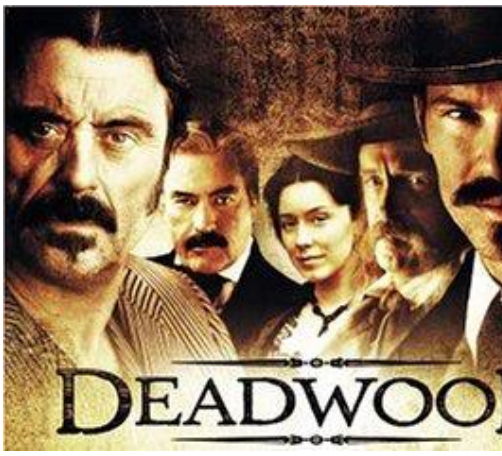
Mitch's 'Sopranos' recaps were a huge hit on the site this spring. 'Deadwood' is probably an even better show, and I was ecstatic when Mitch proposed doing a mid-season review of sorts to assess what has gone down so far on season three of this phenomenal HBO drama. Containing hiss usual brand of humor, wit, and prognostications ... Mitch chimes in to tell us where we're at, and where we're going in this season of Deadwood.



This year the Sopranos were like the stereotype of a Chinese dinner. One hour after it aired, we wanted more (unless Vito was involved…then we wanted much less). In no case was this more evident than in the last episode, one that left us with the same feeling we had after watching the latest “Pirates of the Caribbean” movie…entertain, but frustrated that we once again have to wait several months before its conclusion.

Fortunately for fans of high quality drama, a week was all that was needed before the fix was delivered in the form of “Deadwood”. Unlike the Sopranos, this gritty, vile, vulgar, and yet near poetic drama started out its first season as a very good show, and has continued to improve every year. And so far this season, as it reaches the midpoint, it has surpassed Tony and his crew as the best show on television. The six episodes shown so far have been engrossing and gross, riveting and revolting, profane and profound. The mixture of Shakespearean cadence while liberally spreading some of George Carlin’s longer members of the “Seven Words You Can’t Say On TV” make Deadwood an acquired taste, but one that should be savored. This is especially true since we know there will not be a fourth season. Creator David Milch decided to work on another project with HBO and the cast was cut loose. Outrage ensued from the public, and an agreement was made to create two final two hour movies to tie up all the loose ends. So at least this show will not end up dangling the way HBO dropped “Carnivale”.

So for now, it is just better to concentrate on enjoying what is on our plate at the moment rather than obsess on how depressing it will be when it’s gone. I’m not sure where it will all end, although I know that like the other historical fiction from HBO, “Rome”, some things have to work out a certain way since they are using historical figures. Two cases in point are George

Hearst and Seth Bullock. Hearst is obviously the more famous as he later became a senator from California and the father of publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that either of these antagonists will do in the other.

Note: For those of you that want a true historical account of the town of Deadwood and its inhabitants, check out th is link to LegendsofAmerica to see how history really went. Warning; it does contain what may be spoilers regarding the fates of some of the characters (assuming HBO follows the timing of the deaths of the historical figures correctly), so if you don't want to know who lives and dies during the show, you may want to avoid that page. Sorry for giving away the fact that Hearst will live…but I put that one up there with believing that I didn't spoil anyone's enjoyment of "Rome" by informing them that Caesar gets assassinated. If you're too dumb to figure that out; you don't make enough money to afford HBO, let alone be so inclined as to watch the high brow shows.

So what have we had so far this season? What jumps to the forefront of my mind is two of the nastiest beat downs EVER shown on film or TV. First was Bullock's pummeling of E.B. Farnum in response to Bullock thinking the ferret-esque hotel manager blabbed to Heart about Bullock's affair with Alma. Although it was inferred that E.B. did not tip off Hearst, there was not a single person who was sorry that it happened. The second was the Throwdown in the Thoroughfare between Dan Dority and The Captain, the ugliest, most realistically gruesome fight to the death since the one that culminated with Ralphie Cifaretto's head in a bowling bag. The ripping out of its socket of the Captain's eye still makes me cringe to think about it, and has set the wheels in motion for a showdown between the Swearengen/Bullock alliance and Hearst.

Timothy Oliphant's portrayal of Seth Bullock has been fleshed out greatly this season, with some help from the writers. Originally drawn up as a Dudley Do-right type of lawman, Bullock started the change last season with his affair with Alma Garrett-Elsworth and his uneasy partnership with Al Swearengen. This year, he has shown his personality much deeper, and it's a pretty scary one. Bullock is wound so tightly that it's amazing he has any teeth left from constantly clenching his jaw in anger. Glimpses of this trait were first seen last year with his fight with Swearegen, but it's come through in full Technicolor this season with his run-ins with Hearst. At the same time, the relationship with his wife has improved, and it has moved beyond a marriage of convenience to his brother's widow (a plot device NOT based upon facts) and blossomed into a true romance. This is a benefit to the show, as the affair between Seth and Alma never quite rang true, and it is good that they have abandoned it, other than showing the tension that still exists between the two of them.

