

third-season episode "The Dirty Half-Dozen.")

The end-credits disclaimer: "No maggots were harmed during the making of this motion picture, although a few were found stuck to Gabrielle's teeth."

RATING: ★★

3. HEART OF DARKNESS

First televised October 2000

Guest starring Adrienne Wilkinson (Eve), William Gregory Lee (Virgil), and Alex Mendoza (Lucifer); **Written by Emily Skopov; Directed by Mark Beesley; Edited by Tim Batt**

Angels (Michael and Raphael) discuss Xena's status as the ruler of Hell—she can't remain on Earth, but the last time she ruled Hell, she almost captured Heaven. Another angel somewhat arrogantly promises to force Xena to descend to Hell, knowing she won't go voluntarily. On Earth, Eve is concerned about the coming evil. The third angel—actually an archangel—battles Xena, but she defeats him. He says his name is Lucifer.

Xena spares Lucifer's life. Eve recognizes "a cancerous evil" that has taken root in Xena's heart and is destroying her soul. Xena's plan is to trick Lucifer into taking the rule of Hell for himself so she won't have to go. Xena and Lucifer go on a picnic while at a nearby village Eve preaches (unsuccessfully) about Eli. A fight breaks out; Virgil beats up someone. The portal to Hell is drawing people to the area and "feeding their dark side."

Xena gives Lucifer a massage, but he resists her seduction. Lucifer finds Eve praying in the temple. Xena enters with an entourage, deciding to throw a party. Gabrielle and Virgil kiss. Xena tells Lucifer he ought to stay on Earth and rule with her. Xena and Gabrielle dance. Gabrielle pairs off with Virgil; Xena invites Lucifer to dance with her. Lucifer offers Xena his body and soul. Michael and Raphael appear and tell Lucifer that an archangel can't give away his soul, because it belongs to God.

More angels appear; Xena fights them off. Michael, Raphael, and Xena get zapped to the ground next to the portal. The three fight. Lucifer appears but ends up fighting the angels; they disappear. Xena gives Lucifer a kiss until Gabrielle intervenes. Xena says the kingdoms of Hell and Earth will soon merge; she and Lucifer will rule it together. Eve is determined to set Xena straight. Xena suggests to Lucifer that Eve needs to be killed.

Eve flees as Xena and Lucifer pursue. Gabrielle and Virgil find Eve at the temple. Eve believes she needs to send Xena through the portal. Lucifer fights Eve and is about to kill her when Xena stops him. He's angry. Xena says he's committed all seven deadly sins. Lucifer transforms into a monster. He fights Xena. Xena kicks him into the portal, which closes afterward. Eve sees that Xena's heart has become clean.

COMMENTS: Essentially a sequel to "The Haunting of Amphipolis," this episode continues the larger thematic arc of getting the spiritual realms in place, though it gets there sluggishly—the individual scenes are not especially interesting. It's as if the producers are trying too hard to force a particular storyline onto the series instead of letting it flow naturally. Or perhaps they're simply being too cute, inserting Xena into the Lucifer storyline. The thing is, that's not really a bad idea, and it does follow from the death of the Olympian gods in "Motherhood" at the conclusion of season five. But while that episode was fascinating in its allegorical implications, with Xena symbolizing the coming dominance of Christianity into the world, "Heart of Darkness" lacks that. As such, it becomes a rather uninspired interpretation of the fall of Lucifer as is alluded to (according to many scholars) in Isaiah 14:

How you have fallen from heaven,
O star of the morning, son of the dawn!¹

¹The King James Version reads, "O Lucifer, son of the morning!"

You have been cut down to the earth,

...

But you said in your heart,
"I will ascend to heaven."

...

Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol [the grave],
To the recesses of the pit. [NAS]

The pride of Lucifer (literally, "the bright one") led to his downfall, and "Heart of Darkness" retains this idea, but it gets



Xena, Eve, and Gabrielle

there through the clichéd scenario of having the archangel commit all of the "seven deadly sins"² (wow, nobody could have seen *that* coming, right?). The frustrating thing about this episode is that fascinating possibilities are swirling around. Xena's heart gradually darkens as she enacts a daring plan—to succumb to the temptations of evil in an attempt to drag Lucifer down with her, and then at the last minute have the strength to climb back out of the pit (figuratively speaking) while throwing Lucifer into the literal pit. If done as a kind of *Screwtape Letters* metaphor (as was accomplished with Shawn Cassidy's *American Gothic* a few years ago), Xena's struggle could have resonated profoundly. At heart (so to speak), what were the differences between Xena and Lucifer that allowed her to escape the final fall? If it's just a matter of physical strength, of who is the best fighter, the episode becomes little more than a shaggy dog story.

We should note, however, that Mark Beesley's direction is occasionally quite interesting. The "orgy" (or, strictly speaking, impending orgy) scene, for instance, is both sizzling and embarrassing at the same time.

We noted archangel Michael's first appearance in our comments for "The Haunting of Amphipolis," but this episode refers to other events in the Xena/Michael history. Xena and Gabrielle both die (having been crucified by Caesar) in the fourth season episode, "The Ides of March." In the next season's premiere, Michael rescues Xena from being carried into Hell. Gabrielle is not so lucky. Xena insists on rescuing her, but Michael says that is a job for the archangels. (Things get complicated after that. See

²The "seven deadly sins" are pride, envy, anger, sloth, covetousness (i.e. avarice), gluttony, and lust. Originally there were eight, but Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century (and, later, Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth) essentially codified the seven that we know today.