

## Blu-ray Review: First Season of AMC's Watchable Western 'Hell on Wheels'

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CHICAGO – AMC's watchable western series "Hell on Wheels" is just good enough to sustain audience interest despite its meandering plot. As soon as Gustavo Santaolalla's catchy theme music kicks in over the brooding title sequence, it's effortless to become absorbed within Joe and Tony Gayton's handsomely photographed dramatization of the first transcontinental railroad's epic construction in 1865.

The most intriguing aspect about the series is how it parallels the expansion of the railroad with the colonization of America itself, and how necessary progress was forged by men with little more on their minds than self-serving greed. Financier Thomas Durant (Colm Meaney) has figured out an excellent way to make a fortune off the railroad with the help of government subsidies. Since he's being paid \$16,000 per mile, he intends to add as many arcs and curves to his railroad as possible, rather than have it chug straight to its destination.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.0/5.0**

Durant would've felt right at home alongside the arrogant scumbags on ABC's "Shark Tank." He represents capitalism at its worst, yet he insists in the pilot's chilling closing monologue that such grand achievements couldn't have been possible without people like him. After all, the establishment of America was forged through genocide, regardless of whatever principles its founding fathers agreed upon. No honest historical drama can shy away from the ever-troubling darkness in our shared past, and "Hell on Wheels" is at its best when it raises provocative questions about our true identity as a nation. Meaney is so good here that he easily overshadows the show's bland protagonist, Cullen (Anson Mount), a Civil War veteran who fought for the South despite his awakening to the evils of slavery. Now Cullen is driven by the single most clichéd character motivation in the western playbook: blood vengeance. His wife and son were murdered and now he must find their killer. If the show were merely about Cullen, it may have been deadly dull, but the Gaytons load their series with a wealth of intriguing subplots—perhaps a few too many. Eddie Spears plays a young Cheyenne who attempts to embrace the traditions of his invaders rather than succumb to his doomed tribe's methods of slaughter. As spunky Irish brothers looking for business, Ben Esler and Phil Burke brings the sort of light comic relief supplied by Merry and Pippin in "Lord of the Rings," while prostitute Eva exudes feminist strength by refusing to be treated like property by her potential husband.



Hell on Wheels: The Complete First Season was released on Blu-ray and DVD on May 15, 2012.

Photo credit: Entertainment One

While several of these people are made all-too-palatable for modern sensibilities, the most memorable characters harbor the darkest of hearts. Tom Noonan is chillingly effective as a disillusioned minister who lectures Cullen on the importance of hatred and the helplessness of God. Yet the real scene-stealer of the show is "Twilight" veteran Christopher Heyerdahl as Durant's head of security, dubbed "The Swede," whose unmistakable vampire-like features cause him to stick out like a Transylvanian thumb. Anyone who lost sleep because of Heyerdahl's uncanny portrayal of Nosferatu on Nickelodeon's "Are You Afraid of the Dark?" is well aware of the man's inherently freaky features. He looks like Judge Doom as played by Bela Lugosi, and he manages to be simultaneously eerie, sinister, tragic and oddly funny (his pronunciation of "cuckoo clock" is particularly priceless). It's actors like Heyerdahl that keep the viewer's attention rapt despite the obviousness of the show's central plot threads. It's clear from the get-go that Cullen will form an allegiance with the emancipated yet no less oppressed slave Elam (well-played by rapper Common), and that his romance with Lily (Dominique McElligott) will move at a glacial pace. All of this is meant to set up potential drama for future seasons, but there are times during these episodes where one wishes that the writers would quit beating around the bush. The season finale ends on an inevitable yet no less frustrating note typified by that maddening Mario Bros. line, "Our Princess Is In Another Castle."

"Hell on Wheels: The Complete First Season" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio) and includes all ten episodes in a three-disc set that also features a fair amount of bonus material. A 16-minute featurette detailing the show's period detail is a bit of a yawner, save for the footage of crew members attempting to put up tents in gale force winds. There's also 24 minutes of behind-the-scenes tidbits and 33 minutes of diverting mini-featurettes that reveal how the show's impressive-looking train was essentially built from scratch. The wheels are made of steel, but everything else consists of wood and styrofoam. Most informative of all are 52 minutes of episode-specific featurettes that allow the cast and crew to offer candid discussion on character arcs and plot structure. It's inferred that a final standoff between Cullen and his arch-enemy will be saved for the final episode, since his vengeance-fueled mission is meant to parallel the journey of the railroad construction itself. Just as Durant intends to stretch his railroad to an utterly needless length, the Gaytons are aiming to perfect the art of procrastination in order to preserve their longevity. Just how long can audiences wait for this show to reach its inevitable conclusion? Hopefully Season Two will transcend expectations by subverting predictable story threads and finally allowing all hell to break loose.

*'Hell on Wheels: The Complete First Season' is released by Entertainment One and stars Anson Mount, Colm Meaney, Common, Dominique McElligott, Tom Noonan, Eddie Spears, Ben Esler, Phil Burke and Christopher Heyerdahl. It was created by Joe Gayton and Tony Gayton. It was released on May 15, 2012. It is rated TV-14.*





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