

two of them were traveling the countryside, ridding ancient Greece of a seemingly never-ending supply of evil warlords. Late in the season, "Callisto" introduced two major supporting characters, Callisto and Joxer.

During the second year, an unfortunate accident gave *Xena* more publicity than the show could have generated on its own. Lucy Lawless was scheduled to appear on *The Tonight Show* in October 1996, and during a pre-show taping of a skit, she fell from her horse and suffered serious injuries. Footage of her being wheeled by stretcher into an ambulance made the news, and suddenly everyone knew about *Xena* and *Hercules*. Of course, Lawless's recovery forced the show's writers to scramble to come up with *Xena* episodes with little or no Lawless in them—their solution was to put *Xena* in Callisto's body temporarily. (Later *Xena* ended up possessing Autolykus's body.) It worked well enough, and show continued to be one of television's more interesting offerings.

It was about this time that the writers began to hint that the *Xena*/Gabrielle relationship might have been somewhat more than platonic. As discussion on Web sites intensified, the writers began having fun with the idea, intentionally placing scenes that could be interpreted more than one way. Years later, fans debate the "sub-text" of the show and what was, or was not, the exact relationship of the two characters.

Fortunately, the show offered more than sub-text—the text itself was often interesting enough, as the series began appropriating historical figures that lived centuries apart and placing them within *Xena*'s world. This gave the writers the ability to delve into historical, religious, and literary topics as they grabbed various characters. It was thrilling, inventive television, alternately silly and insightful.

The variety of silly and dramatic—which is now employed more and more in television, most notably on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—was perfected on *Xena*. From week to week, the viewer never knew whether he was in for some slapstick comedy on par with the Three Stooges or some melodrama that challenged the best of the network dramas. While the merging of humor and drama had been done before, *Xena* pushed it to extremes—and, somehow, succeeded at both. The humor episodes were often *very* funny, while the dramatic episodes were gripping. It's astonishing that one type of show didn't undercut the other, but the producers were able to make it all work.

And when all else failed, there was fighting. *Xena* could boast some of the most exciting, best-choreographed battles ever on TV. Borrowing from Japanese kung-fu movies, executive producers Sam Raimi and Robert Tapert gave *Xena* a flashy, gravity-defying style that, combined with

her chakram, provided the basis for some visually fascinating moments from directors who chose to take advantage of the possibilities, and fortunately, many did.

Challenges of the Sixth Season

Like the film *Titanic*, *Xena* had enough diverse elements that it was able to draw from several demographic groups and remain at or near the top of syndicated



Xena in north Africa

adventure programming for years. But as the writers continued to push the dramatic story arcs forward, the show may have been forced into a box. Season four actually had a perfect series ending. In the next to last episode, *Xena* and Gabrielle were crucified by Caesar and died just as Brutus killed the emperor. In the final episode, the story jumped forward, as present-day incarnations of *Xena*, Gabrielle, Joxer, Ares, and Salmeoneus continued their battles and friendships.

But the story didn't end there. In season five, *Xena* got a cool new chakram, had a baby, and ended up in a coma of sorts. Ares took *Xena* and Gabrielle and encased them in tombs of ice, believing they were dead. But they awoke twenty-five years later. While Gabrielle had to endure the murder of her religious teacher, Eli, at the hands of Ares, *Xena*'s daughter Eve (Livia) ended up becoming a vicious Roman warrior, thanks to Ares. Before long Eve had killed an elderly Joxer, but eventually Mom and daughter Eve got reunited; Eve renounced her evil (as *Xena* did years earlier); and—for reasons that were never spelled out exactly—*Xena* was

able to kill gods as long as Eve was alive. In the season finale, *Xena* killed all the Olympians except for Ares and Aphrodite: the rule of the Roman gods had passed, to be replaced by Eli's god of love. It was almost as good of a series finale as season four, incorporating the allegory of Christianity's rising prominence in Roman times.

When the series returned for a sixth season, the large story arc involved Ares' frustration at becoming mortal and, eventually, *Xena*'s ability to return him and Aphrodite to Olympia. Compared to the extraordinary arcs of the fourth and fifth seasons, this one was a let-down. After one has killed gods, how can one possibly generate the same kind of excitement? Battling warlords just doesn't do it, particularly when one considers the metaphorical aspects of the fifth season.

Nevertheless, the writers did come up with some interesting adventures for the final season. Several stories featuring the Amazons worked well, and three episodes (four, counting "You Are There") had *Xena* journeying north and meeting up with Norse gods and legends. Unfortunately, though they looked great (*Xena* in Viking armor!), and the first episode got off to a fine start, the two episodes that followed faltered somewhat.

More interesting—at least on a thematic level—was the situation Ares and Aphrodite found themselves in. Ares especially had a peculiar situation, having renounced his godhood in "Motherhood" in order to save *Xena* from being killed by Athena. Ares became mortal, setting up all kinds of predictably humorous situations, but also allowing for some metaphorical explorations that could continue those begun in season five. Unfortunately, the writers did not pursue them.

We're thinking about the idea of what constitutes mortality versus immortality, i.e. humanity versus godhood. Are gods simply humans with special powers—superheroes, in a sense? Or is there something more? Considering that "Motherhood" set up parallels to real history by having Eli's "god of love" (i.e. Christianity) replace the "petty and cruel" (to quote from the *Hercules* intro) ancient gods, Ares mortality suggested the Christian idea of Jesus' renouncing (at least some aspects of) his divinity in order to become human for a short while. (According to Christian theology, one of the reasons for the necessity of Jesus' humanity was so that God could more fully understand the frustrations and limitations of being human.) A debate arose within the early church: if Jesus were human—fully human—then was he no longer divine? A compromise was worked out that described Jesus as "fully God and fully man." While logically problematic (one philosophy professor once told us, "I don't have a good definition of God, but whatever it is, it doesn't include being human as part of it"), the phrase