Robert Eggers's Historical Visions Go Mainstream

"The Northman" may be the most accurate Viking movie ever made. It may also be the most ambitious.

By Sam Knight March 28, 2022

Eggers's films combine folktales and the occult with scholarly attention to detail.Photograph by Nadav Kander for The New Yorker

Last September, the filmmaker Robert Eggers was having breakfast—grains, seeds, black coffee—at a bistro in central London. He was preoccupied, to some extent. At seven that morning, he had spoken to an executive at New Regency Productions, to receive the studio's notes on the latest cut of "The Northman," the ninety-million-dollar Viking movie that had consumed two years of his life. "The studio is expecting the next cut to be *different*," Eggers said.

Eggers's previous films—"The Witch" (2015) and "The Lighthouse" (2019)— were claustrophobic, visionary works that blurred the boundary between the imagined and the real. They didn't test well at all. The first audiences for "The Northman"—a loose pre-telling of "Hamlet" (Shakespeare's play is based on a Viking tale) involving longships, volcanoes, transcendental visions, and the singer Björk's first cinematic role in seventeen years— reported feeling similarly flummoxed. Out of a hundred, the movie was scoring in the mid-sixties; the studio wanted more like seventy-five. "Some audience member wrote, 'You need to have a master's degree in Viking history to understand, like, *anything* in this movie,' " Eggers said. "Like, ahhh, fuck."

The budget for "The Northman," which comes out in late April, started at sixty-five million dollars. Eggers wrote the script with Sjón, an Icelandic novelist and poet, and attracted a major cast. The film stars Alexander Skarsgård and Anya Taylor-Joy, alongside Ethan Hawke, Nicole Kidman, Claes Bang, and Willem Dafoe. But then months of *COVID*-related delays and costly safety protocols pushed the budget way beyond that. "We had kind of an expensive, arty—but commercial—but arty, but commercial, like, Viking movie. . . . Now everyone is kind of, like, 'If this isn't "Gladiator" or "Braveheart," we're fucked.' And the thing is: it isn't," Eggers said. "It has aspects of that, for sure. But my best intention of doing 'Gladiator' or 'Braveheart' is still . . ." He let the sentence hang. "Weirder."

Eggers, who is thirty-eight, has pale-green eyes, a dark cropped beard, and hair buzzed close to his scalp on the sides. He dresses in black, and

his left hand is heavy with signet rings and a large gold watch. He could be a double-crossing ambassador in the court of a depraved Habsburg emperor, or the guy in front of you ordering an oat-milk cortado. As a child, he loved comics. But, when Eggers was about ten, an aging Latvian American painter named Hyman Bloom, who influenced Jackson Pollock and was a friend of Eggers's parents, gave him two books of woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer and Martin Schongauer, fifteenth-century German printmakers. "That is when I almost literally, but certainly metaphorically, put away my comic books and became a snob and a dilettante," Eggers told me. "The sea creatures and the satyrs and the wild men and the demons did kind of put Marvel to shame, in my eyes."

Alfonso Cuarón, the director of "Gravity" and "Roma," read Eggers's screenplay of "The Witch" in 2013, when the movie was still in development. "I was just in awe of it," he told me. "I was, like, more than anything, curious." Cuarón observed that, unlike other filmmakers, who treat the magical or the symbolic as breaks from normality, Eggers makes no such distinction. "It's as if those elements are as natural as the weather. And people coexist with those elements as a matter of existence," Cuarón said. "There's no question about the existence of witches. There's no ulterior explanation. . . . It was just *witches*."

Over breakfast, I asked Eggers if he could explain why testing audiences were having trouble with "The Northman." In conversation, he hesitates, as if to consider his potential vulnerability, and then answers rapidly and in full, to get it over with. "Currently, with my best intentions, like, I'm not normal," he replied. "I look like a poster boy for a Bushwick hipster, but that is where my relatability ends, I fear."

Eggers was supposed to be in Prague. The previous week, he had been scheduled to move there to begin preparing a remake of "Nosferatu," F. W. Murnau's silent vampire film, from 1922. In high school, Eggers co-directed a stage production of the movie, in which his younger brothers, Max and Sam, who are twins, were painted gray and played motionless gargoyles. The new version featured Taylor-Joy, who also starred in "The Witch," and Harry Styles. But, at the last minute, Styles pulled out, citing

scheduling concerns. Jarin Blaschke, Eggers's cinematographer, had already enrolled his daughter in school in Prague.

