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"[B]reakaway pop hit or . . . book number?": "Once More, with Feeling" and Genre

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> A soundtrack. Of My Musical. It took a year . . . to get it out, but now I have a real soundtrack album of my musical. With endless, pompous liner notes, just like the real thing. This makes it real. It makes it forever.
> Joss Whedon, liner notes, "Once More, with Feeling" soundtrack

(1) The Buffyverse, the world in which the characters of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* live, is clearly not our world; yet it exists in close connection to it, and this creative tension between reality and fantasy, between truth and artifice, enhances our interest in the series. To be sure, the fantastic elements of *BtVS* have much the same appeal to us as other examples from the fantasy and science fiction genres. We derive pleasure from what is not real; yet, as J. R. R. Tolkien observed in his landmark 1947 essay, "On Fairy Stories," we can only truly be satisfied by our sojourn into imaginary worlds if such worlds possess "the inner consistency of reality" (Tolkien 47). For us to be able to suspend our disbelief, according to the framework articulated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (*Biographia Literaria*, ch. 14), we must be able to transcend our awareness that the world of a drama, or a poem, or a novel is only a representation of reality. The ancient Greeks realized this; hence their emphasis on the dramatic unities of time (all action within a single day), place (all action in one geographic location), and action (no plot digressions). The unities facilitated the escape. We are in a theater watching a play, or a film, or in our easy chair reading a novel, and yet we are able to immerse ourselves within the secondary worlds of literary representation, if they are well crafted.

(2) While suspension of disbelief is required in order for us to fully appreciate a fictional work, the genres of fantasy and science fiction depend on a creative tension between the real and the unreal worlds; the unreality is part of our fascination. Tolkien notes that we enjoy the "arresting strangeness" of fantasy (47-48). Similarly, Darko Suvin accounts for the appeal of science fiction by positing the "interaction of estrangement and cognition" (7-8), the perception of difference between our primary world and the secondary world of the fictional text. The fictional world is not our world; yet it operates in a way that seems logical, despite the presence of a "'*novum*' (novelty, innovation)" (Suvin 63)—an element of strangeness, such as time travel, alien contact, or an alternate universe. *BtVS*, however, is perhaps unique (at least among television series) in its creative and often explicit exploitation of this tension between the real and the unreal, a tension nowhere more brilliantly depicted than in the musical episode from Season Six, "Once More, with Feeling" (episode 6007). This paper will explore the episode's deployment of the stylized genre of the musical, the way its own dialectic of fantasy and reality represents an analogy to the dialectic between the Buffyverse and our own world and contributes to the Season Six story arc.

(3) Despite its supernatural elements—the existence of vampires, demons, and the Slayer—the Buffyverse partakes of many elements of our world. Aside from its location over a "hellmouth," Sunnydale, California looks and feels as we would expect a real California town to look and feel. When they aren't saving the world, the members of the Scooby Gang deal with the rituals and challenges of adolescence and young adulthood, and despite her high calling, Buffy yearns to live a normal life. The fantastic elements of the series—in Darko Suvin's terminology, its *novum*—are juxtaposed against moments of realism.[2] In fact, series creator Joss Whedon's stated goal was "to create a fantasy that was emotionally completely realistic" (*Fresh Air* interview).

(4) Especially during Season Six, the series employs a network of ironies to manipulate our suspension of disbelief. Sometimes this strategy is obvious and dramatic, as in the episode "Normal Again" (6017), where Buffy hallucinates that she is in a mental institution hallucinating about vampires and her career as the Slayer.[3] A more common (and more subtle) approach is the way that correspondences between the Buffyverse and our world are hyperrealized, not by means of references to current events, but through a sharing of imaginary works between both worlds. This is particularly evident in the Evil Trio story arc. For Warren, Andrew, and Jonathan, the boundary between fantasy and reality is permeable and they seem motivated to make their lives imitate art, to live in the imaginary worlds that supply so much of their dialogue. For example, in "Life Serial" (6005), these adolescent, self-proclaimed "crime lords" argue endlessly about trivia from science fiction films and television series (*Star Wars* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) and comics (*Superman* and *Spiderman*) and they have a lengthy discussion about which actor played the best James Bond.[4] (This isn't the first time such a phenomenon has occurred, nor will it be the last; for example, in "Helpless" [3012], Xander and Oz argue about the effects of various forms of kryptonite upon Superman before Buffy reminds them to concentrate on "reality." And there are at least three references to the *Harry Potter* novels, in "The Real Me" [5002], "Lessons" [7001], and "Empty Places" [7019].) These details correspond to our knowledge of our own world—or at least our own world's fictional representations. The result is that, even though the Buffyverse is imaginary, it stands in the same relation to its own imaginary worlds as our reality does to those *very same* imaginary worlds. These imaginative texts are part of what Tanya Krzywinska terms "cultural vocabulary" (193), and the result of sharing them is the "illusion that the viewer is living in the same cultural space and time as the Scooby Gang" (190). That the Buffyverse has its own fictions gives it depth and complexity, part of the "inner consistency of reality" that Tolkien described. That these fictions are also *our* fictions reinforces our sense that the world of Buffy—despite its supernatural elements—could almost be our own.[5] And the fact that the characters themselves struggle with their acceptance of these supernatural elements further cements their bond with the audience. During the first few seasons, most of Sunnydale's citizens refuse to believe in the existence of vampires and demons, and local authorities exploit this disbelief. For example, in "School Hard" (2003), Principal Snyder and the chief of police conspire to explain away a vampire attack by invoking "the usual story . . . gang-related. PCP." It's only when denial becomes unsustainable (the "natural" explanation more absurd than the supernatural), that some residents begin to believe the evidence of their senses. Joyce only reluctantly accepts her daughter's role as Slayer at the end of Season Two ("Becoming, Part Two," 2022). For others, however, belief comes more easily. When Oz is told that "vampires are real," a fact that Willow warns him is "hard to accept at first," he responds, "Actually, it explains a *lot*" ("Surprise," 2013).

