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Blackstone, Hell on Wheels big winners at Alberta Film and Television Awards

By Eric Volmers, Calgary Herald April 13, 2014



Jason Cermak won the best actor award for his role in the movie Common Chord, at the Alberta Film and Television Awards at Telus Convention Centre in Calgary. Photograph by: Stuart Gradon , Calgary Herald

There was a plea for more diverse roles for native actors, lots of nostalgia for the salad days of the Alberta film industry, music from the 1970s and even a hairy stalker to end the evening on a surreal note. But, for the most part, the Alberta Film and Television Awards didn't hold too many surprises on its return to Calgary for its 40th anniversary at the Telus Convention Centre to honour homegrown productions and film workers, with two of the province's most established

shows coming out on top. AMC's gritty western *Hell on Wheels* and APTN's even grittier drama *Blackstone* were the big winners, earning five and six trophies respectively in various categories.

Hell on Wheels, from Calgary-based Nomadic Pictures, took the prize for best dramatic series, beating out CBC's *Heartland* and *Blackstone*. The Edmonton-shot *Freezer*, a thriller starring Dylan McDermott, picked up the win for best feature film.

Other notable winners included Calgary actress Michelle Thrush, who picked up her second *Rosie* for her acclaimed performance as Gail Stoney in *Blackstone*. After her thank-yous, Thrush took the opportunity to make a direct plea to Alberta producers in the audience to cast native actors and actresses as "human beings."

"I've been in this business for close to 25 years working professionally as an actor," Thrush told the Herald after the ceremony. "And I think we're beyond the time to start casting aboriginal actors as just human beings. I am so tired every time there is a native character guest starring or a native character here or there they call us in. I want to come in an read for people who are just doing whatever and it has nothing to do with the culture I'm a part of. I'm an actress who just happens to be aboriginal."

Blackstone, currently shooting its fourth season outside of Edmonton, tells the often harrowing story of corruption, power and addiction on a First Nations Reserve. It took home an impressive haul of hardware this year. Alongside the win for Thrush, creator Ron E. Scott was honoured in directing and screenwriting categories while Mike Shields also won two awards, for his soundtrack work in both the series and a *The Making of Blackstone* documentary. The show was also awarded the prize for the production that best reflects cultural diversity.

Scott says he take pride in the series' ability to inspire natives both in and out of the entertainment industry.

"We're inspiring this next generation to say 'We can do that,'" he says. "We hire actors, we train them and we try to do our best. It's something I'm really proud of."

Drayton Valley native Jason Cermak took home the best actor prize for his work in the tender, Lethbridge-shot family film [Common Chord](#), beating out *Tiny Plastic Men*'s Chris Craddock, Kevin Davey from *Hell on Wheels*, Sheldon Elter from *Blackstone* and *Heartland*'s Shaun Johnston. Although that was the film's only win, it earned an impressive seven nominations with its story about a musician forced to come of age when the mother of his young daughter is killed.

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