As far as Alma goes, Molly Parker's character may have gotten the short end of the stick this season, as she seems to be stuck in plot lines more appropriate for the Lifetime Network than for HBO. She was first on the sidelines, confined to bed rest with a difficult pregnancy along with her unconsummated marriage of convenience to Percy Elsworth. She later fell ill, and had to have an abortion in order to live, with the results being that she is now back to being hooked on drugs…a fact that's just been leaked to Hearst. Again, this is soap opera level theatrics, and her character was much more interesting last year as she went from drug addled doormat (and secret paramour to Bullock) to a strong leader in the community as she ran not only her mining business, but also founded the first bank in the camp.

The other women of the ensemble have also been stuck somewhat in neutral; but they are still entertaining to watch. Joanie Stubbs has still not quite gotten over the traumatic shock she received last season when Wolcott murdered her partner and two of the prostitutes working in her brothel. She now helps take care of Cy Toliver's girls as Cy recovers from his stabbing, but she's lost, and at least once checked into a seedy hotel and put a gun to her temple, but was unable to pull the trigger. Based on the previews for this week's show, she might be entering a lesbian relationship with Jane. There are not enough words to describe how gross that is.

Trixie is doing better in life, continuing to tutor as a bookkeeper for Sol Star at the hardware store, and also working as the teller in the new bank, where her people skills regarding telling customers where they can stick their complaints serve as an example for bank employees to this day. She did quit (or was fired, depending on how you view it) her bank job during the last episode after confronting Alma on her drug use, but Al will make sure his prize conduit to Star, Seth, and Alma remains in place. Paula Malcomson probably had her best episode last week as Trixie got to rant to Sol after going through the secret sex passageway between her hotel and Sol's new house, and then pulling her trusty derringer out and threatening to kill Leon if he kept selling dope to Alma (remember that in the very first episode, Trixie shot a john in the head after he beat her).

Calamity Jane is still a drunken, foul mouthed, sewer dwelling wreck, and that's just the way we like her. Robin Weigert can steal every scene she's in, whether it's freaking out over talking to Mrs. Bullock's class about her time with General Custer or swilling whiskey straight from the bottle with Aunt Lou, Hearst's black cook/maid. According to most historical documents, Calamity Jane was every bit as vulgar and crass as she is being portrayed, and the show is much more amusing having her in it.

The same can't be said at this point about Cy Tolliver. Powers Boothe is great at playing greedy, evil men at their slimiest. So good that I don't think he's played anything but that in the last ten years. Early on he was meant to possibly be either a partner in crime for Al, or a worthy foil, but now he's just a bitter man resentfully acting as Hearst lapdog. But while Cy's behavior has grown a bit stale, it's still amusing to watch the other hateful villain of the show (excluding Hearst), Steve the Racist Drunk. They almost lightened Steve up a bit last year, at least until he was standing next to young William Bullock when the boy was killed by the runaway horse. Since then, Steve's been taking care of the livery that Hostettler abandoned when he ran off with Sam Fields (the "Nigger General"…and another real person back in Deadwood's history…and I won't apologize for repeating a word used in a historical context by the writers and the individual himself). The return of the two men to face the consequences ended up in a completely unexpected manner…with Steve buying the livery from Hostettler, but infuriating him at the end with such a barrage of disgusting racial epithets that the frustrated Hostettler went outside and shot himself.

But the glue that holds everything together continues to be Al Swearengen, brilliantly brought to life by Ian McShane (and I refuse to even watch the Emmy's after he was incomprehensively denied even a nomination for Best Actor). At the beginning of Season One, Swearengen appeared to be the type of disgusting villain you couldn't wait to see killed mercilessly, especially after his complicity with the murder of Sophia's family, and the implicit threats made to the little girl in Alma's care. But he evolved into the type of anti-hero that you couldn't stop watching, similar to James Gandolfini's Tony Soprano, Michael Chiklis's Vic Mackey on "The Shield", or Denis Leary's Tommy Gavin on "Rescue Me". As good as those three are, McShane outshines them with his Machiavellian control of the town from his quarters above the Gem Saloon. But Al is quite human, and in those moments we get even better performances from McShane, as seen last season as he dealt with near fatal kidney stones and the minor stroke passing them produced. This year has been even more dramatic, if less life threatening on the surface, when Al was held down and had part of his finger cut off by the menacing Hearst. Al's soliloquy while being…er…"serviced" was truly Emmy worthy as he revealed much of the psyche of the man, and his imbedded fear/hatred of being held down helplessly as he described his mother abandoning him at a young age.

This change in the dynamics of the two leading men; Bullock now rash, impulsive, and ready for violence while Swearengen councils patience and strategy will set the stage for the second half of this season. We know Deadwood still stands today, and we know the fate of Hearst, but the "how" is what will make such entertaining viewing over the next six weeks. One thing for

certain; this “Shakespeare in the Mud” is hands down the best show on television. But like a fine bottle of opened wine, its time is limited, so savor the taste now and remember it, for it won’t be around much longer. And how knows? Maybe it’s better to go out this way, at the top of their game, rather than limp towards a finish like so many other fine series have done.