(5) Besides its juxtaposition of the fantastic and the realistic, *BtVS* is also a generic hybrid. Joss Whedon wanted the series to be a "cull-from-every-genre-all-the-time thing" (*The Onion AV Club* interview). The series gleefully employs conventions from horror Gothic (vampires and demons), from fairy tales (Der Kindestod in "Killed by Death" [2018], Hansel and Gretel in "Gingerbread" [3011], the Gentlemen in "Hush" [6016]),[6] and from science fiction (such as humanoid robots—Ted in Season Two, April and the Buffy-bot in Season Five, and the Trio's freeze and invisibility rays, cerebral dampener, and quantum devices in Season Six),[7] blending these fictive elements with the speech patterns and alternative rock music of our world's popular culture.

(6) *BtVS* also blends the comic and the dramatic, so that light and dark elements and story arcs often coexist, even amid some of the bleakest moments of the series. The Evil Trio's exploits are an excellent example. Their adolescent obsessions with science fiction and their desire to be crime lords and rule Sunnydale are comic, but they soon spiral out of control, resulting in attempted date rape by electronic means, and then murder. But even after Warren's murder of Katrina, and his botched attempt to kill Buffy (Buffy is wounded, and subsequently saved by Willow, but Tara is killed by a stray

bullet), we can't help but be amused by some of their juvenile antics—at least those of Jonathan and Andrew, such as when the pair find themselves in the Sunnydale jail. ("The joint changes you," Jonathan melodramatically insists in "Villains" [6020].) And, when Giles returns from England in order to prevent Willow from destroying the world ("Grave," 6022), and Buffy fills him in on what he has missed, he manages to laugh at the absurdity of Buffy's having slept with Spike, a revelation that shocked and horrified most of the Scoobies. These unexpected shifts in mood—"from Dracula to Jack Benny in a heartbeat," as Whedon puts it (referring, in the Director's commentary to "Chosen" [7022] to James Marsters's acting ability)—are a by-product of Whedon's "cull-from-every-genre" approach. *BtVS* rejoices in its postmodern refusal to be pinned down to a single generic formula.

(7) In the context of *Buffy*'s generic hybridity, then, a musical episode seems almost logical, as it affords Whedon a perfect opportunity to play with generic conventions on a more ambitious scale. What is characteristically *Buffy*-like is the way Whedon joyfully and self-consciously manipulates the genre to his own ends.

(8) "Once More, with Feeling," which originally aired on 6 November 2001, begins conventionally enough with a "previously on Buffy" segment[8] followed immediately by opening credits and music that are reminiscent of a 1950s musical. The "previously" thus serves as a transition device from the style of the series as we have come to know it to this point, to the retro style of the musical. The sharply different look of the opening credits signals an abrupt shift in genre, accentuating its hybridity.[9] Uniquely, this generic shift is actually experienced by the inhabitants of the Buffyverse as well as by the audience.

(9) Unlike most musicals, in "Once More, with Feeling," the characters are aware of, and frequently discuss, the musical conceit. Jane Feuer has noted that "a large percentage of early musicals took for their subjects the world of entertainment . . . . 'Putting on a show' was a formula that made breaking into song and dance plausible, thereby justifying the inclusion of musical numbers in a film" (ix). The so-called "backstage musical" was a film that contained (or "framed") an embedded play, film, or other musical performance, such as a rehearsal. *Showboat* is an excellent example of a backstage musical. Other musicals incorporate singing and dancing as a folk motif. These are usually set outdoors, often in frontier settings, as in *Oklahoma!* But in all these musicals, the characters' awareness of the musical conceit is confined to their attitude toward the embedded object. In other words, they live in a real world; it is the world of the performance that is a fantasy. "Putting on a show" preserves the plausibility of the primary diegesis by enclosing the singing and dancing within a secondary diegesis.

(10) In "Once More, with Feeling," though, there is no secondary diegesis, no separate world of the performance. It is *not* normal behavior for characters to sing and dance, as the previous 106 episodes have demonstrated, and this is much discussed. The opening song sequence depicts Buffy in the graveyard slaying vampires and demons and rescuing citizens.[10] The next day, Buffy asks the other members of the Scooby Gang if anyone else had "burst into song," and all her friends look at her in astonishment for a long moment before everyone begins to talk at once. They had all experienced this, but each believed she had experienced an isolated phenomenon[11]:

> XANDER: Merciful Zeus!
> WILLOW: We thought we were the only ones! It was bizarre!
> GILES: Well, I sang but I have my guitar at the hotel and I often . . .
> 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 . . .
> ANYA: Xander and I were fighting about Monkey Trouble.
> BUFFY: You have monkey trouble?

> [. . . .]
> ANYA: And we were arguing and, and then everything rhymed and there were harmonies and the dance with coconuts.
> XANDER: It was very disturbing.

