



NEW RELEASES

# The Northman

The word 'visionary' has been grossly devalued in the world of cinema. For a long time, 'visionary director' has pretty much meant anyone with an excitable publicist, a sturdy CGI budget and a knowledge of art history extending slightly beyond the frames of the classic Marvel comics. But what might visionary filmmaking actually mean today? For the purposes of argument, let's imagine: work that aspires to transcend the usual restraints of genre and the familiar, or to infuse the generically familiar with some dimension of the irreducibly strange, even the mystical.

In that sense, it's fair to classify Robert Eggers' new film *The Northman* as a visionary epic – although hardly an unproblematic one. It's also fair to say that Eggers is a director of visionary aspirations in the way that his three features to date kick at the usual parameters of historical drama. They are hybrid ventures, fusing historical realism with genre elements (horror, myth, the supernatural), but are also rich in visual and verbal invention which are the fruit of fairly scholarly research. With a background in directing and designing for the stage, Eggers made his feature debut with *The Witch* (2015), subtitled 'A New England Folktale', in which a 17th-century Puritan family encounters baleful forces in the New World: a nightmare as much informed by Freud as by the likes of Nathaniel Hawthorne. It was followed by *The Lighthouse* (2019), a febrile two-hander with Robert Pattinson and Willem Dafoe as men spiralling into mad-eyed desperation on a remote maritime outpost. The imagery (Eggers' features are all shot by Jarin Blaschke) was steeped in the inky chiaroscuro of Gustave Doré's engravings, while the language, reeking of brine and baccy, was decanted from such 19th-century sources as mariners' journals and the writing of Herman Melville.

Now comes *The Northman*, a film considerably grander in ambition. Inspired by the spirit of Icelandic sagas, it aims to live up to its epic sources: as Eggers told me recently, he and his co-writer, the Icelandic poet and novelist Sjón, wanted 'to make *the* Viking movie – to have the movements that you want in a Viking movie, but also defy expectation where we can, in ways that are true to that world. We wanted it be a movie – but also a Viking saga.'

Set in the ninth century, *The Northman* begins with Nordic king Aurvandil (Ethan Hawke) returning home from his latest raid, greeted by his queen Gudrún (Nicole Kidman), their young son Amleth (Oscar Novak) and his brother Fjölfnir (Claes Bang). But Fjölfnir has his eyes on the throne, and on Gudrún, and springs a bloody coup. Young Amleth flees; years later, played by Alexander Skarsgård, he has become a brutal, muscled-up warrior, a berserker, of the sort liable to bite a chunk out of an enemy's neck and howl like a wolf (strictly speaking, the actual berserkers were more ursine: the word is derived from '*berserkr*', meaning bearskin).

Then a shamanic seer (who else but Björk, eyes blacked out and wearing a headdress resembling half a cornfield) reveals to Amleth his destined mission of revenge. The name will have tipped you off: *The Northman* is essentially cinema's latest reworking of *Hamlet*. But this is not straight Shakespeare: the film looks back to an earlier version of the *Hamlet* story, by the 12th/13th-century Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus.

Using a familiar source, Eggers says, allowed the film to stretch out imaginatively. 'It needed to be a revenge story, but if we could use *Hamlet* – a mythic family drama that everyone knows – then we could indulge in what's unique in Viking

culture without confusing the audience. Unlike Arthurian legend, which is weird and mystical and out there, or [ancient Welsh myths] the *Mabinogion* or whatever, the sagas are pretty straightforward. The mythology is odd, but even the legendary sagas are ripping yarns.'

Eggers' new film also benefits from the eclectic research that informs all his projects. 'I'm drawn to the things that confirm what the public might assume they already know about that world – and then the things that are unexpected, that are just as important to that culture. [We have] Vikings coming home from a raid and having a big feast, but it's not raucous, crazy, sloppy ale frothing out of the horns – it's very ceremonial and controlled, with specific codes and actions.' One advantage Eggers has is that, while there's a small, significant canon of Viking-themed movies, most of us aren't familiar with a Viking genre per se, meaning he isn't saddled with conventions. The best-known film of its kind, Richard Fleischer's 1958 *The Vikings*, feels more like a western, with swords instead of arrows. Indeed, says Eggers, 'A lot of the sagas read like westerns. If you think about Iceland at the period, it's like the Wild West – you have big wild landscapes and warring clans, a lawless society that's trying to become a lawful one.' (For the record, Eggers has mixed feelings about another recent high-profile take on this material, the TV series *Vikings*: 'There was some interesting writing. But the level of stylisation in making it really cool and sexy doesn't appeal to me.')

