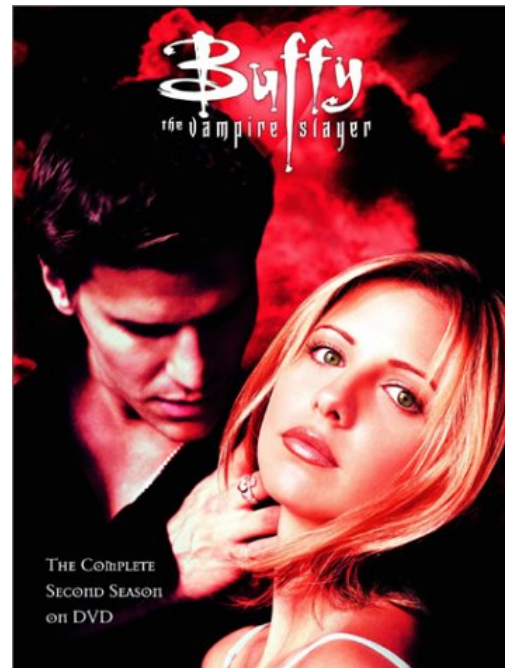




David Lavery
“Emotional Resonance and Rocket Launchers”:
Joss Whedon’s Commentaries on the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* DVDs*



I think everybody who makes movies should be forced to do television. . . . Because you have to finish. You have to get it done, and there are a lot of decisions made just for the sake of making decisions. You do something because it's efficient and because it gets the story told and it connects to the audience.

Joss Whedon, Interview in *The Watcher's Guide*, Vol. 2 (323)

The two things that matter the most to me: emotional resonance and rocket launchers. *Party of Five*, a brilliant show, and often made me cry uncontrollably, suffered ultimately from a lack of rocket launchers.

Joss Whedon, Audio Commentary for “Innocence”

(1) According to an old witticism (credited to, of all people, Otto von Bismarck), “Laws are like sausages, it is better not to see them being made.” Perhaps television shows and movies should be added to the list. The magic we so often experience as members of the audience of both media may well not be visible on the production set. With the advent of the DVD, however, we are now often given the opportunity to peek behind the curtain and see the wizard for what he is, especially when the wizard does the audio commentary. On the DVD releases of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s first and second seasons, the great and powerful Joss Whedon speaks over the two part pilot, “Welcome to the Hellmouth” and “The Harvest” (1001 and 1002; hereafter “Hellmouth” and “Harvest” respectively) and “Innocence” (2014), and in the process we are given the opportunity to see through his eyes how *Buffy* was made.[1]

(2) The Season One DVD is not the first time Whedon has emerged from behind the curtain. Previously released VHS boxed sets *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,[2] *The Buffy and Angel Chronicles*,[3] and *The Slayer Chronicles*[4] each contained interviews (placed either before or after the episode in question) in which Whedon offered behind-the-scenes insights into the show’s creation, and he has granted numerous online and print interviews as well (see the bibliography). But on the DVDs Whedon talks in real time accompanying the pilot, and in the process we learn a great deal about the realities—technical and economic limitations, on-set exigencies, ambitions and frustrations, actor proclivities—of television production. Whedon was making television for the first time and had much to learn about the process, and thanks to the magic of DVD we learn along with him.

(3) A third generation television writer, Whedon recalls in a recent interview with James Longworth that his childhood was filled with humorous dialogue.

I think my father's best work was probably done at our dinner table. . . . It was great to live around a writer, and my mother also wrote in her spare time, so the sound of typewriters was probably the most comforting sound in the world to me. I loved that. And while I really enjoyed all of the funny things my dad was working on, it was really just being around someone who was that funny. And all of his friends were comedy writers. So the house was constantly filled with these very sweet, erudite, intelligent guys just trying to crack jokes—my father's friends, my mother's friends, teachers, drama people. It just had a great air to it, and what you wanted to do is to go into that room and make those guys laugh. (199)

(4) Watching *Buffy* DVDs accompanied by Joss Whedon we become the recipients of this impulse. With self-deprecating humor—at the very beginning of his commentary on “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” setting the tone for what will follow, he promises to offer “hundreds of . . . well . . . like . . . four fascinating insights” into the creative process behind *Buffy*—Whedon makes us laugh, constantly, but we get sweetness, erudition, and intelligence as well, and we understand better how *Buffy* happens.

