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Singing Their Hearts Out: The Problem of Performance in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*

[1] The narratives of film and television have a long history of representing acts of performance, with professional performers playing other performers, both fictitious and factual. These range from the "backstage musicals" so popular in the 1930s and 1940s, to biopics of classical composers and popular musicians, and television series such as *Fame*. More recently, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spin-off *Angel* have also regularly included musical and dramatic performances by the principal characters as a feature of the narrative but, unusually, these characters frequently perform very badly. [1] This essay examines the singing and performing of the principal characters, and the curious nature of performance in "Once More, with Feeling" (B6007) from *BtVS* Season Six, to draw some conclusions about the unusual position that performance occupies within the Buffyverse.[2]

[2] The first examples of performing occur towards the end of *BtVS* Season One. "The Puppet Show" (B1009) centers on the school talent show in which all the principal-character students take part. Cordelia is seen singing "The Greatest Love of All" which, of course, is "learning to love yourself", an ironic yet revealing comment on the self-obsessed character of first-season Cordelia. She clearly believes herself to be quite talented whereas in fact she is out of tune and has an awkward stage presence in marked contrast to her off-stage sophistication.

[3] In the same episode, Buffy, Willow and Xander, are forced into performing a dramatic scene, an extract from the Greek tragedy *Oedipus*, and a tragic performance it is, with stilted and badly remembered dialogue, Willow finally fleeing from the stage in panic. The theme of performance is then continued in the following episode, "Nightmares" (B1010, where Willow's nightmare is finding herself onstage expected to sing the role of Madame Butterfly. The trauma of this experience reprises itself in the finale of Season Four, "Restless" (B4022), where in her First-Slayer induced dream, Willow again finds herself about to go on stage in a production for which she has had no rehearsal and for which she does not know the words. The earlier episode is referenced again when Willow checks to make sure that the production they are about to do is not *Madame Butterfly* as she has "a whole problem with opera."

[4] Immediately, however, we must acknowledge that art is not mirroring life and that characters who cannot perform are rather evidently being played by people who can: Willow may be a hopeless actress and a terrible singer, but Alyson Hannigan is not. We hear very little of her singing in "Once More, with Feeling", but what we do hear is in tune and in time, and therefore competent at the very least; and she is clearly a gifted actress. Likewise, Cordelia sings dreadfully in *BtVS* Season One, gives a terrible performance as Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* ("Eternity," 1017) in *Angel* Season One and sings "We are the Champions" drunkenly with Wesley and Gunn in Season Two ("Redefinition," 2011). Again, as with Willow/ Alyson Hannigan we know at one level that Cordelia is a

fictitious character who cannot perform well being played by a very able actress called Charisma Carpenter. We already know, from “The Puppet Show” (B1009), that Xander and Buffy can act no better than Willow, although obviously Nicholas Brendon and Sarah Michelle Geller can (and do) act very well.

[5] It is clearly a deliberate script-writing decision that the Buffyverse should be populated by people who perform badly on stage, but it appears to be the stage itself, the formalized act of performing, that is in some way problematic. Away from the stage, Buffy obviously fancies herself as a stand-up comedienne, practicing her slayage one-liners and expressing disappointment when her vampire victims do not seem suitably impressed by her delivery, but this ability is restricted to the ‘real’ world of slaying. Put her in the field, and she can deliver; put her on the stage and she cannot, something made quite explicit in “Wild at Heart” (B4006), which opens on Buffy running away from the college campus, pursued by a vampire. Her flight is intentional, to get her away from public view, as she then explains as they fight:

> Thanks for the relocate. I perform better without an audience. [She and the vampire fight.] You were thinking, what, a little helpless co-ed before bed? You know very well, you eat this late [she stakes him] you're gonna get heartburn. Get it? Heartburn? [He turns to dust without responding.] That's it? That's all I get? One lame-ass vamp with no appreciation for my painstakingly thought-out puns. I don't think the forces of darkness are even trying. I mean, you could make a little effort here, you know? Give me something to work with.

There are several regular characters who do sing well. Lorne, Darla and Lindsey all acquit themselves professionally at the karaoke bar, Caritas; Giles and Oz are both musicians, Oz with his band and Giles with his guitar, although we never hear Oz sing as such.[3] Initially, Giles’ singing is a solitary activity that is not revealed to us, but in Season Four we see him both performing in the local coffee bar and singing at home. Oz, of course, is a werewolf and one might argue that competent music-making or performance is a mark of the outsider, of Otherness. The Host and Darla are non-humans, whilst Lindsey is a human working for the demons, his loyalties divided in such a way as to make him an outsider in all available camps; in *BtVS* Season Four, the two most obvious musicians are Oz and fellow werewolf Veruca, whose Otherness is quite explicit; and Giles’ Englishness might also qualify him as an Other in California.

