

The Northman Review: Robert Egger's Viking Epic does not disappoint.

There are SPOILERS for The Northman in this review. Film watched at ODEON Epsom.

Robert Eggers' latest feature may find itself being remembered as the most accessible of his filmography so far, with a simple enough, easy to follow plot (it's Viking Hamlet, not rocket science) and immense popcorn-munching fight scenes, including a climactic lava-lit battle at the mouth of a volcano, where it wouldn't have been too much of a visual stretch to give the characters lightsabers instead of short swords. The main character, Amleth, is a Viking Prince and heir to his father's (played by Ethan Hawke) Kingdom, who witnesses his Father betrayed and murdered by Amleth's uncle Fjölfnir, who also steals his kingdom and kidnaps his mother. So begins his quest for revenge, he speaks it aloud to himself while he's escaping the Irish coast: Avenge father, rescue mother, kill uncle. This admirable conflict is well established, the sides are drawn clearly and the brutality of the ordeal young Amleth has to go through gets the audience rooting for him instantly.

The next time we see Amleth he's a grown man, a Viking berserker who raids villages along the Slavic coast. It's on one of these raids that we're truly reintroduced to Amleth, as he cuts and slashes his way across a village in a sequence so truly brutal and raw, that you completely believe that this is a man who had his world taken away from him. The story wastes no time and after a brief magical encounter with Bjork (not kidding, wish I was), Amleth is on his way to confront his uncle. Alexander Skarsgård throws himself into the role completely, delivering earth-shattering Viking-berserker wolf-howls and vengeful promises of retribution, while also carrying the more dramatic parts of the film, like the chemistry-oozing scenes featuring Anya Taylor-Joy's Olga. The cast is certainly star-studded, Ethan Hawke's King Aurvandill commands a powerful presence for his brief screentime, Hawke is a wonderful actor, who puts 100% into every role he plays, opposite him, Nicole Kidman plays Queen Gudrún, a multi-layered and complex character that she plays effortlessly. Willem Dafoe makes an appearance as court jester/he-witch Heimir the Fool, a role he absolutely knocks out of the park.

The Northman, like all Eggers films, is shot magnificently, Jarin Blaschke (who also collaborated with Eggers on his 2019 film The Lighthouse, as well as his directorial debut The Witch) does an incredible job at making you feel like you're in the middle of a village being raided, you can practically feel the bite of the cold in the wide-shots of the Icelandic landscape, simply put, the camera work is exhilarating and visceral. The visuals are a treat from start to finish, the epic shots of a smoky volcano, the incredible establishing shots of settlements and villages, and the trippy dream-sequence vision quests that occur more than once, are all delightful to spectate. Blaschke uses everything at his disposal to his advantage, colour, light and phenomenal framing bless our screens with pure movie magic.

Eggers manages to build a very gritty, realistic depiction of the dark ages, the production and sound design come together to transport the audience to a violent, cold, but very real 895AD, whose magnificent scope simply must be seen to be believed. The film is markedly an Egger's picture, with mysticism and surreal elements scattered throughout, but if anything, he's reined in some of his more Lovecraftian and horror-based inspirations, with The Northman being much more accessible to the everyday filmgoer than the surreal psychological cosmic-horror that was The Lighthouse. It's a bit of a shame, to me, the film absolutely thrives in these surreal scenes and is at its best in these scenes, and honestly, I wish he lent into them a little more.

The Northman is very well-paced and rarely dull, even its calmer scenes are stacked full of well-written character interactions and powerful performances, Claes Bang puts in an excellent shift as the villainous Fjölfnir, as does Gustav Lindh, who plays his son Thorir. One of the things I really liked about The Northman was how it portrayed a character who was almost completely selfish in his motivations, not driven to stop his Uncle because his Uncle was an evil man but driven entirely by his own revenge and personal grudges. The film explores this throughout, introducing elements that make Amleth and the audience question the moral absolutism of his quest. While this complexity is appreciated, it falls a tad flat by the film's conclusion.

Eggers has cemented himself as a visionary with his first two films, a master of substance and style, and The Northman deserves to stand amongst his stunning filmography. Overall though, it's in the third act of his Viking Epic that this substance begins to wear little thin, certain contrivances in the plot begin to arise and it feels like the film is plodding along to the next beat until we reach the (admittedly thrilling) climax. However, that is a small gripe compared to the pure majesty of the film, a visual marvel and an absolutely exhilarating ride, I'll be shocked if it doesn't adorn top ten lists at the end of the year.