“I couldn’t afford the pony. I only had the dog”: The Ambitions, Limitations, and Frustrations of Making Television

(5) The “dog and pony show” of series television production apparently provided a rapid education for Joss Whedon, who, except for writing earlier shows like *Roseanne* and *Parenthood*, had no prior hands-on experience with making TV. As he acknowledges at the outset of his

commentary on “Innocence,” every aspiring television auteur thinks of his work, however, minor it may be, as equal in weight and importance to *Citizen Kane*.^[5] In reality, the strict parameters imposed on creative inclinations by small budget and time constraints force novice and veteran alike to find less expensive and more expeditious paths to quality. Whedon’s commentaries have much to say about this process.

- (6) The skateboard on which Xander makes his first appearance on the show (crashing into a railing on his first sight of Buffy) was quickly jettisoned because lighting such a moving figure was too complicated and expensive (“Hellmouth”).
- (7) The set on which scenes in Sunnydale High School were filmed in the first season was, in fact, a single hallway, shot from different angles, recast, and rehung as needed to give the impression that it was much larger (“Hellmouth”).
- (8) The dream sequence which follows the opening credits in “Welcome” was supposed to be elaborate and original. To save time and money it was in the end constructed out of imagery from future episodes of season one (“Hellmouth”).
- (9) In “The Harvest” Xander asks if vampires can fly. The possibility of flying vampires had to be rejected because of the special effects cost, as did other vampire motifs (e.g. vampires turning into bats).^[6]
- (10) The graveyard setting which figures so prominently in “Hellmouth” and “Harvest” was a real cemetery, which would be used for filming only rarely thereafter. Future graveyards—*BtVS*’s primal scene—would actually be redressed portions of the *Buffy* set parking lot (“Harvest”).
- (11) When Whedon first envisioned the Sunnydale High School Library, Rupert Giles proprietor, he had in mind something dark and labyrinthine, but at the time he had not given any thought to how such a design might be lit. The idea was jettisoned, and the library become more modern and bright (“Hellmouth”).

“Rabid Animals”: Working with Actors

(12) With tongue-firmly planted in cheek, Whedon attributes to colleague David Greenwalt the Hitchcockian belief that actors are “rabid animals and should be put down,” but in the DVD commentaries he shows tremendous respect for them and again and again heaps on his cast high praise (“Hellmouth”).

- (13) Whedon speaks of the sexiness and wit Tony Head brought to the role of Giles, qualities none of the others trying out for the part exhibited. As a result, Giles became much more than “boring exposition guy” (“Hellmouth”). (We also learn, in a recurring joke, that on-set Head apparently does not wear pants [“Innocence”].)
- (14) Whedon praises the tremendous specificity and great professionalism of Sarah Michelle Gellar as an actress (“Hellmouth”).
- (15) The WB had problems with the casting of Alyson Hannigan as Willow. Whedon wanted a truly ensemble cast exhibiting a wide range of looks and types; the network wanted a “supermodel in horn rims” to play Willow (“Hellmouth”). Obviously, Whedon won the battle. Early on, Whedon notes, he learned that Hannigan was especially masterful at exhibiting pain and fear, and putting her in danger became a staple of the show. (In an aside, he reassures us that, despite the persistent concern of fans, he will never, ever kill Willow [“Innocence”].)
- (16) We learn about his initial reluctance to cast David Boreanaz as Angel and his great admiration for him later (“Hellmouth”). In the “Innocence” commentary, Whedon recalls worrying, needlessly, whether he would be up to the transformation into Angelus. Boreanaz, Whedon quickly discovered, “plays a bastard with extraordinary aplomb” (“Innocence”).
- (17) Commenting on a scene from “The Harvest” in which Buffy and Xander flee through

the sewer, Whedon pays tribute to the great professionalism of the “rat actor.”

Inside Baseball

(18) Although he cautions viewers at the beginning of “Innocence” that he will have no hilarious anecdotes about the silly hijinks of Buffy’s cast because they are far too hard working and professional, Whedon does offer us scores of “inside baseball” tidbits from behind the scenes.

We learn that:

