

# How the 'Northman' team pulled off that village raid and the (naked) volcano battle

By [Mark Olsen](#) Staff Writer April 29, 2022 1:52 PM PT



Alexander Skarsgård stars as Amleth in "The Northman."

(Aidan Monaghan / Focus Features)

Mounting a large-scale Viking epic was new territory for director Robert Eggers, whose ["The Northman"](#) opened in theaters last weekend. Among the film's most ambitiously cinematic sequences are a brutal raid on a village that plays out in a single seemingly unbroken take and a jaw-dropping finale set atop an erupting volcano as the film's primary adversaries strip down for

a nude sword fight with ash and smoke and lava surrounding them.

Known for paying obsessive attention to detail and striving for historical accuracy, Eggers accomplished his vision by reuniting with a close-knit team of collaborators who also worked with him on his previous features, [“The Witch”](#) and [“The Lighthouse.”](#) Production designer Craig Lathrop, costume designer Linda Muir, cinematographer Jarin Blaschke and editor Louise Ford all made the leap to a significantly higher-budgeted film with multiple locations, battle sequences, sailing ships and more.

In the film, co-written by Eggers and Icelandic writer Sjón, Alexander Skarsgård plays Amleth, an exiled prince who has grown into a fearsome Viking fighter. He is determined to avenge the death of his father, King Aurvandil (Ethan Hawke), at the hands of his Uncle Fjölur (Claes Bang) and to save his mother, Queen Gudrún (Nicole Kidman), who was taken by Fjölur. (The ancient Scandinavian story of Amleth was a precursor to Shakespeare’s “Hamlet,” if that all sounds a bit familiar.)

Here’s a look at what went into making “The Northman.”

## **Attention to detail**



Alexander Skarsgård, front, along with cast and crew members on the set of Robert Eggers' Viking epic, "The Northman."

(Aidan Monaghan / Focus Features)

Eggers uses the phrase "holistic cinema" to describe the way in which he wants all the elements of production — the camera, costumes, setting, performance — to coalesce into a unified whole.

"Atmosphere is an accumulation of details," Eggers said during an interview ahead of the film's release. "I'm hoping that the amount of detail that me and Craig Lathrop and Linda Muir are putting into the physical world and making the whole thing just transports people. That's the goal."

Shooting on location in Northern Ireland, the production built numerous outdoor sets that were striking in their exactitude. And with production delayed due to COVID-19, the structures were even able to age from

weather as they waited for shooting to begin.

“When you step out onto set, and you’re wearing exactly what a Viking would’ve worn a thousand years ago and you look around the set 360 and it’s all real and you’re in that environment — half my job’s already done,” said Skarsgård, who, aside from starring in the film, is also a producer.



Ethan Hawke, front, stars as King Aurvandil in “The Northman.”

(Aidan Monaghan / Focus Features)

“Little things can make a difference,” said Eggers, noting that instead of just putting baskets and barrels beside a building, he and Lathrop work to give each place a purpose, deciding what’s a threshing building or a weaving hut and working with that intention in mind.

“You want to visually tell a story, otherwise it’s just a shack,” said Lathrop.

"What is that shack? Even if the camera's just going to swing by it, if it has intent, even in that brief moment, it will ring true. It will feel like it's right. It's meant to be there."

"Obviously very, very few audience members are going to know that that's this, that or the other," Eggers said. "But I do think that you sort of unconsciously experience that, you can believe in it."

"One of the greatest things about being a production designer, for me," added Lathrop, "is that you have an idea of something — whether it's small or it's big, but especially when it's big — and you do a little drawing, and then a few weeks or months later, you walk into a studio and there it is. On this one, that was two villages, this large Icelandic farm, the interiors, a couple longhouses, some temples. I got to have that feeling every day."

## **The visual design**





Alexander Skarsgård, right, stars as Amleth in Viking epic "The Northman."

(Aidan Monaghan / Focus Features)

For Blaschke, who began working with Eggers on short films even before "The Witch," one of the advantages of the expanded resources of the "Northman" production was being able to shoot 35 mm test footage on actual locations, checking lighting at different times of day.