The change of plans presented Eggers with a vacation—his first in a year and a half. Eggers met his wife, Alexandra Shaker, who is a clinical psychologist, when they were kids. They have a three-year-old son named Houston. They left London for a few days and went to see Stonehenge, staying in a Tudor cottage near the town of Frome, in Somerset. Eggers is a committed Anglophile, but he hasn't had a chance to see much of the place. "It was fucking awesome," he said, of Frome, which has Saxon origins. "It's, like, so cute it's ridiculous. It looks like a back-lot set. It's on a hill and it winds around, and it's, like, a bank next to a pub next to half-timbered bullshit." He had come back feeling refreshed.

On the street, Eggers called Louise Ford, his editor, and relayed the studio's notes. He has worked with Ford and Blaschke on every film he has made since 2008: a total of three features and two shorts. The same production and costume designers, Craig Lathrop and Linda Muir, have worked on all of Eggers's features. But none of them had ever been involved in a film the size or ambition of "The Northman." "No one. Nobody. None of us were prepared to make this film," Eggers said.

The studio wanted the beginning of the film to move faster. Ford and Eggers's challenge that morning was to streamline the grand return of King Aurvandill, Amleth's father (Amleth is the Viking name for Hamlet), played by Hawke, to his queen, Gudrún, played by Kidman. The sequence, which had been filmed on a windswept headland in Northern Ireland in the fall of 2020, was elaborate, featuring a cliff-top fort, horses, and dozens of extras. Because of *COVID* delays, Eggers had been forced to shoot one scene, involving Dafoe, who plays Heimir, a mixture of holy man and fool, twice— months apart—and stitch the material together in the edit. "This incredibly crucial sequence was just . . . it was so pressured," he said.

Eggers and Blaschke shoot long, unbroken scenes, often from a single point of view. They eschew handheld cameras, second units, and many

other Hollywood filmmaking techniques. Other directors and cinematographers set up twenty or twenty-five shots in a day—capturing closeups, wide shots, and all the other coverage they might conceivably need; Eggers and Blaschke shoot three or four heavily planned "oners" over and over, and very little else. "It's a very unique way of making films," Lars Knudsen, a producer of both "The Witch" and "The Northman," told me. "We will see on 'The Northman' if it translates into, like, a bigger audience."

"It's almost like being with people that saw a movie two years ago, and they're trying to remember it," Hawke said, of his experience on "The Northman." He told me that, when he was younger, he might have bristled at Eggers and Blaschke's methods, but now he admires their exactitude. "So much of moviemaking is people trying to sell you something," Hawke said. "I've spent my life wondering, Will I ever get to be on a set that feels like 'Apocalypse Now'? You know, like, somebody's trying. They have the balls, and the hubris and the arrogance to say, 'I want to make a masterpiece. I'm going to write a movie about Vikings with an Icelandic poet. And shoot it in a way that a film has never been choreographed before.' So, for me, just seeing somebody take a swing like that, you know, it's like a jump off a high dive."

Eggers understood that the studio wanted the film to be unusual. It also wanted a return. "Now everyone's scared," he said. We crossed a street near the BBC, on the way to the edit suite, in Soho. The long scenes and the formal composition of Eggers's films are sometimes more redolent of theatre than of cinema. "The impression is almost of intoxication," Cuarón said. "You are there, and you're breathing with those actors." But Eggers and Blaschke are left with very little spare footage or flexibility that might get them out of a jam—or a tough set of studio notes—later on. "Like, there's not a lot of alternatives," Eggers said. "The stakes are really high, and without, you know, coverage." He said the word with big air quotes.

We passed a film crew unloading equipment from a truck, which Eggers did not seem to notice. He is both present and not. He wakes early each morning to write, and seeks to get lost in the period he is researching. He

was working on something Elizabethan at the time. “There’s a lot of scholars who maybe aren’t quite as sophisticated as he is,” Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir, a Viking historian who consulted on “The Northman,” told me. Taylor-Joy describes Eggers as a genius. But he does not like the word. He writes fluently in Early Modern English, and his idiom is a blend of Brooklyn mumblespeak and something more antique. Eggers readied himself for the day. “I just don’t know on God’s green earth how we’re going to do it,” he said.