[6] This idea, however, does not stand up to the slightest scrutiny. Almost every principal character on the ‘forces of good’ side in both *BtVS* and *Angel* can make a claim for Otherness: preternaturally gifted Slayer; gay witch; former demon; werewolf; Englishman and/or vampire. Cordelia ends up part demon, Gunn is the only regular-cast black character in either series and Fred is a physicist: given the largely negative portrayal of scientists in the Buffyverse, as represented by the *BtVS* Season Four confrontation with The Initiative, and the Season One encounters with praying mantis science teachers and demon-infested computers, being a physicist working for Angel Investigations arguably marks Fred as a reformed Other in the same way as Anya and Angel himself. Meanwhile, Xander, a non-supernatural, white, heterosexual human male could

probably use this exceptional non-Otherness as a claim in its own right. Otherness is clearly an important concept in the Buffyverse, but the process of Othering characters is less about making them unsympathetic or threatening, and more to do with requiring us to judge characters by what they do rather than by what they are: we cannot make assumptions about characters based on their intrinsic physical nature. Relating this to performance, whilst there are clearly those who are naturally good performers, being a good performer is more of a thing one does than a thing one is. It is a question of confidence, self-awareness, and can be learned through training or experience, including being able to sing in tune. Given the writers' decisions to populate the Buffyverse with characters who variously can and cannot perform well, what are the rules and codes underlying who can sing in the Buffverse?

Singing and singers

[7] Anyone can sing, even if they cannot sing beautifully. Most professional singers will describe themselves as singers rather than musicians, because a musician is usually understood to be an instrumentalist, and there are significant differences between singing and playing music.[4] While many people can sing competently without having had any kind of tuition, it is much more unusual to find a proficient instrumentalist who has never had any formal or informal instruction in how to play.

[8] Another difference stems from the fact that almost all instruments are positioned across the body (the torso or the face) when one plays them. The singer, on the other hand, stands before the audience with at most a microphone between them, which does not mediate the performance space in the same way, because the 'instrument' is not the microphone but the body itself. The true mechanism of the sound's production is completely concealed within the singer's body and one of the results of this is that singers, unlike instrumentalists, are expected to look at the audience (as the audience in turn gazes back), creating a type of immediacy and intimacy between singer and audience that is different from other types of musical performance: an instrumentalist who fixed the audience with an unwavering gaze would be frankly disconcerting.

[9] Lastly, where a problem in sound production for an instrument might be blamed on some mechanical failure, the singer's voice is, in a very real sense, the singer. A concomitant problem of this is that to criticize a singer's voice is, in effect, criticizing the person, an aspect of singing personified in the figure of the pop diva or operatic prima donna as a hysterical and fundamentally insecure character. An instrument with a poor tone can be replaced: a larynx cannot. This is part of the paradox of the voice: it is inside the body yet it is also the means by which one sends sounds out to communicate with the world. It is both internal and external, and as Jonathan Rée (1999) points out, the paradoxes do not end there. The voice can use language to communicate linguistic, abstract ideas, or can yell or laugh to communicate emotional ones:

> Voices thus encode an intriguing human tension, even a contradiction: they are both expression and communication, both feeling and intellect, both body and mind, both nature and culture.

> The whole of us, it would seem, is included in the compass of the human voice. (16)

Singing is positioned very firmly within this set of oppositions. When one sings, there is an assumption that the singer is sincere, that we are indeed hearing the person, their self, their soul laid bare. In singing, we reveal ourselves: "[i]t is as if your voice were as private and vulnerable as your defenseless naked body" (Rée 1999, 1).

[10] However, a professional singer is not like an ordinary person when it comes to singing, but takes on a form of Otherness, adopting specialized strategies (disguises, even) to enhance the *appearance* that the soul is being laid bare. In addition, one of the greatest paradoxes of the act of singing is that using the voice, that ultimate expression of the self, the singer is almost always also an actor (explicitly or implicitly), often singing first person, present tense narratives that may or may not represent his or her own history, and using particular vocal tricks in order to convince us that this is real. As Simon Frith (1998) describes:

> In popular cultural terms, good talkers are mistrusted as well as admired: people who have a "way with words"--the seducer, the salesman, the demagogue, the preacher--are people with power, and the power to use words is a power to deceive and manipulate. Sincerity may then be best indicated by an inability to speak (as in soul vocal convention) or though an aural contradiction between the glibness of the lyric and the uncertainty of the voice (as in much male country music) (168)

Singers, therefore, negotiate a very slippery territory: in order to sound genuinely convincing, they must not sound too polished. The vocabulary of professional singing is full of subtle tricks which form a cultural code of emotional sincerity, perhaps most obviously seen in the way singers from Pavarotti to Alanis Morrisette allow the voice to break, employing breath noises, catches, sobs and glitches in the sung line and the vocal timbre that indicate the depth of their emotion. These are recreations of the normally involuntary vocal sounds associated with physical and emotional stress: the very mechanisms employed to convince the audience of the singer's sincerity are arguably a form of deception.

