

## **'Cheers: Season 4 DVD' Review**

*by Alan Bennett Ilagan (for Edge Boston)*

While we continue to grieve over the passing of *Friends* and *Sex & the City*, there is some consolation to be found for those looking for great ensemble comedy in the Season 4 DVD of *Cheers*. As *Will & Grace* limps into irrelevance with its non-stop parade of guest stars and complete disregard for its core characters, *Cheers* is a welcome reminder of when NBC proudly ruled the Thursday roost with a solid collection of sitcoms.

Though Season 4 does not feature the series' finest few hours (those would come a bit later in its run), it is notable for maintaining a pleasant consistency in the midst of a few major shake-ups. This was the year in which Boston's most-famous watering hole was introduced to the character of Woody Boyd, played winningly by movie-star-in-the-making Woody Harrelson. A replacement for the character of Coach, Woody quickly inhabited the dim-witted but lovable role and ran with it. Harrelson's early episodes showcase a naïve charm that dissipated slightly in later seasons, but here is seen in full, winning effect.

The budding brilliance of Kelsey Grammer's portrayal of Frasier Crane sows the seed for his spin-off sitcom, and it's interesting to note the origin and evolution of that character. His neurosis and relationship with Diane form some of the funniest moments of the season, as well as adding a new dynamic to Diane's history with Sam.

The sexual tension that still lingers between them is a mainstay of Season 4. Highlights of their chemistry and on-screen sparks include mid-season episodes "Don Juan is Hell" and "Take My Shirt Please." Ted Danson and Shelley Long inhabit their roles nicely, particularly Danson, who adds new layers of depth to his oversexed, overdone womanizing Sam Malone. While Sam and Diane have been together and broken up, there is no bitterness to the affair, but rather a comedic comfort in each other and the sometimes poignant development of their relationship. It is testament to the investment the characters have earned that the cliffhanger of the three-part finale ("Strange Bedfellows", where Sam proposes to someone ~ either Diane or the politician he has been dating) leaves us aching for the next DVD installment.

Although Sam, Diane and Frasier provide most of the dramatic fireworks, the real star is the ensemble as a whole. In fact, Season 4 may well be the year that the cast coalesces into one of its strongest incarnations. The indelible supporting characters often steal the show ~ from

Norm's casually flippant one-liners to Cliff's earnest eccentricities to Carla's biting sarcasm. Together with Woody's witless innocence they provide one of the toughest comedic backbones of any sitcom. Though some series start showing signs of strain in their fourth year, *Cheers* comes into its own ~ the start of a trajectory that would ultimately lead to its status as the number one television show for a few years. Season Four lays the groundwork for this ascent ~ in the development and loyalty to character and history, and the consistency of its writing and direction. It also weathers time fairly well, featuring nothing too topical or serious, nor relying upon numerous guest stars and plot gimmicks. It's something that NBC and the rest of the big networks could stand to remember.