Ford speeded up the opening by making a much larger cut than either she or Eggers had thought possible. The next day, they watched “The Northman” from beginning to end and came up with other fixes. “All of a sudden, our eyes were opened to how to do all this other stuff,” Eggers said.

I dropped by the editing room the following week. Ford was working at a standing desk, with a model of a longship resting among three screens. Eggers sat against a wall, at a desk littered with books. A blind was pulled most of the way down. While Ford is processing footage, or trying a change, Eggers reads or works on his next script. They had been editing

“If you need me, I’ll be in the next room forever

and ever and ever.”

Cartoon by Christopher Weyant

since the start of the year. “We’re like siblings at this point,” he said.

Ford, who is in her early fifties, is from Nantwich, a market town in Cheshire. She came across Eggers in 2007, in Brooklyn, after she was given a script of "The Tell-Tale Heart," a short that he had written, based on the Edgar Allan Poe story. When they met to discuss the project, Ford was surprised to meet a novice American filmmaker with a passion for Arthur Rackham, a late- Victorian British children's-book illustrator. During the shoot, Eggers sourced nineteenth-century constables' hats, for historical accuracy, and triple- wicked beeswax candles from Alaska, for their appearance on film. Now, while Ford tidied up minute blemishes or awkward beats in the opening reel of "The Northman," Eggers commented on some of the academic sources for the Viking artifacts and behavior unfolding on the screen.

"Fun fact for nobody: her headpiece is of Finnish origin," Eggers said, when Kidman's character, Gudrún, came into the shot. "So that would have been something that, like, Aurvandill plundered from somewhere else and brought home to his queen."

Next to Gudrún, Aurvandill sat with his sword across his lap, in the pose of a twelfth-century Norwegian chess piece that was dug up on a beach in the Outer Hebrides in 1831. The royal couple wore golden headbands; crowns would be anachronistic. "I was very insistent," Eggers said, "knowing full well that an audience is going to interpret it as a crown." The longhouse built for the movie's fictional court of Hrafnsey, which means "Raven Island," was decorated with nine-foot, carved wooden columns, whose motifs were blown-up versions of carvings found in a ship burial south of Oslo. "This is a complex society," Eggers said. "It's governed by vengeance, but there still are rules. There still are conventions, and there still is art, and there's adornment and music and joy."

"The Northman" might be the most accurate Viking movie ever made. "This is kind of a dream for me," Neil Price, an archeologist at Uppsala University, in Sweden, who worked on the film, said. "I doubt that I will ever encounter someone who has the eye and the concern for it that Robert does." Skarsgård, as Amleth, wore a single pair of boots throughout filming, which Muir, the costume designer, repaired with

strips of leather as they fell apart. ("More impressive than the Vikings doing all the things they did was that they did it in, like, *moccasins*," Eggers said.) Other garments were made of nettle fabric and reindeer leather. At one point, Amleth's uncle Fjölnir (Claes Bang) wears a showstopping Viking cloak called a *varafeldr*, made with *tog*, the long coarse wool from the outer coat of Icelandic sheep. "It shimmies like a nineteen-twenties flapper dress or something. I mean, it's so sexy and so beautiful," Muir said. "I've never seen anything like that on film."

The "Northman" shoot lasted eighty-seven days, and Price, Friðriksdóttir, and Terry Gunnell, a folklorist at the University of Iceland, handled a stream of calls and e-mails about tiny details of Viking life. Price was out grocery shopping when his cell phone rang with a query about how to light the long hall. Friðriksdóttir was asked whether there had been a taboo about menstrual blood. "I had never thought about that, to be honest," she said. (She concluded that there probably was not.)

The Viking story of Amleth was recorded in "The History of the Danes," by Saxo Grammaticus, in the early thirteenth century, but it was likely based on an earlier Icelandic folktale. Writing "The Northman" with Eggers, Sjón imagined the script as a missing saga. Most of the story takes place in the year 914, during the early settlement of Iceland but before the founding of the Althing, the parliament, in 930. "There is still a certain kind of lawlessness," Sjón said. "I realized that we could slip in a family there, that settled early and then just disappeared from the face of the earth."

