

Band of Outsiders

Joan of Arcadia Follows the "Gang of Misfits"
Tradition of
Buffy, *My So-Called Life*, *Freaks and Geeks*
and Other Stalwarts
of the Teen Television Pantheon
**It Just Needs More Misfits and Less Bloviating
Adults**

Basil Joe Rocker, 11/19/2003



Amber Tamblyn takes the "Sainted French One"
for Smoothies and a Spa

I am not certain if *Joan of Arcadia* can last. It has stumbled out of the blocks, feeling its way toward some sort of compelling arc. The only arc apparent in the series so far is Joan of Arc. Yet the series is not only a two-dimensional heir apparent to the Sainted French one. With a little more development, *JOA* could also emerge as an heir to the demon fighting, ass-kicking *uber femme*¹ who bid the cool medium adieu last year. Indeed, this is big talk and very hopeful conjecture.

Fans of the Chosen One may be happy to find this paler, artificially sweetened riff on High School trauma, and let it serve as a rebound relationship to ease the pain of a messy breakup² after seven years in deep, all-encompassing love. God knows *Angel* has taken a dive into the bog this season, and has become utterly unrecognizable as a scion of the slayer. It's as if someone dropped something potent into Whedon's Kool-Aid, then turned out the lights and told him to write the new *Angel* Season in one sitting. It has regressed into a wicked awful mess indeed. I weep and shudder at the thought. Many an acolyte of the Buffyversity are wailing, gnashing their teeth, flagellating themselves and walking over hot coals over the sad state of affairs at the last WB Wednesday corral.

Yet *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is not the only echo in the chamber. There are ample doses of the seminal, yet short-lived ode to teenage angst, *My So-Called Life*,³ by way of its insistence on exploring the trials and tribulations not just of the title character but of her parents and lone biological sibling as well.

In *Joan of Arcadia*, the title character is the middle child who actually has *two* brothers with whom to share the billing. Unhappily, she shares way too much with her sibs and 'rents. The inverted pyramid of foci, which gave greatest narrative space to the title character and band of friends-cum-siblings with diminishing attention paid to the parents, biological sibling, and other characters so successfully employed by *MSCL* and *BtVS*, has been wrecking-balled by *JOA*, to be replaced by yet another inverted pyramid. However, *JOA* has apparently reconstructed an upside-down ziggerat with barely distinguishable gradients. It looks more like a champagne flute with pointed corners and flat bottom than a pyramid.

JOA's take on the friends-cum-siblings falls-in line nicely with the *Band of Outsiders*⁴ tack of *BtVS* and *MSCL*, the opposite strategy employed by *Beverly Hills 90210* which cast its narrative light solely upon the beautiful and popular with few asides to geekdom in the form of a cautionary tale here and there. Geeks had an uncanny habit of winding-up dead on *90210*, dying violently.

Buffy's Scoobies featured a beautiful, but outcast demon slayer around whom circulated no paucity of rumors regarding mental illness, a computer geek turned powerful Wiccan in the form of Willow, and the big-hearted chucklehead, Xander, who was the butt of many a popular kid's jokes, but managed to stumble his way to happiness over the years nonetheless. Various other persons stumbled in and out of Scoobiedom over the years - Angel, Spike, Cordelia, Oz, et al, but the above triad was always the core, with Giles hovering nearby as a steadfast fatherly advisor.

The *MSCL* gang didn't have a moniker, and didn't really give much thought to their outsider status, since such status was so obvious as to be futile to dispute. While the Scoobs tended to keep a low profile in the public eye, fiercely guarding their otherworldly extracurricular activities, the *MSCL* Gang of Four were sore thumbs in their most subtle moments. Angela Chase, Claire Danes' lead, was the very picture of introversion and hyper-self-consciousness that is the modern condition (amplified many times in teenagers), hence the title and her parent's reference to her as a "future Psychology Major." Angela's very obsession with the appearance of her life, truncated most of her attempts to actually live her life. This debilitating self-reflexivity diminished as the series wore on, and Angela's process of shedding that unneeded skin was well the driving force behind its narrative and its high regard among critics and other television writers.⁵ Unfortunately, the series was cancelled before it could be completely shed. The *MSCL* gang is rounded out by Rayanne, a reputed harlot who is not so much a social butterfly, as a social horsefly- loud, obnoxious, and often stinging, Ricki, the gay teenager who always primped and preened himself in the Girls' Room at school, and the show's big hearted clean cut geek, Bryan Kracow, who seems equal mixes Xander and Willow.

