

The Northman review: A Viking epic of thick, blood-red brutality

Robert Eggers directs a film of hard-bitten masculinity, about a time in history when ‘bros being bros’ meant

By Clarisse Loughrey

Dir: Robert Eggers. Starring: Alexander Skarsgård, Nicole Kidman, Claes Bang, Anya Taylor-Joy, Ethan Hawke, Björk, Willem Dafoe. 15, 137 minutes.

History comes thundering back to life in *The Northman*, in a chorus of howls, farts, and belches. This is a Viking epic of thick, blood-red brutality, where Alexander Skarsgård – so bulked up he can only stand wide-legged like a He-Man action figure – rips a man’s throat out with his bare teeth. Where Ethan Hawke, high off the fumes of ancient henbane seeds, crawls feverishly around a mossy cave while a dust-caked and cackling Willem Dafoe decries the “dogs that want to become men”. Where [Nicole Kidman](#), coins shimmering around her furrowed brow, delivers a performance so feral it seems to shake the very foundations of the frame she inhabits.

[Robert Eggers](#), a director who might be better termed a mythmaker, has stretched his ambitions beyond the claustrophobia of his New England folktales, *The Witch* (2015) and *The Lighthouse* (2019). *The Northman* – set in the craggy expanses of Iceland’s fjords – is its own, complete saga, a loose adaptation of the story that once inspired Shakespeare to write his *Hamlet*. As a child, Prince Amleth (Skarsgård) saw his father (Hawke) killed by his uncle Fjölfnir (Claes Bang), who then claimed as his own both the throne and its queen – Amleth’s mother Gudrún (Kidman). Eggers, co-writing the script with Icelandic poet Sjón (a friend of Björk, who makes a thrillingly on-brand cameo here as a wool-weaving Seeress), sets his story in 914, before Iceland began to form its sense of national identity.

The Northman is a film of hard-bitten masculinity, about a time in history when “bros being bros” meant fighting to the death at the foot of an erupting volcano. There’s an extended tracking shot in this film, which follows a berserker raid on a village, that might very well snatch your soul out of your body – where physical prowess is rewarded with nothing but the shuffling of chained captives, burning bodies, and the starved, vacant eyes of Skarsgård’s Amleth. The actor’s work in *The Northman* isn’t burdened by the egotistical theatrics that usually come with “transformative” performances – it’s the pinnacle of a career founded on well-crafted but unshowy turns, usually as men who are very bad news.

There’s no glory to be found here for Amleth or his fellow warriors, with the film directly resisting the weaponisation of Viking imagery by white nationalist movements. Throughout his film, Eggers maintains a commitment to authenticity over populist perception. The director never shrugs off the vicious misogyny of the period, either, carving out a special place for the women of his film and the deep, feminine nature of Viking sorcery. On his journey, Amleth crosses paths with a Slavic slave, Olga of the Birch Forest ([Anya Taylor-Joy](#)). Minutes into their meeting, she slyly informs him: “You have the strength to break men’s bones, but I have the courage to break their minds.”

The Northman’s authenticity isn’t limited solely to its aesthetic details, though the sets and costumes crafted by Eggers regulars Craig Lathrop and Linda Muir put any of the film’s contemporaries to shame (yes, even *Gladiator*... especially *Gladiator*). There are exquisite wood carvings, braids and buckles, and an appearance by a shield-maiden that nods directly to recent DNA evidence that female warriors weren’t confined to the Viking imagination.

The film is also fundamentally rooted in pagan beliefs, without sacrificing the modern demands of the action genre – the whole thing still barrels along like Amleth’s headed towards a final standoff with John Wick. Our hero, as it’s uttered in the film’s prologue, is a “prince destined for valour”. Yet, *The Northman* doesn’t abide by a triumphant “chosen one” narrative, but by the far more Viking-appropriate and grimly stoic

acceptance that one's fate has already been woven by the Norns, the wise women who shape the fates of all beings.

Eggers's films have all been set in eras and places where the divide between the natural and supernatural feels as thin as a wisp, but *The Northman* allows him to push his flair for folkloric images to a new extreme. He shows us a tree hung with the zombified corpses of long-dead ancestors, and a valkyrie riding her way to the hero's paradise of Valhøll. The film's budget, partially due to pandemic delays, reached somewhere around \$90m (£69m). It's a big risk to spend that much cash on an auteur-driven historical epic at a time when historical epics have largely fallen by the wayside. But what a beautiful risk it is. I call upon Odin: may *The Northman* make a billion dollars.