Note Giles's reference to the orchestra and dancing, although his words are nearly impossible to distinguish, in the rush of everyone talking at once. The song "I've Got a Theory" expresses the Scooby Gang's awareness that something unusual is going on and that people do not normally act as if they are in a musical. Indeed, it expresses their resistance to the musical conceit, which is decidedly not typical behavior for characters in a musical. Willow theorizes that "Some kid is dreamin' / And we're all stuck inside his wacky Broadway nightmare," and Willow, Anya, Xander, and Tara even observe that "It's getting eerie," and wonder "What's this cheery singing all about?" Whedon has stated that

> this whole sequence was there very simply to say, "Hey, we're in a musical and we don't like it," because people have trouble accepting musicals . . . . So already they're in the same boat as the audience . . . and that gets you past the biggest problem with musicals that people have, that they just don't buy it. (Director's Commentary to "Once More, with Feeling")

(11) Yet, despite the self-consciousness that this is not normal behavior, even in Sunnydale, there is an intriguing tension between the elaborately stylized and choreographed conventions of the musical, the sense that this is not real or normal, and the subjects of their songs.[12] Whedon even mocks the seriousness of the genre by including a few songs (sung by bystanders, who are played by David Fury and Marti Noxon, two of *BtVS*'s producers, who have thus entered its diegesis) about subjects that are entirely mundane: a man rejoicing that the dry cleaner has removed mustard from his shirt ("The Mustard"), a young woman arguing with a policeman about a parking ticket ("The Parking Ticket").[13] We soon realize that each of the characters sings what they secretly feel, so the songs represent the real and the true, a truth that is at times painful for the others to hear. In Xander and Anya's duet, "I'll Never Tell," they pointedly do tell, revealing to each other their doubts and fears about their forthcoming marriage, as well as behaviors or physical characteristics that each finds annoying in the other. We see this painful honesty particularly in Buffy, who, in her opening song, reveals that she feels she is only "going through the motions / Walking through the part." This song actually provides a rare opportunity for a direct view of Buffy's inner feelings, as the series seems only rarely to have used the device of the interior monologue, and so we usually know what Buffy is feeling only when she discloses it to the other characters.[14]

(12) When Buffy first reveals to the other Scoobies that she has experienced this singing phenomenon, they ask what she sang about. She pauses, and then says, "I don't remember. But it seemed perfectly normal." Clearly, she remembers, but wants to spare their feelings. (She is "going through the motions" because she has been pulled, not from the "hell dimension" in which Willow was convinced she was trapped, but from what Buffy increasingly comes to regard as heaven.) Near the end of the episode, of course, she reveals the disturbing truth in the song "Something to Sing About."

(13) The second part of Buffy's statement—"it seemed perfectly normal"—is intriguing. Singing and dancing through the graveyard as she slew seemed normal to her. Of course, in a further layering of the ironies, we must remember that Buffy was singing that "I always feel this strange estrangement / Nothing here is real, nothing here is right" ("Going Through the Motions"). Here again, Whedon is toying with the tension between the normal, and behavior that is decidedly not normal, unless you happen to be a theatrical performer. It goes almost without saying that this song erodes the barrier between the actors and the audience, and accentuates our awareness of them as a cast. We seem to partake of some of Buffy's "strange estrangement," in a process reminiscent

of Darko Suvin's "interaction of estrangement and cognition." Buffy complains in her song that she feels she is only playing a part. We can't help but be reminded that Sarah Michelle Gellar is also playing a part. The fact that the cast does not consist of professional singers enhances this effect. That is not to say that their singing is unpleasant, and in several cases (Anthony Stewart Head, James Marsters, Amber Benson, and Emma Caulfield), they show obvious talent. However, except for Head (whose roles included *Godspell* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) and guest star Hinton Battle (*The Wiz* and *Miss Saigon*, among others), they do not have professional musical theater experience (though, as rising actors, several of them may have appeared in musical productions). In any case, the combined effect is of a group of people for whom singing is not their usual milieu, and this nicely amplifies the unnaturalness of the musical conceit.[15]

(14) The characters' varied responses to the effects of Sweet's spell depict this tension, or perhaps more accurately, slippage, between the real and the represented, as the musical genre strikes them differently. Buffy says that singing and dancing "seemed . . . normal"; Xander found the same phenomenon "disturbing. And not the natural order of things"; Willow and Tara are enchanted by the romanticism of it; and even Dawn is briefly caught up in the novelty of singing about math in school. And of course there is a layer of irony in the way Whedon has crafted the musical, assigning the serious love theme (and potential breakaway pop hit) to two lesbians (Anya and Xander's own love theme being in a mode that Anya terms "retro pastiche"), but without the fanfare that seems to accompany situation comedies that call attention to their gay characters. There is also a dark side to all this fun: A man dances himself to death via spontaneous human combustion immediately after Dawn says, "Come on, songs, dancing around . . . what's gonna be wrong with that?" Clearly, what is wrong is too much of a good thing. Excessive truth can hurt the feelings of those we love; the excessive energy of our emotions can even kill. As Sweet will later sing, in "What You Feel":

> All these melodies
> They go on too long
> Then that energy
> Starts to come on way too strong
> All those hearts laid open—that must sting
> Plus, some customers just start combusting
> That's the penalty
> When life is but a song.[16]

(15) As the episode progresses, more of the characters' innermost thoughts and emotions are revealed. Sweet's assertion to Dawn that "I know what you feel, girl / I'll make it real" is applied to everyone. Giles reveals to Buffy his anxieties about going away so that she can stand on her own (though she does not hear him, so this, too, functions as the equivalent of an interior monologue ["Standing"]); Spike, who notes that he has seen some "damn funny things" such as a "[s]ix hundred pound Chorago demon making like Yma Sumac," believes that he is immune to the spell, and then, surprising himself, gives the lie to that assertion by revealing to Buffy the ambivalence (or at least frustration) of his love for her ("Rest in Peace"). Tara sings of her discovery that Willow had used magic to make her forget their fight about Willow's too-casual use of magic ("Under Your Spell—Reprise"). Dawn wonders if anyone notices or cares, as she contemplates a necklace that she stole from The Magic Box ("Dawn's Lament").