- (19) *BtVS*’ creators use pet names. The Sunnydale High School Library was known as the “Bat Cave” (“Hellmouth”). The mystical mumbo-jumbo that underpins demon behavior was known as “Flibottinum” (the term is David Greenwalt’s—the spelling mine) (“Harvest”).
- (20) The idea of the Hellmouth, and the origin myth of the show in general, contributed mightily to selling the show to the WB. Later, Whedon admits, it became a handy shortcut way of explaining the inexplicable.
- (21) The scene in which Giles and Buffy have it out about her reluctance to assume her slayer duties was actually shot eight months after the rest of the episode.^[7] In the version as originally shot Gellar had come across as far too angry (“Hellmouth”).
- (22) Angelus’s cruel dismissal of Buffy’s concern for him the first time they meet after having sex, a scene which transpires in his bedroom with Angelus shirtless, had been already filmed—to no one’s satisfaction—outside of Buffy’s house (“Innocence”).
- (23) Whedon had toyed with the idea of placing Eric Balfour (Jesse in the first two episodes) in the opening credit sequence, thereby leading viewers to conclude that he would be a regular, only to kill him off in “The Harvest” (“Hellmouth”). Later, of course, Whedon would develop a fondness for killing off essential characters: Jenny Calender, Maggie Walsh, Joyce Summers, and Tara in *Buffy*; Doyle in *Angel*.
- (24) The decision was made early on to tone down the California speak prominently displayed in the pilot (“Hellmouth”).
- (25) Joss was concerned about the degree to which Giles appeared to be in-the-face of Buffy in Sunnydale High scenes in “Hellmouth.” He imposed that old standard of nun-enforced Catholic school discipline: the 6 inch rule.
- (26) When Buffy, dressing for her first trip to the Bronze and trying on outfits, verbalizes her look before a mirror, announcing, “Hi. I’m an enormous slut,” the phrasing caused a bit of consternation for the network (“Hellmouth”).
- (27) The first two seasons of *BtVS* were filmed by Michael Gershman, director of photography, on 16 mm, though no one knew. Whedon praises Gershman’s “beautiful and eerie” lighting of the series and the superb “palette” he exhibits as a DP (“Hellmouth”).
- (28) Cordelia’s rejection of Jesse in The Bronze in *Welcome to the Hellmouth* is word for word from Joss’s own life.
- (29) The WB was uneasy with the show’s “schizophrenic” combination of horror, drama, and comedy (exemplified in the title), not because they were opposed to it but because they were uncertain how to market it (“Hellmouth”).
- (30) Nerf Herder’s original recording of the *Buffy* theme for the pilot was flawed—the beat is noticeably lost at one point—and had to be re-recorded (“Harvest”).
- (31) Joss feared that the show’s mythology—in particular the idea that demons were the primordial inhabitants of the earth and that there was no original paradise—would be more offensive than it turned out to be (“Harvest”).
- (32) Joss and all the directors came to find shooting the obligatory library exposition scenes a real challenge. How to make them unique and visually interesting became a

weekly challenge (“Hellmouth”).

- (33) Computers came to function as a “shameless” all-purpose plot mechanism. Willow is able to hack into just about any website or database and acquire any information the narrative might require (“Hellmouth”). (*Buffy* is full of such factors, including the tunnels of Sunnydale, which provide a handy transportation system for vampires, and the oft-consulted Book of Thoth, which serves as the all-purpose bible of demon knowledge [“Harvest”].)
- (34) The actors who played vampires, especially David Boreanaz, had some difficult talking with fangs (“Harvest”).
- (35) In an unintentionally provocative shot in “The Harvest” in which Luke pledges his allegiance, the mise-en-scene appears to suggest that the disciple is performing fellatio on The Master.
- (36) The decapitation of a vampire (in the final showdown with Luke and his minions in The Bronze) by a cymbal thrown by Buffy was edited out when the episode aired in Britain (“Hellmouth”).
- (37) Part of the inspiration behind the appearance of Spike and Drusilla (and later Angelus) in Season Two was to introduce younger villains, who could actually function in the real lives of the Scoobies, a far cry from the distant and remote Master of Season One (“Innocence”).
- (38) Joss admits that Nicholas Brendon is “way too hunky” to actually play a schlemiel like Xander, but he speaks admiringly about the actor’s ability to “bring on the Shemp” (“Hellmouth”).^[8]
- (39) Whedon admits that the idea of a “Gypsy curse” may be “hokey” but explains that he went with it because he rejected the alternatives (“Danish curse”) and “loves the classics” (“Innocence”).
- (40) As a script doctor often called upon to find the means to reconcile the unreconcilable, Whedon is especially proud of the notion, articulated by Uncle Enyos in “Innocence,” that vengeance has a life of its own and must be served, which enabled him to explain the escape clause of Angel’s curse (“Innocence”).
- (41) Speaking admiringly (“Innocence”) of the performance of Robia La Morte as Jenny Calendar, Whedon comments. “And what did we do to thank her? We killed her” (by Angelus in “Passion” [2017])
- (42) The pouring rain that gives atmosphere to Xander’s visit to a military base to steal a rocket launcher was not in the script (“Innocence”) but rather a happy accident.
- (43) The blossoming love between Willow and Oz was strongly opposed by the fans, who wanted Willow to be with Xander (“Innocence”).
- (44) The words Angelus scrolled in blood on the wall at the scene of his murder of Uncle Enyos (“Was it good for you too?”) prompt Whedon to speak of his amazement at what *Buffy* is sometimes able to “get away with” (“Innocence”).
- (45) We learn that the original “no weapon forged” that was to be used to defeat The Judge was to be a Tank—the rocket launcher was David Greenwalt’s idea (“Innocence”). Though its cost seemed beyond their means, they knew they simply had to have it.
- (46) With mordant humor, Whedon expresses his comic conviction that “Killing extras” is “always funny.” (He has in mind the scene in which The Judge incinerates his first victim in the mall in the climactic scene of “Innocence.”)
- (47) When Buffy hoists the rocket launcher to her shoulder, about to obliterate The Judge as he stares uncomprehending at her from across the mall (“What’s that do?” he asks), Whedon acknowledges that “I’ve never loved her more” (“Innocence”).
- (48) Whedon admits, with great tenderness and a double entendre, that the final, low-key denouement of “Innocence,” in which Buffy and her mother watch an old movie on TV and celebrate her birthday with cupcakes and a single candle, made him just as happy

