

TV Review: AMC's Western 'Hell on Wheels' Dramatically Derails

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 6, 2011 - 10:38am

- [AMC](#) [2]
- [Anson Mount](#) [3]
- [Breaking Bad](#) [4]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [5]
- [Colm Meaney](#) [6]
- [Common](#) [7]
- [Deadwood](#) [8]
- [Dominique McElligott](#) [9]
- [Hell on Wheels](#) [10]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [11]
- [Mad Men](#) [12]
- [Television](#) [13]
- [Tom Noonan](#) [14]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [15]

CHICAGO – AMC has been on such a creative streak lately that it's tempting to think (or at least hope) that every new offering will be of the caliber of "Mad Men," "Breaking Bad," "The Killing," or "The Walking Dead." With those four programs, the network has firmly solidified itself in the conversation for the most artistically-important network on television with HBO, FX, and Showtime. Their new Western drama, "Hell on Wheels" might work against them.



Television Rating: **2.0/5.0**

The remarkably disappointing "Hell on Wheels" is the kind of show basic cable used to be known for before the wave of creativity splashed over the walls at HBO and into the non-pay channels. It's the generic storytelling that people so commonly associate with television in last century and if it weren't for the incredibly high production values, it could fit squarely at home during the days when subtlety was a dirty word and actors looked down on peers who did TV. If it were fun and not so remarkably self-serious then the lack of wit, originality, or depth wouldn't be as big of a problem, but this Western is modeled after one of the smartest programs of the last twenty years (and, therefore, ever) — HBO's "Deadwood." The comparison makes its flaws that much more difficult to ignore.



Hell on Wheels
Photo credit: AMC

"Hell on Wheels" takes place a year after the Civil War as the country is, as we're told, "*an open wound*." Into that wound rides the mysterious

Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount), a man who we meet shooting an unarmed former soldier looking to repent in a confessional. Bohannon seeks revenge for the death of his wife during the war, but the writers go to great lengths to make sure he's not TOO unlikable. He can kill someone who wronged him in a place of worship but he makes clear in a later conversation that this Southerner released his slaves a year before the war but still fought for the South out of "*honor*." He can be a murderer, but not a slave-owner. Wouldn't it be more interesting if he too was seeking repentance for the wrongs of slavery instead of one of the most forward-thinking men below the Mason-Dixon line?



Hell on Wheels
Photo credit: AMC

Our tough not-so-anti-hero who mutters cliched things like the fact that the only higher power he believes in is strapped to his hip comes upon a small community built up around the construction of a railroad. The setting is undeniably similar to "Deadwood" in its collection of personalities living on the edge of filth. Bohannon gets a job for the railroad company but he's really seeking the aforementioned revenge. We also meet emancipated slave Elam Ferguson (Common), a man who will clearly become an ally for Bohannon but harbors his own demons of violence and vengeance against the wrongs still being perpetrated against his people.

On the fringe of the premiere, we're introduced to two other characters that will clearly become primary ones — entrepreneur Doc Durant (Colm Meaney) and the lovely Lily Bell (Dominique McElligott), whose husband says to her "*I fear this cough is going to be the death of me*" in such a way that only someone who has never seen a Western will think he's making it to the end of the episode. Even worse is the cliched presentation of Durant, a character who really should be twirling a handlebar mustache if the writers of the show were honest about their characterization. At one point, after noting that every drama needs a villain, he actually says "*What is the building of this grand road if not a drama?*" Well, it's not a GOOD drama.

Lest you think I'm being too harsh on "Hell on Wheels," there are some elements of the production that work. Most notably, the show looks incredible, as if it has a higher budget than most feature films. Winning Emmys must have left some nice cash in the AMC budget. And Mount and Common could conceivably make engaging leads, especially the latter, a true charismatic force on the big or small screen who has just never found the perfect role with which to display his acting gifts.

Casting and a high production budget should be secondary to what will always drive television — the writing. And it's the writing that lets down the production of "Hell on Wheels." Primarily created by two men whose most notable writing credits are the Dwayne Johnson vehicle "Faster" and the Adam Sandler flick "Bulletproof," this is a program that just doesn't fit on AMC. It's not original, not witty, and not creative.

The network really began its acclaimed run in 2006 with the Western mini-series "Broken Trail" (which benefited greatly from the involvement of Robert Duvall and Walter Hill, two massive talents with no peer in this production) and the press notes for "Hell on Wheels" makes clear that they've been looking for something similar to add to their stable ever since. Being a fan of the Western, I'm all for a new modern take on the timeless genre in my DVR, but the bar has been raised — both by the quality of TV on AMC and the legacy of "Deadwood" — and "Hell on Wheels" doesn't get anywhere near it.

"Hell on Wheels" stars Anson Mount, Common, Dominique McElligott, Colm Meaney, and Tom Noonan. The premiere was written by Joe and Tony Gayton and directed by David von Ancken.



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