(16) The character most conscious of the musical conceit is Anya, who makes frequent comments about the various musical styles of the songs, lamenting to Giles that her duet with Xander "was clearly a retro pastiche that's never gonna be a breakaway pop hit." All her comments about the various songs frame her discussion of musical styles in the context of popularity, and depict an insider's view of the discourse of musical theater, an insider's view that emphasizes her awareness of the relationship

between theater and the marketplace.[17] Fittingly, Anya's duet with Xander is—possibly excepting the "and you can sing along" lyric in Buffy's "Something to Sing About"—the episode's strongest example of the direct address form (in which one or more characters speak or sing to the audience directly). Virtually all the other songs are either sung to another character ("Rest in Peace," for example, sung to Buffy by Spike); as a form of interior monologue (Buffy's "Going Through the Motions"); a hybrid of these two forms (Giles's "Standing" is sung to Buffy, but she doesn't hear him, so it could be regarded as a monologue); or involve several members of the cast singing together ("I've Got a Theory" and much of "Walk Through the Fire"). But in "I'll Never Tell," both Xander and Anya are clearly addressing the audience. The direct address form simultaneously exposes the artificiality of the musical world and makes the audience a part of it. Feuer refers to this seemingly contradictory phenomenon as a "pattern of demystification and remystification operating in the filming of onstage numbers in backstage musicals" (43). Demystification and remystification interact exactly as estrangement and cognition do for Suvin. In many musicals, the opening shot will reveal the stage and the surrounding theater audience, and we know that we are viewing a performance. But then the camera focuses on the performers and we become immersed in that secondary reality (Feuer 28). We are (re)mystified when we become part of the illusion of the musical-within-a-musical, viewing the action from the perspective of a member of the theatrical audience. Shots that depict "a more grim reality backstage" (43), shatter that illusion; they are demystifying. According to Feuer, these two contrasting techniques always operate together:

> Demystification splits open the narrative, exposes the world backstage, speaks in the first person. But the narrative gets sutured back together again for the final bow. It is unusual for a number to end on a demystifying shot. The preferred closing shot is a cut or dolly-in to a close-up of the performer, sealed into her third-person reality. (44)[18]

In "I'll Never Tell," there is no illusion-shattering demystification—until the scene immediately following the song, when Anya deconstructs their performance for Giles. "It was like we were being watched . . . Like there was a wall missing . . . in our apartment . . . Like there were only three walls and not a fourth wall." (So immersed in their own quest to unravel the mystery, they seem unaware of all the singing and dancing going on all around them, as street sweepers dance with their brooms and a young woman protests a parking ticket. Or perhaps they have become desensitized to the novelty of such behavior.)

(17) Later, when she learns that Spike has also sung a song, Anya asks if it was "a breakaway pop hit, or more of a book number." Anya's comment may be seen as a form of direct address by Joss Whedon himself, the writer entering his created reality. Describing his exhilaration at the completion of the score for the musical, Whedon enthused, "My head was suddenly filled with visions of greatness. The music would be a phenomenon. 'Under Your Spell' would go straight to the top of the charts! Videos! Soundtrack album! Emmys Emmys Emmys!" (CD liner notes). In her desire for the "breakaway pop hit," Anya wishes to break away from the bounds of her supporting role (which she seems to be conscious of *as* a role), just as Whedon may have wished to transcend the bounds of genre television. Anya demonstrates that in this musical, the characters pointedly do *not* suspend their disbelief.

(18) Just as in "I'll Never Tell," which simultaneously calls attention to its own unreality even as it invites us to be a part of its figurative theater audience, the episode constantly negotiates a tension between the real and the true (which is often hidden) and the fantastic, stylized, and artificial. Yet it's a complicated dialectic and is not always what it seems. As Patricia Pender has noted, "*Buffy* is a television series that delights in deliberately and self-consciously baffling the binary" (35). For example, the songs often contain an ironic subtext, even when the singers are trying to be open and honest, such

as Tara's love song to Willow, which ends with her repeating the line, "You make me complete." Yet we know that her joy in her relationship with Willow is based on a notable *in*completeness: Willow's editing of Tara's memory. And even though Xander and Anya express their anxieties about their relationship, Nikki Stafford points out that the pair sing in harmony, which demonstrates that they are "meant to be together" (Stafford 332). Of course, viewed from the perspective of the season as a whole, we see that the doubts they reveal here foreshadow the end of their relationship nine episodes later in "Hell's Bells" (6016).[19]

(19) Fittingly, the most complex emotions belong to Buffy, and her song, "Something to Sing About"—appropriately "full of syncopated beats and dissonant chords" (Stafford 332)—comes at the episode's climactic scene. This "reflexive" song (a "[n]umber in which a performer sings and dances *as* he sings about singing and dancing" [Feuer 50]) negotiates the tension between emotional truth and the artifice that glues society together. "Life's a show," Buffy begins, "and we all play our parts / And when the music starts / We open up our hearts." Even those first few lines express an apparent contradiction, between playing parts in a show and opening our hearts, an opening that suggests emotional truth, not playacting. But her next few lines do nothing to resolve the contradiction:

> It's all right if some things come out wrong
> We'll sing a happy song
> And you can sing along.