[11] With this in mind the politics of singing in *Buffy* and *Angel* become much more transparent, and sincerity appears to be the key issue governing whether a character can be permitted to sing in tune or act well: rather than the intentionally subtly flawed singing of the professional, here the sheer bad singing of the amateur (Frith's "inability" to speak or sing taken to its literal extreme) appears to be an indication of the extent to which we can trust a character to be who or what they appear: they are incapable of deceiving us with vocal trickery, regardless of the abilities of the actors who play them. Being on stage indicates an intention to perform and an intention, potentially, to pretend to be something one is not, which is therefore different from the motivations underlying "performances" in the field, such as Buffy's one-liners. Using this principle, examining the singing in specific episodes reveals how ideas of sincerity (or lack of it) are articulated, and how this in turn informs our perceptions of the characters who sing.

Giles and Lindsey

[12] There is an important distinction to be made with regard to the characters who are essentially on the side of the angels and yet can sing to a high standard, specifically Giles and Lindsey. **[Editors' note]** They have in common the fact that that they are musicians, guitarists, rather than simply singers. [5] Lindsey is the only character who does not sing karaoke when he performs in Caritas: in "Dead End" (A2018) he brings his guitar along and sings a song apparently of his own composition, again enhancing the sense that what he sings is genuinely felt rather than simply the reiteration of someone else's thoughts and feelings.

[13] Similarly, we discover in Season Four that Giles is a musician, a theme which recurs throughout this season in particular. It is first introduced in "Wild at Heart" (B4006) when Oz defends Giles's unexpected appearance in the Bronze. Having seen Giles' record collection, Oz asserts Giles's right to be there as someone with the correct cultural credentials to be admitted into the youth-and-music subculture of the Bronze: even if he is now a little old and irredeemably English, nonetheless "he was an animal in his day."

[14] The two episodes in which we see Giles singing (as opposed to seeing him dreaming that he is singing, which occurs later) also take steps to mitigate the extent to which he is seen as a performer, and therefore potentially deceiving us. In "Where the Wild Things Are" (B4018), he is discovered in the coffee bar, performing to an adult audience. The Scooby Gang are shocked (and Xander is horrified) by the discovery. However, Giles has tried quite hard to keep this side of himself hidden from them, as if he is aware of the complex problem that performance represents. On the one hand, it is likely to reveal too much about him on an emotional level, making him vulnerable and undermining his status within the group as a figure of authority and unflappable English calm. On the other hand, it sets him apart from them, turns him into a performer rather than simply a person. It is not being Other that creates good performers in the Buffyverse, but being a good performer can create a sense of Otherness, setting the performer apart from normative modes of behavior. Lindsey occupies very ambivalent moral territory throughout *Angel* seasons one and two: his abilities as a performer, revealed just as he is about to leave L.A. and the series, serve to enhance that ambivalence. Giles, aware at some level of the problems of sincerity (whether too much of it or too little) inherent in being a performer, strives to keep his performing hidden. The only other occasion we see him singing with his guitar is in the privacy of his own home, where he believes himself to be unobserved until he is disturbed by Spike (B"The Yoko Factor," 4020).

[15] Xander's horror at the sight of Giles's singing is also worth examining. In many ways, these two—the only human, non-supernatural, "unenhanced" white men in the regular cast of *BtVS*—act as a pair. None of the Scoobies have effective or even visible father figures, and Giles acts as a surrogate father to all of them to some extent. For Xander, however, he is more clearly a role model and, Englishness aside, there are considerable similarities between them, not least the fact that they are both usually represented as being physically powerless—Buffy is the essentially undisputed source of agency until Season Six—but have a hidden and occasionally unleashed ability to act. Giles sometimes

reassumes the ruthlessness of his younger self, “Ripper,” and Xander is able to access the knowledge from his own alternate self, the soldier he became in “Halloween” (B2007).

[16] Xander demonstrates extreme and often out-of-proportion hostility to other men in the regular cast and this hostility could easily be interpreted as a jealousy of his father/son relationship with Giles when it is threatened by other male characters having things in common with him that Xander does not share. Angel threatens it through his shared knowledge of the occult, Spike through his Englishness—in his First-Slayer induced dream, Xander even sees Giles adopting Spike as his successor as Watcher. He never demonstrates the same kind of hostility to Riley or Oz, arguably less because they are not vampires (Xander never seems to have a significant problem with a werewolf dating his best friend despite the fact that he is clearly just as potentially dangerous as Angel or Spike) and more because they never threaten to intrude on his relationship with Giles. Xander’s extremely negative reaction to Giles’s singing might therefore be seen as another jealous reaction from Xander towards a part of Giles’s life that he cannot share, something which emphasizes their differences.

[17] Returning to Giles’s singing itself, whilst being a thoroughly convincing performer, he has a distinctive but not conventionally beautiful voice, which fits in very well with his slightly Bob Dylan-esque performance image. The reluctantly revealed intimacy of his relationship with his guitar and the ‘rawness’ of his voice (exploiting those very catches and glitches, the vocal instability that, in Frith’s reading, would partly account for why Dylan himself is heard as being sincere) both add weight to our perception of Giles’ sincerity ‘despite’ the high standard of his performance.

The good, the bad and the outrageously terrible.

