

WHY XENA SHOULD NOT HAVE DIED: A REJOINDER TO ROB TAPERT

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Group Therapy Project

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WHY XENA SHOULD NOT HAVE DIED: A REJOINDER TO ROB TAPERT

Seduced



Death was a recurring theme, as in *FALLEN ANGEL*, but so were resurrection and togetherness.

[01] Throughout its six-year run, *Xena: Warrior Princess* has had its occasional detractors, even among devoted fans who found some particular episode trifling if not downright offensive. To be honest, I was not one of those detractors because I simply ignored the show for most of its run. Finally, a friend convinced me that, given my love of lesbian subtext, I should try *Xena*.

[02] Picking it up at the beginning of the fifth season, I took a while making sense of the story line and the characters. Ironically, it was a rerun of the controversial episode *THE BITTER SUITE* that made me fall in love with the show. While I agree that the Gab Drag was over the top, I appreciated the dramatic conflict of *The Rift* and thoroughly enjoyed the

operatic musical it engendered. After that, I caught reruns and bought video collections until I had seen practically every show.

[03] In all that time, I was never a nitpicky *Xena* fan. As a latecomer, I lacked the same sense of progression in the bond between Xena and Gabrielle that original fans of the show had experienced. Consequently, I did not share their dissatisfaction with the fifth season, when the relationship seemed to take a back seat. I may have been floundering for an understanding of the story arcs that were being referenced, but watching reruns in tandem with first-run shows let me appreciate individual episodes on their own merits. Consequently, I found most of them enjoyable. I even liked MARRIED WITH FISHSTICKS, which was goofy, funny, and had great nutty costumes. Who can forget Renee O'Connor in the heart-shaped glasses? In short, I was hardly a hard-to-please fan.

[04] More to the point, I came to respect Rob Tapert's vision. Although I knew better, I even shamelessly enjoyed his cinematic gaze when he slipped the soft-focus filters onto the camera lenses and let them linger erotically over half-clad female bodies: a gaze he turned as often on Gabrielle's body as on Xena's. Consider, for example, the tender massage Xena gives Gabrielle in PARADISE FOUND or, for that matter, the Great Tattoo scene of the series finale FRIEND IN NEED. Those slow-motion close-ups of female hands working on Gabrielle's luscious bare back helped galvanize my ardor for the bard-turned-warrior. With such alluring images, how could I help but become intrigued? Nor was it long before I discovered the substance underlying those images: the depiction of a loving bond that transcended time, space, and circumstance. I was hooked.

And Abandoned

[05] The two-part series finale of *Xena: Warrior Princess* was also the product of Rob Tapert's vision. He directed it based on a story he co-authored with R.J. Stewart, who wrote the actual teleplay. As it unfolded, this adventure, too, looked every bit as wonderful as previous ones. In fact, it was better than most. It was an extremely entertaining, beautifully photographed, and, for the most part, very well told story. In the last five minutes, however, something went terribly wrong.

[06] Although I initially gave Tapert the benefit of the doubt, trying to convince myself that the ending gave the show more dramatic content and made it as much about Gabrielle's growth as about Xena's redemption, I could not get past the sudden turn of events in the denouement. Tapert's decision to keep Xena dead left me feeling surprisingly devastated and more than a little betrayed.

[07] For a number of fans, the finale has cast a pall over everything that came before it. The experience of watching reruns is now tainted with the sure knowledge of how the relationship ends. Tragic endings have that effect. It is ironic that one bad decision might ruin the franchise and the popularity of syndicated reruns of what was once a fun show to watch. It is a disservice to the cast and crew, who poured six years of hard work and talent into 134 episodes, and it is undeniably a disservice to fans, who drew strength and pleasure

from the characters and the stories.

Defiant?

[08] I suspect that the decision to leave Xena dead was what Lucy Lawless was referring to when she noted that the finale was "the most defiant episode we've done," adding that her husband (Tapert) "is afraid of nothing, nobody tells him, 'You can't do that'. They might try, but he'll do it his way."

