

Hell on Wheels actor calls filming in Calgary 'the highlight of my career'

By Alex Strachan, Postmedia News | August 7, 2013



Anson Mount plays Cullen Bohannon on Hell On Wheels, now shooting its third season in the Calgary area.

Photograph by: Michelle Faye

serious discipline at a serious school - and is now an associate adjunct professor. His great-great-great grandfather led a cavalry troop on the Confederate side in the U.S. Civil War, and he does not suffer fools gladly.

Hell on Wheels opens its third season Saturday and Mount says quite simply, "the highlight of my career so far."

It's a career that has spanned two decades and included roles in the 2011 film remake of Straw Dogs, 2012's Seal Team 6: The Raid on Osama bin Laden and guest roles in everything from Ally McBeal and Sex and the City to Lost, Law & Order and Third Watch.

Hell on Wheels features Mount as Cullen Bohannon, a rootless, haunted Civil War veteran and one-time Confederate cavalryman determined to see the building of the First Transcontinental Railroad through to its bitter end.

"I can't tell you what a joy it is to get paid to ride a horse and shoot a gun on a daily basis," Mount said quietly, his Tennessee accent subdued but plain for all to hear. "I grew up in a place where I got to ride horses and shoot guns. Being an actor, you live in your work and you kind of miss that. To get paid and play make-believe at the same time is amazing." Mount has grown fond of Calgary, and not just for the usual reasons. Filming a period western in present day, especially one with as many moving parts and potentially dangerous stunts as Hell on Wheels, can have its ornery moments. Mount says it's reassuring to be surrounded by professionals who know the land understand the risks. The Hell on Wheels film set is not a place for faint hearts or Hollywood dilettantes. A crew that doesn't know what it's doing could get a man killed.

"It's good working in Calgary, because our crew is so experienced in the western genre," Mount said. "They keep us safe. They're the friendliest people in the world, and they're the hardest-working people in the world. I had to fly out for a few days to shoot our teaser in March, in the snow, and I realized I was actually nostalgic for Calgary. I like working there. I like it a lot."

Hell on Wheels' new season finds Bohannon emotionally rootless once again. In the first two seasons, he swore revenge on the killers who massacred his family during the Civil War, but his moment vengeance left him feeling unfulfilled. The new season finds

Hell on Wheels

Aug. 10, 9 p.m., AMC

With his sagebrush stubble, rugged, prairie swept hair and all-seeing, hide-the-kidsthis-is-going-to-get-ugly stare, Anson Mount could not look more out of place in the gloss and ersatz glamour of Beverly Hills if he tried, but then he's always been comfortable in his own skin.

Whether noshing quiche with a visitor from Canada in a backroom at the Beverly Hilton Hotel's Circa 55 Restaurant surrounded by eavesdropping handlers and AMC publicists, or settling back in his saddle on the range outside Calgary, Mount adapts easily to any situation.

The White Bluff, Tenn., native and veteran character actor has come to call Calgary his second home after three years of filming the AMC antiwestern Hell on Wheels. He holds a Master of Fine Arts in acting from Columbia University - a

Bohannon newly committed to the railroad, but it's not enough. He's a man destined never to find the peace he so desperately wants, Mount believes.

"I don't think he ever had a perfect life. I think Cullen Bohannon had a beautiful family, but he's one of these guys who couldn't stop looking over his shoulder. Cullen Bohannon's dirty little secret is that he's ambitious. When he saw Mississippi had seceded in the Civil War, he thought he would volunteer to be an officer and he would end up having a position of influence in the government, so he left his family behind to pursue his ambition. And he lost his family because of it.

"At the end of last season, he had another choice. He could stay and protect the town and be with the woman he loved, but he chose to go and protect the (railroad) bridge. And he lost his heart again. He saved the bridge. He saved the railroad. But he lost the woman he loved. That was his choice."

Bohannon's mercurial, morally complex relationship with the emancipated slave Elam Ferguson, played by the musician-actor Common, is at the heart of *Hell on Wheels*' drama.

"We were adamant from the beginning that we didn't want this to be the black-guy-and-white-guy thing," Mount said. "At the beginning we had to pay homage to the time and where the characters are coming from, but now that we've got through that. It's become more nuanced. The one thing they know about each other is that they've got each other's backs."

Bohannon is driven, Mount believes, and that may yet prove to be his undoing.

"Ambition can be good, as long as it's attached to a higher purpose. The dark side to ambition is hubris. You see a lot of it in this industry. People get into my field because, basically, to put it bluntly, they want to be famous. They always crash and burn. Because either they don't achieve it and they're unhappy, or they achieve it and they realize it's not what they wanted, and they become alcoholics and drift away. "Bohannon doesn't give a s---about money. And power is just something he assumes. It's not about respect.

It's simpler than that. He wants to win. He wants to win bad. And he's addicted to the bad."

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