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ENTERTAINMENT

AMC's 'Hell on Wheels' returns strong, 'American West' not so much



Colm Meaney as Thomas 'Doc' Durant - Hell on Wheels _ Season 5, Episode 9 - Photo Credit: Chris Large/AMC

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AMC has paired Robert Redford's docudrama "The American West" with "Hell on Wheels," and you can easily understand why.

The latter, which begins the second half of its fifth and final season Saturday, is a drama about the building of the first transcontinental railroad after the Civil War. One of the characters is a fictionalized version of Thomas Durant (played wonderfully by Colm Meaney), who was once head of the Union Pacific Railroad.



Anson Mount as Cullen Bohannon - Hell on Wheels Season 5, Episode 1 - Photo

The railroads play a significant role — and the real Durant to a small degree — in "The American West," which chronicles the years from 1865 to 1890 when the United States (rightly and wrongly) fulfilled its manifest destiny.

Alas, the eight-episode limited event series "West" is more entertainment than insightful. No Ken Burns level of quality here. We are given a fair amount of history, though not particularly nuanced, and too much of it is breathlessly delivered, such as this is a "story of an age of violence." You think so?

It begins with discontented Confederates like the outlaw Jesse James, who is shown suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. A newspaperman with Southern sympathies eventually made the outlaw into something of a folk hero, belying the fact that James murdered people he thought had fought for the Union.

Unrest prompts the then-general of the armies Ulysses S. Grant to send more troops to the area to keep the peace, but while the narration suggests that the crisis was so dire that the Civil War was about to flare up again these comments aren't really backed up. Before he was assassinated, Abraham Lincoln saw the wide-open spaces of the West as a place to defuse the eventual post-war tensions by creating opportunity for those seeking a better life. In the great

American tradition, this was done by giving the railroad companies millions of acres of free land to build train lines on. They then sold off the rest of the acreage to settlers. It was more than a tidy profit. Even so, Durant was believed to have swindled quite a bit of money from his own company.

Later, the series examines the Indian Wars as well as retelling stories of famous gunmen like Billy the Kid and lawman Wyatt Earp. Though it doesn't shy away from the politics of the times — like what to do with the Indians who roamed much of the land — “The American West” doesn't dig into the ramifications of transformation of the West, preferring to keep skipping through history.

Most of the dramatizations are functional, although a few border on cheesy. While the series relies on a number of historians to tell the stories, it also has celebrities who have appeared in Westerns doing the talking. This includes Redford, James Caan, Burt Reynolds, Tom Selleck, Kiefer Sutherland, Mark Harmon and Ed Harris. Apparently, star power makes history more palatable. While Redford and a couple of others sound somewhat knowledgeable, some come across as ludicrous. So be warned.

On the other hand, “Hell on Wheels” has been a solid, gritty and entertaining throughout its 4 1/2 seasons. Anson Mount as Cullen Bohannon, the onetime Rebel officer employed by the railroads, is the epitome of a Western star. He supplies his character the expected stoicism but also a range of emotions and conflicts.

Meaneey's Durant is not part the first episode of the final seven, called “Two Soldiers,” which becomes something of a final showdown between Bohannon and his nemesis, the Swede (Christopher Heyerdahl). Both had been in the Civil War. In a brief prelude, The Swede — really a Norwegian named Thor Gunderson — is shown to have been something of a mild-mannered Union soldier who ended up in Andersonville, a Confederate prisoner-of-war camp known for its brutality.

Jumping forward to where Season Five picks up, the very changed Swede attacks Bohannon's family, and much of the episode skillfully revolves around the two settling the score. If you like Westerns, this has been the best in years.