Sjón, Eggers' co-writer on *The Northman*, is acclaimed for his literary work but he co-scripted the recent Icelandic fantasy *Lamb* (2021). Sjón was originally reluctant to take on a Viking project, Eggers says. 'Most Icelanders don't want to have to talk about Viking anything – but they all know what saga characters they're literally directly related to. I needed someone who had this in their culture, to make this as, quote, authentic as I might try for.'

That authenticity is evident in the film's use of language, although this is where some viewers might balk. Stretches of dialogue come in English-subtitled Old Norse or Old Slavic – the latter for Anya Taylor-Joy's character Olga, from the kingdom of Rus. But mostly the actors speak English with heavy Nordic accents – which can sound a little forced. That's to do with level-headed commercial imperatives: 'If I were to do my method,' says Eggers, 'the film would be in Old Norse and Old Slavic and that's the end of it. But I knew it was never really on the table.' As it turned out, one of his models for the dialogue was Seamus Heaney's 1999 translation of *Beowulf*, 'which is Old English, not Old Norse – but they're very similar languages. Sjón and I said, it has to be as understandable as *The Lord of the Rings*.'

Language aside, *The Northman* is Eggers' and Blaschke's most visually ambitious collaboration. The film starts primarily in black and white, but gradually opens up with striking highlights – red and green clothing, blazes of volcanic fire, flashes of bronze. The texture alone is remarkable: a certain ash-grey, fine-grained moonlight effect genuinely feels like something new in the cinematic palette.

There are overwhelmingly intense battles, not least a long-take sequence in which Amleth's detachment of Berserkers massacre a village in the kingdom of Rus (early Russia, but the setting is Ukraine, Eggers points out – which gives the story an inescapably uncomfortable thrust right now). The sequence is dazzlingly shot, minutely choreographed, requiring precision and athletic prowess from all concerned. What Eggers and Blaschke wanted from these long takes, the director says, was an effect 'where the story and the camera and the action are all like one beast moving forward, rather than shooting multiple cameras and figuring it out in the post.'

**Jonathan Romney, *Sight and Sound*, May 2022**

## THE NORTHMAN

*Directed by:* Robert Eggers  
©: Focus Features LLC, Regency Entertainment Inc (USA), Monarchy Enterprises S.a.r.l.  
*Production Companies:* New Regency, Square Peg  
*With funding from:* Northern Ireland Screen  
*Development support provided by:* Pulse Films  
*Presented by:* Focus Features, Regency Enterprises  
*In association with:* Perfect World Pictures  
*With support from:* Film in Iceland  
*Production Services Provided by (Iceland Unit):* True North  
*Executive Producers:* Yariv Milchan, Michael Schaefer, Sam Hanson, Thomas Benski  
*Produced by:* Lars Knudsen, Mark Huffam, Robert Eggers, Alexander Skarsgård, Arnon Milchan  
*Co-produced by:* Francesca Cingolani  
*Associate Producer:* Garrett Bird  
*Producer (Iceland Unit):* Leifur B. Dagfinnsson  
*Unit Production Manager:* Alex Boyd  
*Production Manager:* Darren Chesney  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Amy Moore  
*Financial Controller:* Peter Eardley  
*UK Production Accountant:* Nikki Chamberlain  
*Unit Manager:* Seán Logan  
*Supervising Location Manager:* Naomi Liston  
*Post-production Supervisor:* Emma Zee  
*1st Assistant Director:* Ben Burt  
*Key 2nd Assistant Director:* Oana Ene  
*Script Supervisor:* Giuilia Patané  
*Local Casting by:* Carla Stronge  
*Written by:* Sjón, Robert Eggers  
*Director of Photography:* Jarin Blaschke  
*Aerial Director of Photography:* John Marzano  
*A Camera Operator:* Chris Plevin  
*B Camera Operator:* Graham Albert Hall  
*Gaffer:* Seamus Lynch  
*Key Grip:* Darren 'Dutch' Holland  
*Still Photographer:* Aidan Monaghan  
*Visual Effects On-set Supervisor:* Colin McCusker  
*Visual Effects Producer:* Wendy Garfinkle  
*Visual Effects by:* Bluebolt, Atomic Arts, Vitality Visual Effects  
*Additional Visual Effects by:* Yellowmoon Post Production  
*Special Effects Supervisor:* Sam Conway  
*Editor:* Louise Ford  
*Production Designer:* Craig Lathrop  
*Supervising Art Director:* Paul Ghirardani  
*Senior Art Director:* Robert Cowper  
*Art Directors:* Hauke Richter, John Merry  
*Set Decorator:* Niamh Coulter  
*Graphic Designer:* Michael Eaton  
*Concept Artists:* Philipp Scherer, Thorhallur Thrainsson  
*Costume Concept Artist:* David Craig  
*Senior Draughtsperson:* Brendan Rankin  
*Costume Designer:* Linda Muir  
*Assistant Costume Designer:* Angela Bright  
*Costume Supervisor:* Louise Cassettari  
*Wardrobe Supervisor:* Lucie Corcoran  
*Hair and Make-up Designer:* Maralyn Sherman  
*Make-up & Hair Supervisor:* Stefania Pellegrini  
*Key Make-up & Hair Artist:* Carmel Jackson  
*Make-up & Hair Artists:* Michelle Maxwell, Orlaith Walsh  
*Make-up & Prosthetic Artist:* Polly McKay  
*Prosthetics Designer:* David White  
*Titles by:* Matt Curtis  
*Supervising Colourist:* Adam Glassman  
*Music by:* Robin Carolan, Sebastian Gainsborough  
*Choir:* London Voices  
*Conductor:* Jessica Cottis  
*Score Recorded and Mixed by:* Nick Wollage  
*Music Consultant:* Poul Høxbro  
*Choreographer:* Marie-Gabrielle Rotie  
*Sound Designers:* James Boyle, Damian Volpe