As an Icelander, Sjón felt an obligation to make the story historically plausible but sensed that he was freer than Eggers in his interpretations of Viking lore. "He feels more responsibility to get it right than I do," he said. More than forty Icelandic sagas survive—and give the fullest extant description of Viking lives and attitudes—but they were written in medieval times, after Scandinavia had converted to Christianity. Much of the research that went into "The Northman" was about trying to see past those later cultural inflections to an earlier, pagan belief system. Eggers and Sjón were guided by recent archeology and anthropological research. In 2017, DNA analysis concluded that a high-ranking Viking

warrior, dug up on the Swedish island of Björkö, was a woman. (In the film, you catch a glimpse of her.) “The saga writers, they had to rely on what was known at the time: stories that had come down through the generations, poems, artifacts that were still around,” Sjón said. “Of course, they get a lot of things right. . . . But it also means that there were things lost to them. And some of those things were accessible to us today.”

In the edit, Ford and Eggers checked for glitches during an initiation ritual for the young Amleth, which takes place underground. Eggers’s script said that the scene should smell of mildew and rot, with human bones sticking out of the mud. Gunnell had suggested Maeshowe, a Neolithic chambered cairn on the island of Orkney, as a reference for the location. “The hair continuity is a little weird,” Eggers observed, as figures came in and out of view. In the sequence, the young prince (played by Oscar Hovak), Aurvandill, and Heimir inhale the smoke of henbane seeds, a Viking-era hallucinogen, and bellow fragments of the Hávamál, the sayings of Odin, while Heimir sports a mask and a rattle painstakingly re-created from archeological discoveries. Eggers explained that this was probably the most fictional ritual in the movie.

Eggers gives himself more latitude at the outset of a project. “It can be sort of the spirit of the age...I don’t need to tie it down,” he told me that day. “Honestly, I usually start out feeling like, Well, maybe it’s O.K. if I do a little bit of this and that. And then, the more I get honed in, the more I’m, like, No. This is *this*.”

The clapboard farmhouse in “The Witch,” which was set in sixteen-thirties New England, was constructed with froes and drawknives. (Circular saws were a thing of the future.) The family’s possessions were based on the household inventories of early Puritan settlers, and Eggers drew on the diaries of John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, for the dialogue. In “The Lighthouse,” a manual of instructions for lighthouse keepers, from 1881, helped structure the action, and the Maine dialects of Sarah Orne Jewett’s nineteenth-century novels and poems informed the language. Eggers insisted on building his own seventy-foot lighthouse with a working

Fresnel lens. The movie's financiers wanted him to shoot in color, but Eggers stuck with 35-mm. black-and-white film, forgoing around six million dollars (more than half the film's eventual budget) in the process. Eggers talks about constructing a doll's house, in which his movies take place, and in which, through a massing of detail, he can claim his characters' memories as his own.

"I felt like, you know, he's in my head," Dafoe told me, of his experience on "The Lighthouse," in which he played Thomas Wake, an aging, demonic "wickie," cooped up with Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson) in a lighthouse station at the ends of the earth. (The description of Wake in the script reads, "His high cheekbones smile even when he grimaces. His wild eyes shine like jewels. He's an old Pan. A Satyr.") In 2016, Dafoe saw a poster for "The Witch" and walked into a theatre to see it. The next day, he took his wife to watch it. He set up a meeting with Eggers, and they agreed to work together.

During rehearsals for "The Lighthouse," Dafoe realized that the goal was not to help him find his character. "We didn't really rehearse the scenes," he said. "What we rehearsed was that he would tell us where the camera would be." Eggers and Blaschke storyboard almost every frame of their films. Chris Columbus, the director of "Home Alone" and of the first two Harry Potter movies, was an executive producer on "The Witch" and "The Lighthouse." "I've never seen such detailed storyboards from a director, ever," he told me. "You know, ninety per cent of directors don't do their own storyboards. . . . His storyboards were precise, almost Hitchcockian." Dafoe relished the restrictions. "It was, like, for us to bend ourselves to what the frame was," he said.

It is hard going. During one scene in "The Lighthouse," which was shot using camera lenses from the nineteen-thirties, Dafoe had to rise from a table, limp over to a coal stove, extract a burning cinder with tongs and light a clay pipe with his left hand, then walk to the window, in conversation with Pattinson, taking specific steps as the camera followed him on dolly tracks. (Blaschke was nominated for an Academy Award for the film's cinematography.) "They gave me impossible tasks. But it focusses you in a way that you're never distracted," Dafoe, who learned

to knit for the part, said. “You can only go here. . . . The pipe may go out, but then you have to take the cinder. It was a real cinder. All that stuff roots you. Because it’s really happening.”