"Wrong" here is clearly ironic, for it is associated with truth, but represents a breach of social propriety that we must remedy by "sing[ing] a happy song." Buffy goes on to sing a series of clichés as she is punching out Sweet's minions, but a note of sarcasm is evident; notice also how her frustration at not being able to lead a normal life breaks through in the lyrics:

> Where there's life there's hope
> Every day's a gift
> Wishes can come true
> Whistle while you work
> So hard
> All day
> To be like other girls.
> To fit in in this glittering world.

Backed up by Tara and Anya, she proceeds to articulate her dilemma: "Don't give me songs / Give me something to sing about." Buffy needs to *be* happy, not just to *seem* happy, but she can't take any joy in family and friends because her life is so abnormal that she can't even *die* and not be brought back (by those same friends). And then comes the revelation of the most painful truth of all, what she had previously confided to Spike must never be revealed to her friends:

> I live in hell
> 'Cause I was expelled from heaven
> I think I was in heaven.

(20) Her friends, Willow in particular, are stricken with horror. Now Buffy dances faster and faster, and is about to combust, when Spike saves her, and she gets a lesson on living from the undead:

> Life's not a song

Life isn't bliss
Life is just this: It's living
You'll get along
The pain that you feel
You only can heal by living
You have to go on living
So one of us is living.

Spike's prescription is for, not joy, but a continued existence that is reminiscent of the vampire's life. Vampires do not age or die naturally, but simply continue. No wonder Angel was reading Sartre's *Nausea* during the "Lovers' Walk" episode (3008)!

(21) Continuing on this joyless note, Sweet goes on to exult in the hurt that the unvarnished truth has caused the Scoobies, observing that

. . . there's not a one
Who can say this ended well
All those secrets you've been concealing
Say you're happy now—
Once more, with feeling. ("What You Feel—Reprise")

The episode's title, "Once More, with Feeling," refers to a rehearsal direction to a performer to repeat a song with more emotion, and is obviously meant ironically here. Yet there is truth in Sweet's advice. These characters have certainly hurt each other by some of their revelations. This may be one of the reasons why, at the end, Buffy turns away from the logically true and embraces a different kind of truth, the emotionally true, when she sings "This isn't real / But I just want to feel" and begins an affair with Spike on somewhat false pretenses. (It can be argued that she is up front about her motives, and Spike goes into it with eyes open, seeming to echo her emotionally as well as musically, when he sings "I died / So many years ago / But you can make me feel" ["Coda"].) If Buffy can truly feel, she'll have something to sing about, after all. What the Scoobies need to do is go on living, even if it means embracing the "life's a show" ethic to survive. In a way, what they must do is suspend their disbelief, to follow the advice of Alcoholics Anonymous and "fake it to make it." This resolution is consistent with the Hollywood musical's synthesis of its multiple narrative levels. The primary world of the musical (which is analogous to our own reality) is joined to the secondary world of the show (the play or film within the film). The success of the show leads to the successful resolution of the main plot, usually a romantic plot that is fulfilled through marriage—or at least the romantic union of the lovers (Feuer 67-85). Whedon even calls attention to the conventional nature of this resolution with the lyric "The curtains close on a kiss— / God knows / We can tell the end is near" ("Where Do We Go From Here?"), a lyric that is heard from offstage, from within the Bronze, just before Buffy and Spike make it come true.

(22) To be sure, there are some elements of this episode that make our own suspension of disbelief problematic. Sweet seems to concede too readily at the end, after all the mayhem he has caused, and the seriousness with which he had regarded his contest with Buffy and her friends. The episode seems conscious of this shortcoming; Giles notes in the song "Where Do We Go From Here?" that "we kinda won." (This somewhat unsatisfactory and qualified victory might be regarded as a moment of realism, however, since it is more akin to the kinds of victories we experience.) And the explanation for Sweet's summoning in the first place—not so much Dawn's stealing of the amulet, but Xander's confession that he "thought there were going to be dances and songs" is not very well developed.[20]

(23) But even these shortcomings can be forgiven in the context of the larger issues the episode raises. In addition to the dialectic between reality and fantasy, as already discussed, the relationship of "Once More, with Feeling" to the series as a whole

makes an interesting statement about genre. In *BtVS*, as noted by Philip Mikosz and Dana C. Och, the real "'unit' of discussion," (thus the genre) is not the individual episode, but the series. This is true of all television serials, but Joss Whedon takes this a step further. Roz Kaveney points out that *BtVS*'s "use of foreshadowing and echo across seasons indicated a real commitment to, and respect for, the intelligence of its viewers" (2), later commenting on the "subtle[ty]" of some of the "continuity points" (36) that are sometimes separated by several seasons.[21] This reflects a great deal of planning on Whedon's part as he envisioned at least some of the major developments of the series several years ahead.

