

Actors Assemble!: The Intertextual Pleasures of the Joss Whedon Ensemble

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[1] Of the many pleasures afforded viewers of Joss Whedon texts, one of the most significant is these texts' diversity in genre, time period, tone, and format. They range, for example, from an Internet musical to a television science fiction/western to a big-screen Shakespearean romantic comedy. This diversity draws in a wide range of critics and viewers with a variety of interests and tastes, ensuring Whedon's cultural impact on contemporary media and the economic success of his projects. At the same time, such diversity has the potential to disconnect the texts in Whedon's ever-expanding oeuvre and diffuse the sense of a coherent style. However, a tissue both connects these texts and encourages viewer engagement, namely the Whedon performing ensemble: actors who reappear from project to project, familiar faces in new contexts. These performers and the characters they play form binding agents that link Whedon texts and shape their production, distribution, and reception, so probing this ensemble's nature and effects can offer new insights on the Whedonverse.ⁱ

[2] There are, of course, other forms of collaboration that link these texts besides that between Whedon and his ensemble, including Whedon's work with other writers, producers, and directors; however, this paper focuses on the performing ensemble as the most visible symbol of the Whedonverse's interconnectivity.ⁱⁱ Examining Whedon's ensemble also foregrounds the role of collaboration and community within and without Whedon's texts—tropes that are, I argue, a significant reason for the strong emotional affect these texts create and for their loyal, proactive fan communities.ⁱⁱⁱ To do so, I use as case studies two artists working in mass media who are often linked to Whedon—playwright and actor William

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Shakespeare and novelist Charles Dickens—and explore their ensembles (of performers and characters, respectively).

[3] Definitions of the word *ensemble* vary; however, several central meanings germane to my focus on Whedon's ensemble thread through these definitions, specifically the concept of group versus individual effort and the attendant concept of blending and harmonizing. The ancient Greek and Roman chorus is an early instance of a performing ensemble, with later examples including the Commedia dell'arte companies in Italy and the patent companies of 16th century England. One of the greatest of the latter was the London-based Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men). Founded in 1594, this was the company with which Shakespeare worked for much of his professional life and for whom he created masterpieces such as *Henry V* (1599), *Hamlet* (1599-1602), and *Twelfth Night* (1601/1602).^{iv} The nature of the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the company's impact on Shakespeare's texts and audiences form an instructive antecedent for the ways Whedon's ensemble shapes the creation of his texts and their influence on viewers.

[4] In its combination of permanent company members—the sharers—and temporary members—the hired men—the structure of the Lord Chamberlain's Men incorporated both continuity and change. As scholar Stanley Wells details in his book *Shakespeare and Co.*, the company was built on sharers such as Shakespeare, lifetime members who shared the company's responsibilities and profits, and hired men brought in to swell the ranks and fill specific needs.^v This structure created both possibilities and limitations. Considering the former, Shakespeare could develop scripts with full knowledge of and trust in the individual talents and group dynamics of his fellow sharers and confidence in their availability. However, such a stable company limited the number and kind of roles Shakespeare could create, although the option to add hired men, as well as the occasional outflux and influx of sharers, offered some flexibility (Wells 20).

[5] Whedon has often been linked to Shakespeare due to his 2012 adaptation of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598/1599) and his frequent citation of Shakespearean texts and characters; that both authors use a performing ensemble is another intriguing connection. While Whedon's ensemble and the media forms in which he works differ from

Shakespeare's company and theatre, there are important similarities. Like Shakespeare, Whedon has built an ensemble of actors—Nathan Fillion, Felicia Day, Amy Acker, and Clark Gregg, amongst others—who participate frequently in his work, while bringing in additional actors to augment each text's world.^{vi} Just as the arrival of comic and musician Robert Armin may have spurred Shakespeare to create a different kind of “fool” role that included singing, beginning with *Twelfth Night*, these ensemble actors can serve as a creative spur pushing Whedon to write new characters and narrative arcs to fit their talents.^{vii} An example is Whedon's decision to shift Acker's role as the shy physicist Fred on *Angel* (1999-2004), creating a narrative in which Fred is taken over by the demon Illyria (whose name derives from *Twelfth Night*'s setting). As Whedon and Acker note in a June 2013 *BuzzFeed* interview with Adam B. Vary, Whedon conceived the idea after discovering new aspects of Acker's performance skills during one of his Shakespeare Sundays—opportunities for actors, writers, and others associated with Whedon to meet and read Shakespeare.^{viii} The ensemble members can also solve practical problems such as filling in for unexpectedly unavailable actors, as Day notes she did for her role of Mag in *Dollhouse* (2009-2010).^{ix} Whedon has repeatedly noted, as in James Hibberd's September 2013 article on *Entertainment Weekly*'s website, that he casts for “sanity” (page 5), and the option to use trusted members of the ensemble could help to counter the economic and creative disruptions of unexpected or diva-esque behavior.^x Whedon has not specifically raised this as a problem, but in a September 2001 interview with Tasha Robinson for *The A.V. Club* he relates his difficulties with actor Donald Sutherland on the feature film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992), noting Sutherland's “very bad attitude” and creative meddling (qtd. in Lavery and Burkhead 24). While Whedon argues he does not craft characters with specific actors in mind, he has also cited the efficiency and gratification of working with familiar faces. For example, responding to a community member in an April 2012 AMA (ask me anything) on *Reddit*, the news and entertainment website, he argues, “I don't write for my favorite actors (I can't create that way), but I sure don't mind slotting them in when I need someone awesome who knows my shorthand.”

