

## ● REALLY BIG SHOW

# Deadwood

## Cowboys, Sopranos-style



Sitting down and  
city in the Old  
West: Keith  
Carradine and  
Timothy Olyphant

By MICHAEL GILTZ

If you were wondering how HBO was going to get a big bang now that "Sex and the City" has put the Manolos away and "The Sopranos" is eyeing the finish line, think one word: "Deadwood."

A Western set in the Dakotas during the 1870s, "Deadwood" reimagines the TV western as a bloody, dusty, foul-mouthed universe. There's no Matt Dillon or Miss Kitty. The cowboys curse, the whores are nasty and the series' violence would make even Tony Soprano flinch. In the tradition of the HBO prison show, "Oz," "Deadwood" also has male frontal nudity.

One of the best things about this gritty drama is its sterling cast: Keith Carradine, Powers Boothe, Brad Dourif, Ricky Jay, Molly Parker and a terrific lead in Timothy Olyphant.

The creative force behind the show is David Milch, co-creator of "Hill Street Blues," who immersed himself in period research, which accounts for the series' coarse language. According to Milch, it's all authentic and essential.

"The language seemed to me so much of the essence of that world," says Milch. "I spent an awful lot of time at the Living Memory Project at the Library of Congress. There wasn't anybody who writes about that settlement who doesn't say you just couldn't bear to listen to people talk — the unrelieved obscenity imposed itself so strikingly on everybody."

The cursing is so constant that it threatens to overshadow the fact that Milch has created a gripping drama. While Milch is aware that "historically accurate" can be boring, he's managed to populate this town with figures who lived at the time — great, familiar characters such as Wild Bill Hickok (a magnetic Carradine) and Calamity Jane (Robin Weigert).

Milch's Old West doesn't include Indians at first. "Two weeks before the [series] begins," explains Milch, "Custer had his battle at Little Big Horn. In the aftermath, Crazy Horse went west and Sitting Bull went to Canada. So just at the point when the terror about the Indians was at its height, the Indians had all split."

The initial 12 episodes of "Deadwood" were filmed in California on a set producers took pains to make as accurate as possible. For Olyphant, who plays the real-life lawman Seth Bullock, the accuracy was impressive — in their first meeting, Milch told him what would be happening to his character three or four seasons down the road — but not as important as finding out what Bullock would be like.

"I read a biography written by a nephew of [Bullock's] that was really quite informative," says the 35-year-old Olyphant. "He's a very familiar, iconic character but at the same time, he's not. The amount of rage that's on the surface, the amount of vulnerability — I don't remember seeing John Wayne crying."

Olyphant was the first actor cast in the series and, after years of knocking about about in Hollywood in search of a career (his films include "Scream II"), he's clearly found the role of a lifetime.

"I committed to this because of just one episode," says Olyphant, who knew of Milch's reputation but, as a non-TV watcher, hadn't actually seen his work. "I thought, 'This is fantastic!' And if it were a film, I'd be behind a long list of guys trying to get a hold of this part."

Well, this time, Olyphant didn't have to get in line behind the Pitts, Damons and Depps of the world. "I didn't know Timothy at all," says Milch, who adds that, together, they decided to push the boundaries of what a lawman in the West would be like. "Timothy was a little provisional with his performance in the beginning. It really encouraged me to make much of his emotional apprenticeship to Hickok."

Just as "Deadwood" will evolve over the seasons from a lawless spot to a town that had telephones even before San Francisco, Bullock shows the transition of the gunman from a vigilante figure of justice to a citizen with, as Hickok puts it, "an active conscience."

"Bullock is the apostolic successor to the gunfighter," says Milch. "He was a more responsible figure."

**Deadwood**  
Sunday, 10 p.m., HBO