[18] Of the remaining characters who can sing, the issue of sincerity operates differently in each case. Lorne can clearly sing but there is no attempt on his part to pretend to soul-baring sincerity in his performance. Both his singing style and his choice of repertoire demonstrate that he is operating in the realms of camp, and camp and sincerity are mismatched partners at the best of times. Camp might be interpreted here as the affectionate parodying of the sincere, taking the vocabulary of (sincere) bad taste and celebrating and exaggerating it knowingly, self consciously and with an unmistakable element of irony. He sings for the sheer joy of the physical excess his repertoire offers him rather than from a need to bare his soul to others. It is, however, extraordinarily revealing that it is through their singing that he is able to see the souls and therefore read the futures of his clientele, this corresponding to another idea from Rée (1999), that in philosophy “the idea of the soul is just a furtive and inhibited metaphor for . . . vocality” (3). This again points to the voice as a direct channel to the singer’s inner self, immediate, intimate and revealing.

[19] Lorne notwithstanding, the moment a member of the regular cast starts to sing in tune, we should automatically be suspicious, as when the demonically-enhanced Jonathan reveals himself as a polished crooner à la Sinatra in “Superstar” (B4017). Likewise, Darla’s stylish performance

of Arlen and Koehler's "Ill Wind" in "The Trial" (A2009) is a textbook example of Frith's singer using vocal tricks to convince us of her sincerity. These are most pronounced during the bridge section of the song:

> You're only misleadin' the sunshine I'm needin' -
> Ain't that a shame?
> It's so hard to keep up with troubles that creep up
> From out of nowhere, when love's to blame.

[20] It is worth looking a little more closely at exactly what she does here. Although we may hear it as being straightforward professional standard singing, this is in part due to the fact that it is full of timbral alterations and pitch changes that deviate from the written melodic line. There is use of a particularly breathy tone on "only" in line one, "up" at the end of line three, and the "where" of "nowhere" in the final line. There is instability in the sung notes including sliding down in pitch at the end of "shame"; and various kinds of ornamentation, moving away from the note and back again on "needin'", "shame" and "blame". Similarly, at the start of the third line, she leaves the pitch of "It's" early, slipping down a semitone halfway through the word, onto the pitch belonging to the following word "so." There are a large number of creaks, the introduction of noise into the sung note, something that in speech might be heard as fatigue, misery or illness--that is, all physical or emotional states of vulnerability. These are particularly noticeable on the line "It's so hard to keep up with troubles that creep up," where only the breathy "up" is entirely free of creak.

[21] All of these flaws, these apparent failings in the voice, are designed to impress us with her sincerity, a code which declares "look how hard it is for me to talk about this." But we should not be fooled. That Darla is in deep emotional pain at this point, knowing that she is terminally ill, is not in dispute; but the way that professional-standard singing is coded in the Buffyverse means that we simply cannot trust her. Her singing signposts that her apparent conversion to Angel's point of view is ultimately just an expedient act of desperation.

[22] The extent to which Angel is prepared to put himself (and everyone else) through the horror and humiliation of his singing reaffirms the selflessness of his character—and we should probably remember that Angel and Wesley can not only not sing, they can't dance either as they revealed at Cordelia's party in "She" (A1013). Harmony is potentially an anomaly, a self-proclaimed evil vampire who nonetheless sings appallingly at Caritas in "Disharmony" (A2017): but evil is not the governing factor and Harmony frankly doesn't have the intelligence to be insincere. She is exactly what she appears to be and we know we cannot trust her, but we also know that she is virtually devoid of guile and at many levels she is impossible to dislike. As a result, she has to be allowed to sing out of tune, not unlike the early, unreconstructed Cordelia (Harmony's best friend).

Cordelia

[23] Cordelia is perhaps the most interesting character in relation to singing, performance and issues of sincerity. Like Buffy, she performs

badly on stage but does manage to pull off a believable performance in the field when lives are in danger: in “Eternity” (A1017), she is confronted by a temporarily, drug-induced evil Angel and delivers (by her own estimation) an Oscar-winning performance, fooling him into believing that she is armed with holy water. In retrospect, the fact that she sang badly back in *BtVS* Season One might well have been an early clue that Cordelia was not simply the vain and selfish creature she at first appeared. The potential for altruism in her personality is an aspect that appears to be hidden from everyone, including herself, because like Harmony in “Disharmony” (A2017), Cordelia seems unaware that her singing is bad. All the other forces-of-good characters tend to be extremely aware when they are performing badly, but the rehabilitation of Cordelia’s character goes hand in hand with her growing awareness that she is not cut out for the performing life. In *Angel* Season One, she is still seemingly unaware of how bad she is in *A Doll’s House* and still determined to pursue her acting career, but the gift of her visions is a significant factor in changing her ambitions. We see this first in the Season One finale, when she becomes aware of the sheer amount of suffering in the world, an awakening that almost destroys her sanity. Then, in seasons two and three, Cordelia’s development as a character is played out as a confrontation between Cordelia the performer and Cordelia the seer.

