ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE
THE THEATRICALITY OF *DEADWOOD*

By Jeremy Fassler

Television has always been an inherently theatrical art form. Much of the most significant early programming, including *I Love Lucy* and *Playhouse 90*, was performed in front of live audiences, sometimes straight through, as if you were watching a play in a theater, and many of TV's earliest writers, such as Paddy Chayefsky and Gore Vidal, were also playwrights. Even when TV began to embrace more cinematic techniques, like cutting between locations and employing voice-over narration, that theatricality never went away. Sitcoms like *All in the Family, Barney Miller*, and *Cheers* were still performed before live studio audiences and set mainly in one location, and at their best resemble one-act plays. The same held true for dramas: *Hill Street Blues*, a show whose ensemble plotting and complex writing revolutionized primetime storytelling, rarely left the police station.

David Milch, who got his start writing for *Hill Street Blues*, has always had one foot in TV and the other in theater. Although a great play reader, he rarely attended live theater, as his bad back and inherent restlessness prevented him from sitting in one place for too long. But in *Deadwood*, he embraced theatricality in a way no other television show has before or since. When Milch first got the green light for *Deadwood*, HBO had already enlarged the scope of scripted TV. *The Sopranos* may have been a TV show, but it often looked and felt more like a movie cut up into 80+ hours, taking viewers to an array of locations across the United States and overseas, and utilizing cross-cutting for truly cinematic sequences. If Milch had been so inclined, he might have taken us all over the Wild West, but he chose to stay in Deadwood.

And why not, when you have a set like *Deadwood*'s thoroughfare? Built at Melody Ranch in Santa Clarita, California, its wooden structures and muddy streets form the literal as well as metaphorical stage on which the majority of action takes place. Like the Greek and Roman theaters of old, it serves several functions depending on the type of performance being enacted.

In the Season 3 episode "A Two-Headed Beast," the thoroughfare becomes the Roman Coliseum, as a crowd gathers to watch Dan Dority and Captain Turner fight to the death. From the balconies of the Gem Saloon and E.B. Farnum's Grand Central Hotel, Al Swearengen and George Hearst look down on the action like emperors. Here, Deadwood becomes an arena for brutal violence that serves no democratic function other than to prove that might makes right.

In other episodes, the thoroughfare hosts impromptu performances that embody egalitarianism and community. The most striking example is "Amateur Night," in which Jack Langrishe and his theater company erect a stage and open it up to anyone who wants to reveal a hidden talent. It's one of the great sequences in the series, in large part because, with one exception, none of the characters who take the stage are regulars. By emphasizing *Deadwood*'s communal aspects, Milch evokes Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, a play in which even the townspeople who only speak a handful of lines are endowed with humanity.

What strikes most viewers as most theatrical about *Deadwood* is Milch's heightened language. The dialogue has often been described as Shakespearean, both for its use of iambic pentameter and the way Milch packs into the lines so many vivid images and dialectical concepts. But just calling it Shakespearean only scratches the surface of how *Deadwood* employs theatrical devices to its advantage—especially in its monologues.

Monologues are more associated with theater than TV or film, since they break the rules of fourth walls and "Show, don't tell," as characters create a direct bond with the audience. Think of Richard III's "Now is the winter of our discontent," Hamlet's "Oh that this too too solid flesh would melt," or Prince Hal's "Yet herein will I imitate the sun." These speeches, delivered to the onlooker, grant us access to the characters' psychologies as they reveal secrets the other characters don't know.

The rise of modern drama in the 1860s, beginning with the plays of Henrik Ibsen, changed the nature of dramatic speech. Poetry was replaced with prose, and palaces and far-off lands were replaced by living rooms. The conjoining of realistic language and setting eliminated the need for characters to share their thoughts directly with the audience. However, monologues retained their inherent audience/character bond by adding an extra element of theatricality: the other person listening to a character's speech would often be unable to respond.

Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* has a great example of this: throughout the play, Andre, the brother of the three sisters, speaks in long, passionate monologues about how disappointed he is with his life. But instead of speaking to the audience, he's speaking to a deaf servant who only responds in non-sequiturs about pancake-eating competitions. This way, Andre can share his thoughts with us, but by directing it to someone who can't hear him, Chekhov keeps the play within the fourth wall.

Deadwood bridges the gap between classical and modern drama in the use of its monologues: they are Shakespearean in language, but more often than not are spoken to a person who cannot properly reply back. E.B. Farnum's speeches to the nearly deaf Richardson feel like a deliberate homage to Chekhov; like Andre, Farnum longs to rise from his status as an object of scorn for the more powerful

characters, but can only express his innermost thoughts to an acquaintance who's even lower in status. Farnum's speeches are filled with the comedic self-pity that makes Chekhov's plays so captivating.