[6] That shorthand is distinctive, and it can create challenges for Whedon's actors. For instance, discussing the complex dialogue in *Firefly*

(2002) and *Serenity* (2005) in September 2005 with Mike Russell for the website *CulturePulp*, Whedon says, “It’s largely Western. It’s also Elizabethan. There’s some Indian stuff. There’s some turn-of-the-century Pennsylvania Dutch. Irish . . . There’s absolutely anything that fits” (qtd. in Lavery and Burkhead 111). Whedon actors must adapt to this language. As Adam Baldwin notes of his role as Jayne, quoted in Amy Pascale’s *Joss Whedon: The Biography*, “I had trouble in the early going with the whole ‘Nothing into nothing carry the nothing’ [line in the pilot], the rhythm of the language in a couple of the scenes, before it really clicked in” (206-207). Baldwin then relates that Whedon provided line readings to help the actor connect with the language (207). This distinctive language that Whedon and his collaborators create and use is another element binding Whedon texts, characters, and the actors who embody those characters together.^{xi}

[7] The impact of ensemble actors such as Acker on Whedon resembles the textual impact of comic actors and sharers Will Kemp and Armin on Shakespeare’s work, and delving more deeply into the latter can inform understanding of the former. Considering the link between performers and textual production in *Shakespeare and Co.*, Wells argues, “Clear evidence that he [Shakespeare] was creating parts with specific members of his company in mind exists in early texts of certain plays” (30). Wells cites as evidence a reference to “Kemp” (the actor) rather than “Peter” (the role Kemp played) in a stage direction for a 1599 edition of *Romeo and Juliet* (30).^{xii} Kemp joined the Lord Chamberlain’s Men the same year as Shakespeare, and he left the company a few years after fellow comic Armin joined. Wells notes that a number of scholars have noticed a shift in Shakespeare’s characterization of his fool roles following Kemp’s departure, such as the addition of song, indicating that he was writing with Armin, not Kemp, in mind. Wells maintains that it is simplistic to argue for too great a shift, noting some continuity in the nature of the roles; however, he also discusses key differences between the men that may have shifted the nature of the roles themselves, including their differing physical builds and the kind of the roles they performed: “Whereas Kemp seems to have specialized in extrovert roles of robust comic humor, Armin, probably slighter in build, was more intellectual” (37).

[8] That there was both an alteration in Shakespeare's fool roles due to the change in comic performers and a continuity in the construction of these roles speaks to the flexibility of Shakespeare's textual creation in adapting his characters to the talents of his available performers and to the strength of his signature style, which remained the same regardless of changes in the company's roster. Similarly, Whedon's work is marked by a particular Whedon style, providing continuity, but also by distinct evolutions, even departures, from that style that may be traced, in part, to his ensemble. Whedon's choice to shift Fred's character in *Angel*, with the more overt invocation of Shakespeare and classical drama as a whole that it allowed, may be argued as an example: a shift due to Acker's talents.

[9] If ensembles play an important role in the creation of texts, they can also be essential elements in textual reception, with audiences responding with interest—and a healthy box office—to performers and the characters they play. Shakespeare's audience members, for example, could find pleasure in seeing Shakespeare deploy and stretch the talents of individual sharers as they tracked various permutations of actor/actor and character/character interactions. For instance, audiences might watch Richard Burbage, one of the period's theatrical stars, transition from the youthful Romeo or Hamlet to the seasoned Moor Othello and the aged Lear, or Armin create very different tricksters in the forms of Feste in *Twelfth Night*, Lear's Fool in *King Lear* (1605/06), and possibly even Iago in *Othello* (1604/05). Seeing Burbage and Armin play out the very different relationships of Lear and his Fool or Othello and Iago could form a significant enjoyment for audiences, both in conjunction with and beyond the drama of the texts themselves.

[10] Whedon's diverse use of ensemble actor Fillion provides another contemporary parallel to Shakespeare's work with sharers such as Burbage and Armin. Whedon shifts Fillion from Mal, *Firefly* and *Serenity*'s conflicted, heroic captain, to *Buffy*'s (1997-2003) villainous misogynist Caleb, to *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*'s (2008) vainglorious Captain Hammer, to Shakespeare's Dogberry, master of malapropisms, in *Much Ado About Nothing*—the range of these roles highlighting both the actor's talents and Whedon's skill in writing and directing to highlight Fillion's skills.

[11] A Whedon newcomer may find individual Fillion roles rewarding in their own right, but for frequent Whedon viewers there are distinct pleasures in recognizing Fillion, connecting each role to previous roles and texts, seeing him work with Whedon players from non-Fillion texts, and reveling in the radically varied ways in which Whedon showcases him. Writing in the Winter 2013 *Slayage*, Jeffrey Bussolini discusses this linking as “intertextuality of casting,” describing it as “the often intentional crossover of actors and actresses between and among different shows, and the way in which bringing along recognizable faces and styles serves to cross-pollinate televisual texts and create a larger televisual intertext” (“Television Intertextuality After *Buffy*” para. 3). Discussing such casting in *Joss Whedon as Shakespearean Moralizer: Narrative Ethics of the Bard and the Buffyverse*, J. Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson quote the ideas of Alyson Buckman, who in her paper for the sixth biennial *Slayage* Conference referred to this specifically as “hyperdiegetic casting” and argued its potential benefits for fans, noting, “Whedon has built a collective, specialized fund of knowledge available specifically to those who have watched (and rewatched) his fictions, although certainly one may bring additional subtext” (15).^{xiii} In this manner a Whedon regular such as Fillion becomes the tissue binding together very different Whedon projects while connecting these projects to texts outside the Whedonverse.

[12] Whedon is not, of course, the first TV and film creator to use a performing ensemble—precedents for such a relationship and its potential benefits lie in media creators from Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford to Martin Scorsese and Judd Apatow. Ford, for example, famed for his influential westerns from *Stagecoach* (1939) to *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), worked with a group of actors often called the John Ford Stock Company. The Company’s members included actors who became significant stars, such as John Wayne, and character actors such as John Carradine, Ward Bond, and Ben Johnson.^{xiv} This shared connection of showcasing the ensemble points to another potential benefit: serious consideration of Whedon’s work. Such a link with revered artistic antecedents helps to explain interest in Whedon from critics and academics and the argument for him as an auteur with a meaningful impact on contemporary culture.

