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## SEEING *THE NORTHMAN* IN IRELAND

AS 2022 BEGINS, it seems that travel has returned, and so perhaps has cinema. For me, these two have always been intertwined. From my teenage days in the 1980s, when my friends and I drove up to Denver to see oddball films that would never make it to Colorado Springs, right on up to pre-COVID days, when (as I have written about in previous chronicles) I went as often as schedules and funds allowed to film festivals like Locarno (Switzerland) or New Directors / New Films (New York) in search of undiscovered material, cinema has been something I have always felt the need to *seek out*. Streaming has long promised to change this—to uncouple filmgoing from physical location—and the pandemic prompted studios, independents, and festivals alike to up their game and make this a reality. Over the past two years I have only set foot in a movie theatre twice (to see *Uncut Gems* in January 2020 and *The French Dispatch* in December 2021), but I felt like I was still able to keep up with world cinema, as I hope my chronicles from that period indicate. But in May 2022 I finally got back on an airplane and went to Ireland and England with my teenage son. It was in the first of these two countries that he insisted we see Robert Eggers' new film *The Northman* (2022).

We didn't go to a movie theatre as such. Throughout the trip we made a habit of having coffee or hot chocolate at the café in the Irish Film Institute, at whose archives I have done research at regular intervals since 1994 (and with whom I collaborated to bring to Halifax a program of newsreels about the Easter Rising, which we did to observe that event's centenary at the Halifax Public Library in 2016). In addition to a café and the country's central film archive, the Irish Film Institute is also home to three screening rooms whose exhibition program tries to balance Irish cinema with world cinema. So when the boyo, between sips of hot chocolate, spied the poster for *The Northman* on the wall, I hardly felt I could refuse. He had, after all, been a pretty good sport about all those bookstores I had insisted on linger-

ing in.

The experience of watching *The Northman* ended up being an odder one than I'd imagined. What, I wondered as we emerged from the spectacle, did it mean to see this film at the *Irish Film Institute*? In what way was it Irish? And what did it mean to see it at the Irish Film *Institute*? How could this be part of a basically educational mission to bring world cinema to Ireland, especially since the very same film was also playing at the Savoy—a commercial theatre on Dublin's O'Connell Street, which was a 15-minute walk away? The two answers, I believe, are connected to one another.

It's hard to imagine a movie more self-consciously Viking than *The Northman*. It tells the tale of the young prince Amleth (played as a child by Oscar Novak and as a young man by Alexander Skarsgård) exiled from his kingdom when his evil uncle Fjölfnir (Claes Bang) kills his noble father King Aurvandill (Ethan Hawke) and makes off with his beautiful mother Queen Gudrún (Nicole Kidman). The narrative is thus basically a Hamlet-adjacent family saga that centres on acts of warrior bravado and offers surprisingly detailed portraits of the everyday brutality of life in 9th and 10th century Scandinavia. It is incredibly, and at times comically, violent. It has a cameo from Björk (connected, no doubt, to the fact that it was co-written by Sjón, who has collaborated with Björk since their days in *The Sugar Cubes*). Even though the entire film is in English, its sections are divided by text written in runic script. It even concludes, for the love of Þór, with a confrontation before a lava-spewing Mount Hekla. How could any of this be Irish?

As it turns out, the film is Irish as hell (literally: the title card that opens that climactic volcano sequence reads "The Gates of Hel," alongside some runic text that I am quite incapable of parsing). That is to say, it is literally Irish inasmuch as it was shot almost entirely in Northern Ireland (those who stay to the last of the credits, which the aforementioned 15-year-old always makes a big deal of doing, will indeed see the logo of the funding body Northern Ireland Screen at the very end). Irishness is hiding elsewhere too. The priestess of the evil uncle Fjölfnir, not exactly a starring role but definitely not a bit part, is played by Olwen Fouéré, who is a difficult figure to explain. She has been in a handful of important films and television productions, but she is better-known in Ireland as a key figure in the experimental theatre world. These days her work is centred at *TheEmergencyRoom* in Galway, which is described on its website as "a necessary space" that was "created by Olwen Fouéré in 2009 for projects 'in need of immediate atten-

tion' and as a virtual holding space for the development of art-based ideas, relationships and performance contexts." Nobody who knows anything about performance in Ireland is ignorant of her work. Her presence encourages a viewer to pay attention to the ways in which the film is Irish (hm, this landscape seems awfully green and lush given that so much of it is supposed to be set in the famously lunar Iceland . . .), and *The Northman* thus does belong as part of the *Irish Film Institute's* exhibition program.