*Sound Recordist:* Derek Hehir  
*Re-recording Mixers:* Paul Cotterell, James Harrison, Mark Taylor  
*Supervising Sound Editors:* James Harrison, Steve Little  
*Sound Effects Designer:* Tom Sayers  
*Sound Effects Editor:* Kevin Penney  
*Stunt Coordinator:* CC Smif  
*Old Norse Translations:* Hauker Porgeirsson  
*Old Ukrainian Translations:* Yurii Andrukhovych  
*Master Armourer:* Tommy Dunne  
*Horses Provided by:* The Devil's Horsemen  
*Horsemaster:* Tom Cox  
*Unit Publicist:* Wendy Kidd

## Cast

Alexander Skarsgård (*Prince Amleth*)  
Nicole Kidman (*Queen Gudrun*)  
Claes Bang (*Fjölnir the Brotherless*)  
Anya Taylor-Joy (*Olga of the Birch Forest*)  
Ethan Hawke (*King Aurvandil War-Raven*)  
Willem Dafoe (*Heimir the Fool*)  
Gustav Lindh (*Thorir the Proud*)  
Elliot Rose (*Gunnar*)  
Phill Martin (*Hallgrímur Half-Troll*)  
Eldar Skar (*Finnr the Nose-Stub*)  
Olwen Fouéré (*Ashildur Hofgythja*)  
Edgar Abram (*Hersveinn Battle Hard*)  
Jack Gassmann (*Hjalti Battle Hasty*)  
Ingvar Sigurdsson (*he-witch*)  
Oscar Novak (*young Amleth*)  
Jack Walsh (*Hallur Freymundur*)  
Björk (*seeress*)  
Ian Whyte (*the mound dweller*)  
Katie Pattinson (*shield maiden*)  
Andrea O'Neill (*Helga the Nanny*)  
Rebecca Ineson (*Halla the Maiden*)  
Kate Dickie (*Haldora the Pict*)  
Ísadóra Bjarkardóttir Barney (*Melkorka*)  
Kevin James Horsham (*Völundur the Smith*)  
Seamus O'Hara (*Audunn the Irish*)  
Scott Sinclair (*Griðmur Skull-Hammer*)  
Tadhg Murphy (*Eiríkr Blazey Eye*)  
James Yates (*Hrothgar Split-Lip*)  
Hafþór Júlíus Björnsson (*Thorfinn Tooth-Gnasher*)  
Ian Gerard Whyte (*Thorvaldr Giant-Crusher*)  
Ralph Ineson (*Captain Volodymyr*)  
Murray McArthur (*Hakon Iron-Beard*)  
Nille Glæsel (*Gunnhildr Ship-Breasted*)  
Jonas K. Lorentzen (*Eysteinn*)  
Magne Osnes (*Berserker priest*)  
Ineta Sliuzaitė (*Valkyrja*)  
Finn Lafferty (*fisherman's son*)  
Jon Campling (*standard bearer*)  
Helen Roche (*Hofgythja*)  
Faoileann Cunningham (*Kormlóth*)  
Gareth Parket (*the Hird officer*)  
Mark Fitzgerald (*hallucinating guard*)  
Gavin Peden (*burly guard*)  
Joel Hicks (*Fengr Shield-Biter*)  
Christopher Finlayson (*Grani Battle-Screamer*)  
Eric Higgins (*Ketill the Whale Sided*)  
Matt Symonds (*Ragnar Cold-Mouthed*)  
Luca Evans (*Ivan*)  
James Harper-Jones (*Vasill*)  
Thomas Harper-Jones (*Stanislav*)  
Sheila Flitton (*Lyudmila*)  
Lily Bird (*the Maiden King*)

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137 mins

A Universal release

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