[13] While the ensemble offers artistic benefits, it also plays an important practical role in connecting the production, distribution, and reception of Whedon's projects. A consideration of Whedon's adaptation of *Much Ado*, filmed during a break from *Marvel's The Avengers* (2012), is illustrative. *Much Ado* gained substantial buzz not only for its cool, contemporary take on Shakespeare's romantic comedy but also for its decidedly DIY nature. As writer Dana Ferguson notes in a June 2013 article on the *Los Angeles Times* website, the film was financed by Whedon himself and shot in only 12 days.^{xv} Given such limitations, the advantages for Whedon of being able to depend on a group of skilled actors with whom he already had well-established working relationships are evident, and Whedon indeed drew heavily from his performing ensemble, using familiar faces such as Fillion, Gregg, Acker, and Alexis Denisof to complete the picture.

[14] While the acting ensemble was essential in providing Whedon with dependable performances for the film, the critical and popular appeal of actors such as Fillion, particularly for audience members acquainted with the Whedonverse, formed an additional advantage. Whedon notably highlighted Fillion and the other cast members in the promotion for the film, bringing the cast to film festivals and even arriving with them at the SXSW [South by Southwest] Festival in a branded *Much Ado* bus.^{xvi} Such promotion of his ensemble, in concert with Whedon's own stardom, may have helped ensure *Much Ado* distribution through Lionsgate, as well as attention from major news outlets. Certainly Lionsgate had a profitable prior relationship with Whedon and *Much Ado* actors Acker, Fran Kranz, and Tom Lenk, having distributed Whedon and Drew Goddard's successful film *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), in which these actors appeared.^{xvii} And in discussing *Much Ado*, a number of reviewers make a point of emphasizing the actors' work in previous Whedon texts. Such a choice foregrounds media awareness of Whedon's ensemble, and an understanding that highlighting these actors and their connections with previous popular Whedon texts may not only serve as a touchstone for reviewers of the actors' talents but act as an incentive for fans of those previous texts to read the review and see the film.^{xviii}

[15] If Shakespeare and his work with his performing ensemble provide an antecedent for Whedon's creation of texts, examination of the

work of Charles Dickens, Whedon's favorite novelist (Lavery and Burkhead 4), can elucidate elements not only of production and reception, but distribution, particularly through the serial form often used by both artists. While my focus to this point has been the ensemble of performers who bring texts to life on stage or screen, my discussion of Dickens brings in another ensemble, the character ensemble: the group of characters within the text whose actions provide the work's drama and texture and who become the basis for stage/screen adaptations. These ensembles—of performers and characters—create a parallel between Dickens and Whedon despite differences in time period and medium, particularly in the manner in which their use of the ensemble addresses some of the difficulties, practical and aesthetic, and possibilities of the serial form.

[16] The expansion of a mass media in the nineteenth century helped to produce the print serial: a form that was appealing to writers such as Dickens for its financial rewards and potential for widespread cultural impact, just as TV in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries would be for Whedon. In *Why Buffy Matters*, Rhonda V. Wilcox observes that Dickens “published his novels in serialized ‘shilling numbers’” (2) and identifies seriality as one of the noteworthy similarities between Dickens and Whedon. Then and now, the form proved compelling to vast numbers of the public. In *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*, Jennifer Hayward notes, “Since the inception of mass-market culture . . . producers have relied on the serial form to consolidate and hold a mass audience, thus enabling the profits that make new technologies . . . viable in a market economy” (1-2).^{xix} Dickens's use of installment publishing is not dissimilar to the production of weekly installments of a TV series such as *Buffy* or an Internet series released over a number of days, as in the case of *Dr. Horrible*.

[17] Despite its financial and cultural advantages, the serial form can create difficulties that require artistic strategies, such as the utilization of an ensemble of one kind or another, to address. The first is the practical concern of leading viewers from narrative point A to narrative point B within a text, and then from that discrete text to the next in the series (whether chapter to chapter for Dickens or episode to episode / season to season for Whedon). Second, there is the need to guarantee that the text's audience emotionally bonds with the characters and invests in their

narrative arcs, ensuring not simply the occasional act of consumption but a profound outlay, emotional and financial, in the texts and their creator. For Dickens and Whedon the ability to create and sell future installments depends on the sales of present installments, necessitating an appeal to a vast, diverse audience through a wide range of characters and stories.

[18] In response to this need, Dickens, as Whedon will later do (albeit in a more modest manner), builds large character ensembles who interact in textual worlds that are similarly vast and notably intricate. In her discussion of Dickens's lengthy, multifaceted novel *Bleak House* in *Television for Victorianists*, a special issue for the online academic journal *RaVoN*, scholar Liz Maynes-Aminzade notes that this narrative strategy not only affords the texts great scope and scale, but anticipates the intricacy of contemporary TV shows such as *The Wire* (2002-2008) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) (para. 2-4). Dickens's complexly linked characters, along with other elements, serve as crucial connective forces within the vast length and convoluted narrative structure of his texts, just as Whedon's ensemble does both within and between his texts. For example, considering *Bleak House* in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, scholar Caroline Levine notes Dickens's creation of multiple elements that tie the characters together and create narrative networks; these include a lawsuit, disease, philanthropy, kinship, and the city of London itself (518). Taken together, the characters' ties form what Levine terms "a network of networks" (518).^{xx}

[19] From an audience perspective, the serial form and the resulting web of characters can create diverse pleasures. Following the distinct networks of individual characters as they weave together against larger social networks that both connect and constrain the characters is one of the distinct gratifications of reading Dickens, as in watching Whedon's *Buffy* or *Dollhouse*. Another enjoyment lies in the intertextual delight of tracking character tropes that appear across the artists' work and following the evolution of these characters over the development of their respective texts: from Dickens's beleaguered orphans, such as Oliver in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) and Pip (Philip Pirrip) in *Great Expectations* (1860-61), who must seek family, literal and figurative, in hardscrabble worlds, to Whedon's super-powered young women, including Buffy Summers and River Tam,

whose abilities both constrict and direct their own search for identity and purpose.

