



deliberate, and is used to point out how much Gabrielle has changed as a person since the show's premiere episode, *Sins of the Past*.

*The Abyss* is an effective runaround episode, in which Xena and Gabrielle come up against a rather lively bunch of cannibals and Gabby finds herself served up as the main course for their next feast.

The episode's best scenes come when Gabrielle is delirious following an injury. Here we see the depth of her and Xena's affection for one another, and are reminded that Gabrielle too once lost a child. Her guilt from the events in *Legacy* is dealt with effectively and economically, with Gabby eventually coming to the conclusion that learning to live with your mistakes is all part of 'The Way'.

The action ramps up in the season's series of Norse-themed episodes, collectively titled the Ring Trilogy, which contain a fair few surprises. In the first instalment, *The Rheingold*, a surprise visit from Beowulf, the eponymous hero of Europe's oldest piece of fiction, brings with it the revelation that Xena was once a Valkyrie, one of Odin's elite army of flying horse-riding mortals.

Xena leaves her companion to ride out with Beowulf on what is clearly a dangerous mission, and the action unfolds between flashback sequences revealing yet another secret the Warrior Princess has lived with for many decades: that she created the terrifying Grindl which plagues the Norse lands.

*The Ring* continues the story of unspeakable monsters and unfinished business, with Gabrielle returned to Xena's side only to have her companion wrenched from her yet again. The second episode ends with Gabrielle sent into a *Sleeping Beauty*-style slumber along with the titular ring by the dotting Brunnhilda, much to the distress of would-be suitor Beowulf, while Xena wanders amnesiac and in tears,

having been cursed by the ring.

The final instalment, *Return of the Valkyrie*, focuses on the rescue of Gabrielle and her role in the ring saga. Years have passed and many suitors have died trying to wake her from her deep sleep, but Brunnhilda has decreed that only her true soul mate can do so.

Of course, we all know who that soul mate is, but Xena is now Wealthea, a noble princess about to be wed to King Hrothgar. Many obstacles must be overcome before she can be persuaded to wake her companion from her slumber and also herself from her amnesia, with a kiss which can leave none of us in any doubt that the love these two women share is anything but platonic.

The Ring Trilogy is an enormous epic which deserves every single one of the production awards it has been nominated for. As with *Fallen Angel*, the episodes push the boundaries of what seems possible within serial television.

Again, however, the best scenes are those that concern our characters, not those which involve explosions and CGI.

*Old Ares Had a Farm* is, as the title suggests, a not entirely serious instalment of *Xena*. The episode contains the kind of elements of sitcom pastiche seen in last season's *Married With Fishsticks*. Kevin Smith shows us another side to Ares, one bordering on humane – just listen to the way he says, "Does this mean I don't get a puppy?" He also gets to wear the silliest of hats, and Xena and Gabrielle's song



Clockwise from top: Ares as a farmer; Xena enjoys a chariot race; fighting her own daughter; and the cursed ring of the memorable trilogy.