[24] Cordelia’s character is complex: she is far from stupid, as her multiple acceptances by good colleges demonstrates in *BtVS Season Three*; and she is not as shallow as she almost willfully appears—her feelings for Xander and her unhappiness over his infidelity are entirely genuine, compared to Harmony’s vacuous inability to perceive Spike’s true feelings for her, let alone have any deeper feelings for him beyond her own sense of the status he gives her (as seen, for example, in “In the Harsh Light of Day,” 4003). Cordelia has clearly been spoilt in material terms, but there are considerable hints that she has been neglected emotionally, and more or less abandoned by her family after her parent’s problems with the IRS. There are also indications that she suffers from low self-esteem: the constant battle to maintain her popularity at school at the expense of more meaningful relationships in *BtVS Season One*; and her attempt to escape from reality through acting, leading to her willingness to submit to what she clearly believes to be Russell Winters' casting couch in the pilot episode of *Angel*.

[25] However, Season Two of *Angel* uses this aspect of Cordelia’s personality to demonstrate her development and the radical changes she undergoes. The very first episode of Season Two begins with a brief introduction to Lorne, The Host at Caritas, so locating the karaoke bar at the centre of the overall season narrative. The second scene of the teaser then takes us to Cordelia at an actors’ workshop, apparently doing very well (despite the fact that she gets carried away and physically slaps her co-actor). However, in the midst of receiving praise from her director, she is called away by her other job working for Angel Investigations. As she leaves, the director is still trying to direct: Cordelia exits to the line “Focus on how conflicted you. . . .” This comment very pointedly highlights the conflict between her two lives, and, as with Caritas, foregrounds it in the open minutes of the first episode as a theme that will run through the entire season.

[26] The final episode of the season begins with a "previously on *Angel*" segment, the first clip of which comes from "Belonging" (2019), the last occasion on which we saw Cordelia in her role as performer, being resoundingly humiliated during the recording of a commercial. She had been excited about making the commercial, excited by the idea that her acting career might be taking off, but as much as anything excited by the perceived glamour of the situation and being the center of attention: in other words, by all the aspects of the performing life which appeal most strongly to the early Cordelia's desire for attention and validation. The use of this clip as part of the teaser for the Season Two finale is, in terms of establishing the sequence of events, completely irrelevant; but in terms of Cordelia's development, it is essential that we should be reminded of Cordelia as the performer who craves the love of an adoring audience. When she is sucked through the vortex into Pylea, her dreams of being a star are suddenly realized when she is made princess and ruler, lavished with luxury and attention. In effect, the dreams of Cordelia the performer have come true: she can play at being the adored star for as long as she wants, complete with the obligatory gorgeous co-star boyfriend, Gru.

[27] Then, however, she learns that Gru's role in the arrangement is to take her visions away from her, and here the conflict between her two roles is brought into sharp relief. To retain her visions, she must give up the starring role she has landed, but the choice would appear to be a surprisingly easy one to make:

> Cordelia: You can't take my visions. I need them. I use them to help my friends fight evil back home…. I can't give up my visions—I like them. OK, so I don't like the searing pain and agony that is steadily getting worse…but I'm not ready to give them up either…they're a part of who I am now. They're an honor.

Her altruistic and humble reasons for wanting to keep her visions are as important as the fact that she is willing to give up her starring role. Performance, and its analogue as a Pylean princess, is again positioned as a form of (self-)deception, a self-indulgent escapism in contrast to the painful, grimly real but honorable nature of Cordelia's role as seer.

[28] In Season Three, the conflict between performance and Cordelia's growing sense of moral responsibility is again made explicit. The visions are threatening to kill her and in "Birthday" (A3011), she reaches the end of her ability to survive them, but the Powers that Be offer her a chance to live by rewriting history. Not unlike her chance at being the princess in Pylea, here she is offered the acting career of her dreams, a life as a nationally-loved television star; but it seems that the changes that have been made to her character by the visions in the original version of history cannot be erased. She may have been taken to a reality where none of the events of seasons one or two have occurred, but her character's development has remained intact. When she is confronted with what has happened to Angel and Wesley in this version of reality, she is again forced into a moral choice and again does not hesitate: she asks to be made part demon, takes back her visions and rejects the other life she was offered as a performer.

[29] This conflict between her two possible lives again suggests that performance and sincerity are mutually opposed propositions in the

Buffyverse. By rejecting performance in favor of the visions, Cordelia chooses service, altruism and engagement with the real, difficult world of the Buffyverse over the potential deceptions and glamours of performing. Rejecting performance, she becomes more credible as an agent for the Powers that Be and more sincerely loveable for herself. In fact, by rejecting performance and its illusions she becomes much more like Buffy herself. Both are chosen ones, chosen by mystical forces and given a gift with which to serve the world; both have to give up the lives they expected to lead in order to do this; both have to give up some of their literal humanity in order to serve humankind better. Cordelia becomes part demon, while Buffy (involuntarily) comes back from heaven in order to keep saving the world with her humanness altered such that she is no longer protected from Spike by his chip. Both are also offered an alternative reality that might well be easier to live in than the one they are currently in, Cordelia in "Birthday" (3009) in *Angel* Season Three and Buffy in "Normal Again" (B6017) in *BtVS* Season Six, running parallel to this season of *Angel*.