[20] Large character ensembles allow Dickens to encompass a wide range of classes, professions, and ages—reflecting not only aspects of real-life society, but increasing the possibility for affective investment for his texts’ audiences. While Whedon’s character ensembles are smaller than those of Dickens, the range of his characters and their complex backstories can facilitate a similar emotional attachment to the characters and the actors who play them. For instance, detailing her experience of rewatching *Buffy* from the beginning on her blog *Nik at Nite* in 2011, nine years following her initial contact with the series, pop culture author Nikki Stafford responds with strong affection to the character of Willow: “♥♥♥ Willow ♥♥♥ She’s always been my favourite character, and season 1 Willow is the version of her that you just want to reach out and hug I adored her when I first saw her . . . and I still adore her.” Stafford’s link with Willow is made visible not simply through her words but in the graphics she uses: both emphasize her connection to both the character’s origins and her journey over the series.

[21] Willow is, of course, one of the central characters on *Buffy*, but Whedon’s use of his ensemble resembles Dickens’s in that both create seemingly small or potentially insignificant characters who are tied in essential ways to other characters and the textual whole. These characters can shape the direction of a narrative and audience responses, as Wilcox argues, noting, “Dickens wrote with a long arc in mind, but sometimes followed where character led” (*Why Buffy Matters* 8). One illustrative example Wilcox offers is Sam Weller from *The Pickwick Papers*, whom she compares to Spike in *Buffy*: both enlivened their texts and proved popular with audiences (8).^{xxi}

[22] Indeed, Whedon takes all of his characters and performers seriously, as can be seen in his treatment of Gregg’s Agent Phil Coulson, the dryly witty bureaucrat of *The Avengers* and earlier MCU [Marvel Comics Universe] films. Coulson is seemingly incidental to the storyline and the lives of the other characters in films before *The Avengers*, yet in Whedon’s hands he proves crucial to both. For instance, in *The Avengers* Coulson’s heroism in facing down the dangerous god Loki acts as the catalyst to unite the disparate heroes and allow them to destroy the invading Chitauri.

Just as Whedon highlights minor characters such as Coulson, so too actors in smaller roles are often not only given room to shine, but sometimes transitioned to more prominent roles, as with Gregg's move from *The Avengers* to his central role in the TV series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-present).

[23] Given that audience investment is crucial to their success, both Dickens and Whedon cultivate their audiences' relationship with their texts and with themselves as textual creators. Wilcox notes that Dickens "was seen as having an extraordinarily close relationship with his audience; he gave public readings and wrote directly to his readers in magazines he edited" (8); similarly, Whedon maintains a strong connection with his fans, who respond to Whedon's texts and Whedon himself through posts, emails, fan-created products, and purchases. Whedon's connection with his fans is articulated through an extensive online presence, as well as in-person appearances at festivals and conferences that often feature present, and even former, cast members. For example, in 2012 Whedon appeared with his *Firefly* cast at Comic-Con International: San Diego to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of the short-lived series, an appearance that proved to be one of the Con's most popular events. Appearances of this kind enhance the association between Whedon and his ensemble while pointing attention to both past and future Whedon texts. Whedon has frequently noted the benefits of such appearances, as well as other fan interactions, often couching his relationship with his fans in emotional tones. In his September 2013 interview with Hibberd for *Entertainment Weekly*, for instance, he notes, "I was always about interacting with people partially because I was so gratified that people would care. Partially there's a business aspect to it—be decent [to people]; that will help. And there's a real connection . . . We're almost like a support group" (3). Whedon's cult stardom is thus built in part on his close relationship with his fans and his position as a fan himself, yet Whedon's control of this relationship, as of the texts that inspire such devotion, separates him from his fans.

[24] The power of these fans and their investment in Whedon's texts has enhanced Whedon's oeuvre insofar as it has allowed Whedon to take on financial and creative risks such as crafting the multi-million dollar *Serenity* from the cancelled *Firefly*, designing the profitable web series *Dr. Horrible* at the dawn of the genre, and filming a low-budget, black and

white Shakespearean adaptation. On the whole, Whedon's success in these ventures lies in part in the nature of Whedon fans, who form what transmedia scholar Tyler Weaver calls an "absorptive audience." This kind of audience, as Weaver explains in a February 2013 interview with Henry Jenkins on Jenkins's weblog *Confessions of an Aca-fan*, "will seek out as many pieces of a transmedia experience as they can and absorb it into their lives somehow . . . This is different from a passive audience. Some people simply want to sit back and be entertained. Both are essential" (para. 1).

[25] This issue of textual absorption and its effects is taken up by Wilcox in her discussion of the Browncoats, *Firefly's* and *Serenity's* fans, in "Whedon, Browncoats, and the Big Damn Narrative: The Unified Meta-Myth of *Firefly* and *Serenity*" in *Science Fiction Double Feature: The Science Fiction Film as Cult Text*. In her essay, building on the work of scholars such as Tanya R. Cochran, Wilcox frames an examination of the creation of these Whedon texts and the activities of the Browncoats through the lens of myth-making and religious devotion, an argument that foregrounds the intensity of the Browncoats' relationship with Whedon, the texts' characters and actors, and with each other as a unified group. Wilcox argues, "In the Browncoats' meta-myth, the avowedly atheist Whedon is the prophet (and his various avatars—actors/fans and other Browncoats—share that prophetic message)" (99). This is a message that has real-life effects, Wilcox notes, such as the Browncoats' charity work with the human rights organization Equality Now.^{xxii} Thus Whedon's skill in serving multiple audiences, particularly the absorptive one Weaver discusses, exemplified by the Browncoats Wilcox examines, has been vital to his development as a powerful creative voice within the media, with his ensemble of performers a crucial element of this success.

