through the vampire dust. Such a Disney

number is ironic considering the slaying going on and dancing goat demons in a grave yard. There is, however, that prototypical princely character with the open, flowing shirt and long hair that tries to serenade Buffy with thanks, whom she then cuts off and ignores in keeping with the humor elements discussed earlier. Here we have layers within layers providing an ironic mix of Disney feel-good with the killing of vampires and demons who break through that fourth wall in a dance routine.

Next we move into the Magic Box and establish that it is truly a musical and not pop opera as the dialogue continues as usual until the story calls for 'I Have a Theory,' which is a traditional multi-part song for the whole cast. Thrown into the mix is yet another layer of heavy metal rock opera for Anya to sing about the evil of bunnies. (This is a side note which originates back to a previous episode for her character.) This also has a parallel to a moment in the off Broadway *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* ('Random Number Generation') when a female character bursts into a song in the exact same way, discordant with the current melody. Ending the song is more commentary about the song itself, again manifesting the meta-fiction aspects whereby the story is about why they are performing. And yet, the performance is also about finding out why they are performing thus forwarding the narrative.

The 'big finale' production number about dry cleaning complete with coordinated clothing on hangers, choreographed dancers and sweeping crane shot throws us back again to the 50's MGM grand musical numbers credited to Arthur Freed, but only briefly. We then find ourselves in a love affair ballad as Tara sings 'Under Your Spell' to Willow. This song, along with costumes, dancing and animated 'pixie dust' hearkens back to the days of *Camelot*, *Mary Poppins* or even *Grease*.

Back to normal dialogue, Xander, Buffy and Giles discuss the situation when Dawn comments...

DAWN

Come on, songs, dancing around... what's gonna be wrong with that?

SMASH CUT TO:

Our Red Shoe-like tap dancer is bursting into flames as mentioned earlier and our first glimpse at the demon, Sweet, proclaiming, "That's entertainment..." right from *The Band Wagon* (1953), which will again be incorporated in a later dance sequence.

Act Two swings right into the 30's and 40's complete with art deco apartment and silk pajamas as Anya and Xander slide into 'I'll Never Tell.' Reminiscent of *Silk Stockings* and RKO

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers choreography, Noel Coward bedroom comedies style and ending with a collapse on the couch laughing from 'Good Mornin'' in *Singin' in the Rain*, this number also suddenly breaks that fourth wall as they sing right into the camera as mentioned earlier.

This sunny exposition will then parlay into the rock ballad Spike grudgingly sings, 'Rest in Peace,' bringing us more up to date in our historiographic layering with the likes of *Godspell* or the more modern *Rent*. This time, however, there is a departure from the MGM and RKO musicals with the visual flair of music videos that even includes staged stunts around a funeral procession at night with sharp, quick cutting. This perhaps plays right into the Billy Idol look Spike has going (which will later be referenced to in Season 7). Following this Dawn is kidnapped by the very 50's ventriloquist dummy henchmen and we finally meet the dancing demon, Sweet. His introduction is prefaced by a more classical attache dance number by Dawn that echos of Cyd Charisse with her classical ballet movements and modern dance choreography. Sweet then steps in with a little tap dance and zoot suit singing 'What You Feel.' The dance going down the steps is yet another appropriation from *The Band Wagon* as Jeffrey Cordova dances up the stairs, portraying the devil, at the beginning of the number 'That's Entertainment.' We are back into the 50's feel of the Technicolor MGM musical but with

a contemporary look to the stage set in The Bronze nightclub. We will now begin to have a mixing of layers whereby the set, the costumes, the dance, and the songs begin to overlap when the Scooby Gang meets the demon Sweet.

Cutting forward in time once again, as Buffy begins a workout she worries that "this whole session is going to turn into a training montage from an 80's movie" as seen in *Rocky* or *Flashdance*. We then get just that complete with slow motion knife throwing and martial arts kicking. What makes this different is that instead of the *Rocky* style music, Giles sings a ballad in real time while Buffy continues her slow motion workout oblivious to the performance. This is implicative of *Les Miserables* 'Empty Chairs at Empty Tables' when Marius sings with the seemingly invisible 'patrons' around him. Again we have layers within layers both in context and technique.

A pivotal point in the story is then reached when a reprise duet of Tara and Giles combining 'Under Your Spell' and 'Standing' takes place. These characters come to realizations within the bigger picture of the series and the songs progress that plot line. It's where co-executive producer Marti Noxon says that, "It takes some very pivotal character shifts and moves the story forward and leaves the characters in very different places than they were before. All of a sudden you realize, 'Oh my God, this is actually going to change

everything. It's not only a musical, it's a musical with a point."<sup>14</sup> This too separates "Once More, With Feeling," as not just stunt television, but as progressive storytelling with a post-modern twist. We do not have music for it's own sake. We have a layering of songs that develop the characters and the story within both the episode and the series.

Bringing back the prevailing theme of "Once More, With Feeling" and all it's elements, 'Walk Through the Fire' provides an ensemble montage of the characters bringing us to the climactic showdown as Sweet proclaims, "Showtime..." This piece is patterned after *West Side Story* complete with background dancers as Buffy makes her way through town. Again, though, the music video montage and superimposition push the visuals creating a complex mixture of styles leading into the finale.