Neither Eggers nor Blaschke had ever shot a major action scene before “The Northman,” but they stuck to the same principles: a single camera, nothing handheld, increasingly improbable oners. “Some days on ‘The Northman,’ we had one shot, you know, but it’s dense. And it was thought about for months,” Blaschke said. “And then maybe months went by, and then another solution came up, when I was trying to fall asleep, or while Rob was trying to fall asleep.” The adult Amleth takes part in a raid on a Slav village which is prolonged and horrifying to watch and was almost as brutal to configure. Blaschke, who is an antic presence on set—fussing with lights, checking angles—filmed almost the entire sequence in a straight line, with a camera mounted on top of a car. “To do that in a scene with ten actors, twenty stunt guys, three hundred extras, horses, fire—it drives you crazy,” Skarsgård told me. At the end of the four-minute take, Skarsgård would be on his knees. “And then it turns out that, two minutes into the shot, there was a horse deep background that was facing the wrong way,” he said. “And then you have to do it again. And they end up doing it twenty-five times.”

Skarsgård, who is Swedish, became involved in the development of “The Northman” in 2017. His father, the actor Stellan Skarsgård, has a library of old Hollywood films. As a boy, Skarsgård watched “The Long Ships,” with Sidney Poitier, and “The Vikings,” with Kirk Douglas. With Knudsen, the producer, who is Danish, he had dreamed of one day making a definitive Viking movie. But he had not been on set with Eggers until the shoot began, in August, 2020.

During the first two weeks, in which Amleth mostly labored on a farm, Skarsgård felt conflicted by the filming process. “I’m not used to working in that way,” he said. “There was a moment where I was, like, I could either freak the fuck out . . . because you feel like: Well, there’s no space for me to explore my character. I’m a robot.” But Skarsgård chose to submit: “You play around with it, and then small details will then open up, like a flood of inspiration, and suddenly you’re in it.”

Taylor-Joy, who was working with Eggers for the first time in six years, realized how much of her conduct on set derives from their work together. “Who I am, or how I identify as a performer and a collaborator, really does come from ‘The Witch,’” she told me. “If you come onto a movie that’s already been storyboarded . . . and you know that’s the way the film’s going to look, I actually find that incredibly liberating,” she said. “I can do my own version of this dance within the parameters that have been set. And I’ll end up with something more interesting than if you just show up and it’s, like, Oh, we might have the camera here. We might have the camera here.”

On a good day, you’re pushing the cinematic form. “I don’t know of a medieval movie this size that is shot this formally,” Eggers said. “Not even, like, a Soviet movie.” When Skarsgård and his fellow-berserkers landed a bloody fight sequence on the umpteenth take, they celebrated like berserkers. “My God, when it’s there and it works, it’s one of the greatest experiences I’ve had on a movie set,” Skarsgård said.

On a bad day, you’re in the tenth month of the edit and you’re trying to deal with notes from a test screening in Texas, where the audience was befuddled by the Nordic accents, character names like Leifr Seal’s Testicle, and the unsettling moral outlook of tenth-century Iceland. “None of those things are changing,” Eggers said, while Ford was processing footage of the young Amleth, hiding in a forest. He started to laugh. “Like, those things can’t change. And those are kind of the biggest obstacles.” The studio had suggested inserting an intertitle at one point, to indicate the passing of time. Eggers and Ford went into another room, where Paolo Buzzetti, an assistant editor, had mocked up a time card: “Twenty-Two Years Later.” Ford noted that this would make the adult Amleth thirty-three, the same age as Jesus when he died.

“Is that relevant?” she asked. “Not to a Viking,” Eggers replied.

Eggers’s grandfather Robert Stroud Houston was a geologist and an outdoorsman. When he was conducting field work on the mafic igneous rocks of Wyoming’s Sierra Madre, Houston hired old cowboys to keep him company and tell him stories of the frontier. His daughter, Kelly,

went to New York to work as an actor and a ballet dancer. She had a recurring part on “One Life to Live,” the soap opera, appearing alongside Laurence Fishburne. Eggers was born in the city in the summer of 1983. Soon afterward, Kelly and he moved back to Wyoming to live with her parents. Eggers does not know his biological father. In Laramie, Kelly met and married Walter Eggers, an English academic and Shakespeare scholar, and they had twin sons. (Eggers’s brother Max co-wrote “The Lighthouse.”)