[26] Whedon's ensemble forms a significant engine for fan interest and pleasure for a number of reasons. One of the most compelling is the draw of the familiar, especially the familiar in unfamiliar circumstances: not only a "Where's Waldo?" but a "Wow, how different is Waldo now?" experience. This necessitates a shift in viewer position from passive to active—a more concentrated engagement that can extend to an affective investment in a text's characters and actors. Such investment is crucial, particularly given the rollercoaster nature of a typical Whedon text, which can move from genre to genre, frivolity to tragedy in mere moments: shifts

that might disrupt viewers without the visual and emotional bridge of Whedon's ensemble to unify individual texts and connect these texts to others.

[27] A case study of the vital role of Whedon's ensemble in gaining and keeping fan interest, along with Whedon's love of intertextuality and hybridity, is the web series *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. In creating a self-financed production on a limited budget and timeframe in collaboration with his family members, Whedon turned to tried and tested ensemble members Fillion and Day while leaning on the latter's experience as creator of the web series *The Guild* (2007-2013).^{xxiii} Responses to *Dr. Horrible* and its cast by members of the Whedon fan site *Whedonesque* reflect fans' pleasure in seeing Whedon alums appear in a new context while exercising new skills. For example, when part one of the web series was released, a member called hacksaway writes, "Gotta say, Nathan (like his alter ego) stole the show for me. Not that Neil and Felicia weren't amazing . . . But Nathan was just so hilarious and played the part perfectly. Awesome singing all around." Member Saturn Girl seconded the pleasure of this revelation of the actors' talents: "NPH and Nathan Fillion were great, but Felicia Day was the real surprise. She has such a beautiful singing voice!" As the fan responses demonstrate, the chance to see the actors' talents in new ways both individually and in new/old combinations with other performers is a significant draw of *Dr. Horrible* and other projects featuring the ensemble.

[28] Whedon's use of Day in *Dr. Horrible* and other texts in the Whedonverse forms a useful example of how an actor's presence can create intertextuality within and without Whedon texts.^{xxiv} As a member of Whedon's ensemble, Day connects texts in the Whedonverse in a range of genres and media forms—the supernatural *Buffy* and cyberpunk *Dollhouse* on TV, and the tragicomic musical *Dr. Horrible* on the Internet. Through her presence she also links these Whedon texts to her work in texts in similar genres by other producers, such as the supernatural-themed TV series *Supernatural* (2005-current) and *Eureka* (2006-2012) and her own web series *The Guild*. Given Day's work in the ensemble, instances such as her citation of *The Guild* on Whedon's *Commentary! The Musical* (2008), the companion to *Dr. Horrible's* DVD and Blue-ray editions, do several things at once: they draw attention to *The Guild*, but

they also, given the role of *The Guild* in the genesis of *Dr. Horrible* and Day's long association with Whedon, return focus to the Whedonverse.

[29] To this point my focus has been the overt role of the ensemble—the performers and the characters they play—on Whedon's work, but also evident and worthy of mention is the ensemble's less direct role in Whedon's thematic exploration of groups and team dynamics both in the projects he creates, such as *Buffy*, and in the existing projects he helms, for example *The Avengers*. These groups are often made up of disparate individuals who, over time, form self-made families, referred to by writers such as Jes Batts as "chosen families." "[T]he key signifier for being a member of these alternative families," in Batts's words, "is loyalty, not heredity" (7). Whedon's narratives often chart the tentative togetherness, fragmentation, and eventual unity of chosen families, often coupling formal elements with this narrational focus.

[30] For instance, Whedon may employ *mise-en-scène* elements such as composition, along with framing, to emphasize issues of personal space and physical containment. Such a use occurs even in films whose ensemble and world are not Whedon-generated, as in *The Avengers*. In the latter, we may chart distinct developments in Whedon's compositional style over the course of the narrative: early scenes are characterized by a composition that stresses the separation of characters within the frame, while in later scenes composition contributes to an impression of unity. More specifically, in the film's early scenes the characters are often photographed individually and their conversations edited in a shot/reverse shot pattern; these compositional choices separate the characters even when they are putatively together. While they begin to be shown within the same frame near the film's midpoint, shortly before the attack on the Helicarrier, their positions within the frame and the actors' performances often stress that while these characters occupy the same physical space their emotional connection is tentative. This is overtly indicated in the argument scene before the attack, when the characters are shown upside down, Loki's scepter in the foreground. Yet in Whedon's tableaux of the entire team united against the Chitauri in New York in the film's finale the characters form an intimate circle, their close proximity coupled with their terse, yet witty, dialogue supporting the point that they are now truly a team.

[31] Similarly, sets and settings may be employed to emphasize the distance of characters or to crowd them together as in *Dollhouse's* Dollhouse, with this clustering gesturing to a potential for greater emotional connection. One of the most striking uses of formal elements to highlight a narrational focus on an ensemble and its evolution occurs in Whedon's *Firefly* and *Serenity*, in which the cramped conditions of the ship *Serenity* foreground the closeness, literal and figurative, of its crew. This formal focus on the ensemble may be one of Whedon's debts to Ford, particularly his *Stagecoach* with its ensemble of characters literally and figuratively pressed together in the cramped confines of a stagecoach as they navigate dangerous territory, beset by internal and external forces/conflicts.^{xxv}

