

WARRIOR WITCHES IN HELL

By Michael Ventura

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Most dramatic TV shows depict cops, doctors, and lawyers -- professions on the gritty interface between working citizens and the powers that be; professions that most of us are at best leery about. It's as though we watch TV to reassure ourselves that the agents of Officialdom can be depended upon in a pinch. *Somebody's* serious about looking after us. The heart of society *is* good, after all. But it's unlikely that millions would watch hours of reassurance if they didn't need to be reassured; if, that is, they didn't nurse the nasty notion that trusting a lawyer, cop, or doctor might be hazardous to your health.

I've called these dramas The Priest-and-Nun Shows: earnest charismatic folk endlessly agonizing over their worthiness and morality, no matter how hectic the emergency or how frantically their beepers beep. Priests and nuns with stethoscopes (*ER*, *Chicago Hope*), priests and nuns with guns (*NYPD Blue*), priests and nuns with briefcases (*Law and Order*, *The Practice*). Even *The X-Files* -- a priest and a nun who even seem to be celibate, and are convinced that the truth is out there somewhere (a moral certitude if ever there was one); if only they keep searching, they'll win (more moral certitude). Throw in *Baywatch*: naked priests and nuns. And *Dawson's Creek*: the teen novitiate hour. Every plot presents stark moral choices about which the characters talk and emote, emote and talk -- indeed, the bulk of the show is a discussion of this week's hot moral choice.

Such fare speaks of an America unsure of what it means to be good or moral. It used to be that moral choices weren't really an issue. The major characters on *Gunsmoke* and *Kojak*, for instance, had already drawn a firm line between right and wrong, and the drama was getting the job done against tough odds. Now characters agonize over where the line is, or whether it even exists. They always come out on the side of traditional morality -- that's the point of the exercise -- but it takes an hour to get there. Interesting: it takes a whole hour of prime time to reaffirm that the heart of society is, after all, good.

But there's another breed of show on TV, with large and mostly young followings, that takes the opposite stance: The heart of society is demonic. Society *is* Hell. The vision is fatalistic. Zero moral certitude. There may or may not be a God, but the Devil is the bully in *your* neighborhood. To be human is to constantly fight demons.

And in these shows men aren't much use against demons. It's up to the ladies.

Buffy: The Vampire Slayer features a perky high-school kid (Sarah Michelle Gellar) whom fate has designated to be the Slayer. She has no choice. Every generation has a Slayer, and, if you're it, you don't get to date much. *Buffy* depicts the American high school experience as one in which the Mouth of Hell is (literally) in the center of the school (the library!), spewing forth demons who disrupt traditional American education. With one exception (the librarian) adults are oblivious to the demonic nature of reality. Amazing things happen, and Buffy is rarely home nights, but her (single) mom always hopes Buffy will do her homework if she gets the right counseling. Buffy has student allies (of both sexes), but she's the Slayer, she does the heavy fighting. When Buffy falls in love, it's with a vampire named "Angel."

The symbolism is dizzying. While drugs, alcohol, and gangs, are conspicuously absent from this high school, it's clear these are what "the Hell-Mouth" signifies. The

demons are the gang. The surreal transformations that happen to gullible kids victimized by demons -- that's your brain on drugs. And the utter helplessness of grown-ups in the face of this Hell -- that's life. While the only angel around is, in the end, just another vampire. (He's a good vampire for the moment, but his curse is that if Buffy makes him too happy in bed he'll become Evil Incarnate, so they can only pet. Teen hell for sure.) Buffy has often expressed the Janis Joplin-like assumption that she'll die young and therefore must live for whatever moment she has. (Fatalism-plus-youthful-fierceness -- a tonic for my middle age.)

Buffy is done with a sly yet generous humor that lets you forget the pain of its premise -- hence its appeal. The show manages to be sweet without offering any hope whatsoever. There's always another vampire to fight, every night, every generation. Welcome to the real world, kid.