The characters of *Deadwood* don't always need real people to address: anything nearby will do. In Season 1, Reverend Smith, losing his mind to an undiagnosed mental disorder, walks through the thoroughfare and preaches a sermon to an ox – specifically, the ox's erection. Only Al, positioned on the balcony as though in an opera box, witnesses this performance. In Season 2, Whitney Ellsworth, debating whether or not to propose marriage to the widowed Alma Garret, pours out his emotions to a dog. That the objects of these speeches are of a different species doesn't matter to the speaker. Sometimes these objects aren't even alive: Al Swearengen delivers multiple monologues to a box containing a severed head.

In a series where most of the characters are emotionally repressed, Al's repression is so great that he cannot speak his thoughts out loud to anyone who could reasonably reply. Characters like Joanie Stubbs and Calamity Jane may have endured horrific traumas, but they're eventually able to open up to others about their pasts. One of the series' most famous recurring jokes is that Al can only open up about himself when being fellated at the Gem. The first blowjob monologue takes place in the penultimate episode of Season 1, "Jewel's Boot Is Made For Walking," and during it, Al admits, "I don't fucking look back." The irony, of course, is that the entire speech is backward-looking: a tearful account of his mother abandoning him to an orphanage where he was abused by a cruel headmistress. (Al the actor is also Al the director here, giving notes on technique.) The contradictory nature of these speeches humanizes him: even as he's doing reprehensible things, we know that he still possesses some vulnerability, even if it's offered on his own terms.

Like Al, Seth Bullock also delivers monologues that contradict his actions, but the most revealing comes to us through voice-over. At the end of "A Lie Agreed Upon Part 1," Seth walks from his home, where his wife Martha and her son Bill have just settled in, to the hotel where his lover, Alma, is staying. As he moves through the thoroughfare just after the magic hour, we hear him reading the letter he wrote to Martha about the building of the house. He professes commitment to his wife and son on the way to visit his mistress.

Unlike Al, the villainous Cy Tolliver and Francis Wolcott speak in monologues that serve as psychological weapons. In the Season 2 premiere, "A Lie Agreed Upon Part 1," Cy, alone on his balcony, has a short soliloquy punctuated by the chilling line, "Don't believe there's no good women till you've seen one with maggots in her eyes." Shortly after this, Wolcott, a serial killer under the employ of gold baron George Hearst, arrives in camp. A few episodes later, in

“Something Very Expensive,” Tolliver tells Wolcott that he knows of his previous crimes but won’t report them to Hearst because he is “past surprise.”

Wolcott’s ensuing monologue, directed at Cy, chides the Bella Union boss for arrogantly believing himself incapable of being shocked: “Believing yourself past surprise does not commend you to me as a friend. A man inadequately sophisticated or merely ignorant, or simply stupid, may believe himself past surprise, then be surprised to discover, for example, that Mr. Hearst already knows of my inclinations and finds them immaterial.” Wolcott continues this monologue to himself as he walks to Joanie Stubbs’s new whorehouse: “But past surprise? What an endlessly unfolding tedium life would then become…we mustn’t let you be past surprise.” The implication within all this is that Cy, like Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov, has subconsciously willed Wolcott’s killings into being.

Deadwood’s monologues don’t just reveal the characters’ contradictions: as the characters change over the course of the series, the direction of their monologues changes as well. Calamity Jane’s arc can be tracked by analyzing her monologues. Throughout the series, she speaks primarily to herself, or to the gravestone of Wild Bill Hickok. But in Season 3’s “A Constant Throb,” she speaks a four-minute monologue to her new lover, Joanie Stubbs, about a dream she had. In the dream, her subconscious takes the form of her friend Charlie Utter, who recounts the story of their arrival into Deadwood, the death of Wild Bill, and her saving the little girl, Sophia. At the end, she says “Charlie says to me…any evenings in your life you made mistakes, remember where even evenings you was as most ashamed as you ever thought you could ever be are able to wind up, and don’t fuckin’ only remember the middle of the fuckin’ dream!’”

Jane’s monologue recalls the language of Sam Shepard and Maria Irene Fornés, two playwrights whose works have the feeling of living dreams. And like a dream itself, it serves multiple functions. It traces Jane’s arc as a character, recalling the inciting incidents that forced her to look outward rather than inward. Jane walks a steady line between altruism and the egotism that comes with alcoholism and self-loathing, but when she speaks of her dream, she’s set the dial to nurturing. Most important of all, Jane is able to share these feelings with the first woman she’s ever met who’s struggled with similar feelings (though for different reasons). Jane can’t process Joanie’s love the way she could in a freer society, but the act of retelling her dream allows her to leave something of herself on the table for Joanie, as a way to demonstrate her love. It’s a milestone for Jane. She doesn’t only have to deliver speeches to a gravestone anymore. She can share them with another person.