(24) "Once More, with Feeling" was a long time in the making. Whedon grew up with a love for the musical genre and was inspired by the idea of producing a musical episode of *BtVS* during the fall of Season Five when he had the cast and crew over to his house for one of his Sunday evening Shakespeare readings and discovered their musical talents during a sing-along around the piano. By the end of Season Five, he already had the first few episodes of Season Six planned and knew that the musical would be the sixth episode,[22] which he wrote over the summer. Whedon was adamant that the episode must advance the "emotional arc" of the season, and that the songs must be married to the plot; he stated that he "get[s] very cranky about TV shows that do musical episodes that are basically variety shows where they play a scene and then they'll sing an oldie that has something vaguely to do with the scene, but the scene is over already" (*The Script Book* 63-64). Clearly, he prefers the classical Hollywood musical to the teen musicals of the 1980s (such as *Flashdance* and *Dirty Dancing*) which rely on "non-diegetic" music (Feuer 130).

(25) Whedon seeks a kind of continuity that is often missing when a generic experiment is employed for nothing more than the effect itself. He never loses sight of the fact that the series is the true genre, not the individual episode, and Whedon has stated that he always envisioned the series as being "like a novel" (*Fresh Air* interview). This makes M. M. Bakhtin's theories of the novel especially relevant to our purposes. In "Discourse in the Novel" Bakhtin notes that:

> [t]he novel permits the incorporation of various genres, both artistic (inserted short stories, lyrical songs, poems, dramatic scenes, etc.) and extra-artistic (everyday, rhetorical, scholarly, religious genres and others) . . .
>
> Each of these genres possesses its own verbal and semantic forms for assimilating various aspects of reality. The novel, indeed, utilizes these genres precisely because of their capacity, as well-worked-out forms, to assimilate reality in words. (Bakhtin 320-21)

In the case of "Once More, with Feeling," the musical genre is incorporated into the series and provides its own assimilation of reality. The episode transforms the reality of the series by transmitting the reality of the musical. It makes possible some plot developments that would be difficult to accomplish by other means. For example, Buffy unwillingly transcends her inability to tell anyone but Spike that the reason she is so depressed is because she feels her friends pulled her from heaven when they resurrected her. This is rendered plausible by the device of the spell that compels her to sing about it. Her resistance enhances our awareness of her inner turmoil. Indeed, the musical form depicts emotional conflict with an intensity greater than can usually be represented in narrative television. Spike's conflicting feelings for Buffy are vividly and dramatically expressed in the song "Rest in Peace," as he simultaneously wants her to leave him alone and keeps following her. These feelings are summed up even more succinctly, later, by the lines, "I hope she fries / I'm free if that bitch dies / I'd better help her out" ("Walk Through the Fire"). Such revelations reverberate throughout the entire season. Also, getting Spike and Buffy together, but clearly in a way that suggests it is not true love (at least not on Buffy's side) is accomplished very efficiently through the musical shorthand

of this episode. As Whedon has remarked, "[a] musical is a chance for people to express things they couldn't otherwise express" (Director's Commentary to "Once More, with Feeling").

(26) One reason that the musical format seems to work so well is that, despite its artificiality, we "assimilate [its] reality." We have certain expectations about the musical genre that we "buy into" as a result of our familiarity with the genre's conventions and traditions. One of these is the storybook romantic ending that we might not have accepted so readily in a nonmusical format. (We suspend our disbelief.) We also accept as a matter of course that music operates in the affective realm and often conveys one's true, inner emotions.[23] As Feuer notes, "In becoming song, language is in a sense transfigured, lifted up into a higher, more expressive realm" (52). This makes the musical genre a good fit for an episode in which several characters have secrets that are troubling them, but which they fear to disclose because such revelations would hurt others' feelings. (These range from the serious, that is, Buffy's true feelings about coming back to earth, to the more comic, e.g., Xander and Anya's fears about their impending marriage.) And the very artificiality of the characters' experience—their awareness of being in a world that is one step removed from their own reality—is strikingly akin to our own vicarious experience of the Buffyverse. They experience the interaction of estrangement and cognition even as we do.[24]

(27) "Once More, with Feeling" accomplishes two goals. It makes possible an elaborate dialectic on fantasy and reality, through the plot device of Sweet's curse that the residents of Sunnydale must sing their true feelings, as well as through the incorporated genre of the musical and its own particular way of assimilating reality. And, as Whedon intended, the episode unites several themes that had been established in the first few episodes of the season and moves the emotional arc of the season forward. As befits a series that so delights in transcending binary oppositions, "Once More, with Feeling" is at once *both* "breakaway pop hit" and "book number." The episode has been enormously popular on its own, but, as Whedon noted, that was not his primary goal; he wanted to advance the story arc. *The Script Book*'s glossary of musical terms defines a book number as "a musical piece written largely to progress the plot, as opposed to a stand-alone number that can be understood separate from the larger work and released to the general public" (59). "Once More, with Feeling" facilitates plot developments such as Buffy's revelation of her true feelings about coming back from the grave and the beginning of her romantic connection with Spike. In accomplishing both objectives—breakaway pop hit as well as book number—the episode transcends the limitations of its genre in a way that is unique and enormously pleasurable.

(28) For Whedon, the soundtrack album and its "endless, pompous liner notes" assimilate reality. For *Buffy* fans, the appeal of "Once More, with Feeling" is the same as that of the series. We love its fusion of emotional truth and "arresting strangeness." This unique blend "makes it real."[25]

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Notes

[1]I wish to thank Rhonda Wilcox for her encouragement and her many helpful suggestions as I developed this essay, and in particular for directing me to Jane Feuer's *The Hollywood Musical*, an excellent resource.

[2]During the first few seasons of the series, while Buffy is a high school student, critics such as Tracy Little have interpreted her supernatural encounters as metaphoric representations of the high school experience. See "High School is Hell: Metaphor Made Literal in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*.

