

A Buffy Family Tree: 'Bones' and Demons and Rabid Fans



Twenty years ago this month, the Hellmouth opened, and television hasn't been the same since.

On March 10 in that long-ago year, an upstart network called WB broadcast the first episode of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," Joss Whedon's smart, campy, funny series about a teenage girl who is the world's best defense against all sorts of demonic forces.

Five years earlier, a movie of the same name written by Mr. Whedon hadn't made much of an impression, but the TV show, with Sarah Michelle Gellar in the title role and a perfectly cast collection of supporting characters, became a phenomenon.

With its girl-power message and its deft mix of horror, humor and romance, "Buffy" quickly developed a passionate fan base. Teenagers watched it. College students developed drinking games around it. Tweener girls and their mothers made it the kind of bonding ritual later identified with "Gilmore Girls."

The series, which ran for seven seasons (the final two on UPN), drew just over five million viewers at its peak, but its influence was far larger than its audience. Here's a quick look at a few of the branches that sprung from the "Buffy" tree and continue to shape television.

BUFFY: Season One TRAILER Video by BuffyverseTrailers - Then Came the Flood Of All Those Undead

"Buffy" wasn't the first TV series to traffic in vampires — just ask fans of "Dark Shadows," the 1960s soap opera. But before "Buffy," vampires, zombies and other assorted demons were mostly the stuff of formulaic horror movies.

'Buffy the Vampire Slayer,' Reimagined by Its Fans MARCH 27, 2017

In 'Game Change' on HBO, Julianne Moore Plays Sarah Palin MARCH 8, 2012

Critic's Notebook: 'Bones' and 'Sleepy Hollow' Cross-Pollinate OCT. 28, 2015

'Switched at Birth,' a Series Illuminating a World Without Words JAN. 30, 2017

After “Buffy,” television of the undead not only proliferated, but it was also expected to have a certain level of sophistication. “Buffy” used the monsters that crossed into the human world through the Hellmouth as a metaphor for the horrors of high school, which in turn were a metaphor for the horrors of life in general.

As the generation that was the target “Buffy” audience has grown into the generation old enough to be making TV shows, the undead genre has become only more ambitious. The WB’s successor, CW, has stayed in the game with dramas including “The Vampire Diaries” and “The Originals,” while on other networks series like “Being Human,” “Helix,” “True Blood” and “The Walking Dead” have reached different audiences, allegorically exploring geopolitics, L.G.B.T. rights, and the nature of identity and humanity itself. Even some of the lighter entries in the genre, like the comedy-drama “iZombie,” another CW series, mix depth with their brain-eating antics.

Chickens, Forensics And Career Boosts

Ms. Gellar has had a range of TV and film roles since “Buffy,” including starring opposite Robin Williams in his final television series, “The Crazy Ones,” but some of Buffy’s sidekicks have fashioned even more visible careers.

David Boreanaz, who played one of Buffy’s forbidden-love interests, first starred in a spinoff series, “Angel,” that ran for five seasons, then landed in one of the most successful crime shows of recent years, “Bones,” which when it concludes later this month will have amassed 246 episodes. Alyson Hannigan, who played Willow, Buffy’s best friend, had her own run of 200-plus episodes, in “How I Met Your Mother.”

Dozens of other actors also received career boosts. Two of the more interesting alumni are Seth Green and Danny Strong. Since his “Buffy” stint as the werewolf Oz, Mr. Green has worked regularly as an actor and voice-over artist. But he is also a creator or producer of some of the most cutting-edge animated TV series out there, including Adult Swim’s “Robot Chicken.” Mr. Strong, who played a troubled student named Jonathan on “Buffy” and later had a tasty story arc on “Gilmore Girls,” has also been busy behind the scenes. With Lee Daniels, he created the hit series “Empire,” and his writing credits include the TV movies “Recount” and “Game Change.”

Don’t Cry, It’s Only Teenage Angst Lan

For decades, television’s portrayal of youth had a 1950s sheen to it. Teenage characters were allowed to have car trouble and fret about going steady, but sexual identity, suicide, self-harming and social ostracism usually weren’t on the agenda.

All of those subjects and more were addressed head-on in “Buffy.” Before the series was through, Willow, who at one point dated Oz the werewolf, was in a lesbian relationship. One episode, “Earshot,” in which a student brought a rifle to school with apparently lethal intent, was accidentally so topical it had to be delayed: The Columbine massacre had happened a week before it was to air.

The series, with its intricately constructed “Buffyverse” and fearlessness in tackling substantive issues, spawned academic treatises, seminars and cultural-studies courses that looked at its feminism, its diversity, its place in the long literary tradition of vampires and ghouls.

The series took teenagers, their problems and their insights far more seriously than practically any show before. Television has continued to do so, from “Dawson’s Creek,” which began the year after “Buffy” did, right up through “Pretty Little Liars,” “Switched at Birth” and other current shows.

Switched at Birth 5x03 Sneak Peek #3 "Surprise" (HD) Season 5 Episode 3 Sneak Peek #3 Video by tvpromosdb

The Fans Discover Their Internet Voices

“Buffy” appeared early in the internet age, and as viewers, especially young ones, discovered the show, many of them also discovered one another via chat rooms and other emerging forms of what would today be labeled social media.

Episodes were intricately dissected by fans on message boards like the Bronze (named for a nightclub on the show), a phenomenon that a few shows, like the Fox series “The X-Files,” had already experienced but was still relatively new. And Mr. Whedon and some of the show’s writers and stars would sometimes chime in with posts of their own, a Twitter-like back-and-forth long before Twitter existed.

A large body of fan fiction has also been written by “Buffy” fans over the years, taking the characters in all sorts of directions Mr. Whedon may never have envisioned. There’s an entire website of “Buffy”/“NCIS” crossover fiction. Currently, the Whedon-authorized Buffyverse lives on in a Dark Horse Comics series, in which it is now Season 11.