When Eggers was six, Walter became the provost of the University of New Hampshire, in Durham. The family moved to Lee, a small town nearby. “It was, more or less, like, a church, a library, a country store, and a graveyard. I’m exaggerating a little bit to make it sound more romantic,” Eggers said. “We used to throw corn husks at cars—you know, that kind of situation.” When Houston retired, he bought an early-eighteenth-century farmhouse in Epping, a few miles from Lee. He filled the place with curiosities: taxidermy, model ships, African masks, Civil War artifacts, lassos and spurs from the Old West.

“It was super magical,” Eggers recalled. He would go with his grandfather to antique stores and handle relics of New England’s Colonial past. He loved costumes and performance of all kinds. The woods outside felt old and haunted. “I think probably the landscape itself informed a lot of Rob’s aesthetic,” Amanda Michaels, a childhood friend, who performed with

Eggers in a production of “Oliver Twist,” in the fifth grade, told me. “We weren’t running around playing cops and robbers when we were kids—we played ‘enchanted forest.’ ”

In 1995, Michaels’s mother, Charlotte Mandell, and Kelly set up the Oyster River Players, a children’s-theatre company. The O.R.P. came to include about eighty kids and mounted three or four shows a year. Michaels and Eggers, who were in their teens, helped choose the plays, performed, painted the sets, and rehearsed the younger children. “It was basically O.R.P. seven days a week,” Michaels said. “Rob became the de-facto production designer. It was his eye that guided these productions,

even when we were kids." In high school, Eggers and a classmate named Ashley Kelly-Tata, who is now an experimental-theatre and opera director, staged "Nosferatu" as their senior-year project. Eggers was an erratic student: he aced English, but in French, instead of doing the assignments, he made short films for the teacher. In "Nosferatu," he played Count Orlok in a scene-for-scene re- creation of the silent film, complete with intertitles and sibling gargoyles.

Eggers invited Edward Langlois, a local theatre impresario, to the dress rehearsal. "He said, 'I don't think you'll be bored,' " Langlois recalled. Langlois ran a storefront theatre called the Edwin Booth, in Dover, where he lived upstairs in an apartment full of masks and his own papier-mâché models of saints. A few months earlier, he had cast Eggers as Geoffrey in "The Lion in Winter." The boy had a presence. "He was so pale and black- haired, a very striking-looking kid," Langlois said.

"Nosferatu" was mesmerizing. "I was bowled over," Langlois said. "It was all in black-and-white, except for the blood that would occur on the victims' necks. And it was all high-school kids. So there was a kind of sweet innocence combined with the depravity." Langlois invited Eggers and Kelly- Tata to put on the show in his theatre, asking only that they speed up the scene changes, which lasted several minutes. At the time, Langlois, who is of French Canadian descent, was in his mid-fifties. He grew up in a working- class, Catholic community in Newmarket, a mill town on the coast. Eggers was privileged, by contrast. "He's a golden boy," Langlois told me. "The support he's had has been extraordinary." Nonetheless, Langlois felt a deep sense of connection. "He suffers from nostalgia, which I do, too," Langlois said. "He knows things, for someone who has not lived a very experienced life."

Eggers moved to New York, in 2001, to attend the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, a conservatory on West Sixty-first Street, but he would return to New Hampshire to put on plays at the Edwin Booth. Langlois took thirty per cent of the box-office. One summer, it was "Hamlet." "Everything was painted white, and all the characters had a specific color," Tom Macy, a friend, told me. Macy wore blue, as Horatio. Eggers, as Hamlet, was in black. They were eighteen. Eggers played the

ghost as well: a giant figure, in armor, filmed and projected onto a backdrop. “Just big swings,” Macy said.

He and Eggers became roommates. They hung furs and swords on the walls of an apartment on the Upper West Side that they called

Warwick Hall. Eggers had a waxed mustache and worked as a runner, a waiter, and a set designer on commercials. On his days off, he would watch six films in a row. “Any movie that I had heard the name vaguely, or any actor or director or anything,” he told me. “I would just, like, rent it and watch it.” He plumbed IMDb. He worshipped Ingmar Bergman.

