



The Coming of Shadows (Babylon 5, No 2)

By Jane Killick

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Now in its fifth hit season, Babylon 5--TV's hottest interstellar science-fiction phenomenon--has spawned its own series of definitive episode guides! Catch up on all the action, show by show, from the very beginning with the Babylon 5: Season by Season guidebooks.

Babylon 5: The Coming of Shadows, opens with "By Any Means Necessary: Making Babylon 5 on a Budget," a behind-the-scenes account of how series creator J. Michael Straczynski and his production team bucked the system to create the extraordinary twenty-first century world that would change the face of sci-fi TV. Then, in a thrilling second season overview, experience the arrival of Bruce Boxleitner as John J. Sheridan, new captain of the Babylon 5 station, and the looming threat of the sinister Shadows.

In-depth, episode-by-episode summaries--with detailed analysis by author and B5 expert Jane Killick--cover all of the second season's twenty-two shows, including "Points of Departure," "Spider in the Web," "Comes the Inquisitor," and the dramatic season finale, "The Fall of Night."

Veteran viewers or first-time fans, relive the adventure--or find out what you've been missing--with the complete companions to Babylon 5!

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Editorial Review

From the Publisher

Through trial and error (and books I won't name) I learned a hard lesson: don't do books unless the source material is good. Books based on movies and television have to stand on their own, entertain without the benefit of a screen. Exciting characters, action, mystery, political intrigue, technology, race relations, romance--excellent fiction incorporates all of the genres. With Babylon 5, the series had been envisioned as a five-year epic, and that epic sports one helluva backstory. That backstory has held the attention of millions of viewers for five seasons--these are dedicated and constant supporters.

All well and good, but I'd been stung before. Initially, I was skeptical. It wasn't until I visited the Babylon 5 studios, met with series creator J. Michael Straczynski, watched the actors at work, that I saw the creative spirit that drove them. The hours they put in are painful to watch. I'm pretty sure Straczynski doesn't actually sleep--he wrote the lion's share of the episodes, including two that won Hugo Awards.

So I was convinced. Now we've got four million hard-core viewers to convert. At least we know the target audience.

--Steve Saffel, Senior Editor

From the Inside Flap

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By Any Means Necessary: Making Babylon 5 on a Budget

Babylon 5 has changed the face of television science fiction with its epic storyline, detailed futuristic world, intriguing Human and alien characters, and its use of computer-generated special effects. But it probably would never even have been made without its ability to stick to a budget. The production model that makes Babylon 5 possible was so ambitious in the beginning that many people didn't believe it could be done.

Science fiction has a reputation for runaway budgets, and it's easy to

see why. When a series is set in the future, everything has to be designed from scratch. While a contemporary show might put a desk in an office and dress it with standard objects like a telephone, a desk diary, and a computer, a futuristic show has to reinvent everything. If the show has aliens, then they have to have makeup and specially designed costumes. Special effects always add a large slice to the budget, especially with shows set in space as creating inserts of spaceships or planets costs money. Wandering space shows in the Star Trek mold incur even more expense because they are constantly moving from place to place, requiring a new alien world every week.

Babylon 5's producers knew the reputation of their genre, and they were determined not to go down the runaway route that leads to cancellation. At the heart of that determination was producer John Copeland's production plan. It was an ambitious document right from the start, and he remembers that even his own staff--production manager Kevin G. Cremin and production accountant Sarah Fischer--was doubtful when he showed it to them in the first season. "Both Kevin and Sarah looked at this budget and said, 'You're out of your mind. You'll never do this!'"

One or two things gave the production an advantage over other shows, however. The first was getting a commitment for a whole first season of twenty-two episodes. This is extremely unusual for American television, which usually commits for half a season to see how things go, how many people tune in, and what the reaction of the advertisers is before committing to the second half if things go well. The president of Warner Bros. Domestic Television Distribution, Dick Robertson, remembers how important that initial decision was. "That allowed us to put a lot more money on the screen," he says. "We didn't have to pay holding fees to actors; we didn't have to pay holding fees to the guy that owned the building where we produced the show. We could commit up front for twenty-two episodes, and the savings on that was probably at least \$300,000 an episode."

It gave the production the assurance of knowing exactly how much money they had to spread over the first season and the freedom to make some big decisions up front. One of the biggest was creating their own studio complex in a warehouse on the outskirts of Los Angeles. At this time, many American TV shows were relocating to Canada or even further afield in search of lower production costs. This would have been more trouble than it was worth for Babylon 5. Its reliance on postproduction and special effects meant there was a real advantage to staying in L.A., where all those facilities are on the doorstep.

"It was more efficient for us to come in here and build three soundstages from the ground up," says John Copeland. "We had way more space and way more control here than we ever would have had [in a ready-made studio facility]. Where we shot the pilot, we had two little soundstages side by side. We would just have had those two little

soundstages for a whole season. Our main stage, with the Observation Dome, the customs bay, and the Central Corridor, is bigger out here than those two soundstages were combined."