[09] I respect the stand-by-your-man reaction. Lawless' genuine pride notwithstanding, however, even she would have to admit that there is nothing particularly bold about killing off strong women characters or, for that matter, (apropos the subtext) about ending a quasi-lesbian relationship with the tragic and untimely death of one of the partners. These have been standards of the mainstream media since well before the word "lesbian" made it past Hollywood censors. I doubt, too, that anyone at Studios USA retained a personal stake in how the show ended. The rights to airing the reruns, after all, have been bought by executives of the Oxygen network, who are now perhaps regretting that investment decision. So, if this was not an instance of valiantly striking out against Hollywood standards and interests, what exactly was Tapert defying?

[10] Except perhaps for its creators, including the show's cast and crew, the only people who cared deeply about how *Xena* ended were its fans. The logical conclusion, therefore, is that, in deciding to kill Xena off, Tapert was defying the very fan base that had for six years staunchly supported the show, making it one of the highest rated first-run syndicated programs in television history. As a bonus, *Xena*'s popularity also helped Lucy Lawless become the second wealthiest woman in New Zealand, an accomplishment I hardly begrudge her, especially given the arduous work involved in producing an hour-long show week after week. Still, when these facts are considered, the series finale smacks a little of biting-the-hand-that-feeds, and this makes Tapert a lot less gracious than he should have been.

[11] The "*Xena* phenomenon" was more extraordinary than most other television fandoms. Unlike the "*Trek* phenomenon", for example, *Xena* began and ended its run as a syndicated program produced outside Hollywood. In the absence of that traditional support structure, the show arguably benefited from the support of its fans, which was apparent in its high ratings and worldwide popularity. At the same time, *Xena* fans exploited the burgeoning World Wide Web as a place to gather, exchange stories and ideas, and develop an active community, one that has produced in fact more than it has consumed. After all, Tapert and Company created only 134 episodes. By contrast, Xenites have written thousands of fan fiction stories, and they have generated hundreds of thousands of dollars in franchise revenues and charitable donations. It is not surprising, then, that this community came to the attention of the show's producers and encouraged them to push the envelope on certain themes like the show's lesbian subtext. In other words, what developed between the "official" creators of the show and its "unofficial" creators, the fans, was more symbiotic than for the standard Hollywood fare.

[12] True to their personal involvement, when news broke that the sixth season would be the show's final one, fans began writing in to beg the creators to end the show on a high note. For many of us, that meant allowing Xena and Gabrielle to share a passionate kiss and ride off into the sunset together. Other fans probably had different ideas about how the show should end, maybe some vague hope that Xena would find peace and redemption. To my knowledge, however, no fans actually suggested achieving this closure by killing Xena off. Why would they? Having an exciting and enjoyable finale was not contingent on leaving Xena dead at the end.

[13] In fact, given the situations in which both Xena and Gabrielle were placed in the finale and the extent of their personal sacrifices, this adventure was already thrilling and profoundly moving, and it would have remained so without the added provocation of leaving Xena dead. I suspect that even those fans who claim that they ultimately liked the finale would still have enjoyed it with a happier ending. Of course, that is a difficult suspicion to prove since so many of us are tempted to believe that a story *has* to end the way the author originally intended. That belief, however, is false. *Xena* could have ended differently and without sacrificing Rob Tapert's sense of "artistry", "self-expression", "showmanship", or whatever it was he was trying to achieve.

A Breach

[14] Tapert's decision to kill off Xena breaches an implicit social compact that he had helped to cultivate over the years, even to the point of hiring *Xena* fan fiction writer Missy Good to pen a couple of episodes for the final season. As a writer of alternative fan fiction, Good has developed a strong and well-deserved following among subtext fans. In that respect, hiring her sent a very specific and probably intentional message to those long-standing *Xena* fans who had become disenchanted by the relationship-barren fifth season, luring them back with the promise of a return to basics.



Xena and Gabrielle ride off together at the end of WHEN FATES COLLIDE.