In 2007, an Israeli theatre director named Geula Attar was walking through Astor Place with her husband, Victor, when they happened upon a street performance of “Faust.” Eggers had written a thirty-minute, commedia- dell’arte version, in trochaic quadrameter. The troupe wore masks and lavish costumes, and had an old circus wagon. “They were so involved with the people in the street, without playing any distance,” Victor Attar said. “It was like a stream of water in the river. It was beautiful, so imaginative.”

Eggers built sets and designed costumes for two Off Off Broadway shows by the Attars. He told them stories about Edgar Allan Poe. The Attars met Shaker, who also grew up in Lee, and Eggers’s parents. Geula wondered if Eggers’s fixation with the past, and his taste for the macabre, was a way of searching for his father. “I was just, like, Sure. Yeah. Could be,” Eggers said, when he relayed the observation to me. “It’s more easy to talk about *how* I’m interested in it. But I can’t like say, like, where it comes from.”

In 2010, Ford, Eggers’s editor, passed a script of “The Witch” to Knudsen and Jay Van Hoy, producers she was working with at the time. Eggers was horrified. He didn’t think it was ready. “The Tell-Tale Heart” had had a decent festival life, but nothing more. “Everything always fell, I think, a little bit short of his expectations,” Macy told me. “He never said that.” Eggers waited a month before he called Knudsen and Van Hoy, who told him that they loved “The Witch.” In its early drafts, there were five acts, each told from the point of view of a different family member. Knudsen

and Van Hoy advised Eggers to simplify the script, if he wanted to get it made.

It took four years to finance the film, which had a budget of three and a half million dollars. Eggers cast it in England, to source the correct accents. The first audition tape he watched for the part of Thomasin was by a seventeen- year-old Taylor-Joy. Shooting began in the spring of 2014, in Kiosk, an abandoned logging town in northern Ontario. There was no cell-phone service. The actors wore straight shoes—no left or right—with wooden soles. "You show up and exist," Taylor-Joy said. "You don't have to imagine it." In the film's penultimate scene, the Devil, in the form of a black goat, speaks to Thomasin:

B*LACK* P*HILLIP:*
Wouldst thou like the taste of butter? A pretty dress?
Wouldst thou like to live deliciously? *Pause.*
T*HOMASIN:*
Yes.

"The Witch: A New England Folktale" premièred at Sundance the following January. Eggers won the festival's Directing Award. A review in the *Guardian* described the film as a meeting of "The New World," by Terrence Malick, and "The Exorcist." Eggers was fêted in the trade press and offered a studio deal. In 2016, the movie got a general release. Langlois saw "The Witch" in a cinema in Portland, Oregon, where he was living at the time. (His landlord in New Hampshire had raised the rent; the Edwin Booth was no more.) He sat very close to the screen, which he recommends for watching all of Eggers's films. "It's exciting," Langlois said. "It's like the ocean. It rolls in, and it rolls out."

"The Witch" made forty million dollars. In the spring of 2016, Eggers and Shaker, who is a fan of the sagas, took a trip to Iceland. Eggers wasn't particularly taken with Viking history. "It was just too macho for my sensibilities," he said. At the time, he was working on a medieval epic, "The Knight," which was never made.

But when their plane landed at Keflavik Airport, outside Reykjavík, Eggers was awed by the volcanic, pitiless landscape. “It looks like pre-, you know, pre-pre-pre-pre-pre-pre-pre-history,” he told me. The witch’s voice at the opening of Bergman’s “The Virgin Spring” echoed in his mind: “Odin, come, Odin, come.”

Robin Carolan, a friend from Brooklyn, who has worked with Björk, had suggested that Eggers and Shaker meet the singer during their visit. “We were, like, ‘That’s fine, we don’t need to see Björk,’ ” Eggers said. (She makes him feel that he has to find something interesting to say.) They went to Björk’s house. She cooked salmon. She had seen “The Witch” and introduced Eggers to Sjón, who had written a novel about seventeenth-century witchcraft in Iceland. When he got home, Eggers read Sjón’s books. “I was, like, this guy’s a fucking magician,” Eggers said. “He sees all time, in time, out of time.” A year later, after learning about Skarsgård and Knudsen’s proposed Viking project, Eggers called Sjón and asked him to co-write a script. Knudsen said, “I’ve never been involved with a project of this size that . . . the pieces just fell into place at the right time.” (Carolan is the film’s co-composer, with Sebastian Gainsborough.)