as “his big man toy” (his rocket launcher).

“My incredibly low-budget attempt to do Sam Peckinpah”: Cinematic Influences

(49) Not surprisingly for a film studies graduate of Wesleyan University, Joss Whedon reveals in his audio commentaries his movie influences.

- (50) The clash in the opening theme music, in which the drone of an organ, a staple of horror movie music, is replaced by rock and roll was intended to signal that *Buffy* would not play by the rules of the traditional horror film. [**Editor's note:** for more on this, see [Janet Halfyard's essay in Slayage 4.](#)] This collision is echoed, as Whedon also points out, in the frequent altercations between Giles, whose generic roots are in the von Helmsings of British horror, and Buffy.
- (51) Describing the final showdown with The Judge in the shopping mall in “Innocence,” Whedon acknowledges that the slow-motion violence of the scene is his attempt to do “Peckinpah.”
- (52) As Drusilla and Angelus flee from the oncoming rocket Buffy uses to destroy The Judge, Whedon admits his indebtedness to a similarly choreographed scene in [Luc Besson's *The Professional*](#) (1994) (“Innocence”).
- (53) With images from [Blue Velvet](#) in mind, Whedon describes the sex scene between Buffy and Angel in “Innocence” as [Lynchian](#).
- The backward head-butt Buffy uses in the show down with Luke in The Bronze (in “The Harvest”) was inspired by Abel Ferrara's [China Girl](#) (“Harvest”).
- (54) Discussing his love of long takes (“one-ers,” as they are called in TV techno-speak), he cites the influence of French New Wave director [Marcel Ophüls](#) and American auteur [Woody Allen](#). And he seeks to distinguish his intention in using them from the style of “[Brian DePalma-see-how-far-I-can-take-my-stedicam-before-I-run-out-of-film](#)” (“Innocence”).
- (55) In Whedon's eyes, the three way standoff in “Innocence” between Xander and Jenny Callendar, Angelus (holding Willow captive), and Buffy (the scene in which Angelus first reveals himself without a soul to the Scoobies) evokes the style of a gunfight in a western (the films of Spaghetti-Western master [Sergio Leone](#) are alluded to). In the same scene, the shot of Angelus in vamp face standing in shadow, not quite visible, in the school doorway recalls for Whedon the Joker's first appearance before Boss Grissom in Tim Burton's [Batman](#) (1989).
- (56) Emphasizing his view that a horror narrative should abide by its own rules and exhibit internal consistency, Whedon speaks sarcastically of the scene in [Blade](#) (1998) in which vampire Deacon Frost is able to walk in sunlight thanks to his use of a special sunscreen (“Harvest”). (With great embarrassment Whedon points out a few moments—the scene in “The Harvest,” for example, in which Angel is clearly standing in sunlight—in which *Buffy* unintentionally violates its own rules.)

(57) “Freedom,” **Robert Frost once observed**, “is swinging easy in harness.” Though he began as “Mister - I - don't - know - how - to - make - a-television - show” (“Hellmouth”), Joss Whedon has mastered the TV harness as well as any of his contemporaries, and he concedes that what he really “love[s] about my show is the amount of cheese that we can sort of get away with, the amount of how little money we have and how we make it look a little more epic than it is” (“Innocence”). But he continues to chafe at the bit. In an interview in *The Watchers's Guide*, Vol. 2, he confesses that “I'm getting to the point now where I'm like, ‘Okay, I've told a lot of stories. I've churned it out.’ I just feel like I want to step back and do something where I can't use

the excuse of 'I only had a week'" (323). When he does finally get the chance to make that big-budget film, we will anxiously await its release on DVD. The director's commentary, no doubt, will make it worth the price.

