

## **CALGARY HERALD:**

# **To Hell and back: AMC's Alberta shot Hell on Wheels returns**

By Eric Volmers, Calgary Herald August 8, 2012



**Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount) in Hell On Wheels: Season 2, Episode 2. Photo Credit: Michelle Faye**

**Photograph by: Michelle Faye**

No matter how fitting it may be for the surroundings, there's something unsettling about chatting over a pool of blood.

Yet, here we are. It's mid-morning on the Alberta set of [Hell on Wheels](#) and a cheery Colm Meaney is on a break from playing corrupt railway baron Thomas (Doc) Durant. Dressed to the nines in dapper attire from the late 19th century, Meaney apologizes for the mess in the railway office. He cheerfully explains that someone had been shot earlier. It's all a bit surreal.

But there's no denying the puddle of blood on his desk fits in nicely with the overall esthetic of the hulking new set for Hell on Wheels, which sits amid yellow canola fields along the Bow River just southeast of Calgary.

"Look around Hell on Wheels, it is filthy," says Meaney, explaining the larger themes of corruption and greed in the post-Civil War western.

"It's the idea of coal and smoke and waste and all the s.t, literally, that comes with so-called civilization."

Signs of violence and general unpleasantness are not hard to find on the Hell on Wheels set. There's the skulls. The piles of bones. A few skinned rabbits.

There's even a makeshift graveyard full of freshly turned earth and wooden crosses.

The gritty AMC drama was introduced to TV audiences last November with the tag line "blood will be spilled." The unofficial mantra on the set these days is that Season 2, premiering Sunday, will be "bigger and badder." "It's not just tents and train cars," Meaney says. "There's walls and roofs and more of a feeling of a permanent situation."

"It's a dangerous place," he adds.

Of course, it always was. Season 1 focused on the bloody mission of former Confederate soldier Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount), who signed up to help build the first Transcontinental Railroad while getting revenge on the Union soldiers who murdered his wife and young son.

As the season drew to a close, most characters were in flux. Bohannon fled after discovering he had brutally murdered an innocent man.

Freed slave Elam (Common) broke up with his prostitute girlfriend due to differing views on their future. Durant's gangly and abusive enforcer, The Swede (Christopher Heyerdahl), was tarred and feathered by the enterprising Irish brothers Sean and Mickey McGinnes (Ben Esler, Phil Burke).

And finally, the ambitious and beautiful widow Lily Bell (Dominique McElligott) became further involved in the the day-to-day business of building the railroad, realizing she had more power than she thought.

On this particular day in mid-July, though, the cast is careful not to give away too many plot points that will unfold over the next 10 episodes. But it's clear that the fortunes of those building the Trancontinental can change quickly as it snakes further west. Six months later, Elam has

risen in the company ranks. The Swede has fallen. Bohannon seems more of a violent, lost soul than ever and, perhaps most surprisingly, Lily Bell has secured her hold over railway business by shacking up with Durant.

“I was as surprised as anybody,” says McElligott, whose character had traded in the elegant dresses of Season 1 for more pragmatic slacks and long coat.

“The writers explained to me that it’s a case of survival for Lily. She needs to live and she is ambitious and she wants to finish the railroad. So she sacrifices and starts the relationship with Durant.”

If there is a thread among all the characters that inhabit the grimy world of Hell on Wheels, it’s ambition, says Mount. Standing on the railway tracks between takes, Mount’s bearded and forever-scowling Bohannon looks even more dishevelled than he did in Season 1. But while his violent crusade to kill the murderous Union soldiers gave the character focus and empathy, the motivation behind his actions this season is more murky.

“When you go from a first season to a second season, you are shifting from a plot-driven arc to a character-driven arc,” Mount says. “You have to start looking at some of the deeper wires that make this puppet move.”

As with all AMC original shows, there is a focus on writing, on playing with genre and offering characters who reside somewhere in the grey zone between hero and villain. Created by brothers Joe and Tony Gayton, Hell on Wheels received good reviews for its first season and respectable numbers, becoming the second highest-rated AMC show after The Walking Dead.

Now that the first-season duties of introducing the characters, premise and historical context are done, one gets the impression that a certain unpredictability will rule the day.

There will be train robberies, unexpected sexual liaisons, strange allegiances and even a murder — and that’s just in the first episode.

“That’s the graveyard we just passed,” says Common with a laugh, pointing to the smattering of markers in the dirt on the edge of town. “You never know what you’re going to find and what can happen. It’s a dangerous time. It’s a time when people were more raw.”

Christopher Heyerdahl, the Vancouver actor who stole scenes last season as the menacing Swede, certainly benefited from the unpredictable nature of the writing. He wasn’t meant to survive the first season, but the character was so chillingly effective that he became a principal player.

Now, humiliated by the McGinnes brothers and forced to wallow in a degrading job that involves collecting bodies and chamber pots, one gets the impression the Swede is more dangerous than ever. Not unlike the town itself. “He’s as low as he can get,” says Heyerdahl, who’s character still sports the angry red sores from being tarred and feathered. “But the Swede is a hell of a chess player. And he’s definitely five moves ahead of most everyone.”

Spotlight: The second season of Hell on Wheels premieres Sunday on AMC at 7 p.m., following a Season 1 marathon starting at 9 a.m.

AMC's locally shot series rumbles into second season

[evolmers@calgaryherald.com](mailto:evolmers@calgaryherald.com)

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