Fouréré's presence also leads the viewer to pay attention to the degree to which the film is, if not quite experimental, then at least *weird*. That's also true of *The Northman's* other "secret star": Willem Dafoe. Dafoe plays a comparably minor part that parallels Fouréré's character—namely, King Aurvandill's fool, who leads him and his young son through a quasi-religious ritual meant to bring out the wolflike spirits that supposedly lurk within them. Dafoe has been in a handful of very important experimental theatre pieces, such as *Brace Up!* (1993)—a play based on Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1900) that was staged by The Wooster Group, which Defoe helped to found in 1975. He is, of course, better known as a movie star, and nobody who knows anything about contemporary Hollywood cinema is ignorant of his work. His presence in *The Northman* really encourages a viewer to pay attention to the ways the film is weird (hm, that self-consciously excessive acting style on Dafoe's part really does set a tone of high artifice for this extravaganza . . .). *The Northman* certainly indulges in a great deal of macho spectacle, but this isn't *Conan the Barbarian* (despite what Eggers said about the inspiration of everyone's favourite Cimmerian in an interview with *Thrillist*). Rather, it's a hybrid of commercial action filmmaking and transnational coproduction models, one that recalls the 1970s and then 1990s heyday of Europudding (inasmuch as its stars come from all over the continent, and the production companies are a mishmash of American, British, and Scandinavian entities). Such co-productions have a long history of incorporating (sometimes crassly) elements of popular cinema with bits and bobs of more unconventional cinema. That's definitely an important part of the history of world cinema in the last third of the 20th century and, as we see here, the first third of the 21st as well. *The Northman* thus also belongs as part of the *Irish Film Institute's* exhibition program.

The real unresolved paradox of seeing *The Northman* at that fine institution lay in the space itself. Their website tells us that "the fine wooden benches in the IFI Cafe Bar are actually original pews saved during the

building's conversion from the Quaker meeting house" and that "Quaker worship has taken place on the site from the late 17th century right up to the present day as our next-door neighbours." Resolving the goriest and most violent film I have seen in a long time with the legacy of the most celebrated pacifists of them all shall have to be left to greater minds than mine.

None of my meditations about the significance of seeing a specific film in a specific place should obscure the degree to which the Irish Film Institute has actually been admirable for the gusto with which it has expanded its online offerings. The key resource on that front is the IFI Archive Player (located at [ifiarchiveplayer.ie](http://ifiarchiveplayer.ie)), which is the repository of a massive amount of Irish cinema, most of it utterly unknown to even the most serious and historically minded cinephiles. Indeed, the amount of material on offer can be a bit daunting, and so the way to start, really, is by going there and clicking on "Collections." There one finds 24 expertly curated groups of films, most of which are short and nearly all of which are fascinating. The "After '16" collection is a group of short films that respond to the aforementioned Easter Rising; Andrea Harkin's *The Party* (2016) is sensitive, nuanced, and violent—a kind of polar opposite of *The Northman*. The "Irish Adverts Project" offers a seemingly endless amount of insight into everyday Irish life from the 1960s-1980s, 15-50 seconds at a time. The collection of films about James Joyce, none of them longer than 20 minutes, should together be required viewing in this centenary year of *Ulysses* (1922). I don't know of a national film archive that has done a better job of showcasing in equal measure the breadth of its collection and the expertise of its archivists, all in a way that is easily accessible to a truly global viewership.