Only one show has a bleaker premise: *La Femme Nikita*. With *Buffy*, Hell's around the corner. But Nikita (Peta Wilson) lives in Hell. It's called Section One, and is even located underground. "I was falsely accused of a hideous crime," the opening narration goes, "and condemned to death." Section One staged her funeral, recruited her, trained her, "and if I don't play by their rules, I die." In other words, Nikita's a demon, one of the living dead, but darkly on the side of light. Section One fights terrorists, and the ends justify the means. These "moral" anti-terrorists practice torture in almost every episode. Nikita resisted this at first, but now she breaks fingers with the best of them. Is willing, like a demon, to do anything, even commit torture. It's the Gestapo, but it's *our* Gestapo. Ugh.

Buffy is a squeaky-clean hetero teen; Nikita is a tall, volatile, gorgeous blond, a fashion-plate with a runway walk, who swings both ways. Once she fell in love with an equally stunning African-American woman, and their sexy tongue-in-close-up kiss made anything on *Ellen* look like a *Brady Bunch* rerun. But usually Nikita's love is a cold passive-aggressive control-freak named Michael (Roy Dupuis), who manages to be effeminate and masculine at the same time. Hell, in other words, knows no boundaries. Butch/femme, straight/gay, good/evil, control/chaos -- everything's blurred. *Hell is just like the Nineties*. The ambivalences that frighten Americans most are taken for granted on *La Femme Nikita*.

You want Officialdom to be on your side? Ok, it is, sort of. But if it has to threaten you and your children to stop a terrorist, it will. So: being on society's side doesn't necessarily mean being on *your* side. There are no comforts in *La Femme Nikita*. It assumes we live in the worst (and sexiest) of worlds, and, as with *Buffy*, there is no future. Not really. For every terrorist you kill, you'll have to kill (or torture) another.

What Buffy and Nikita have most in common is that they are warriors. Buffy is uncorrupted by her struggle; Nikita has fallen victim to it, accepting corruption and far worse. But, as warriors, Western story-telling hasn't seen their ilk since the legendary female warriors of the Celts. For the first time in a thousand years, Western culture is admitting and even celebrating the warrior quality of women.

So it's fitting that the most brazen of TV's warrior women is the Greek battler Xena (Lucy Lawless). Buffy and Nikita inhabit the Devil's kingdom, but Xena frolics in a sorcerer's realm where *Playboy*-foldout witches come and go in puffs of smoke. *Xena* is never threatening like *Nikita* and rarely cogent like *Buffy* -- and her only-slightly disguised love affair with her sidekick Gabrielle is played for sweetness, not titillation. (The insider gay-jokes are often hilarious -- I know several lesbians for whom this is the

best comedy on TV.) *Xena: Warrior Princess* is strictly comic-book, except for one thing: The eyes of Lucy Lawless are so intense they leave holes in the screen.

A scantily clad butch who's still femme enough to please the boys, Xena's eyes blaze with rages, fears, and paradoxes that belie the scripts. The strain of her fierceness seems to be wearing on her. Where we see a fairie realm she sees a bad dream in which she's always tempted to be evil and is barely (though not always) saved from her own worst impulses by the good Gabrielle. A very human face stares at us from that comic book -- and you can't get more Nineties than *that*.

The old-fashioned dramatic conception of the male hero isn't flexible enough to handle the realities that Buffy, Nikita, and Xena deal with. John Wayne would sooner nuke Nikita's world than tolerate it; trapped in Buffy's high school, Humphrey Bogart would get drunk and stay drunk; faced with Xena, Clint Eastwood would die laughing -- but he'd die. The traditional male hero depended upon strong boundaries. In a world where more boundaries disappear every day, he looks more and more lost. The adult American mainstream isn't ready to accept sexual ambivalence in its hitter-men, but Young America (the major audience for these shows) seems willing to let warrior women lead in the realm of the betwixt-and-between, morally, sexually, every which way. If these fictional women prove survival is possible in such a world, fictional men may eventually tag along. But not until, like Buffy and Xena, they can not only tolerate but learn to relish ambivalence -- and, unlike poor fallen Nikita, refuse to let a lack of boundaries corrode their morality.

It may be that to be human *is* to fight demons -- at least in a world where, as one song had it, "everything is possible but nothing is real." And men had better welcome the warrior quality in women, because, at my last count, there are too many demons out there for just half the species to handle.

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