JOA's gang does have a name- the Subdefectives, not as much a nod to outsider status as a badge of pride. The SD's are a Gang of Three. Along with Joan there is the rather antisocial Grace who has pumped-up the punk ethos for yet another decade of cynicism and discontent, and the intriguing Adam, who could well be the Willow factor for *JOA* in that he will be the one that all the alienated kids watching at home will immediately hone in on. I foresee a strong fanbase for Adam, no matter the state of his relationship with the title character. Right now, the two aren't on speaking terms. Adam is a kid reminiscent of Bryan Kracow with severe head trauma. Adam is a unique individual, a driven artist who is so enveloped in the creative plane that he can't get Joan's name right no matter how much time he spends with her and how many times he hears her correct name. He calls her Jane, always greeting her with what could well be the show's most endemic line- "Cha, Jane." T-shirts, anyone? ⁶

The premise of *JOA* is ripped right from the Joss Whedon handbook of compelling High School-based television: sixteen year-old high school girl wants a normal life filled with boys, dates, proms, clothes-shopping, smoothies while skipping an afternoon class, and other consumerist "teenagery" things typical of the gender at that age. But there is this higher calling that keeps mucking-up the works, putting duty before fun. For Buffy, it was fighting vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness. For the title character of *Joan of Arcadia*, it is to enact the will of God.⁷ No small potatoes for a teenager, naturally, and

there is no small amount of kvetching about this burdensome fate, *a la Buffy*, on the part of Amber Tamblyn's Joan.

God appears in numerous guises to Joan: a faux-pompous homeless man; a snippy substitute teacher; a surly lunch lady; an earnest hot dog (well, a guy dressed as a giant hot dog, a chili dog, no less, with lots and lots of onions); among others, giving Joan rather odd instructions that don't seem to make sense at all. But, of course, she obeys, and things seem to work out pretty well. Her instructions to build a boat bring her dad and wheelchair-bound brother closer together. Joining the cheerleaders leads to the discovery of the girl who abandoned her newborn baby in a dumpster, and the list goes on.

While Joan is talking to God, her mother, played by Mary Steenburgen, works hard to be a good mom, wife, and school secretary despite her crumbling faith in a benevolent God and Universe, a situation brought about in no small part by her eldest child's unfortunate accident which ended his dreams of college football stardom by putting him in a wheelchair. Her dad, played by Joe Mantegna, is the chief of police of Arcadia going through his own moral dilemmas on the job. The oldest wheelchair-bound brother, played by the late John Ritter's son, Jason Ritter, is adjusting to life in a wheelchair after being a jock all through high school and her younger brother, Luke (Michael Welch), is just a big happy science geek.

With all of these characters and all of these crises, not to mention up-and-coming, and already-established stars jostling for screen time, *Joan of Arcadia* is, at best, an intriguing, yet convoluted mess. It is a premise in search of a text. It is the show's overwrought determination to "focus on the family" (luckily, not the hyper-rightists in Colorado who would most likely find *JOA* blasphemous- gosh, will they ever learn) that leads to *JOA*'s structural integrity going all pear-shaped. It is trying to do way too much way too soon. It caroms between teen morality play, crime drama, feel-good melodrama that all but shouts, "Up with Disabled People," while simultaneously groaning underneath with "what can a mother do?" disquietude. The seams are too obvious between these segments, and the transitions tend to be downright jolting. To put it bluntly, at this rate, the center of *JOA* will not hold.