[30] In *Angel Season Four*, we lose Cordelia: for the second time, a major and much loved character was written out of the series in a way that left viewers in denial—surely she, surely Doyle, would return: this could not be the end. But, to all intents and purposes, it was: and in retrospect, we can see that Cordelia's journey is framed by her two renditions of the same song: shortly before she is possessed by evil, she sings the opening line of "The Greatest Love of All" as badly as ever, for Lorne to read her. By recalling the song, as in the following episode where all the characters revert to the age of seventeen, we are invited to remember her as she was in *BtVS* Season One, and to marvel at the changes in her, the distance that her character has travelled, making it all the more tragic when we lose her soon after.

[31] At the end of Season Four, Cordelia's position is left in considerable doubt, and all her character's achievements appear entirely undermined. Her assumption into a higher dimension appears to have been a fraud, and her return leaves her first possessed by evil and then consigned to a coma. However, her final appearance in episode 100, "You're Welcome" (A5012) is a final vindication of the true Cordelia, who returns for one last time, to save Angel and put him back on the right track. In her last appearance, the two sides of Cordelia as performer and servant of the Powers that Be are finally united for at the end of episode we discover that Cordelia has died and that throughout this appearance she has been performing, pretending to be alive and back with the team when, in fact, she is already gone. Her last performance, then, transcends the problems associated with performance and its illusions, for this performance was an act of altruism and of farewell, a performance the intent of which was to protect, to save and to serve rather than to pursue any of the less noble impulses by which Cordelia was once driven.

"Once More, with Feeling"

[32] The most famous example of singing and performance in the Buffyverse occurs in "Once More, with Feeling" (B6007), and this episode is interesting for a great many reasons, not least the peculiar relationship that *BtVS* has with musical diegesis. Essentially, there are two types of song possible in film and television: diegetic song (where the characters

are perfectly well aware that they are singing, as in the songs performed at Caritas) and non-diegetic song. In diegetic song, the song is as real and as normal to us as it is to the characters in the context of the narrative: characters know they are singing or being sung to and the source of musical accompaniment is likely to be visible, be it a karaoke machine, a band or a guitar. Non-diegetic song, on the other hand, relies on the suspension of our disbelief to accept that the characters are essentially unaware that they are singing or being sung to and the musical accompaniment is also usually invisible, coming from the underscore. In these circumstances, we are asked to accept that sometimes in musicals characters will burst into song because their emotions have become so intense that they simply have no other choice if they are to express themselves properly. However, these types of song, whilst clearly being sung, are not perceived as being outside the normal course of communication by the characters; nor is the sudden sound of music from an invisible source perceived as unusual. At some quite profound level, the characters do not know that they are singing or have lost the ability to know that singing and music are not normal in this context.

[33] Another important distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic song is the element of volition. In diegetic song, the character must choose to perform. Sometimes this decision is made under forms of duress, but consent is still given. Rose's first strip-tease in the musical *Gypsy*, when she is cajoled by her mother into performing is one example of this; the dramatic scene performed by the Scoobies in "The Puppet Show" (B1009) is another example, as is Willow's attempted to sing in the Madame Butterfly scene of "Nightmares" (B1010). However bad, half-hearted or unwilling the performance, the character has made a conscious decision to perform. Non-diegetic song, however, is imposed from outside the narrative: the character makes no decision to sing, but sings nonetheless. [6]

[34] *BtVS* has played some quite startling diegetic games, "Once More, with Feeling" (OMWF) being the most elaborate, although this was not the first occasion that something of this nature was introduced. In the Season Four finale, "Restless" (B4022), Giles's dream, like Willow's, takes the form of a performance event, if a very strange one. We see him performing, as we have done earlier in the season, but now he is on stage at The Bronze, and instead of singing a song, he simply sings his dialogue. This creates a somewhat tangled diegetic web. On one level he is clearly perfectly aware that he is performing: he climbs onto the stage, the audience cheers, there is a visible band accompanying him. He grasps the microphone, and his body language bears all the hallmarks of a straightforward diegetic song, an impression reinforced by the fact that the audience responds to his singing by holding their lighters aloft, flames glowing in the semi-darkness. Yet at another level, the precise content of what he sings makes it clear that he and his audience are unaware that his behavior is being governed by the non-diegetic, by something external to his diegetic reality:

> Giles (singing): It's strange. It's not like anything we've faced before, yet it seems familiar somehow. Of course! The spell we cast with Buffy must have released some primal evil that's come back seeking… I'm not sure what. Willow, look through the Chronicles. Some reference to a warrior beast… Xander, help Willow and try not

> to bleed on my couch, I've just had it steam-cleaned. We've got to warn Buffy. I tried her this morning but I only got her machine. Oh, wait…

On the one hand, this could be argued as a reversal of Frith's proposition that intentional faults in singing mediate between "the glibness of the lyric and the uncertainty of the voice": here, it is the uncertainty of the lyric (i.e. the fact that it is clearly not a lyric at all) that mediates the glibness of Giles's rock and roll performance. This in turn reveals another reversal at work here: in a conventional non-diegetic song, the characters' actions usually indicate that they believe themselves to be speaking their thoughts, whereas in fact they are singing a song. Here, Giles's actions indicate that he believes himself to be singing a song, although he is in fact delivering his dialogue. Effectively, this song manages to be both diegetic and non-diegetic simultaneously. Although Giles does clearly know he is singing, he and everyone else fail to perceive what is clear to us, the audience, namely that the song itself is abnormal, the usual rules of musical diegesis having been suspended by the dream-state.