[3]Buffy's revelation to Willow that her parents had sent her to "a clinic" for "a couple of weeks" after she had first told them that she had been seeing vampires, and her tearful questions, "What if I'm still there? What if I never left that clinic?", amplify the uncanny quality of this episode.

[4]Andrew is still arguing that Timothy Dalton is under-appreciated in this role in "Showtime" (7011).

[5]In addition to the cultural similarities between Sunnydale and our own world, Karen Sayer notes that *BtVS*'s use of commercial products, such as Willow's Macintosh Powerbook, lends authenticity to the Buffyverse. See Sayer.

[6i]Even these examples illustrate the eclecticism of Whedon's generic borrowings. Of the three episodes cited, only "Gingerbread" utilizes recognizable fairy tale figures—Hansel and Gretel—although with a twist, as they're revealed to be a single demonic entity; moreover, the episode owes as much to popular conceptions of the Salem witch trials as to fairy tale narratives. "Killed by Death" and "Hush" are constructed from plot devices and villains typical of the genre, but, notwithstanding the prominent display of Giles's book of *Fairy Tales* in "Hush," these episodes aren't based on actual fairy tales. Note that in "Gingerbread," Giles's explanation that "some regional stories have actual, um, very literal antecedents," is quickly simplified by Oz to "fairy tales are real," further conflating fantasy and reality.

[7]Both the Trio and Willow blend knowledge of science with knowledge of magic. (Andrew Aberdein has discussed Willow as an adept in both science and magic [85]). In both cases, they begin with a strong grounding in technology, and eventually extend their toolsets to the use of magic. Willow sometimes net-surfs for information by interfacing telepathically, which is more efficient for her; and the Trio blend superscience and the supernatural, as when they use the the "musk gland of a Homja-Maleev demon" to "charge" their "cerebral dampener" ("Dead Things," 6013).

[8]Whedon's script maintains that this is not actually a teaser, but just a "previously."

[9]The Season Six DVD collection is consistent with DVDs from previous seasons. The American version omits the teasers, so some of the emphasis on generic hybridity is lost.

[10]The original broadcast ran about eight minutes long, and a few scenes were cut for subsequent broadcasts and syndication, including a few opening "wordless scenes" (*The Script Book*) while the overture played over the credits. In both versions, "Going Through the Motions" is the first song sung by a member of the cast.

[11]There are slight differences in dialogue between the published version of the script and the episode as it actually aired. (Even the DVD's sub-titles do not seem to include all the overlapping dialogue in this scene). In scenes such as this one, where the dialogue consists of several characters all speaking at once, it is very difficult to discern all the words with complete accuracy. Accordingly, I have chosen the published *Script Book* as the most authoritative source, since it is the officially licensed text. In order to be consistent, I have used the official script throughout this paper, unless dialogue differences between the broadcast and published versions are obvious and essential to

the discussion. However, for song lyrics, I have used the CD insert as my authoritative source, since it corresponds more accurately to the songs as recorded than *The Script Book*.

[12]Among the many musical conventions, we observe that there are a variety of musical styles, that certain melodic themes, or leitmotifs, are associated with specific characters and recur, and that themes are sometimes reconfigured or interwoven with others in counterpoint. (Chris Neal has suggested that "Once More, with Feeling" does not really employ leitmofis so much as what he terms "leits*tyles*," with certain musical styles associated with specific characters and races). The first two characteristics are self-evident. A fine example of counterpoint occurs in the Tara/Giles duet when they both reprise former solos, Tara singing "Under Your Spell" to Willow at the same time that Giles sings "Standing" to Buffy. Each of the two singers seems unaware of the other (the script direction says that they are "unheard by everyone, even each other" [*The Script Book*]); their songs are joined on the word "believe" (Tara's "You made me believe" evolves into "Standing" when Giles sings "Believe me I don't wanna go") and they harmonize for the rest of the song. "Walk Through the Fire" interweaves the voices of most of the characters and elements of many of the songs in the show. This technique whereby several characters are singing different lyrics at the same time is a common feature of musical theater, and is usually used to bring the action toward a climactic moment.

Another convention typical of the genre is the use of allusions to musicals of the past. "Once More, with Feeling"'s many "quotations," as Jane Feuer calls them, encompass virtually all the components of musical film, including plot developments, song lyrics and styles, orchestration, choreography, and cinematography. Whedon notes, for example, that Buffy's "Going Through the Motions" is self-consciously in the Disney musical tradition; he characterizes the song as an expression of what is missing in her life, one of a class of "I want" songs reminiscent of those sung by Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* and Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*. The closeup of Buffy's face through the dust of the slain vampire was deliberately designed to suggest what Whedon calls "two classic Disney moments," the revealing of the face and a shot of swirling leaves. Similarly, Whedon calls "I'll Never Tell" "my Astaire/Rogers feeling kind of number" (DVD Director's Commentary).

[13] Michael Adams has pointed out that the young woman's song, though mundane, expresses a universal plea when she sings "I think I've paid more than my share."

[14]One of the few examples of the interior monologue is Dawn's voicing her thoughts as she writes in her journal in "The Real Me" (5002). Another is Xander's talking to himself from time to time in "The Zeppo" (3013). Angelus's narration in "Passion" (2017) employs a similar technique.

