



Versailles' George Blagden: Monks, Vikings & Louis XIV

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Someone call the producers of Doctor Who. I've found a bona fide time-travelling actor. Whether he's knee-deep in warriors of the past, or thrust into an apocalyptic future, 26-year-old George Blagden is yet to find himself bang in the present. And he likes it that way.

Best known as doubting monk Athelstan in Vikings, he's about to hit our TV screens in Franco-Canadian collaboration Versailles. It's one of Europe's most costly dramas and no expense has been spared. The English and Canadian cast wear costumes fit for kings – which is apt. And George? He's playing a character he describes as the '17th Century Beyoncé'. Brace yourself for a rock and roll king.



So what is it like playing France's most flamboyant king?

A mixture of terrifying and exciting! I didn't have any idea quite how much of a brand Louis XIV is in France and other European countries - he's the 17th Century Beyoncé! He's so much bigger than what he achieved. When I landed in Paris for my first costume fitting I went into the toilets in Charles De Gaulle airport and all the wallpaper in the gents loo was his face. It's very odd how they revere him, especially now France is a Republic and very anti-monarchy. They seem to love what this man did for France. It's quite amazing really, what he ended up making France into – the centre of luxury. He was the inventor of lots of things we take for granted in today's culture – modern music, modern ballet. I have to keep forgetting about it, take the pressure off and just enjoy it.

Are there lots of French male actors baying for your blood right now? Furious that an Englishman is playing their idol?

There has been a lot of controversy in France about the show being shot in English. Someone explained it to me that it would be like the BBC filming a show about Winston Churchill here in the UK, and casting a French actor. A lot of us Brits would be like “What the Hell?!” But our show runner made a really good point – and I'm going to steal it – that if Louis were alive today he would have wanted it to be shot in English so that the most people throughout the world could see his story. That's what Versailles was – a palace that people from all over the globe would venture to simply to wonder at.

So how did you get into character?

I'm going to put my hand up for this one and say I have a lot of the work done for me! That happens a lot when you're doing something in a different time period - it's a process of going through hair, make-up and wardrobe to get into character. The level of detail is amazing – I have four wigs that I use in a season and each one costs about €5000. If I was sat in front of you now wearing one, you wouldn't believe it was a wig. Once you have that and five layers of immaculate costumes which have been made to measure and heeled shoes it really

transforms you. The simple act of wearing heels totally changes the way you stand and deport yourself. So many aspects of the character are spoon-fed to me from that.



Did you do lots of history homework?

When you're playing someone as iconic as Louis XIV you worry that you haven't done the mountains of research that you should have. I finished filming Vikings on Friday, flew to Paris on Saturday to get my hair and make-up tests, rehearsed on Sunday and filmed on Monday...

This sounds like a Craig David song...

Ha! Yes, it was a baptism of fire. I think our phenomenal writers saved my bacon hugely. I had four weeks while I was still filming Vikings to do as much research as I could, but I said to the guys, if you put me in a room on my own with all of the research you could give me for Louis XIV and I spent 10 weeks reading all of that I would still not have enough time. Plus with research, the more you do, the more you find, and the less you feel like you know. The fact we have a show runner who studied this period of history at Cambridge, and did his Masters on Louis XIV meant that the level of knowledge available was incredible.

Wow – the most qualified runner in the world!

Yes! And there's the other element of historical drama - the 'redacted history'. A lot of what we learn about Louis XIV is from the records he organised himself. He had a lot of historians at Versailles who wrote down his every movement from when he woke up, when he went to the loo, what he ate - he got to edit his own history.

Just like we do now on social media – posting what we're eating for breakfast on Instagram, un-tagging an unflattering photo on Facebook. Literally managing our public reputation?

Exactly! So we have the challenge of taking what we have factually and what was recorded from the time, and going "OK, well that's what Louis wanted us to think, but what was actually happening? What went on behind those closed doors that he didn't let the historians



see?” We can have fun with that and embellish it. That’s always the case with historical drama –finding that balance between being entertaining but not creating a totally fictional account of what happened.

And period drama is your thing isn't it – a bit of a niche?

I love existing in different time periods! My first job out of drama school was a role in a post-apocalyptic future. But I've never worked on anything that's present day. I'm terrified that now if I get cast in something current I'll think I'm not capable of existing in now!

And I'm guessing the jaunty moustache is something you've grown for the role...