[15] For the most part, this promise was met throughout the sixth season, most notably in the epic RHEINGOLD trilogy and in Katherine Fugate's truly moving WHEN FATES COLLIDE, both of which centered explicitly on Xena and Gabrielle's bond. Such episodes in particular helped renew our trust that the creators of the show were at least partially sensitive to what we wanted, a story about redeeming oneself through a loving and enduring partnership. The only defiance exhibited by Tapert's finale is against the notion that this was a trust worth keeping.

[16] The truth is that we got blind-sided by an ending that was designed precisely for that purpose: to shock and dismay its audience as much as Xena's under-motivated, last-minute revelation shocked and dismayed an unwitting Gabrielle. In fact, from the standpoint of the narrative, Gabrielle was taken in no less than we were. In retrospect, I find it remarkably out of character for Xena to have allowed, let alone encouraged, Gabrielle to embark on an adventure that put her in danger, especially for a task that Xena never intended to let Gabrielle complete. Some "friend"!

[17] Obviously, there were many instances throughout the narrative when one could well imagine Xena having had the opportunity to break the sad news to Gabrielle, sparing her the false hope and the close shaves with the Samurai with the bad accent. Apparently, there is no dramatic content in sparing someone's feelings: Gabrielle's or ours. That Xena did not reveal the truth until the end was, of course, a plot device intended to keep the audience in suspense so that we might be, in Tapert's coy terms, "surprised and entertained".

[18] Ultimately, however, the revelation is so contrived that it rings false. It rings false because it comes on the heels of Xena having accomplished her stated goal of killing Yodoshi and having received Akemi's declaration that she had redeemed herself. It rings false because the 40,000 deaths, unlike so many others caused by Xena, were accidental. It rings false because in the revelation that those souls could only be avenged by Xena's death, the finale sends a message that counters what had been the running theme of the show: that one can remake oneself and find redemption in love.

[19] A disappointed fan named Ariana put it best when she noted:

"[The finale] took a show that glorified life and the struggle to do what's right, the power to reinvent yourself despite the wrongs of your past, the power of love and redemption, and cut the legs out of all those things (or I suppose that should be cut the head off). In the end, the moral is that there is no redemption in life. There is no forgiveness, no true atonement other than suffering as much as possible."

-- Ariana, "Why" commentary on *Whoosh's* page for FRIEND IN NEED II

[20] Put this way, the series ender seems a thinly veiled homage to capital punishment as the only appropriate means of achieving social justice and personal redemption, which is not what *Xena: Warrior Princess* had been all about. In fact, that message had been explicitly rejected in both the first season episode THE RECKONING and in the sixth season episode LEGACY.

[21] Finally, the ending rings false because Gabrielle comes to accept Xena's decision with barely more than a whimper. Perhaps by then she was tired from having had to fend off the Samurai with the bad accent. Whatever the reason, I missed the half-crazed bashing of trees and Romans, as in THE GREATER GOOD and IDES OF MARCH, respectively, and I especially missed the heartfelt plea to "Fight to come back! This world needs you. I need you", as Gabrielle declared in DESTINY. Did the world suddenly stop needing heroes? Did

Gabrielle really stop needing Xena?

[22] Even Renee O'Connor's acting, which was brilliant throughout most of the final episode, seemed a bit stilted in the last scene, particularly as she delivered what sounded suspiciously like the beginning of a bad panegyric: "A life of journeying has brought you to the farthest lands, to the very edges of the Earth." That the line was a setup for Xena's loving reply -- "And to the place where I'll always remain: your heart" -- only partially redeems it. For my part, the dialog in the final scene was overly formal and meant to be delivered with an alacrity that simply did not fit the moment. Despite her best efforts, even O'Connor could not imbue such a disingenuous ending with heartfelt sincerity. Who was Tapert kidding, anyway? For all Gabrielle's apparent acceptance, some of us find very little comfort in the lie that Gabrielle is not alone because Xena's memory will always be with her. Any way you cut it, it is an unsatisfying ending. Gabrielle deserved better and so did we.