Quite simply, *JOA* needs to adopt the inverted pyramid scheme that made *BtVS* and *MSCL* such successful narratives. It should concentrate on the teenagers in the show, giving the Subdefectives the top rung of the inverted pyramid. This concentration on the teens in the narrative will thus transpose to more intensive targeting of the teens in the audience. The adults watching can live with the occasional bone for now, saving the main course for a time when Joan is firmly established as the show's anchor. Plus, who says adults don't find Joan and her band of misfits compelling? Teens are, for the most part, an unreasonable bunch who shoot from the hip. The misadventures stemming from their compulsive behavior tends to be entertaining, not to mention good for building dramatic tension.⁸ Refocusing on Joan and her friends, and establishing them now as the core of the series, will make it easier to concentrate on the other members of the family later in the series. As it stands now, Joe Mantegna is taking up way too much program time as a

cop rather than as a father. Wake me up when the *Law and Order* scenes are over. The Subdefectives' narrative involvement should increase at least 30 percent.

But things are looking up. It looks like Montegna's character is not doing so well as a Chief of Police. Seems he doesn't like playing the political side of things. Information regarding upcoming episodes at joanofarcadia.com indicate that he may be out of a job within the next three episodes. Putting Montegna's character back into role of father to Joan rather than tough cop will be welcomed relief. I don't think I can take many more of the tough guy platitudes.

Seamlessly involving Joan's mother and brother Luke should not be too much of a stretch since mom works at her school and Joan and Luke are within a year or two in age and actually have a class together- chemistry lab, no less. The show has done a good job of intertwining these two into the mix so far, but could do better.

This brings us to the older brother problem. He's out of school, about 19, and currently working at the local newspaper as a "Fact Checker," and may be on the verge of scoring with Sidney Poitier's daughter. How can he get more involved in the central nexus without his own issues taking over? There's no easy solution, but here's an idea: since Joan got into this whole "dialogue with God" on his behalf (it is revealed in an earlier episode that God is talking to Joan because she "promised to do anything" while praying to him to let her oldest brother live just after his accident), why not make him the first one in on the secret, and the only one for some time, before others are slowly let in? It would be interesting to see how the crusty ex-jock reacts to the news. He may run to the 'rents and declare Joan crazy, but odds are he'd be touched by the sentiment and gladly keep the secret no matter how far from veracity it may seem.

But now I must define by what I mean by "last" in the first sentence. When I say, "last," I don't necessarily mean *JOA* is heading for cancellation. *JOA* in its present form may be exactly what America wants. It may become a runaway hit and win tons of Emmys just as it is. When I say, "last," I mean "last" for me, or hold my interest. We television snobs have our standards, you know. They are standards far higher than those who give out the Emmys.

¹ I must delineate between the traditional Uber Frau and the German-French admixture of Uber Femme. Uber Frau, of course is derived from Nietzsche's Uber Mensch, an archetype that thrives and dominates with pure might and divinity of right. An Uber Femme has no divine right and lacks the traditional gigantic physical stature of the Uber Frau. To define Uber Femme, basically look at Buffy. She has super strength, but must use it in the fight for good, not dominion. She is often vexed by moral choice, and does not always make the right choice. Her ability to win in physical match-ups against seemingly superior opponents is most often due to her wit, and friends, rather than the fact that she is stronger. She is feminine, yet has the physical and intellectual skill to kick ass. That, my friends, is an Uber Femme.

² And may I add, disappointing break-up. Instead of goodbye sex, there wasn't even a blown goodbye kiss. Just a "Ciao, kids."

³ Okay, *MSCL* had its ancestry, too. Not the least of which was the eighties' curiosity known as *Square Pegs*. I must also give nod to Freaks and Geeks. *SP*, *MSCL*, *FAG* (whew, unfortunate or appropriate acronym there?) were just too good to last. They were way way ahead of their time.

⁴ Hey man, when a media saturated cellunerd like me can toss in a reference to the great Jean-Luc Godard, he damn well does it.

⁵ I must also mention that Joss Whedon has admitted in more than one interview that he pitched *BtVS* as *My So-Called Life* meets the *X-Files*.

⁶ A line with as much "brand" strength is Adams's constant resigned admission of "I'm challenged."

⁷ JOA treats God as a monolithic male entity. Therefore, here a use God with a capital G, though I prefer in my typically pagan manner to use god to imply many. Whether or not "god" implies more than one gender correctly, I don't know. However, that's how I intend it.

⁸ Joan's Pete Townshend act on Adam's sculpture in 1.8, *The Devil Made Me Do It*, is a case in point.