

# The Fresno Bee



## Cable Western 'Hell on Wheels' steams to more emotional junctions

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By Rick Bentley

LOS ANGELES -- The team behind AMC's "Hell on Wheels" compare its first two seasons to the first few miles of the transcontinental railroad that serves as a backdrop for this gritty Western — both were the start of something much bigger to come.

"Hell on Wheels" has all the trappings of a typical Western from six-shooters to horses. But it's not about the guys who wear white or black hats. Instead, it's an examination of the racism, greed and politics that drove people during that period and continues today. How those topics will be broached can be seen as the third season of "Hell on Wheels" starts Saturday on AMC.

At the center of this historical tempest is Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount), a Civil War soldier who initially joined the crew building the railroad as a way of finding revenge against the men who killed his wife.

Season three opens in 1867, with Bohannon focused more on the world of big business, religion and the new role of Wall Street in the White House.



"Hell on Wheels" includes actor Common as Elam Ferguson.

AMC

Mount has watched the show tackle the dark and dirty side of history from the first episode.

"I started with the idea this was a story about a guy seeking revenge but slowly during the first season, I realized I'm playing a guy who has post-traumatic stress syndrome," Mount says. "He's one of those soldiers who's dealing with that through conflict. He's trying to keep fighting the war. He doesn't know how to function outside the war."

"That was the journey in the first season for me. The second season was seeing his hubris play out for a time and at the end realizing this metaphor of the railroad being a war was actually quite a destructive idea."

Bohannon reached the emotional bottom at the end of season two and season three will be about the reconstruction of his life.

Mount has worked in TV and films since 1999 but the combination of the physicality of the Western genre coupled with the deep emotional tribulations of the character has been the most draining work he's done.

He pushes himself to handle the challenge because of what "Hell on Wheels" has become.

"I think we have an opportunity here to tell a very uplifting story about people who were trying to kill each other just months before, or own each other just months before, who now have to work together," Mount says. "I think when a television show functions best it can provide either a platform or a metaphor for talk in front of the watercooler."

One of the biggest elements of "Hell on Wheels" is racism and no one deals with that more than Elam Ferguson (played by Common), an emancipated slave working to achieve true freedom but living in a world consumed by prejudice. The show's set in a post-Civil War era but the discussions of race resonate in contemporary times.

The fact the show shines a line on prejudice is one of the things Common likes best about the series.

"The way we find solutions to our ills is to be able to say, 'I have this issue and let's talk about it. Let's not act like it's not there.' We all have experienced prejudice. Our show is putting all those things out there."

Common has worked in movies and guest starred on TV shows but this is the longest he's played a single role. He said he likes that his character shows growth in a time when it was so difficult for ex-slaves to find a better life. In researching the role, Common found examples of ex-slaves who dared to dream big and that's the way he's played Elam. Common stresses Elam should not be described as a slave but as a man who was enslaved.

"When I was asked what I wanted out of the character, I told them I wanted Elam to be seen as a human being," Common says. "We should all have empathy for a person who was enslaved but that doesn't make the person perfect. Once they get out of being a slave, there's also an inner conflict they have to go through and I think the writers have done a brilliant job with that."

"What's beautiful about Elam is that the scope of what he wants to achieve always rises."

How both men's lives continue to be rebuilt will continue with each mile of track completed during the new season of "Hell on Wheels."

### **Show information**

"Hell on Wheels," Saturday 9 p.m., AMC