[35] A comparable circumstance underlies OMWF, although here it is a spell rather than a dream that suspends the normal rules, and the web of diegesis is further complicated by the nature of the relationship between a character and the actor who plays it. Normally, if a song is non-diegetic, the *actor* knows that he or she is singing in a situation where singing would not be considered normal, but the *character* does not, and this situation remains fixed. It creates a very clear boundary between them, placing the actor in the privileged position of having knowledge the character does not share. There is always going to be an imbalance of knowledge between character and actor, but it is normally hidden by the fact that the actor is rendered largely invisible by the presence of the character being played.[7]

[36] In non-diegetic song, only the character has the abnormality of the singing concealed from them. Both the audience and the actor are aware that singing is occurring in a fictional environment where it would not be occurring in the real world; and the act of singing can itself render the actor slightly more visible than usual. The suspension of disbelief is stretched a little further, with the technical demands of singing potentially making us more aware of the artifice of performance. [8]

[37] However, in the episode itself, songs are only non-diegetic whilst they are being sung. Whilst the songs are in progress, the characters generally behave as if singing in this context is perfectly normal behavior, as one would expect in non-diegetic song: but once the songs are finished, they realize that they have been acting abnormally, that they have been singing despite having made no decision to sing, a sleight of hand that allows a non-diegetic song to become retrospectively diegetic. [9]

[38] This, in effect, renders the actors invisible once more as the characters reassert control over knowledge of their actions. The characters become aware that their universe has been infiltrated by the non-diegetic (even though, by the end, all elements have been accounted for within the series' diegesis) and so the characters themselves are allowed to share the awareness of the actors who play them that they are singing non-

diegetic songs. Rather than destroying the fabric of the Buffyverse, this scenario manages to reinforce the credibility of Buffy's world, because the characters are able to perceive the abnormality of this externally imposed singing in a situation when normally, fictional characters would remain oblivious. This kind of diegetic double bluff is also visited in "Normal Again" (B6017) when the closing shot of Buffy in the asylum leaves us with the awful possibility that the entire Buffyverse is a fabrication of Buffy's own insane delusions, and that we have all spent the last few years watching something that is not real even in its own universe.

[39] The fact that the singing in OMWF is externally imposed is the main reason the characters can, from the point of view of this discussion, get away with the fact that none of them sing out of tune. Because they are essentially unaware that they are engaged in an act of performance, and are certainly not in control of their actions until after the song is finished, their singing is able to take on a direct emotional honesty, too direct in some cases. Xander and Anya articulate feelings that they have obviously been keeping quiet about up to this point in "I'll Never Tell" while, having made it clear in the final line of "Afterlife" (B6003) that she has no intention of ever revealing to her friends that they brought her back from heaven, not hell, Buffy finds herself telling them exactly this in the song "Something to Sing About."

[40] The sincerity of the singing in OMWF is further reinforced by the fact that most of them sing in a very 'unsingerly' way. Giles is already established as someone who can sing, and it would make no sense to alter what we know him to sound like at this point. The demon Sweet can also sing: he is not unlike Lorne in this respect, playing with ideas of camp in his performance, and as a troublemaking demon we would not necessarily expect either sincerity or (therefore) bad singing from him.

[41] Tara also sings remarkably well but interestingly, as Giles has a Bob Dylan-esque persona, so Tara takes on the mantel of Joan Baez, an icon of liberated femininity and lesbianism from the same era as Dylan. Her voice has a certain similarity to Baez's in terms of the timbral quality and the text of the song itself evokes something of the Woodstock generation and the influence of folk music on popular song. Tara and her backing singers appear as hippies with their long skirts and flowing hair, while the lyrics of "Under your Spell" use images of nature, reinforced by the song being presented in the non-urban open air, the only song to take place in daylight that is neither indoors nor on the town's streets.

[42] However, in general, the principals tend to sing in a way that does not obviously correspond to the accepted performance practices of classical, popular or musical theatre singing. Their voices sound quite small and very 'natural', lacking the timbral sophistication and vibrato of trained singers which in itself may well be a crafted illusion: singing is more or less compulsory for anyone wanting to make a career as a performer, and the processes of studio production can help fill out most voices to create a more polished sound. The fact that the core Scooby Gang's singing voices are presented to us not as the voices of professional singers, but as those of ordinary people who are not accustomed to singing, again speaks to the idea of the voice as an indicator of sincerity. Although they all sing at least reasonably well, they sing without the vocal expertise of a character such as Darla, an expertise

that might mark them out as professional performers and therefore different from us, their audience.

