

Interview: George Blagden Talks 'Vikings' Season 2, Athelstan's Journey, What's Coming Up & More

By Patrick Munn | March 23, 2015 - 5:05 pm | [0 Comments](#)

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After a wait of some eight months, Vikings returns to History UK with its second season later this week.

The Michael Hirst created drama which follows the exploits of Viking hero Ragnar Lothbrok (Travis Fimmel), quickly established itself as a hit for History UK when it debuted last May and with a third season already commissioned, there are a lot more adventures ahead for the Vikings on the show.

But just what will the show's 10 episode second season bring? To get the bottom of that question, TVWise recently interviewed Les Misérables alum George Blagden, who plays tortured monk Athelstan on the MGM Television produced drama.

In the below interview, we cover a wide range of topics, including what's in store for everyone's favourite monk, what fans can expect from this latest run of episodes, what it's like shooting on location in Ireland and much more.

TVWise: For anyone who might have missed the show when the first season was airing, how would you describe Vikings?

George Blagden: Vikings is a brand new way of looking at this amazing race of people who lived 1000 years ago. They've got kind of a bad press before; of being this kind of barbaric people who carved their way across Northern Europe. But what Michael Hirst has done with this show is shed a new light on this very interesting, fascinating group of people who were quite amazing really, very technologically advanced and very very human. I think if people haven't seen the show in season one, they should. What they'll see is a new way of looking at these people and a very modern, human and entertaining show.

TVWise: What can you tell us about your character?

George Blagden: Athelstan is, in my opinion, one of the most interesting characters (I'm probably biased!). He is an Anglo-Saxon monk who, in the first few episodes, is captured by the Vikings on their first raid West to England. He's captured and taken back to Scandinavia, back to Kattegat, where Ragnar Lothbrok and his family live. He becomes a slave of Ragnar Lothbrok in this new completely alien world. For me, it's so interesting playing this character because I get to be the medium between both cultures – the Anglo Saxon world and the Pagan world. Watching his journey as a character progress and how he tries to survive through season one is one of the most interesting things I've done in this job so far. Going into season two, how he then becomes very much a Viking was also very challenging and interesting to play.

TVWise: Athelstan has had an interesting journey; going from the captive to slowly being accepted by the Vikings towards the end of the first season, is there more change ahead for him?

George Blagden: There is – plenty more change for him. As Michael [Hirst] says, Athelstan is the character that never stops changing. In season two he doesn't stop changing. You see a man very early on in season two who is seemingly very at home in this new culture, this new Viking culture. He appears to have become completely Viking and bought into their way of life, which results in him actually travelling back to England on a raid with them. So who knows what will happen to him in England, but, yes, he's a very changeable man.

TVWise: Late in the first season, Athelstan was shown to be very much conflicted especially at the festival. Do you think he will ever be able to let go of his Christianity and fully assimilate into his new surroundings?

George Blagden: That's a good question. I keep using words like "seemingly at home in Kattegat" and "he appears to be ok" – I think the point is that the most interesting characters are the ones with have huge conflict and Athelstan is certainly one of those characters. I think it would be very uninteresting to watch Athelstan's journey if he suddenly decided everything was completely ok and that he had bought into this Viking lifestyle.





TVWise: You've had some great scenes in the show, what's it like working with such a good cast?

George Blagden: It's amazing, the cast is just very very different. Everyone is very very different. Every time you come to do a new scene with a new character, and therefore a new actor, you're having a very different experience with each actor. They're all very brave actors as well. It's amazing, as someone who's just staring out in the industry, to work with actors like that who are very brave, because you feel very safe with stuff that you're trying to do and how you're trying to tell this story. You feel you're in a very safe environment when you see actors opposite you taking risks. It kind of pushes you to be the best you can be as well.

TVWise: What else can fans expect from the second season of Vikings?

George Blagden: A lot more of what they've already seen and some they haven't. There's a lot of changes for their favourite characters. I know everyone loves the character Floki, and you'll see him go on a very psychological change through season two. Athelstan, similarly, goes on huge changes – some that he chooses to go on and some that he really doesn't. Athelstan is put in some situations that might be quite uncomfortable for viewers to watch and they were quite amazing for me to try and act, as well. I think some people will be very very surprised by the plot twists in season two.

TVWise: In some respects, do you think that Athelstan is the manifestation of the audience – being the outsider that needs things explained to him?

George Blagden: Yeah, absolutely. We discovered half way through season one that Michael really discovered how to use Athelstan as that sort of plot device. In being able to show, not only his own conflict between these two cultures, but also to the audience the differences between them. He really did become the audience's eyes in season one; discovering this new scary way of life of the Vikings. I purposefully didn't do a lot of research on the Vikings, from Michael's advice, because I would spend a whole season sitting listening to Norse tales and tales about all of the Viking gods.

TVWise: Vikings is shot in Ireland – as is another show it tends to be compared to, Game of Thrones – what is it like shooting on location?

George Blagden: It's incredible, it's just amazing the locations in Ireland. When we said that we were going to Ireland in the start of season one, I thought "Why on earth are we going to Ireland to shoot something that's set in Scandinavia?" And then you get there and you realise it's full of the most amazing scenery. This area 30 KM south of Dublin, the Wicklow Mountains – sometimes referred to as the garden of Ireland – is just full of the most amazing scenery. These massive valleys in the middle of a mountain range, filled with lakes and rivers and forests. It's gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous and very easily puts you in the part of "Oh, I'm in a very very ancient rural landscape".



TVWise: Historical drama is a particularly popular genre at the moment, what do you think it is that sets Vikings apart from the rest of the pack, so to speak?

George Blagden: I think that what makes Vikings so exciting is that it's managed to be very very entertaining as well as being very much rooted in history. I think it's very hard to get the balance right between keeping the historical accuracy and making sure you're producing a show that is entertaining. I think what Michael has done with these scripts is make sure that people want to come back and watch it every week. He's writing characters you want to be invested in and he's writing storylines for those characters that are interesting and cliff-hangery at the end of every episode. It's a show you feel part of and you're not watching it from arms length, you're not an objective observer; you really feel like you're experiencing what it's like to be part of a Viking community when you watch the show. Ultimately, I think people keep watching the show because they feel invested in the characters and the story.

Vikings season two premieres on HISTORY UK on Tuesday March 24th at 10pm.