There Is Nothing Ambiguous About Death

[23] It is difficult to avoid bitterness about Tapert's decision since the finale went so decisively against the grain of what fans expected to see, especially given Tapert's explicit statement that Xena would not be killed off in the end. Particularly grating is the way this seems like a sick joke played on us, right down to the almost cruel disclaimer: "Xena was permanently harmed in the making of this motion picture, but kept her spirits up." Was that supposed to be funny? Perhaps the disclaimer is meant to remind us that we should not take the show too seriously or lose perspective on the things that really matter: like hunger, poverty, illness, or death.

[24] Despite appearances, such reminders are neither necessary nor appreciated since most of us are painfully aware of the differences between the "death" of a fictional character and the death of a real person. Unfortunately, as long as those with far less invested in this television show can pull out the Reality Trump Card, Xenites are going to look stupid getting upset about something as seemingly inconsequential as the death of a character. The problem with this line of argument, however, is that we all have something invested in cultural representations since culture (mainstream, popular, alternative, or all of the above) is how we get a sense of who and what we are, where we belong, what we should do, and how we should live.

[25] For all the smug quips about our "grieving" over a fictional character, the difference is not a species difference (Fiction versus Reality). Rather, the difference is in the type of cultural representation that raises your ire as opposed to mine. Stereotypes about servile women, flaming queers, shiftless Latinos, inbred rednecks, and dimwitted jocks will always inspire critics, and among quite intelligent people who know the difference between fiction and reality. Given the right examples, we could all recognize that cultural representations matter because they help give meaning to our everyday lives, reinforcing positive attitudes or perpetuating negative ones.

[26] Part of what makes the finale such a bitter pill to swallow, then, is that the makers of *Xena* seemed genuinely to understand how the show might matter to some of its audience. As Lucy Lawless herself noted, "The lesbian community in particular has no role models on television." Small wonder, then, that so many of us bought so thoroughly into a show centering on two strong women characters and the loving relationship between them. In the final analysis, however, there was a good deal more lip service, literally, than substance in the ostensibly lesbian orientation of this dyke icon. That, however, is the nature of subtext, and I embrace the ambiguity. In other words, although it would have been nice (and even defiant!) if Xena and Gabrielle had shared a passionate kiss for its own sake, it does not bother me that all we got was yet another form of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, albeit a curiously satisfying one. A real kiss was not central to my considering Xena and Gabrielle lesbian role models. What mattered was the relationship.

[27] Tapert's comments about the finale are in fact very telling. He insists that "the finale was really based on where the series started, and it seemed to complete [Xena's] journey looking for redemption." That is a remarkably cynical view of the series opener since Xena symbolically casting off her warrior garb was more about trying to remake herself into something more positive. The real problem with returning the show to its roots, however, is that the story evolved throughout its six seasons. This is unsurprising since all shows begin with only the kernel of an idea. *Xena* centered on a bloodthirsty warrior who had a change of heart and decided to seek redemption for the sins of her past. It was a good beginning, but the story did not stay there.



Xena admonishes Gabrielle not to die in IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE.

[28] Initially only a sidekick for Xena to play off of, Gabrielle became an integral part of the unfolding narrative. By the end of the first season (in IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE?), she had become a best friend that Xena could not live without. By the end of the second season (in THE PRICE), she had become Xena's moral compass on her road to redemption. These were not changes, moreover, that took place in a vacuum. Fans noticed the "chemistry" between the leads and pressed for more relationship stories, both in their fan mail and in their online commentaries. That the relationship would have deepened as much as it did even without fan encouragement is certainly possible. The show would not have lasted, however, without fan support. The key to our patronage, moreover, was the growing bond between Xena and Gabrielle. With or without subtext, the relationship is what kept many of the original fans watching and what lured newer fans to the fold.