When Buffy finally confronts Sweet we have a question and answer session that will bring us back to the *The Red Shoes* once again, but very subtly. *A Chorus Line* follows this same strategy questioning a dancer who expounds upon becoming a dancer because of *The Red Shoes* as she just wanted to dance all the time. This may be a stretch in thinking, but with all of the inspiration and appropriation from musical theatre thus far it cannot be ignored. Buffy even gets backup in her fight when Giles sends Anya and Tara in to help.

## GILES

She needs backup. Tara. Anya.

They rush to her aid only to sing AAAHHHs and dance behind her, much like in *A Chorus Line*. Again, here we also have an intertextual play on words providing "backup."

Buffy launches into what may be the most sumptuous number, 'Something to Sing About' with the lush background set in the Bronze complete with stage and show lighting on camera. We advance into a more contemporary set and strategy with the moves and vocals emulating the feel of *Rent*. This is a climactic moment for the series whereby Buffy divulges she was pulled from Heaven at the beginning of Season 6, much to the dismay of her friends. While not being the grand scale of 'Spectacular, Spectacular' at the end of *Moulin Rouge*, it does have similarities in that the number is a driving, climactic force advancing the plot with rhythmic changes in tempo. The opening song and dance begins slowly moving into a staccato fight sequence and back again. There is even an incorporation of a *Frankenstein/Monster Mash* move with Tara and Anya to remind us that we are still in the sci-fi, horror genre here. We then see a more modern solo as if in a night club which stops suddenly with Spike's serenade. All of this opens up the 'I want' from the opening number.

We conclude with the traditional gathering together of players for the group sing, 'Where Do We Go From Here?' setting the stage for the continuing of the series and opening the thoughts of the characters and their new revelations. Swinging back again to the big MGM/20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox musicals the title refrain from the chorus swells with the big Buffy and Spike kiss complete with old fashioned Fox titles and the closing curtain.

So, where do we go from here? Why the post-modern structure and why the musical? There is, what should now be, an obvious historiographic layering of musical styles within "Once More, With Feeling" as well as meta-fiction context with a gothic-horror twist. Going further, we can delve into the many intertextual references within the script such as describing Sweet as "some Lord of the Dance – but not the scary one, just a demon" referring to Michael Flatley.<sup>15</sup> There are also the more obscure references, such as Spike witnessing a "Chorago demon making like Yma Sumac," who is a noted Peruvian singer with incredible vocal range and his allusion to "seventy-six bloody trombones" from the breakaway pop hit in *The Music Man*. The list goes on, but our focus has to be the bigger picture.

*Moulin Rouge* provides a good comparison of what is considered a grand post-modern musical, whereby it too layers musical history in many ways. "Elephant Medley" is a prime example of how Baz Luhrmann meshes generations of pop music and

MTV camera techniques with turn of the century Paris all the while the mise en scene reflects that of a spectacular stage play or grand opera. Mix that with both the Bollywood style and MGM musicals they work to create as the climax and there is already enough in the pot for a robust post-modern flavor. Here too, BtVS gives us that mix of the RKO and MGM musicals, MTV and the "breakaway pop hit" combining stage and screen. The difference comes when you have a consistent blend of setting (Paris, 1900), costumes, and visual style in *Moulin Rouge* which gives it the depth of a generously layered lasagne, comprising many ingredients to create one encompassing dish. The eclectic shifts in tone and style in "Once More, With Feeling" are spread out like a plate of antipasti, where there too are many flavors but the taste can change with each bite along the plate. This is definitively seen with Anya and Xander's 'I'll Never Tell' 40's number which transitions to the fully MTV Rock number 'Rest in Peace' with Spike. Is it dabbling with genres or is there purpose?

I would suggest that the very nature of the plot answers this question. The meta-gothic horror aspect of the show suggests that our characters work to discover why they are literally singing their hearts out. The plot makes each character sing and dance their deepest individual fears and desires, thus each character must succumb to their own idiom.

Spike would not be singing a book number, but Anya has always portrayed a throw back style and wit, hence the "retro pastiche" she contends. So too with Tara whose demur persona shines with such a love ballad, sung extremely well I might add. Of course, Joss Whedon wrote to his actors strengths but the plot is folded into that along with a little appropriation.

So why the musical? Was the series painted into a corner and danced it's way out? Having already addressed the issue of it not being 'stunt' material, there is a precedent for BtVS to break the mold. With the all silent 'Hush' (11/03/99) episode and hard cutting starkness of 'The Body' (02/27/01) Joss Whedon has not been confined to the typical episodic structure of BtVS and each of those shows were also pivotal episodes in the season. Answering those critics of the song and dance may be Buffy herself.

#### BUFFY

I think you already know...

(sings)

LIFE'S A SHOW AND WE ALL PLAY OUR

PARTS

AND WHEN THE MUSIC STARTS

WE OPEN UP OUR HEARTS

IT'S ALL RIGHT IF SOMETHING'S COME

OUT WRONG

WE'LL SING A HAPPY SONG

AND YOU CAN SING ALONG

There was a rising tension with all the characters dealing with issues of death, rebirth, love, sex, lying, stealing. The musical was an ingenious way to open up their hearts and expose these issues with "seventy-six bloody trombones" instead of speeches and story arcs that tend to leave out sub-plots for far too long. It takes the gothic horror elements that have long existed and spices them up once more... with feeling.

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the nineties, but was also ridiculed for his flamboyant,  
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