

CALGARY HERALD

Stars and new showrunner offer sneak peek of the Season 3 of Alberta-made Western, Hell on Wheels

By Eric Volmers, Calgary Herald June 15, 2013



Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount). Photograph by: Chris Large/AMC, AMC



Hip-hop artist and actor Common on the red carpet at the Banff World Media Festival at the Fairmont Banff Spring Hotel in Banff, Alberta Tuesday, June 11, 2013. Photograph by Stuart Gradon, Calgary Herald

It was on the crowded and noisy red carpet at the Banff World Media Festival earlier this week when actor and hip-hop artist Common may have revealed more than he should have about the upcoming season on Hell on Wheels.

In Banff to present the Canadian Award of Distinction to actor Will Arnett, Common was asked what we could expect from Season 3 of the AMC western, in which he plays ambitious freed slave Elam Ferguson. "You can expect extreme high level of drama, fun, stories, new characters that are vibrant and incredible," Common said.

He went on to say that the interactions between existing characters will still be key to the drama, listing off those that will be central to the third season. There's the prickly bromance between Elam and protagonist Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount), the haunted, revenge-seeking former Confederate soldier who was asked at the end of Season 2 to take charge of building America's first transcontinental railway. There's Eva (Robin McLeavy), the former prostitute who will have presumably given birth to Elam's love child by the time Season 3 airs. And then there's The Swede, who will no doubt be making everyone's life miserable.

Wait a minute. Wasn't the Swede a corpse in the river the last time we saw him? Is Common having Season 2 flashbacks?

"I guess I said something . . .," Common said with a smile.

No one is officially confirming it one way or the other. But we all know it's hard to keep a good villain dead.

As viewers of the post Civil-War drama know (and if you haven't watched yet, you might want to stop reading now), the dastardly Swede, played by Christopher Heyerdahl, appeared to be one of the casualties as Season 2 came to an apocalyptic end with the town of Hell on Wheels burning to the ground. Much to the annoyance of some fans, Lily-Bell (Dominique McElligott) — the lovely love interest of Cullen — was strangled to death by The Swede. He was to be hanged, but before he could be strung up he leaped off a railway bridge and floated lifelessly down the river.

While AMC is notorious for keeping upcoming plot developments secret, this particular character's return would not be that much of a shocker to fans. The Swede (who is actually Norwegian) has arguably been the breakout character of the show thus far, a creepy and complex one-time "enforcer" of the railroad whose fall from grace in Season 2 only seemed to make him more dangerous.

“There are certain things that are well-kept secrets and there are other things that are the worst-kept secrets about a TV show,” says John Wirth, who took over as showrunner for the series for Season 3. “That might be one of them. I think our ardent fan base guessed and/or hoped that The Swede would not be dead when he fell off that bridge.”

The explosive Season 2 finale of *Hell on Wheels*, which was shot near Okotoks last year, had a high body count. It was all about turmoil and change. The town burned. Lily-Bell was murdered. Robber baron Thomas (Doc) Durant (Colm Meaney) was arrested and Cullen was offered Durant’s [job](#) overseeing the transcontinental railway as it snaked further west. But that onscreen turmoil seemed to move behind the scenes after the cameras stopped rolling. Tony and Joe Gayton — the writers and creators who first envisioned the show for AMC — left the series last year. Showrunner John Shiban followed not long afterwards. At one point, AMC announced that pre-production of the third season would be put on hold until another showrunner could be found.

Enter Wirth, a TV veteran whose resume includes work on *Nash Bridges*, *Picket Fences* and *The Cape*. With a new sheriff in town, *Hell on Wheels* could have a slightly different tone to it when the 10-episode season premieres on Aug. 3.

“Naturally there’s going to be some changes because I’m not them,” Wirth says. “Writing is a very idiosyncratic thing. Good writers have a specific voice. In my case, I’ve tried to toe the line on the tone of the show where it was working in my opinion and I’ve tried to bring some changes to it where it wasn’t. For example, I thought the show was a little earnest and a little bleak. I wanted to bring a little more levity and a little more hopefulness to the show. And, as I’ve said publicly and to Anson on more than one occasion: Cullen Bohannon will be drinking less and talking more this season.”

Which is not to say the show will become *Blazing Saddles*. After all, one of the directors that has been brought in for Season 3 is Neil LaBute, the writer, playwright and film director behind such harrowing black comedies as *The Company of Men* and *Friends & Neighbours*.

But the first two seasons did thrive on an unrelentingly grim undercurrent of revenge. It’s what motivated Cullen as he searched for the killers of his wife. In a perverse, AMC-worthy twist, he even throttled the wrong man to death at the end of Season 1. But that thematic thread will continue to fade, Wirth says. Season 3 will be a “western about work,” not revenge.

“Bohannon was asked by the authorities if he would take over the railroad and I don’t think he answered, at least not directly,” Wirth says. “So we begin the season with him making that decision and that, of course, pits him against Durant who was hell-bent on going down in history as the man who built the transcontinental railroad.”

Cullen will also have a new headstrong woman to deal with, played by Jennifer Ferrin. Last seen in CTV’s *The Following* opposite Kevin Bacon, Ferrin will play New York Tribune journalist Louise Ellison. She is based very loosely on Nellie Bly, a real-life investigative reporter from that time period.

Still, much of the show’s unique dynamic will continue to come from the friendship between Elam and Cullen, the freed slave and former slave owner. In Season 2, Elam revealed himself to be ambitious in his pursuit of the American dream, hoping to defy the prejudice of the day and climb the ladder in the railroad business. Despite his history as a slave, Elam now sees that his goals are within his grasp. It will make him an increasingly complex character who will dial down the outrage and anger and become increasingly savvy, says Common.

“The obstacles that it takes to rise to the top will always be a challenge,” he says. “I think for my character to have that ambition and drive, it’s something that I relate to and I love it. I think he’s becoming wiser too. Everything isn’t about ‘Well, this white man said this to me ... ’ He picks and chooses what he needs to fight for.”

Yes, plenty of change is afoot for *Hell on Wheels*. Among them will be a new Saturday time slot, with AMC hoping to build on the fan base that tunes into the channel for classic westerns on Saturday afternoons.

Meanwhile, the sets are bigger and more varied. A new town has been built near Okotoks. For the first time, filming has also been taking place in Calgary, specifically at Peter Lougheed House and in Heritage Park.

Still, as some things change, others remain the same. The Alberta crew has stayed loyal and many of the writers are still on board, says Chad Oakes, who produces the series for Calgary’s Nomadic Pictures.

And, let’s not forget, it’s still an AMC show. Starting Aug. 3, expect the unexpected.

“It ended with a bang and it will open with a bang,” promises Oakes.