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Television Review



Hell on Wheels Anson Mount, right, and Ted Levine, on horseback, in a scene from “Hell on Wheels,” a new series on AMC, Sunday nights at 10 Eastern and Pacific times; 9 Central time.

It’s Mud and Blood, All the Livelong Day

By [ALESSANDRA STANLEY](#)

The Transcontinental Railroad tamed the Wild West, but the building of it was one of the more savage adventures in American history. That’s the crux of a new western on AMC, [“Hell on Wheels.”](#) which is, if nothing else, ambitious. Even at a highfalutin channel it’s pretty unusual for television producers to list their literary and cinematic influences. It’s a little like a councilman thanking Winston Churchill in a sanitation bill — or a TV critic assessing “The X Factor” with a nod to Roland Barthes.

Joe and Tony Gayton, the creators of “Hell on Wheels,” are fearless, however, boasting in their promotional material that they were inspired by Clint Eastwood’s movie [“Unforgiven.”](#) Robert Altman’s [“McCabe and Mrs. Miller”](#) and Jim Jarmusch’s cult favorite [“Dead Man.”](#) Their writing muses include Upton Sinclair, who wrote “The Jungle,” and Cormac McCarthy, author of “Blood Meridian.”

They don’t mention the one work that people are most likely to compare the series with: [“Deadwood.”](#) It’s a telling lapse. For just as AMC ads promise that “blood will be spilled,” it is inevitable that come the premiere of “Hell on Wheels” on Sunday, ink will be spilled on why the Gaytons didn’t try harder to do something totally different from “Deadwood.”

“Hell on Wheels” isn’t terrible or even half-bad; it’s a western, after all, and it has a lot of violence, which, particularly when inflicted with tomahawks and arrows, covers a multitude of sins.



Chins Large/AMC
The rapper Common, foreground, plays a former slave who forms an uneasy alliance with a Confederate Army veteran. |

But westerns, like a jazz standard, can withstand all kinds of riffing. The 1989 mini-series [“Lonesome Dove,”](#) adapted from the Larry McMurtry novel, revived the genre and also almost killed it. It was so good it was almost impossible to match. Yet [“Broken Trail,”](#) a 2006 AMC movie that even starred Robert Duvall in the same crusty, worn-out cowboy role, found its own voice, mostly by mixing Far East and West. In 2005 a TNT mini-series, [“Into the West”](#) made a point of flipping TV clichés — the first alcohol served is not “firewater” whiskey, but an Indian ceremonial drink, the first massacre is committed by buffaloes, not vigilantes or the cavalry, and the first scalping of a frontiersman is committed by a grizzly bear, not an Indian in war paint.

“Deadwood,” which was written and created by David Milch and was a critical hit for HBO for three seasons starting in 2004, took all the conventions of the classic western and turned them upside down. “Hell on Wheels” takes many of Mr. Milch’s innovations and flattens them out — “Deadwood for Dummies.” The theme music is startlingly similar, if more muted, and so is the faded sepia and gray cinematography. That bleached-out look has become so ubiquitous on AMC

that it’s almost as if there were a premium on bright color, like the window tax that drove 18th-century homeowners to brick up their buildings.

In some cases monochromatic lighting makes sense. AMC’s “Walking Dead” fades its hues to match the illustrations of the graphic novel that inspired it, and “The Killing” is set in Seattle and was based on a moody Scandinavian thriller. “Deadwood” had a drained, claustrophobic palette that was almost an inside joke, an inversion of the grand sweeps of Technicolor in John Ford classics. The cinematography on “Hell on Wheels,” on the other hand, just looks familiar.

Most of all, many of the central characters seem modeled on ones from “Deadwood,” only without the flights of profanity and quasi-Shakespearean grandiloquence that made Mr. Milch’s dialogue so distinctive. Hell on Wheels is the name of a frontier tent city, and like Deadwood, it’s a muddy, cramped encampment for a ragtag crew of brutes — and whores — working on the railroad. The year is 1865, right after the end of the Civil War and Lincoln’s assassination, a time when, as the introduction puts it, the nation was “an open wound.”

The hero, Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount), is a taciturn Confederate Army veteran heading West to track down the men who killed his wife during the war. Working on the railroad, he crosses paths with a former slave, Elam Ferguson, [played by the rapper Common](#), and the two Southerners form an uneasy alliance. Most of the women they meet are for hire, but there is one well-bred beauty, Lily Bell (Dominique McElligott), the English bride of a geological surveyor, who makes her way through hostile Indian territory in a corset and long skirts.

The railroad attracts all kinds of louts and swindlers, and the shadiest of them all is the boss, Thomas Durant (Colm Meaney), known as Doc, who was a real-life robber baron who used government contracts to enrich himself under the banner of Manifest Destiny. “This undertaking is subsidized by the enormous teat of the federal government,” Durant hisses at an engineer who doesn’t understand why his boss wants his railroad to loop around flat terrain. “This never-ending money-gushing nipple pays me \$1,600 a mile, yet you build my road straight?”

Durant is a vicious bully who revels in his own greed and cruelty, but in a caricatured, small-bore way that makes it almost impossible not to think longingly of Ian McShane's portrait of Al Swearengen, the twisted, charismatic villain of "Deadwood."

As Bohannon, Mr. Mount has an easier time — his is a spaghetti western kind of role that mostly requires long, hostile stares and longer verbal pauses — and the actor looks quite a bit like Franco Nero in the era of "[Django](#)." Ms. McElligott is equally watchable as Lily, who, despite all her breeding, adapts quite quickly to frontier mores.

However predictable, there are plenty of things to enjoy in "Hell on Wheels," and sex and violence are only two of them. In a way it's as paradoxical as its subject: a big, lusty but surprisingly timid look at the bold pioneers and profiteers who ravaged nature to build a nation.

HELL ON WHEELS

AMC, Sunday nights at 10, Eastern and Pacific times; 9, Central time.

Produced by Entertainment One and Nomadic Pictures; developed by Endemol USA. Created and written by Joe Gayton and Tony Gayton; Joe Gayton, Tony Gayton, Jeremy Gold, John Shiban and David Von Ancken, executive producers; John Morayniss, Michael Rosenberg, Mike Frislev and Chad Oakes, producers. For AMC: Joel Stillerman, senior vice president for original programming production and digital content; Susie Fitzgerald, senior vice president for scripted programming; Jason Fisher, senior vice president for production.

WITH: Anson Mount (Cullen Bohannon), Common (Elam Ferguson), Dominique McElligott (Lily Bell), Colm Meaney (Durant), Ben Esler (Sean McGinnes), Philip Burke (Mickey McGinnes) and Eddie Spears (Brother Joseph).