* In an e-mail on Sept. 2, 2002, British independent scholar John Briggs wrote the author with the following fascinating observations concerning this essay. His comments are based on research that will be presented in a talk, "Unaired Pilot or Bad Quarto: Textual Problems in Buffy and Shakespeare in an Internet Age," at the October 2002 Buffy conference in the UK. I add them here with his permission.

Your para (6): the skateboarding sequence appears in Whedon's draft pilot script (the precursor of the "unaired pilot"). Whedon had presumably discovered the difficulty and expense of the sequence when directing the "unaired pilot" - he has Xander simply walk up to Willow carrying the skateboard - but he still retained it in his script for "Hellmouth".

Your para (11): the dark and labyrinthine library is in the draft pilot script. This is jettisoned in the "unaired pilot" - "Hellmouth" retains the shortened version of that scene.

Your para (15): Whedon doesn't actually say that the WB had problems with the casting of Alyson Hannigan as Willow, nor is it obvious that Whedon won the battle. In the "unaired pilot" Willow is played by Riff Regan, a choice so bizarre that it can only have been Whedon's. A "close reading" of Whedon's words, combined with Hannigan's own guarded version in interviews, would suggest that she was actually originally the Network's choice! (Incidentally, being put in danger is Willow's sole purpose in the draft pilot script. This, coupled with the absence of a Jesse at that stage, makes one wonder if she was originally envisaged as a disposable character.)

Your para (21): the re-shooting of parts of the library exposition scene of "Hellmouth" cannot possibly have been eight months later (it would have been five at most). My suggestion is that Whedon is thinking of the first shooting of this scene for the "unaired pilot", which could well have been eight months earlier (perhaps a bit more). The version in the "unaired pilot" (which Whedon directed himself) is very close to the version in "Hellmouth", so this would have made it one of the most rehearsed scenes in the series. That was probably why Whedon didn't bother supervising the shooting. He directed the re-shooting of parts of the scene himself, and the original director has not directed another episode for the series.

Your para (24): as "Hellmouth"/"The Harvest" wasn't really a pilot (one of the issues I shall discuss in my paper), the decision "early on" to tone down the California-speak was probably made at the end of the first series (which was, of course, before the show had aired).

[1] Other key *Buffy* players also provide commentary on the second season DVDs. David Greenwalt makes “Reptile Boy” (2005) much more interesting than it ever seemed before, and Marti Noxon talks us through “What’s My Line,” Parts One and Two (2009, 2010).

[2] “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” “The Harvest,” “The Witch” (1003), “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date” (1005), “Angel” (1007), and “The Puppet Show” (1009).

[3] “Surprise” (2013), “Innocence” (2014), “Passion” (2017), “Becoming,” Part I (2021), and “Becoming,” Part II (2022).

[4] “Bad Girls” (3014), “Consequences” (3015), “Enemies” (3017), “Earshot” (3018), “Graduation Day,” Part One (3021), and “Graduation Day,” Part Two (3022).

[5] *Citizen Kane*, Whedon reminds us, should we not know, is a “black and white film about a bald guy.”

[6] In “Buffy vs. Dracula” (5001), of course, *Buffy* does offer us bat transformations.

[7] The dialogue from the scene I am referring to is as follows:

Buffy: Oh, why can't you people just leave me alone?

Giles: Because you are the Slayer. (comes down the stairs) Into each generation a Slayer is born, one girl in all the world, a Chosen One, one born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires . . .

Buffy: (interrupts and joins in) ...with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires, to stop the spread of their evil blah, blah, blah... I've heard it, okay?

Giles: I really don't understand this attitude. You, you've accepted your duty, you, you've slain vampires before...

Buffy: Yeah, and I've both been there and done that, and I'm moving on.

Giles: What do you know about this town? (goes into his office)

Buffy: It's two hours on the freeway from Neiman Marcus?

Giles: Dig a bit in the history of this place. You'll find a, a steady stream of fairly odd occurrences. Now, I believe this whole area is a center of mystical energy, (comes back with four books) that things gravitate towards it that, that, that you might not find elsewhere. (sets them on the table)

Buffy: Like vampires.

He puts the volumes into Buffy's arms one by one as he lists off various monsters and demons.

Giles: Like zombies, werewolves, incubi, succubi, everything you've ever dreaded was under your bed, but told yourself couldn't be by the light of day. They're all real!

[8] Presumably a reference to Shemp Howard, one of The Three Stooges. To learn more about him, go here: <http://www.3-stooges.com/text/shemp.html>

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