Absolutely! When I auditioned I was still filming Vikings and had a huge long ponytail, an undercut and a big beard! I did one take, and I would love to know what Canal+ [the French channel co-producing the show] were thinking! I'd prefer to shave it off now, but I'd probably be sued!

Is it true its France's most expensive television period drama ever [costing over €30 million]?

I think so – it's certainly the most ambitious thing Canal+ has ever done. They want to prove to the world that they can compete with international television. What happens a lot is the European countries make great drama, and then the Americans come over and say "Let's do our own version of that and re-market it." That kept happening to Canal+ shows and they got sick of it, so they thought, "Right, let's shoot something in English with high production values that can compete with American programmes and show the world that France can do television just like America."

If not better!

It's an ambitious show, I think we just about get away with it...

Do you speak French?

I do. By total chance, my parents lived in France for about eight years and I went to boarding school here. My family lived in the middle of nowhere in Northern France – kind of like a



Northumberland equivalent – and they have a Northern French accent there too. So when I started shooting Versailles and talking French to the crew it was really weird. It would be like a French actor coming over here and him speaking in a Geordie accent! I've just about got rid of it now!

It's quite a sexy production isn't it?

It is quite steamy. I had a long talk with the producers about that element of the show when I started and I was keen for it not to become one of those historical dramas that is just about the sex scenes. But it became clear that it would be impossible to tell this story without that element. A lot of how people climbed the political ladder at court in Versailles was through sexual interactions with the nobles and the ladies of court. It was really a way of debating and arguing your point. It was such a big part of the court at the time, it would be impossible to do the show without it. I hope that by the end of season one people will see that a lot of the plot and character development is driven by those scenes and it's not just like, "Character A needs some release now, so he's going to go and find a whorehouse."

Like, "We've not had a nipple shot for 20 minutes, better stick one in?"

Exactly! It's about how characters manipulate and are manipulated by sexual potency in one another. We're portraying that aspect of his court and how hungry he was. A lot of the women in court elevate their status through that. I'm waiting for an onslaught of how anti-feminist the show is, but that's what happens when you do a show in a different time period, you have to deal with these different social norms. So in answer to your first question – yes, it's steamy!

Sex and power never get old. So if you were king for the day in London what would you do?

I would insist that everyone breaks for two minutes and hugs each other at lunch time. This character is the first one I've done that just feels so far away from me. I think if I ever had to deal with power my tiny mind would implode!



Does it help you or hinder you to be so different from your character in real life?

It's interesting when you are playing something that's so far from you because you get to put it on like a coat and it frees you up. You have the confidence because you know you're not presenting you. With Vikings I came from British drama school, and I'd done all this

character work and research, and when I got on set the producers said “Just be you.” I find that harder when people want you to just bring yourself to a role, nothing else.

It must have been very different to playing a monk in Vikings?

They're very similar in that they're both international co-productions [Vikings was a Irish-Canadian collaboration and Versailles a Franco-Canadian collaboration]. It felt like moving from one office block to another – the building has the same amount of storeys, both have a lift... But they could not be more different worlds and more different crews and culture. As an actor it's important to completely shake-up the norm – go from wearing leather boots, lots of fur and an axe and shield and rolling around in the mud in Irish countryside to wearing high heels and trotting down the La Galerie des Glaces [the hall of mirrors] in Versailles. It's the best job in the world!

Vikings has a big fan base. Have you amassed lots of screaming girl fans?

Not screaming girl fans – I play the one character who isn't very masculine and beardy and Viking-y!

He's a bit more of an intellectual?

Or dweeb! One of the two words! My character had an amazing journey – going from being a very religious devout monk to being a Viking who kills people in battle. It was a very big story arc.

Did your Instagram and Twitter accounts suddenly jump in followers?

When I first started using Twitter it was just a few of my mates following me, then I got cast in Les Misérables and that was a big jump! I woke up one morning and had loads of followers. I'm quite vocal and I like talking to people on social media, I like connecting and talking to people who write messages to me. It's interesting when you're talking to a group of 1000 people what changes when that becomes 10,000 and then 20,000. I always try to think

of the number represented in match-sticks, and imagine lining up 20,000 matchsticks and trying to speak to them. It's quite disconcerting – and it's a shame because you start looking at that number as a number rather than people. And the more people that become interested in what you're doing, the more negativity that seems to arise from it. Talking to other actors in the industry it's always very surprising for people when they get negative energy sent their way and it shuts them down. I'm desperately trying to fight against that and carry on communicating.