[15]Feuer observes that, in many Hollywood musicals, the professional entertainers play the roles of amateur performers. According to Feuer's analysis, the players' amateur status helps dissolve some of the characteristics of professionalism (including its economic motives) that may distance the performer from the audience. The resulting performances are therefore rendered more "natural and spontaneous" (14). At first glance, Feuer's point seems contrary to mine, but I am suggesting that the very unnaturalness of the Scoobies' singing makes the effect more natural. This seeming contradiction is consistent with Feuer's explanation of demystification and remystification, discussed below.

[16]In a discussion of a 1955 MGM film, *It's Always Fair Weather,* that hauntingly anticipates the situation in "Once More, with Feeling," Jane Feuer states "We begin to see the dangerous undercurrent to the musical's wholehearted endorsement of spontaneous energy" (108).

[17]Anya's zealous capitalism has been developing since early in Season Five ("The Real Me," 5002), when her experience with a classic board game, *The Game of Life*, taught her that money was good, and of course continues during her proprietorship of The Magic Box. Evidently Anya's ideology has shifted; in a flashback scene set in St. Petersburg in 1905, she remarks to Halfrek that, "The worker will overthrow absolutism and lead the proletariat to a victorious communist revolution, resulting in socio-economic paradise on earth. It's common sense, really" ("Selfless," 7005).

[18]Rhonda Wilcox also cites part of this passage in "'Singing and Dancing and Burning and Dying.'" She goes on to discuss the way the episode's orchestral arrangement of the opening theme and the visuals of the titles and actors serve a demystifying function.

[19]Nothing on *Buffy* is ever that simple, of course. Even after Xander leaves Anya at the altar in "Hell's Bells," the renegotiation of the terms of their relationship proceeds during a good part of Season Seven, when Anya temporarily returns to the vengeance fold, and on at least one occasion she and Xander have sex ("Storyteller," 7016). There's an appropriate musical coda to "I'll Never Tell" in the "Selfless" episode (7005), when vengeance demon Anyanka, in the midst of her battle with Buffy, flashes back to 2001 (the year of "Once More, with Feeling") and sings the song "Mrs.," which celebrates her then anticipated union with Xander. This song reveals Anya's conviction that a life without Xander is a life without meaning and purpose. ("I've boned a troll / I've wreaked some wrath / But on the whole / I've had no path.") See also Wilcox in "Singing and Dancing" on "Once More with Feeling" as extending through the series via the "Selfless" episode, for example.

[20]This has always been the biggest flaw in the narrative logic for me. No possible explanation seems to satisfy. It's hard to believe that Xander could fail to see the connection between some conscious action on his part (a ritual of some kind? Simply acquiring the amulet in the first place? From where?) and the events that transpire. To suggest that he doesn't realize his part until he sees the amulet around Dawn's neck at the Bronze defies credibility. Yet if he did realize that his action (which we never see) had brought about Sweet's advent, why did he allow the Scoobies to continue their research without a hint of a confession, especially when people began to die? Xander's own frustration with the phenomenon, in the scene after "I'll Never Tell," certainly seems genuine, so this is a conundrum. I suspect it's a narrative thread that Whedon did not have time to fully develop, which is not surprising, since the episode ran long as it was. Curiously, the Director's Commentary on the DVD edition, which is comprehensive in its attention to the details of the episode (including pointing out lines in songs that Whedon considered weak), gives no indication that Whedon regards Xander's explanation as in any way deficient.

[21]A good example is the numerology in the dream imagery of several episodes that apparently foreshadowed Dawn's arrival two years before it took place. See Keller, and Wilcox, "T.S. Eliot Comes to Television."

[22]Whedon was counting "Bargaining" (6001-6002) a double-length episode that aired 2 October 2001, as one.

[23]This association of music with emotional truth is a long-standing tradition. No less a cynic than Huckleberry Finn even proves subject to it. In the midst of a funeral sermon by that notorious con-man known as "the king," a speech "full of tears and flapdoodle," Huck contrasts the "rot and slush" of the king's lying words with music:

> And the minute the words was out of his mouth somebody over in the crowd struck up the doxolojer, and everybody joined in with all their might, and it just warmed you up and made you feel as good as church letting out. Music *is* a good thing, and after all that soul-butter and hogwash, I never see it freshen up things so, and sound so honest and bully (Twain 138).

[24]The very next episode in the series, "Tabula Rasa" (6008) continues the exploration of these issues via a different generic formula—the amnesia story. When Willow casts a spell to make Buffy forget that she had been in heaven, her spell misfires

and affects the whole Scooby Gang. The characters don't know who, or even what, they are, but the audience does. The gang's assumptions about their identities and relationships are sometimes comically off-base (as in the hypothesis that Giles and Spike are father and son), and sometimes comically on-target. (Willow's "I'm all sweaty and trapped, no memory, hiding in a pipe from a vampire . . . And I think I'm kinda gay" is a fine example of an unexpectedly accurate perception, and will remind attentive fans that Willow uses exactly the same words—"And I think I'm kinda gay"— to refer to her vampire self from an alternate reality in "Doppelgängland," 3016.) And Buffy's statement, as they are attacked by vampires, that, "Monsters are real. Did we know this?" reprises the whole issue of what we do and do not know.

[25] At the *Slayage* Conference in Nashville, I closed my presentation of this paper with two verses in the mode of "Something to Sing About," the first to the tune of Buffy's part, and the second to Spike's:

It's a show

The soundtrack makes it real

Its truth is what you feel

And this will end my spiel.

How does it fit?

"Once More" is more

Than a book number bit

It's a pop hit—

A breakaway pop hit.