"I had a lot of just pent-up ideas since film school, and we had the resources to try them out," Blaschke said. "The tests were larger than a lot of the films I had shot.

"I could really go deep in these kind of crazy ideas," said Blaschke, referring to his style as "curated naturalism." "Talking about doing night scenes that almost looked black and white, like they would to your eye, and then the day scenes have a lot of color. It's more colorful than any other Rob Eggers

movie before or probably ever again. That was experimental to us — ‘Let’s see if we can do this.’”

Eggers and Blaschke devised a plan to shoot scenes with one camera, rather than opting for the kind of multicamera coverage that is now more conventional on big-budget action pictures. They wanted to let scenes play out as long as they could, not just for the village raid but also for moments such as Amleth battling on a hillside or Viking ships arriving to shore.

“In general, he wanted the movie to be longer ribbons of shots,” said Blaschke of how they constructed the single-take sequences. “I think our relationship as a director and DP is maybe the opposite of what others are because I want to take his ideas to the furthest extent. I’ll say ‘OK, you want these longer shots, and I’m going to push that to the extreme.’”

## **The naked battle (on a volcano)**



Actors Alexander Skarsgård, left, and Claes Bang on the set of "The Northman."  
(Aidan Monaghan / Focus Features)

For all the talk of authenticity and realism, "The Northman" builds to a vision straight out of one of the [fantasy paintings of Frank Frazetta](#), as Amleth and Fjölfnir have a sword fight stripped naked on the edge of a volcano.

"Even that was done with a very grounded approach," said Eggers.

Lathrop brought black earth into a quarry while special effects supervisor Sam Conway created flame effects. Blaschke and gaffer Seamus Lynch designed LED units that mimicked the light patterns of flowing lava.

"That's why it looks more convincing than some CG volcanoes, because the light patterns are actually moving on the people in that way," said Eggers, adding that the most CG work in the sequence was done to conceal the



genitals of Skarsgård and Bang, who are intended to appear to be fighting in the nude, though they actually both wore thongs while shooting the sequence.

## The raid



Alexander Skarsgård as Amleth in "The Northman."

(Aidan Monaghan / Focus Features)

The village raid is the sequence that presented the biggest challenge, as it involved careful coordination of many extras, animals, stunt choreography and more.

"Certainly not always, but often today, these kind of battle sequences are like, 'Let's shoot a bunch of cameras and do our best, and we didn't quite get this, but we can cut to the other camera,'" said Eggers. "And I think, at its

worst, you can't follow the fight, it's just chopped-up nonsense. In [Richard] Lester's 'The Three Musketeers,' you can follow every beat of those fights, or 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,' even with the insane speed of that stuff, every single thrust has intention and every move makes sense. Not that I'm saying we're anywhere near 'Crouching Tiger,' but that was kind of the thinking, so you can follow what's going on."

For Eggers, what matters most is the end result. "Hand on heart, I wouldn't have done it if I didn't feel like it was the right way to tell the story," he said. "But is there part of it that is also like me and Jarin saying, 'We can do this, and we're gonna do it'? Of course."

A sequence like that becomes a full team effort. Lathrop noted that he used a crane to pick up and move a building just a few feet to better facilitate the movement of the camera. Skarsgård said the stunt team and the camera team started rehearsing several months before the scene was shot, working out the choreography in a gym. They first walked through the pacing and eventually worked their way up to jogging through it, on the way to doing it at full speed.

"We had to rehearse a lot of the scenes quite a bit before coming to set," said Skarsgård. "They are very elaborate. Almost all of them are one long shot, so it's not like you show up and you find it on the day. You have to become very well prepared and know exactly the flow of the scene, how I'm moving, how Jarin and the camera are moving, how that dance is going to work.

"It would've been impossible if we hadn't come prepared," said Skarsgård.

Accomplishing the sequence left the "Northman" team ready to try even more. As Blaschke said, "It's only 90 seconds. This could be like a practice run. We got away with a 90-second version, let's make the full-on six-minute

version. There's a lot of ideas."