Another thing that sets Babylon 5 apart from many other shows is the level of planning. While other shows have traditionally learned to cope with last-minute scripts and late rewrites, Babylon 5 works four or five scripts ahead of time. "That's one of the very unique facets of this production," says John. "Very few other series have the ability to see four or five episodes beyond the point that they are in any given time. You can plan to spend your money that way. We have a budget for the season, and we break that down into a pattern budget for what a typical episode should cost--that's our yardstick for production. And we budget every episode. So some of them will be right at that pattern; some of them will be a little less. If we have come under budget on a few episodes, and we know that down the road on episode eight, nine, or ten it's going to be really ambitious, we can plan to spend extra money on that. Joe [J.

Michael Straczynski, executive producer and creator of Babylon 5] always gives me a couple of pages at the beginning of a season, which is an outline, so I can see where we're going and I can plan for things. One of the fundamentals that we adopted going into this was, 'Okay, we're going to have to make choices because of the economics we've got on Babylon 5, and once we've made the choice, that means we've decided we're going to do this, and the four things over here we're not going to do.' "

"We had to play what we call in American football 'no-mistakes ball,' " says Kevin G. Cremin, who remained production manager for the first two years. "We have to not make mistakes. We can't afford to build something and then decide, 'We're really not going to shoot it that way; we're going to have our back to that.' Everything that we'd built, once we'd committed to it, we really had to stay with the idea. There wasn't the luxury of being able to say, 'Well, nice idea, we'll try it later.' We couldn't come up with something less than what the producers and directors expected. We couldn't come up with a cheesy-looking prop or a cheesy-looking costume or a cheesy-looking set. We always had to make sure that if we could build a three-walled set and shoot in it and those three walls were going to look substantially better than spending for the fourth wall and then having to downgrade all of the dressing, then that was a decision we had to make."

In terms of set design, the philosophy of making choices became what the production designer, John Iacovelli, describes as a mantra for the show. He had previously worked with the producers on Captain Power and the Soldiers of the Future and was invited to draw up a plan for Babylon 5 before it was even commissioned because of his reputation for working on a budget. "The basic elements of doing a show on a budget are knowing what your budget is and being respectful of it," he says. "To make choices that are very clear and to make the better choice rather than the idealized choice, to make the choice you know you can win at, not the choice that

you know you may possibly lose at."

Those choices shaped the show in a variety of ways, particularly in John's department, which designs and builds all the sets. "The money, and how little we have of it, made so many decisions for us," he says. "For example, the idea of putting contrasting colors and values on the sets in a very textural way came from the fact that we couldn't afford the very polished-looking sets that they have over at Trek and the other kinds of shows. We just couldn't afford that kind of finish. So my point of view was, like in the theater, if you've got to hide a bunch of staple holes, wood grain, or something like that, then just paint it. It's almost like camouflage. So that was one of the things that drove the show a lot in the first season and second season, and it became successful--it gave the show a kind of grittier look."

It is difficult to imagine Babylon 5 without that grittiness because it fits in so well with the show's fictional reality. At the same time it is a very dark show, which on the one level enhances the dramatic mood, while on another serves to protect the viewer from seeing any rough edges.

Another aspect of the show that has helped keep the costs down as far as sets are concerned is the fact that the story is centered on the space station. There are occasional jaunts to Minbar or Centauri Prime, but on the whole, the action stays in one place and that means keeping a certain look throughout. A space station of this scale is built using modular components, which allowed John Iacovelli to build modules and then reuse them in various parts of the station. "I thought that if we had enough of these kind of Lego building blocks, that we could have a lot of different sets. A lot of the scenery, if you're very clever and you're a die-hard fan, you'll see how we put it together. It's a miracle what a paint job can do on a set. In fact, when we're designing a set, we often think 'What do we have?' before 'What can we make?' Part of that came from my training in the theater and being able to do a set for Shakespeare or for an opera, where you have certain elements that are always the same, specific elements that are specific to certain characters, specific to certain groups, and the smallest change can make a huge visual difference. I think the best example of that on Babylon 5 is the corridors. If we [use the same set, but] change the color of the stripe and change the number of the corridor, it [looks like] a completely different place. Visually, it looks completely different, and I get the biggest rush out of that because it's so simple."

A theater background is what unites some of the key people on the Babylon 5 staff. That applies not only to John Iacovelli but to John Copeland and Anne Bruice-Aling and her team of costumers. "We had all come from a theater background, so we understand construction, we understand fabrication, we understand budgets, and because we've come from theater where the budgets are even tighter, we understand being resourceful," says Anne. "I think that's helped us in a way that maybe other designers and

teams--having come up through television--may not have had that kind of perspective. For me, it always feels like we're doing a big eclectic play every week. It is like doing big theater that goes a lot faster.