[29] Once the creators established that Xena and Gabrielle were "soulmates", they made the characters' shared experiences and transcendent love the centerpiece of the show. It became an epic romance that was at times sad but never hopelessly tragic. Tapert's ending sacrificed that vision for the less interesting original story line, which was more about individual

redemption and growth. To successfully redeem herself and pass the warrior mantle onto Gabrielle, Xena had to die, and Gabrielle had to continue the journey alone. That Gabrielle winds up carting Xena's ashes around and sharing pleasantries with her ghost like some demented widow is supposed to make us think that the friendship endures. However, there is more truth in the final shot, which has Gabrielle standing on the deck alone.

[30] Xena was a lesbian icon because she shared her life, hopes, and fears with another woman, whom she loved. If she was worthy of admiration as a hero, moreover, it was not because she was capable of one great heroic sacrifice that would redeem all her sins and for all time. It was because she had come to accept that redemption is an arduous, lifelong process. Keeping Xena alive mattered for keeping that sense of a shared process of growth and redemption alive.

[31] There is nothing ambiguous about death, however, even in fiction. Allusions to the possibility that Xena might be miraculously resurrected in a movie do nothing for us in the short run. Furthermore, we have been burnt once by Tapert. The show has ended, and the end of the story told by him was that Xena died. The role model might have lived on in our imaginations if Tapert's desire for closure had not been quite so morbid. Of course, Xena may still live on in our imaginations, but only with considerable effort on our part at forgetting the finale, and it takes a lot of work to forget.

An Unmet Challenge

[32] The dramatic ending and sense of closure Tapert sought might have been harder to achieve had he let Xena live, but then why not rise to the challenge? If allowing Gabrielle to save Xena runs the risk of proffering a trite and forgettable ending, then killing Xena off for cheap dramatic effect is tantamount to taking the easy way out. Perhaps Tapert was not up to the challenge of conceiving an ending that was both dramatically "surprising and entertaining" and willing to give loyal fans even a fraction of what they wanted.

[33] Tapert's decision has left *Xena* fans scrambling to offset the effects of the finale, to somehow make sense of this death in a way that will not devastate the community that fell in love with these characters and with the love depicted between them. That will be our challenge, and we will rise to it out of a sense of necessity, desire, and hope, and because "real life" is tragic enough.

[34] Unfortunately, some fans are trying to come to terms with the ending simply by accepting, in good hyper-liberal fashion, that as the originator of *Xena*, Rob Tapert had a "right" to end "his" character any way he saw fit. The trouble with this notion is that it ignores that authors write in a cultural context and for an audience.

[35] When Rob Tapert killed Xena off, he turned his back on his audience. He forgot that sharing one's creative vision with others is not a right, but a privilege. Sadly, he proved that he could not be trusted with our vision. Those soft-filtered images of Xena and Gabrielle's half-naked bodies were hardly central to what really mattered to the fans. Underneath the

pseudo-lesbian teases, Tapert revealed that he never really understood what our vision was all about.

Biography



A. Adams

My commentary will seem surprisingly naive to friends who know my background in critical media studies: those insightful (but ultimately overstated) theories claiming that the mainstream media are purveyors of capitalist ideologies and that audiences are just passive consumers. However, I was an unrepentant television viewer long before I became a cultural critic and political theorist. Today, I am a generally happy forty-year-old woman living under the always-hot Florida sun and working as the network administrator for a group of attorneys I very much like. Maybe that combination of sun and lawyers is what has me thinking in terms of social compacts between television producers, whom one should not trust anyway, and fans, who etymologically are just "short fanatics". At any rate, neither a doctorate nor gainful employment in "the real world" has diminished my sense that culture is the effect of our conversations with others. All we can do, as both creators and consumers, is hope that someone is listening.

Favorite episode: ONE AGAINST AN ARMY (classic X/G moments, signature fighting tactics, and another of those tongue-in-cheek allusions to Xena's role in history: when the Warrior Princess warns the Marathon runner to pace himself because "In this heat, a run like that could kill you.")

Favorite line: Gabrielle: "Believe me. If I have to go the rest of my life without companionship, 'knowing myself' won't be a problem." WARRIOR...PRIESTESS...TRAMP

First episode seen: FALLEN ANGEL

Least favorite episode: CHARIOTS OF WAR