[43] In conclusion, it is evident that singing and performance have a very distinct role in both *BtVS* and *Angel*, and the positioning of singing and the games that are played with musical diegesis serve to reinforce the credibility of the Buffyverse. The very nature of the voice and the extent to which it reveals us and renders us vulnerable to scrutiny is exploited in both series to reveal an apparent direct inverse correlation between good singing and sincerity, while other forms of performance, as explored through Giles and Cordelia, involve similar issues. It is, obviously, not without irony that the act of performance is problematized to explore ideas of sincerity in a television series which therefore relies on performances by its actors in order to communicate those ideas.

[44] The problem with performance in the Buffyverse largely lies in its tendency to encourage vanity and self-seeking behavior. Giles is safe from this tendency as he clearly does not want to be famous. Perhaps Ripper once did, but Giles keeps his performing private and personal, and does not allow it to distract him from his responsibilities. Cordelia's personal odyssey sees her becoming arguably the most comprehensively transformed character of either series, overcoming the seductive deceptions of performance and discovering the rewards of taking up her own responsibilities.

[45] To revisit one of the ideas at the beginning of this discussion, while good singing cannot be convincingly argued as an indication of Otherness, singing of a less-than-professional standard (be it genuinely dreadful or normally adequate) is a consistent indication that a character is fundamentally just like us: not perfect, sometimes in the wrong, but essentially sincere. This in turn reveals that the Buffyverse challenges the usefulness and the very validity of the idea of Otherness simply because everyone associated with both the Scooby Gang and Angel Investigations is arguably some form of Other. It augments the category of Otherness with that of sincerity, and whether a character is sincere or not becomes far more important in the personal relationships and larger-scale dynamics of the narrative than whether someone is (yet another) Other.

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Editors' note: The vacilating character of Lindsey seems to have chosen the "side of the Angels," and Angel, even as late as the penultimate episode of the series, though Angel makes clear in the last episode that he does not believe Lindsey has chosen right for right's sake.

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[1] In film narratives, it would be more usual to find the more unsympathetic or purely comic characters performing badly, such as the character of Lina Lamont in *Singin' in the Rain*.

[2] This discussion refers only to instances of singing by principal and regular characters. There are examples of singing from single-episode characters in *Angel*, but there is no overall predictability as to whether these characters will sing well or not.

[3] We see him singing backing vocals with Dingoes Ate My Baby but never explicitly hear his voice.

[4] This observation is largely based on my own experience as a professional singer and on conversations with my students at Birmingham Conservatoire.

[5] It is worth noting that they are both also men. The implications of a gendered positioning of singers as predominantly female against instrumentalists as predominantly male in both popular film and television is another subject I am currently investigating. Both of the principal male characters in the Buffyverse who sing but do not play have ambivalently gendered positions, Lorne as a camp demon and Angel with the musical gender-reversal that I discussed in an earlier paper (Halfyard, 2001).

[6] There will always be exceptions to these kinds of rules, done to serve the needs of particular narratives: for example, the musical *Salad Days* uses the device of a magic piano. On hearing the piano play, characters find themselves singing and dancing without having made a decision to do so. However, as in “Once More, with Feeling”, exceptions such as these are usually playing with ideas of diegetic and non-diegetic song in a way that makes the nature of the songs highly ambiguous.

[7] This is, perhaps, one of the reasons why successful television actors can find it difficult to establish themselves in the film industry. In film, the audience is used to film actors constantly playing new characters: hence, films are often built and marketed around particular actors, and audiences might go and see a Tom Cruise or Julia Roberts film, accepting the actor as whichever character they happen to be playing this time: our audience relationship with that character will last perhaps two hours. In a television series such as *Friends* or *BtVS,* the actor becomes firmly established as one particular character over many episodes and seasons, an audience relationship that can be measured in years. The

result is that the audience may well identify the character first and the actor second: Monica, Rachel, Ross and Chandler are perhaps names which come more readily to mind on watching films with the *Friends* actors in them than the names of the actors themselves, whereas it is considerably more difficult to remember the names of the characters Tom Cruise played in *Minority Event*, *Magnolia* or *Vanilla Sky*. The continuity of the relationship in television of actor and character, therefore, generally renders the actor much less visible than it does in film.

[8] In fact, the production of OMWF demonstrates an awareness of the heightened level of separation in the actor/character relationship in a musical, as the trailer combined clips from the forthcoming show with footage of the actors both rehearsing in a dance studio and singing in the recording studio, out of costume, out of the Sunnydale diegetic context and therefore evidently out of character. This would seem to be highlighting the extent to which the actors were occupying a privileged position in the context of non-diegetic song, threatening to undermine the coherence and credibility of the characters they had been playing for just over five seasons by this point.

[9] In one instance, this situation is partially reversed: Spike declares himself immune to whatever is causing the spontaneous bursting into song, only to find himself singing a few seconds later--and the expression on his face at this point implies that he is aware and surprised but can do nothing to stop himself. However, this is momentary: as the rest of the song proceeds, he loses this self-consciousness and apparently loses his awareness that his singing is in any way abnormal until the song has finished.