[32] Examining Whedon in the context of Ford is also useful in considering how both artists use the ensemble not only as group of characters played by actors, but as a sort of microcosm, standing in for the community or the nation, thereby linking the directors' fictions to larger, real-life sociopolitical stakes.^{xxvi} Take, for example, Ford's diegetic presentation and treatment of Dallas in *Stagecoach* compared with Whedon's treatment of Inara in *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Dallas is a prostitute banished from town, then treated poorly by some of her fellow stagecoach passengers for much of their journey, whereas Inara is a respected Companion. While other characters remark upon the occupation of both women, their sociopolitical status is quite different: one a pariah, the other socially powerful. Despite the positive positioning of these characters within their texts, both of which argue for acceptance, Ford's *Stagecoach* seeks to "recuperate" Dallas through marriage. Whedon's texts make no effort to do so to Inara, through marriage or other means. Through these characters, then, Ford and Whedon foreground past (*Stagecoach's* nineteenth-century setting), contemporary, and (imagined) future discourses surrounding women's bodies and sociopolitical positions, with Inara representing more progressive, yet still decidedly complex, even ambivalent, late twentieth/early twenty-first-century gender politics.^{xxvii}

[33] The collaboration of Whedon and his ensemble that allows the kinds of choices in form and content that I have discussed here is, of course, a two-way street, and just as a strong working relationship with the sharers may have both facilitated Shakespeare's production process

and benefited the entire company creatively and financially, so Whedon's actors may variously benefit from their work with him. For one, in interviews Whedon's actors frequently cite the pleasure they receive from working on his texts, describing the working relationship in positive terms (for instance, the word "fun" repeatedly comes up) while referencing their respect for his directing and writing ability. A number note Whedon's directorial advantage in his skill in acting out potential takes on characters, a skill that facilitates communication with his actors.^{xxviii} Others note the complexity of the roles he forms, as witnessed by Tom Hiddleston's email exchange with Whedon regarding his role as Loki in *The Avengers*, an exchange reproduced in Pascale's biography of Whedon:

. . . Thank you for writing me my Hans Gruber. But a Hans Gruber with super-magic powers. As played by James Mason . . . It's high operatic villainy alongside detached throwaway tongue-in-cheek; plus the "real menace" and his closely guarded suitcase of pain. It's grand and epic and majestic and poetic and lyrical and wicked and rich and badass and might possibly be the most gloriously fun part I've ever stared down the barrel of playing. It is just so juicy. (352)

The room Whedon provides his actors to take on diverse roles is arguably another reason for their engagement with him. It is this faith in the skill and range of his actors that ensemble member Gregg foregrounds in a June 2013 interview with Jenelle Riley for the website of the entertainment industry magazine *Backstage*: "He does a thing my favorite directors do: He doesn't cast people based necessarily on who they are but how that character will form a dynamic with who they are. So you end up getting cast in roles you might not normally get cast in because there's this alchemy that happens when you're pushed out of your normal comfort zone."

[34] Yet perhaps the most important benefit Whedon's ensemble actors gain, besides a steady paycheck, is the draw of Whedon's cult stardom and the manner in which his showcasing of his ensemble's talents can make these actors objects of both critical acclaim and fan devotion and drive attention to their projects inside and outside the Whedonverse. In the case of Fillion, for instance, his work in *Buffy*, *Firefly*, and *Serenity* may have contributed to greater audience numbers for his TV series *Castle*; the name recognition and experience to co-produce and co-star in the web

series *Con Man* (2015-present), created by *Firefly* and *Serenity* alum Alan Tudyk; and a more significant focus on Fillion from both media critics and academics. An example of this attention is Fillion's appearance on the March 11, 2011 cover of *Entertainment Weekly* with the words "Geek God" in large letters next to the actor (Bierly). The *Castle* producers have mined this connection, citing elements of Whedon texts such as *Firefly* and *Buffy* in dialogue and visual references, particularly when Fillion's character dresses up as a "space pirate," a reference to his role as Mal, and in its use of actors from the Whedonverse, such as Adam Baldwin and Gina Torres, Fillion's *Firefly* and *Serenity* co-stars.

[35] Despite advantages of these kinds, the actors of Whedon's ensemble certainly do not have the same control over the nature of these collaborations and the texts they produce as Whedon himself. One of the many online images that visually demonstrate the nature of Whedon's ensemble also highlights, inadvertently, this unequal relationship. The infographic "Whedon's World" by an unknown artist features a color bust of Whedon at the center of the image, posed with pen in hand, while smaller black and white pictures of a number of his ensemble actors float around him in bubbles, connected to him by lines whose varied colors represent the respective texts in which they appeared.^{xxix} The position and pose of Whedon directly cites the famous funerary monument of Shakespeare, quill in hand, in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon. The comparison to Shakespeare is apt given Whedon's love of Shakespeare and his adaptation of *Much Ado*; however, the image's argument through its citation of Shakespeare's literary authority of Whedon's own significant cultural and economic power, along with the relative size and position of the Whedon image vis à vis the size and position of the actors who surround him, highlights the relative inequality of the relationship. And in truth, although Fillion's role in Whedon's acting company may echo that of Shakespeare's sharers, he lacks the equal financial share granted the members of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. However, Whedon seems conscious, at least in a financial sense, of this inequality and the need to address it. For instance, he noted to a number of news outlets that because his cast worked for scale or less on *Dr. Horrible* he had set up a profit-sharing program to begin when the web series became profitable which it, notably, has done.^{xxx}

[36] To this point my focus on the ensemble and its implications has been couched in relatively uncomplicated, largely positive terms as a source of pleasure and profit for Whedon, his collaborators, and his audiences, with little discussion of any limitations or possible negative implications. Here, however, I would like to complicate this discussion. That Whedon uses actors again and again, even if he does so in very different roles and texts, can be a problem in that it may create a sameness in the look and feel of Whedon texts, losing important distinctions, so that texts with very different aesthetic and sociopolitical aims—such as *Dollhouse* and *Dr. Horrible*—may become muddled together, diffusing their unique effects and arguments. Another element to consider is the manner in which Whedon's ensemble can start to become too much of an insiders' club, one that pushes away other actors and the creative choices those actors present. This is particularly vital when one considers issues such as gender and race and the arguable need for a director such as Whedon to offer texts featuring a wide range of characters played by diverse actors, not only on a practical level, in order to appeal to a wide range of audience members, but also as what is most appropriate to a responsible, thoughtful textual producer. Given that critics have noted that Whedon's texts sometimes lack both diversity of casting and nuance in the presentation of their characters, particularly in regards to race, this is an important area to be addressed.^{xxxix}