Compared with “The Witch” and “The Lighthouse,” both of which derive from primal American stories, “The Northman” represents a departure for Eggers. The cultural references were new to him. One of the film’s recurring images is the Tree of Kings: an arboreal structure, made from human veins, hung with dead warriors and based on Yggdrasil, the sacred ash tree at the heart of Norse mythology. But Eggers immediately felt at home. He is a student of Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Mircea Eliade—twentieth- century believers in the eternal insight offered by myth. Eggers sometimes describes his work as archetypal storytelling. “Like, I get why Aztecs practiced human sacrifice—that’s just not a big leap for me personally,” he said. “Having a religious system where the gods are multifaceted and you’re also having to, like, embrace darkness and death probably makes more sense than how we’re living.”

I once asked Eggers why all his films are set in the past. He directed me to a quote by John Dryden, the seventeenth-century poet: “For mankind is ever the same and nothing is lost out of nature, though everything is

altered." Critics have discerned contemporary themes in Eggers's films (feminist resistance in "The Witch"; toxic masculinity in "The Lighthouse"), which he claims to notice only afterward. "If performers have a mask, where they can speak truthfully through something that is not them, that's kind of what he does with another period of time," Dafoe said. It is the constraints of Eggers's filmmaking process—the scholarly research, the rigid shooting method—that open a way to lost imaginations. "With all this authenticity and 'realism,' it is still a folktale, a dream," a note to the reader in the script of "The Witch" reads. "As much as I am, like, totally in love with the verisimilitude of the tangible world, it's getting into the mind," Eggers told me. "To present it without judgment. Just because, it is what it is. And it's fucking fascinating. . . . The most interesting thing is, like, how it's still us."

One day last fall, Blaschke texted Eggers, asking what he was most afraid of. Eggers gave three answers: being alone; being ambushed and stabbed to death; and surrendering to the occult. "I have met a lot of, like, occultists and witches and hippies who have a way of thinking that, like, I would want to be able to go there but would be afraid to," he told me. His films function as a cage, a form of protection from himself. "I can explore it in my work fully and fully commit to being, like, inside it, without getting lost to it and never being able to come back," Eggers said. Blaschke texted back. He hadn't meant to be deep. His daughter was curious. She was drawing a picture for Halloween.

Eggers and Ford finished the new cut of "The Northman." On November 3rd, Eggers woke up to another message from the studio: they liked it. There was no need for more test screenings. "Isn't that great?" Eggers said, on the phone that afternoon. We met the following week in Soho. Eggers ate a lamb thali and asked if he seemed like a different person. A weight was gone. "I think I've delivered the most entertaining version," he said. "The most entertaining version is not necessarily something I'm usually striving for. But it was here, you know, and it happened."

Cuarón saw the cut and gave his approval. "Every single frame is charged with all the thematic elements of the whole film," he said. "I have to say, it is very complex, it is very complicated what he does." After lunch,

Eggers and I went for a walk and ended up sitting on a bench in Soho Square. Eggers praised New Regency but described the editing process as the most painful experience of his life. “Frankly, I don’t think I will do it again,” he said. “Even if it means, like, not making a film this big ever again. And, by the way, I’d like to make a film this big. I’d like to make one even bigger. But, without control, I don’t know. It’s too hard on my person.”

Skarsgård saw the film for the first time a few weeks later, in Stockholm. He watched it with his father, whose collection of Viking movies made him want to enter the canon. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get to a place where I can watch it and say, ‘Oh, yeah, this emotionally connects, or this works,’ ” Skarsgård said. “Because you’re so in it.” Then he told me about a boat that had been used in “The Northman.” It was a Viking transport vessel, seen once, far out at sea, not even in focus. “You could have used pretty much anything out there,” he said. But of course it was an immaculately researched, museum- quality replica. “No one would ever know. But Rob would know,” he said. I asked Skarsgård if, as Amleth, there had been occasions when he really crossed over: when there were ghosts and Valkyries, along with the longships and the hand-stitched shoes. “It was all there,” he replied, “and all real.”