How do you deal with negative social comments?

I like reading it because it's a bit boring if it's all just praise. Sometimes I reply to it. But I cannot stand conflict – I'm one of those people who will never get into an argument. If someone wants something and is pushy about it I'll just let them have it! It's not the best personality trait – I should find some backbone from somewhere! Often when I've replied to negative stuff people are shocked that I've engaged with them. It's like people think Twitter is a video diary where you voice an opinion and don't think that anyone is at the other end.

Your Vikings death scene in your pants was quite something. Was it as much fun as it looked?

It was quite bitty to film – with lots of different characters coming together from different places and culminating in me being killed. It turned out well, but it's never great to get an axe to the face!

Did you shed a tear when your character died?

No, I shed some blood! He'd become a martyr and was ready to face his demise. I'm looking forward to Season 4.

**You mentioned Les Misérables, what was that like to work on?**

It was just so amazing I'm speechless. At drama school I was always labelled as 'that one who can sing'. In the final year of drama school when you're getting put into different productions, my role was saved for the musical at the end of the year. A lot of people thought that I would end up in the West End. But before I got the opportunity to do that I left drama school early to go and do an independent American film. It was a big choice at the time because I thought I was going to work with my voice, then someone gave me the opportunity to go to Indonesia for the summer and work on a film and it was really hard to refuse.

That took me down the film route, and after a few years of that this audition came up for Les Mis and it was like the perfect project that married my love of working on camera and my old skill-set of being able to sing. I just told my agent “I’m going to be in this whatever – even if I’m a background artist!” The auditioning process was amazing – there were four or five auditions and I was told that for Eddie Redmayne’s character, Marius, it was between himself and me. At that point the director asked me if I’d like to play Grantaire, one of the other students. I had no idea at the time that that had happened. I entered into this world – it was all of the big named billed actors ‘and George Blagden’. My sister took a screen shot of an IMDB page that listed the seven Hollywood A-List stars and me underneath them! That was a moment when I just thought ‘It doesn’t get better than this.’

Are you still in contact with Eddie?

I’m not unfortunately – I would love to be. The nature of this job is that you work on things and get close to people and you then go off and create new ‘families’ on different jobs. I don’t even know if he’d remember who I was now! You know, I think he was the person I learnt the most from on that job. I was cast for my role in Vikings during my last few weeks filming Les Mis and Eddie came to me and congratulated me on getting the role, and sat with me for half an hour giving me advice on doing television. Some really good life long lessons that I’ll never forget. I’d love to work with him again.

You sing, can you play loads of instruments too?

I can play two or three chords on the guitar to accompany myself that’s about it. I’m not going to be in an orchestra any time soon!

If you could choose your next role would it be TV, theatre or film?

A musical which was filmed, with lots of TVs around it!

Quickfire round - egg and chips or boiled egg and tofu?

Egg and chips

Night at the opera or afternoon at a football match?

Opera

Snowboarding down a mountain or watching The Jump from the safety of your sofa?

Snowboarding

If you hadn't been an actor you'd have been...

A soldier – I've always had an affiliation with the military. A large part of being an actor is following orders, and following them well, and I think there's a part of my personality that excels at that.

What would you be doing now if you weren't here?

Having a cup of tea with my girlfriend in Borough Market.

Marmite – love it or hate it?

Love it

What did you dream about last night?

Hmmm. Water skiing barefoot! I don't know where though – in an endless mass of water.

The last thing you did that scared you?

Yesterday, I was on set in Versailles and I heard really loud close gun-fire. I thought something was going down. I went to the window and looked out into the car-park and it turned out they were filming a war scene for an action movie set in Afghanistan 50 metres from the dressing room. That shook me up a bit.

Who would play you in a film of your life?

I want to say James McAvoy but I'd never be able to afford him. I'm a huge fan of his.

Tell me something about yourself I'd never guess...

I had an extra bone growing out of the sides of my feet as a child and had to have them removed when I was 13.

Like spurs?

Yeah – kind of like spurs. They developed in puberty and as a result my feet are pretty deformed and I try to hide them as best as possible.

So no foot-modelling for you?

No foot-modelling. Well, maybe as Gollum in the prequel to Lord of the Rings but apart from that no.

Catch George playing Louis XIV in 'Versailles' Wednesdays, 9.30pm, BBC 2

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