[37] While actors, as noted, can benefit by working on multiple projects with Whedon, there is the risk that their comfortable working relationship with Whedon might lead to lazy, self-indulgent performances. Actors might also find themselves typecast in their work in the Whedon ensemble, which might lead to a more narrow or specific idea of their talents, limiting their range of roles outside the Whedonverse. Finally, while audiences, especially fans, may enjoy the sense of intertextuality and the meta provided by the ensemble, this could alienate new viewers unwilling or unable to access the increasing number of texts in the Whedonverse. And even fans may tire of directors' recycling, whether of tropes or actors; for example, witness the irritation displayed by critics and viewers over some of Tim Burton's choices, including his frequent use of actors Helena Bonham Carter and Johnny Depp.^{xxxix} The danger is that such casting may both distract viewers from the merits of individual

projects and load creators and actors with baggage that will follow them into the future.

[38] These caveats aside, Whedon's ensemble has proved to be an important element in his creative and economic toolkit, providing multiple pleasures and developing the complexities of individual Whedon texts and the Whedonverse as a whole. Understanding the nature and effects of this ensemble can not only aid in a greater understanding of the Whedonverse as a diverse, yet united, entity, but can also form productive ways to link the Whedonverse and its creator to other textual producers and other ensembles, creating new connections that might lead to a better understanding of both these producers and ensembles and the Whedonverse itself.

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Notes

ⁱ Editor's note: Standard usage for this journal is "Whedonverses" (compare the title of the Whedon Studies Association's biennial conferences, as in the most recent: SCW7: The Seventh Biennial Conference on the Whedonverses). This plural term refers to the multiple separate fictional worlds created by Whedon—the world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* being essentially the same as that for *Angel* but distinct from that of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, for example. This article, however, specifically addresses elements shared among the various fictional worlds, and therefore the term used here is "Whedonverse."

ⁱⁱ Important Whedon collaborators include Jane Espenson, Marti Noxon, and David Greenwalt, who have been discussed at length by Whedon scholars, as in David Perry's "Marti Noxon: *Buffy's* Other Genius" from *Buffy Goes Dark*.

ⁱⁱⁱ In media studies the psychological term "affect" is used to consider the close connection of audiences with texts. In *Media Making: Mass Media in Popular Culture* Lawrence Grossberg, Ellen Wartella, and D. Charles Whitney identify what they term "three affective or noncognitive dimensions—emotions, moods, and pleasures—and their relationship to media" (251). Discussing the last, they note, "The various ways in which pleasure is derived from media use signal the complexity of people's affective relationship to the media" (253).

^{iv} As Wells argues, "no other dramatist of the period had so long and close a relationship with a single acting company" (5).

^v Wells notes, "Although some of Shakespeare's plays have more than fifty speaking parts, some of them can be acted by a group of fifteen or so, with many of the actors taking two or more roles. There would be a number of stakeholders, fluctuating perhaps from eight to a dozen, known as the sharers who would normally also be active as actors and possibly writers" (20).

^{vi} In her introductory chapter to *Reading Joss Whedon*, titled "Much Ado About Whedon," Rhonda V. Wilcox specifically makes this connection and details other Whedon texts on which *Much Ado's* actors had worked, as well as the involvement of figures from the Whedonverse behind the camera, including Whedon's spouse Kai Cole, who served as coproducer, and Jay Hunter, a camera operator and director of photography for *Dollhouse* who served as *Much Ado's* director of photography.

^{vii} Wells notes the common argument among scholars is that "After Armin's recruitment Shakespeare began to create clowns who are more wistful, introverted, and musical" (37-38).

^{viii} Discussing Shakespeare Sundays with Adam B. Vary for the *BuzzFeed* article “Life Inside the Whedonverse,” Whedon notes, “Occasionally, it would affect the TV shows, the primary example being the creation of Illyria on *Angel*, which basically came out of Amy reading Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*.”

^{ix} Day reports this in Vary’s “Life Inside the Whedonverse,” noting, “*Dollhouse* was an accident. I think they cast this actress in this role and she dropped out the day before. So I got a call from Joss, and he was like, ‘Heyyyyyyy — what are you doing tomorrow?’ I didn’t even know what the job was. If Joss asks you to do something, you just do it.”

^x Similarly, in Vary’s “Life Inside the Whedonverse” Whedon argues, “I cast for sanity.”

^{xi} Fillion emphasizes this in the 2013 interview “Fillion on the Whedonverse, *Much Ado, Dr. Horrible & Marvel*” with Roth Cornet on the website *IGN*: “Joss Whedon has a rhythm and a singular vision . . . I can certainly see how he picks people that can understand his rhythm, that can understand his voice, that can hear it and make it live and breathe and sing.” Editor’s note: There is a wide array of scholarship on Whedon’s language, starting with the work of Michael Adams.

^{xii} Kemp’s fool roles, Wells notes, may have included Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598/99) and Falstaff in both parts of *Henry IV* (1597/98), as well as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600/01) (34-35).

^{xiii} Buckman revises this term in her essay “We Are Not Who We Are: Joss Whedon, Intra-auteurial Casting, and the Whedonverse” in the forthcoming collection tentatively titled *History at Its End: Uses of the Past in the Works of Joss Whedon*.

^{xiv} Peter Cowie describes this company, who he terms the “Regulars,” in *John Ford and the American West* as “a vivacious gallery of supporting players” (61).

