



These scenes, along with many later on in the season, show how much Ares has grown and deepened as a character since his earliest appearances on *Hercules*.

The ludicrous *Married With Fishsticks* has been widely criticised, perhaps a little unfairly. A flippant, silly pastiche of 1960s-style sitcoms, an episode of this kind was clearly needed at this point in the series to ameliorate the darkness of the surrounding instalments.

Married With Fishsticks certainly appeals more than the ensuing episode, *Lifeblood*. A last gasp attempt at exploring Amazon culture, in it we follow Xena and Gabrielle as they meet up with the tribe of Amazons they've encountered so often before so that Gabrielle can bestow her right of caste upon Eve, effectively making her an Amazon Princess. It's an odd episode – a mix of hugely impressive dance sequences and clips from Renaissance's would-be series *Amazon High*. It's also rather puffed and slightly incoherent. *Kindred Spirits* is also an Amazon fest, and one with a great deal

adventures with the Amazon nation.

You have to be very brave indeed to name an episode after one of the best plays ever written, but that's what Renaissance did with *Antony and Cleopatra*. It then takes another act of almost astonishing bravery to kill off one of the titular characters in the pre-credits sequence and replace her with one of your own. Events don't remotely square with either Shakespeare or history, but since when did history matter a jot in this show? The aforementioned pre-credits sequence is shockingly effective, and consequently one of the most impressive in the series' long history. In concluding the Brutus plotline, *Antony and Cleopatra* finally clears up the last of the series' unfinished business, and by introducing Octavius, it sets the scene for the season's final quartet of episodes.

In fact, given what follows, *Antony and Cleopatra* could almost be considered the last episode of 'proper Xena'; certainly it's the last gasp for the old-style, old-format series that the remainder of the season will wilfully abandon in the quest for something brave, new and exciting.

And *Looking Death in the Eye* embraces this new quest wholeheartedly. The episode begins in a low-key yet shocking manner. An auction is held in a country tavern; someone is selling a scroll which he claims tells the story of what happened to Xena, the Warrior Princess, missing for 25 years. A man at the bar, shocked by this news, turns around, and we see that he is an aged Joxer. Stunned to discover that it's genuine, he snatches the scroll and leaves, determined to find out what happened to his friends.

Looking Death in the Eye is the last of the three pivotal episodes and the first part of what is effectively a four-part story – a single 180-minute narrative that showcases Xena at its absolute best. It's also arguably the best individual instalment of the series since *Sacrifice*, containing too many great sequences to name. The quarrelling between the gods; Xena's rage at Death; all the scenes featuring Ted Raimi's astonishingly dignified 'old Joxer'; the exploding chariot and Ares' desperate attempt to stop Xena from killing herself... These are just some of the memorable moments which spring to mind.

The plot continues directly into *Livia*, an amazing episode in its own right. From the brutal, unsettling pre-credits sequence onwards, it rewrites the book on

Top: Gabrielle gets into mermaid mode for the comedy episode *Married With Fishsticks*.

Above: Xena and Gabby can't work out why the Amazon's activities look so familiar in *Lifeblood*.

Right: Xena gets her daughter back in *Eve*.



“The woman we’re tracking is Livia, champion of Rome. I’m not sure my daughter Eve even exists anymore.”
Xena, Eve