Profane McShane

'Deadwood' villain curses a blue streak and steals the show

By MICHAEL GILTZ

POTTY-MOUTHED characters drop four-letter words all over cable-TVlitter the cable-TV these days — but few relish their utterance like Al Swearengen, the coldly violent saloon owner on HBO's "Deadwood." Based on a real-life person, the character is so gleefully profane he frequently tells his whores to earn their keep with a simple, "Get f****in'!'

The aptly named Swearengen doesn't only talk the talk. He radiates menace. He beats his whores, plots the murder of an angelic little girl who could complicate his plans and taunts the town sheriff.

As Swearengen, British actor Ian McShane is stealing the show from his more famous (and hyped) co-stars such as like Keith Carradine as Wild Bill Hickok, Powers Boothe as a rival saloon owner and Timothy Olyphant as sheriff Seth Bullock.

"That guy is turning cartwheels," says co-star Olyphant. "It's really amazing to watch."

Ironically, McShane, best known in America for his role, in the mid-1980s, as an antiques dealer/amateur sleuth in the PBS series "Lovejoy," almost didn't get the part.

"He was not my first thought," admits "Deadwood" creator David Milch. "But he sure took it, didn't he?"

For McShane, it's the filet mignon of roles.

"The devil gets the best tunes," admits McShane, 61, and he should know — he played the Jack Nicholson role of the devil opposite Lucie Arnaz in the recent London musical, "The Witches of Eastwick."

Born in Blackburn, England, McShane is the son of a Harry McShane, a famous Manchester United footballer. Growing up,

Just the facts

IAN McSHANE

■ Children: Kate, born in 1971, and Morgan, born in 1975.

■ Breakthrough role: as Heathcliff in a TV miniseries of "Wuthering Heights."

■ Location, location: "Deadwood" is filmed at Melody Ranch, home of singing cowboy Gene Autry.

■ Profit Margin: "Al Swearengen was making $5,000 a day from his saloon," says McShane.

Devilish McShane in "Witches of Eastwick."

young Ian knew a lot about dealing with fame but very little about the arts.

"I didn't come into acting because I had imaginary friends when I was five and built little theaters, you know," says McShane, with a laugh. "I had a teacher at school who I still keep in contact with. He put me in this play when I was 15. It was 'Nekrassov' by Sartre, the first amateur production done in England outside of the Royal Court Theater. God knows why."

That led Shane to take the lead in "Cyrano De Bergerac," in a production so good it almost toured England. McShane was ready to head back to the football field, but his teacher convinced him to pursue acting. McShane auditioned for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, got in, and has never

looked back, even though that first day at school was quite a shock.

"The first person I met was a gay, black Jamaican," says McShane. "I was from Manchester, where you didn't meet a lot of gay people. Or black people."

McShane has worked steadily throughout his career, played everything from Judas in Franco Zeffirelli's film "Jesus of Nazareth" to a gangster in "Sexy Beast" with Ben Kingsley. Along the way there were three marriages, two children, and a drinking problem he finally licked after "Lovejoy."

"I hit my bottom then," says McShane, who has been married to actress Gwen Humble since 1981. "We did the show in '85. It was one of the first independent co-pro-

ductions. I came back here to L.A. and decided to stop all that drinking. I stopped smoking, too. There's nothing left."

Nothing except the work, which should multiply even more as his performance in "Deadwood," already renewed for a second season, continues to garner raves. Though Milch has the stories mapped out for the next five years, he's always ready to adapt to what the actors bring to their roles.

"Milch gave me heftier monologues as the show went on," says McShane. "Sometimes I'll hear the fax machine kick on in the other room and think, 'Here we go!'"

DEADWOOD
Sunday, 10 p.m., HBO

If looks could kill: McShane on "Deadwood."