

Tune in tonight: Discovery prospects for ratings with 'Klondike'

Posted: Monday, January 20, 2014 9:00 am

The Discovery Channel has high hopes for its exciting, first-ever scripted miniseries "Klondike" (8 p.m Central, TV-14).

Set in the great gold rush of the late 1890s, "Klondike" follows two brash young New York prospectors into the Canadian Yukon, where they find love, death, riches and adventure set against the staggeringly stark beauty of Canada's frozen mountains and lush valleys, untamed rivers and endless plains.

Speaking of stark, Richard Madden (Robb Stark from "Game of Thrones") stars as Bill Haskell, a young man in a hurry, who bolts from his college graduation ceremony to take up with gambling buddy Byron Epstein (Augustus Prew) and head north by northwest into the last great North American gold rush.

What follows is a grand and epic journey involving mountains and avalanches, rivers and near-drownings, wild wolves, suspicious Native Americans, preachers, prostitutes, swindlers, scalawags and undertakers.

With this scripted drama, Discovery does several things. It yearns for the massive audience of History's "Hatfields and McCoys" miniseries. But it also remains true to its past as a broadcaster of epic nature documentaries. And along the way, the network reminds viewers of its rather prosaic present-day reality hits set in the gold fields of Alaska and elsewhere.

Madden isn't the only element borrowed from "Game of Thrones." Listen to the opening credit theme. There's a hint of "Deadwood" here and a touch of AMC's neo-Westerns there and so on. It's not the first TV series to exploit the allure of gold and guns and kindly hookers. As they say, imitation is the sincerest form of television.

An impressive cast includes Sam Shepard as Father Judge, trying his best to be a holy man in an untamed wilderness. Abbie Cornish stars as Belinda Mulrooney, a rootin' tootin' female entrepreneur, and Tim Roth stars as The Count, a ruthless operator more than willing to kill to exploit the desperation that brings men to a gold rush.

Some may find fault with the series' attempts to graft 21st-century attitudes onto 19th-century facts. Occasionally, the dialogue is ludicrously anachronistic, particularly Epstein's, who

sometimes sounds closer to The Beastie Boys than "The Call of the Wild." And the inclusion of novelist Jack London (Johnny Simmons) as a character is a tad contrived.

But these are minor quibbles in the grand scheme of things. And a grand scheme is a good way to describe the production values of "Klondike" and the epic drama it presents.

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