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'The Northman' Review: Robert Eggers' Viking Epic Starring Alexander Skarsgård

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Alexander Skarsgård as Amleth in "The Northman"

Aiden Monaghan/Focus Features

Revenge is a dish best served cold, and it doesn't get any colder, literally or figuratively, than the bitter portion ladled up in Robert Eggers' merciless yarn of medieval vengeance, *The Northman*.

This seriously nasty and violent tale comes across as an intense labor of love on the part of the American director and his Icelandic co-writer, the poet Sjón; there's scarcely a moment of softness, sentiment or relaxation here, just fierce and ferocious determination to fight and prevail in an unstintingly harsh environment. For the most part it's an enthralling immersion in a forbidding time and place, enhanced by an immoderately attractive cast and saddled only by a dramatic sameness that settles in after a while and gradually diminishes the film's impact.

There haven't been too many Viking movies, most likely because the time and place involved pretty seriously restrict the format to two things—sailing and marauding, and the more violent the better; Richard Fleischer's 1958 *The Vikings*, which was very violent for its time, still stands tall in the mini-genre. *The Northman* most certainly delivers on the mayhem front, as even the most fanatical action fans will feel sated by the time the last sword is swung. All the same, there is a highbrow component here as well, since the instigating action is the murder of the father of Prince Amleth, the latter a figure who one day would be converted by a certain William Shakespeare into a fellow named Hamlet.

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The ferocious rigor with which Eggers approaches his work here won't much surprise viewers of his first two features, *The Witch* (2015), which centered on a small religious community in 1630s New England, and *The Lighthouse* (2019), a stark black-and-white two-hander set on the Northeastern coast in the 1890s.

Both of these small but bracing films comingle weirdness and intensity to unsettling effect. All the same, they are as appetizers to the new work, which draws upon known 12th century historical incidents to the extent possible but more notably devotes itself to creating a convincingly brutal portrait of a ferociously savage lifestyle which no government or religion could significantly moderate.

The only recognizable entity is a clan presided over by King Aurvandil (Ethan Hawke) and Queen Gudrún (Nicole Kidman), but this is very shortly gutted by the king's murder at the hands of his brother Fjölnir (Claes Bang), who spares Gudrún but spirits her away.

Twenty years on, royal survivor Amleth (the handsome and ultra-buff Alexander Skarsgård) has become a fearsome Viking raider. But fate enters in the form of a seeress (Björk), who directs him to avenge his father by killing his uncle. And so a new campaign of violence is launched.

From the get-go, it's clear that Eggers means for his film to be one thing: ferocious. There are plenty of dangerous animals on the loose in the land, but none are as deadly and duplicitous as the human beings.

All the same, *The Northman* is uncommonly rarified when it comes to creative matters. Although the film is in color, it somehow remains in the memory in black-and-white, or something close to it. Eggers and his cinematographer Jarin Blaschke alter the visual treatment here in all sorts of ways that would require multiple viewings to entirely chart; some scenes are saturated in color, but it's often dialed down and occasionally bled of color entirely, depending upon the import and intent of the scenes.

Beyond that, the long takes appear tremendously complicated and demanding, involving long, hand-held shots that encompass massive amounts of chaotic action with significant numbers of people, animals, weapons and inevitable chance occurrences that depend upon precision for their dramatic impact. The immersive, deep-dive style promotes a strong you-are-there feeling and greater-than-ordinary visceral reactions to the frequent violence.

The technical achievements here belong to the current era, when so much more camera mobility is possible than it used to be. Nonetheless, if the chilling tone and visual starkness can be compared to anything, it might be to Ingmar Bergman's then-scandalous 1960 rape drama *The Virgin Spring*.

The churning, relentless movement of the film not inappropriately feels akin to that of a military campaign, which means that it does get bogged down at times in between victories, mostly in the final act. But heavily in its favor is the vital sense of a strange and distant time and place, a historical moment for which limited concrete records open the door for creative minds like Eggers' to imaginatively fill in the blanks.

Rugged Northern Ireland locations stand in splendidly for the harsh Scandinavian settings, and the production design by Craig Lathrop and costumes by Linda Muir also create significant impressions.

Focus Features releases *The Northman* domestically on April 22.