

In the *Deadwood* revival, the people must live on

At least the ones who survived the original series

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [August 14, 2019](#) issue



Timothy Olyphant and Ian McShane in *Deadwood*. Photo © Warrick Page / HBO.

After a 13-year hiatus, the HBO show *Deadwood* (created by David Milch) received a long-awaited coda in the form of a two-hour HBO movie released earlier this summer. Though the movie does not have the same depth as the three-season series (2004–2006), it offers some new insights on the motley band of humans living in a remote outpost of the Dakota Territory—more camp than town—who are trying to do right by each other in the face of monopoly capitalism and a political system ruled by the wealthy.

I have watched the entire series three times, and I would watch it again just for the pleasures of its language. Milch invented an archaic prose style that earned him comparisons to Dickens and Shakespeare. The use of blank verse in heightened moments (“No law at all in Deadwood? Is that true?”) and the mix of stylized, often inverted, syntax with crude content (“It means there’s a horse for you outside you want to get on before somebody murders you who gives a fuck about right and

wrong, or I do”) makes the show ear candy for literary nerds.

But it is not just the dialogue that stands the test of time. While many other highly acclaimed shows in the early 2000s (*The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*) were tracing the rotten foundations of modern society, *Deadwood* was exploring what makes people join together to build a society in the first place. It was hopeful, in its own bleak way.

Perhaps no one represents this hope as clearly as the figure of Reverend Smith (Ray McKinnon), an epileptic preacher traumatized by his battlefield ministry in the Civil War. He is a holy fool whose kindness is out of place in the chaos of Deadwood. At a turning point in season one, he preaches a sermon on 1 Corinthians 12, exhorting the community to see itself as one body, built up by the mutual edification of its many parts.

He does not survive the violence of Deadwood. Any heroic myths about the American West are undone by the show’s portrayal of the town’s relentless racism (toward the indigenous Sioux whose land the settlers are stealing, toward the Chinese migrants who provide service and labor to the camp, and toward black refugees from the Civil War), misogyny (toward every woman, regardless of class or race), and violence.

If the camp cannot unite as the body of Christ, it finds some cohesion under the leadership of Al Swearengen. He is an unlikely leader: he owns the camp’s first brothel and saloon and is not above murdering anyone who gets in his way. But he is looking ahead to the incorporation of the Dakota Territory into the United States and recognizes how the wheels of history are turning. Those wheels are driven forward most of all by George Hearst, a union-busting mining magnate whose arrival in town unleashes death and misery.

Following the lead of Swearengen, citizens put aside their grievances and even their desire for personal profit to hold off Hearst’s machine. This sets up the real drama of the show: Can a small group of people make a meaningful society despite the forces of wealth and power that are happy to toss aside anybody who doesn’t add to the bottom line?

The final season ends with something of a draw. The citizens find a sense of common purpose against unrestrained greed, but at great cost. The final scene shows Swearengen scrubbing a blood stain out of a wood floor. It is not the first

blood stain he has tried to scrub away. The action functions as a kind of metaphor: the “progress” of American civilization has always required mopping up someone’s blood. We are honest about the past only when we don’t forget the stains upon which we walk.

In 2006, this seemed like a tragic lesson. Today there seems to be less noble tragedy and more despair, in our own circumstances and in the world of *Deadwood*. In *Deadwood: The Movie*, we meet the familiar characters a decade later, in 1889, as they celebrate the town’s incorporation into the new state of South Dakota. Hearst, now a US senator from California, still looms over their lives, part of the political machine his money had greased for so long.

A two-hour movie is not able make up for a decade of elapsed time, especially in a show that often took an entire season to follow the events of a few days. The action and language feel rushed, not heightened. Small moments of grace—a wedding, a birth—add some warmth to the pallor of death that hangs over the characters’ feeble attempts to exert themselves against Hearst’s power. But we know, and they seem to intuit, that the Hearsts of the world will control the future. The citizens of *Deadwood* have to find a way to keep living anyway.

As we face our own uncertain ecological and political futures, asking how humans—marked by a violent past they cannot erase or ignore—can build genuine, if imperfect, communities seems as important as diagnosing society’s corrupt foundations. *Deadwood* gave the building of community unsparing, unsentimental attention, and the show should win our attention in turn.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Making a life in Deadwood.”