"We have a budget that's doable," she continues. "What we did in the beginning was decide where we were going to put our money. So we design and build all of our alien things and some of the principal civilian things, like the Lyta telepath things. We built those, and we used to build all of Talia's things and all the uniforms, anything that's specialized, the medlab and all that stuff. But for our civilian look, we do buy off-the-rack, and we do what I call our 'Babylon tweak.' On men's jackets, we take the lapels off, and we have strange collar things going on. I buy certain kinds of shirts with interesting geometric patterns on them, and we take all the collars off and change the buttons. Our background civilians tend to be either very ethnically melting-pot things and a lot of Indonesian and African and South American and Asian garments. Then we mix and match them in strange ways that sort of suggest in the future it will perhaps be more of a melting pot, and that keeps it colorful. Then with contemporary Humans, we start with a basic black underdressing, and I just try and find things that are clean smooth lines, a little bit hip, and we do our little tweak to them. What Joe and John have always said is that our department has really succeeded in putting the money where you can see it."

Anne admits the first year was "pretty hellish" when the aliens, the Humans, and the background characters all needed costumes. Fortunately, many of the principal characters were in uniform most of the time and didn't need a vast amount of wardrobe. That changed over time. "The principals now all have their closets so to speak, so Sheridan has his bathrobe and he has civilian wear and he has go-to-dinner kind of clothes. But yeah, in terms of our principals, we don't have to augment them too often. Delenn usually gets a couple of things every season, and Lennier gets a couple of new things . . . For the background, most of the alien stuff has now been built, with groups of Drazi pilots and Drazi merchants and Minbari pilots and Minbari civilians, so it's not just the principals, but the whole worlds that belong to them, we have now in stock which we've designed and built."

Building up a stock of items to use became an invaluable asset for almost every department. Obviously, in terms of costumes, it means being able to cater for a crowd scene simply by pulling items out of the storeroom. In terms of prosthetics, masks for background aliens become stock items, while preexisting molds are available if others need to be made. Even for special effects, once a Vorlon ship or a starfury has been used for the first time, the model is available in the computer whenever it is needed again. Stock sets also have a major part to play, and like any other show, Babylon 5 has its basic sets, such as the Observation Dome and the Zocalo, which, once paid for and erected on the soundstage, are always there to be used and can even be redressed to look like somewhere

else.

But money cannot be made to rule the show. Babylon 5 is about telling a story, and the production has to move to accommodate that. So, in terms of sets, when the war heated up in season three, the casino set was scrapped and replaced with the war room. Stock sets can be useful but are not always appropriate, as in the second season when Sinclair was replaced by Sheridan. "We had some really nice stuff for Sinclair's quarters in season one," remembers John Iacovelli. "I felt really strongly that not only should he [Sheridan] not be in the same physical place but that his stuff should be almost completely different. That was a big expense, because I felt visually there were certain things, certain paintings, that we could not use again."

There are also certain areas where John Iacovelli and his staff try not to scrimp and save. Sometimes it is necessary to spend the money, particularly when it comes to what are known as the "hero props," things like PPG rifles and links that are going to have significant screen time. "This stuff is usually in close-up; it's usually next to somebody's face or hand," says John. "Definitely with the props and gadgets, we try not to scrimp, and I think that we are pretty successful in coming up with interesting-looking things. There's also what we call 'the danger zone,' which is about three and a half feet up on a set and for the next three and a half feet. That's about where the close-ups happen on the set, and that's the danger zone. I talk often to my staff, saying signing should be very crisp there, all the dressing, any wood-screw holes, or anything has to be cleaned up. We try to pitch it right around where the actors' faces are because it is television and it is, ultimately, a show about talking heads. Also, in the graphics, I think we've never scrimped. We've always tried to put a lot of money into our graphics because all of us know what a storytelling device that is."

It was John Copeland's philosophy from the beginning that the story should be king. As far as he is concerned, it is his job to worry about the money and the writers' job to worry about the creative side of the process. "One of the lessons that I learned as a result of working on Captain Power, which had a lot of special effects, [was that] we came up with a lot of parameters of what you could have in a script and what you couldn't have in a script, and ultimately, this was a handicap for the writers. I wanted us to have a production process that didn't have restrictions for the writers, and we just said, 'Write the story that you want to tell, and we'll figure out how to do it.' "

Nevertheless, the show's executive producer, Joe Straczynski, who started out writing most of the episodes in each season and progressed to writing them all, never forgets that he is working within a budget. "My feeling is if someone hands you \$27 million to make a television show, it behooves you to act responsibly," he says. "So I do try and do things I know we can do, but what generally tends to happen is the production folks

come back to me and say, 'No, we can do more than this.' "

That is exactly what happened with the pilot script, as John Iacovelli recalls: "I got the first script, and there was a very limited number of sets--I wish I could find it, because I would love to compare it to the script we ended up with . . . Basically, I felt that the writing at that moment was being too cautious. I just encouraged him [Joe Straczynski]--I said, 'Please don't write knowing that we don't have any money and we don't have any sets: just write what you want, and somehow we'll figure it out.' I think there's a tremendous trust that's developed between Joe and myself and John Copeland. We know that there're things we won't be able to do, and rarely do we say, 'Absolutely not, we can't do that'--we find a way to do it. Sometimes we fail. Sometimes I'm just amazed by how good some of the sets look."

"We're constantly finding the edge of the envelope," says John Copeland. "When we find the edge of the envelope, we try to redefine what is an envelope so that we can just go a little further."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Holly Flynn:

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