^{xv} In the article, titled “Whedon jokes about ‘micro-budget’ for ‘Much Ado About Nothing,’” Ferguson notes that in response to her questions about the film’s costs Whedon calls it a “micro-budget,” then notes, “Whatever you’re thinking, it’s less.”

^{xvi} In a 2013 article on *BuzzFeed*, Adam B. Vary discusses the bus, provided by Lionsgate and Roadside Attractions, noting that Whedon and his cast posted numerous print and visual updates of the journey.

^{xvii} As David Lavery details in *Joss Whedon: Conversations*, *Cabin* had worldwide grosses of 66,486,080—over twice its budget of 30,000,000 (16).

^{xviii} In a review on *RogerEbert.com*, Sheila O’Malley discusses Fillion’s “great and entertaining comedic performance” with reference to his *Firefly* and *Serenity* roles (para. 8). The skills of Whedon’s ensemble are highlighted by Geoffrey O’Brien in his 2013 *Film Comment* review, in which he contrasts Whedon’s film and Kenneth Branagh’s 1998 adaptation: “Branagh’s film is full of good performances that don’t quite connect with one other, whereas here what is notable is the coherence of the ensemble” (para. 2).

^{xix} Hayward argues, “Charles Dickens perhaps captures the unique attributes of the serial best when he assured his readers, in the conclusion to part 10 of *The Pickwick*

Papers, that ‘we shall keep perpetually going on beginning again, regularly.’ The complex temporal involutions of this sentence parallels serialization’s complex author/audience relations” (2).

^{xx} Or what network theorists call “distributed networks” (518).

^{xxi} Wilcox notes audience investment could shift the fate of characters: “Dickens set up foreshadowing that he then sometime reworked; for instance, early in *Great Expectations* Pip envisions Miss Havisham hanged, but by the end of the story Dickens had decided to burn her. At least she got to live long enough for redemption, when apparently she had been slated for an ignominious death; so, too, Spike” (8-9).

^{xxii} Wilcox argues of this process that the Browncoats “invest in narrative—the narrative of their own actions as well as the narrative of the fictional TV series and film” (99). For example, Wilcox notes the Browncoats created the organization Can’t Stop the Serenity, a worldwide action event benefiting Equality Now (109-110). According to the organization’s eponymous website, fans have raised more than one million dollars so far (*Can’t Stop the Serenity*). Wilcox notes the particular role of Fillion for fans in this relationship in his multiple positions as actor (connecting texts inside/outside the Whedonverse), character (Mal as resistance fighter and captain of *Serenity*, embodying a sense of rebellion against the status quo), and stand-in for Whedon himself (107-108).

^{xxiii} Whedon discusses the origins of the web series on the official *Dr. Horrible* website.

^{xxiv} In “Television Intertextuality After *Buff*,” Bussolini describes intertextuality as “the interpenetration and mutual association between texts in terms of signifiers, motifs, or symbols that cross between them” (para. 2).

^{xxv} The tagline for *Stagecoach*’s poster—“A Powerful Story of 9 Strange People”—would fit *Firefly* and *Serenity*, albeit with a good deal more witty interplay and some spaceships.

^{xxvi} For an article-length comparison of *Firefly* and *Stagecoach*, see Erisman.

^{xxvii} For differing analyses of Inara’s status, see, e.g., Aberdein and Amy-Chinn.

^{xxviii} While Whedon downplays his acting ability, he is a lover of theatre, particularly Shakespeare. David Lavery quotes Whedon on this love in *Joss Whedon: A Creative Portrait*: “As far back as I can remember, I used to read plays” (42). Lavery notes that this self-immersion, as well as experiences watching the BBC Shakespeare series on TV and Whedon’s education at Winchester College, profoundly affected him (42).

^{xxix} Editor’s note: One might also compare the famous painting “Dickens’s Dream,” by Robert William Buss, who began it after Dickens’s death in 1870 and was still working on it at the time of his own death in 1875. The painting shows Dickens seated in his study, surrounded by small images of dozens of his fictional characters.

^{xxx} In an April 2015 *Wall Street Journal* article Whedon says he earned more from profits from *Dr. Horrible* than from Marvel for directing *The Avengers*. In a 2009 interview with an unnamed interviewer on *Knowledge@Wharton*, titled “Joss Whedon’s Plan to Monetize Internet Content” and quoted in Lavery’s *Conversations*, Whedon notes, “So, the production costs alone . . . ran a little over \$200,000 . . . We didn’t want to leave a sour taste and say, ‘Well, we made some money off of you guys being kind.’ It was

like: No, everybody has to benefit from what they've done, obviously not enormously—it's Internet money we're talking about—but as soon as we got in the black we paid everybody off" (177). When the interviewer asks if *Dr. Horrible* had, as reported, earned more than twice the original cost, Whedon responds, "Yes" (177).

^{xxx1} Discussing race in "Things Are Different Now? A Postcolonial Analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," Dominic Alessio notes general problems, such as the limited presentation of race beyond white, and specific issues including the demonizing of the Chumash people in "Pangs," the eighth episode of season four of *Buffy* (733). *Firefly* and *Serenity* have been critiqued for presenting a world in which Chinese language and culture are a vital part of the diegesis, but in which no major Asian characters appear. For an overview of the topic and scholarly response up to this point, see the forthcoming *Joss Whedon and Race: Critical Essays*, edited by Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Lowery Woodall (McFarland).

^{xxxii} A pointedly titled May 2012 piece by Erik Kain posted on the website of finance and lifestyle publication *Forbes* reads, "Dear Tim Burton: Please Stop Casting Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham Carter In Every Movie." A May 2012 review by Britt Hayes for the entertainment website *ScreenCrush* of *Dark Shadows* (2012), the eighth Burton/Depp/Bonham Carter collaboration, is titled "The Magic Is Gone: Tim Burton and Johnny Depp Need a Divorce."