

George Blagden

On History and Beyond

A trend is in the air and I think it's catching on for the betterment of TV. History. It may not all be factual, but there is something fascinating about having a glimpse into worlds from decades and centuries past. The History Channel is at the forefront of the genre which tells the tales of times long ago. First they aired *HATFIELDS & MCCOYS*, a true story about the legendary family feud, which launched a war between Kentucky and West Virginia in the late 19th century. Not only did the show win multiple Emmys, but it was the most-watched entertainment telecast in the history of basic cable. Now HISTORY is hoping for more success with *VIKINGS*. Its premiere night brought 18 million viewers. Based on an actual historical figure, Ragnar Lothbrok, the story follows his

band of Viking brothers as he rises to become the King of his people. He is determined to discover and conquer new worlds across the seas. Ragnar and his army will kill anyone who stands in their path. But out of all of the bloodshed, one man is given the chance to survive: Athelstan, the monk played by newcomer George Blagden. The British-born actor gives a gripping performance to be remembered. Before stepping in front of the camera, he mostly trained on the stage in London, where he attended at the prestigious Guildhall Drama School, which has seen the likes of alumni from Daniel Craig to Ewan McGregor and Joseph Feinnes. For the past couple of years, the 23 year-old has been through a whirlwind of excitement experiencing the

jumpstart of his career. After appearing in *WRATH OF THE TITANS*, George got lucky. He was able to combine his love for musicals and film when he was cast as Grantaire in the Academy Award winning *Les Miserables*. After following his serious role on *VIKINGS*, I am sure that this is the part that will put him on Hollywood's radar for good. George sat down with LATF to discuss his love for history, what it's like to portray a monk, and where we'll see him next.

Out of all the savage characters in *VIKINGS*, yours is the most innocent. What did you first think when you read the role of Athelstan?

What I found really exciting is that Athelstan was seemingly the outsider, the one character who

is so different to everyone else in the show and that he managed to integrate himself within their society. The character is so different from everyone else on the show. I'm definitely not the only person who's not savage. I think that's probably what people will take away from this show most over the first few weeks, how these people are not savage at all, and what Michael (Hirst, the creator), has tried to do in this series is show the real human aspect of the Vikings.

I would imagine it wasn't easy for you to relate to being a monk. Did you give yourself a history lesson on the time the show takes place in?

I'm a big one for research and learning all about what your character's background is and everything, so I actually asked if I





could go to Lindisfarne Island off the coast of Northumberland in pre-production weeks, and I did. It was just amazing being there for a couple of days—to take in that landscape and to see the world in which Athelstan grew up. And, you may say I don't have much of a connection or I might not be able to know really what it was like to be an Anglo-Saxon monk, but when I first got on set Michael asked me, 'Where did you go to school?' and I said, 'I went to boarding school at age 7,' and he said, 'That's so perfect. Just bring so much of that part of yourself to the role because it's very similar to how Athelstan grew up in this isolated community.'

Are you religious? I'm sure not as much as Athelstan.

That's the point, right. Athelstan is so, so devout in his religion. The whole society at Lindisfarne is an all-male society. You are a servant of your faith and I think it's very rare in the multicultural society we have nowadays to find examples of religion as devout as that and as extreme as what these Anglo-Saxon monks were doing, imprisoned, almost, on this island. And so it's very hard to relate to in modern day society.

I'm curious about the dialect. Everyone seems to have a faint English accent. What was the direction for that?

Well, for me, it was 'please use your own voice.' I guess I was lucky in that respect in that I didn't have to do the hours of dialect training that everyone else did, because it's a very specific dialogue that the Vikings are do-

ing. It's not quite modern Norwegian or Swedish or Scandinavian, it's kind of what professors of ancient language that evolved into this sort of accent that Poll (Moussoulides), our dialogue coach, was training them on. I think the idea of it is just to make it sound non-Western. You'll hear lots of characters speaking Old Norse, and I myself speak ancient Anglo-Saxon a couple of times in the show and so that was great. I mean, what kind of job do you get to do where you learn a new language?

Where do you shoot the show?

We shot in Ireland in brand new studios in Ashford, which is about 40 km south of Dublin, and then the surrounding landscape around Ashford, which is the Wicklow Mountains. If you've not been, or don't know about them, you have to look them up, because they're just so dramatic and gorgeous. When I was told we were going to be filming in Ireland, I kind of thought, 'Where are all of the Scandinavian fjords in Ireland? Why are we going to Ireland to film a TV show about Vikings?' And then we got to the Wicklow Mountains, and I was quite wrong.

You don't need any special effects for that.

Yeah. It was amazing.

When your character's captured, his entire world is turned upside down. With all of the temptations, he remains devoted to his faith. Do you think or know if he will break out of his religious barrier?

I will say that, like I said, Athelstan is the outsider in this community, this very daunting,





strange, alien, pagan community, and he's the only person in that society who sticks out like a sore thumb. In having to try and integrate in this society, he will have to change for survival, so yes, carry on watching is all I can say.

The Viking characters are so savage. The series really shows how they had barely any regard for women.

But the other interesting aspect of the show is that, really, women were very equal in society and hopefully you'll get to see that through the character of Lagertha, which Katheryn (Winnick) had so much fun playing. You see her relationship with Ragnar (Lothbrok) and how they are life companions. It's not about this Viking warrior with his wife who looks after the kids at home. She's a shieldmaiden; she's a 'warrioress.'

She's a heroine.

Yeah. She's just as hardened in battle as he is, so yeah, again, something else that I think people will learn is that they weren't raping and pillaging psychopaths.

There is clearly a demand for these types of shows about moments in history. What do you hope for the future of VIKINGS?

I hope to turn 30 and be on the set of Vikings in seven years from now. *(laughs)* No, I really hope that the show does well and that we get to go back to Ireland year after year, because it was like a five month summer camp filming that. It was just magical, with a fantastic group of people to work with, like the crew, which

is so incredible. I think people, hopefully, will watch the show and the demand will be there, because like you said, historical fiction is something that I think people love because we don't get a chance to run around with axes and shields in modern society nowadays. We can't walk up Wilshire in Viking getup.

Some people do on Hollywood Boulevard.

(laughs) I'm sure some people probably do.

But it's a fantasy.

Yeah, and I think that's why people are drawn to historical fiction, because they get to experience other parts of history that they may not have otherwise thought of or learned about it.

You started out on the stage and in musicals and are fairly new to the silver screen. How was your experience mixing both song and screen in Les Misérables?

Overwhelmingly amazing, really. It was new to everyone. I'm just starting out, like you say, and I've been extremely lucky to have done the things that I've done in the last 18 months. On the set of Les Mis, it was that moment where you realize that you're on set with Mr. Hugh Jackman, Mr. Russell Crowe, and Anne Hathaway. And actually with all the people that you're working with in a scene, everyone's attempting something new, which kind of weirdly bonds you all in a really creative way. In the recording of live vocals, you really get to create energies in scenes that you otherwise would just not have been able to do. If you want to take a moment halfway through



a singing line to connect in some way with the person that you're singing opposite, you can, and the fifty-piece orchestra that is in the studio will follow you, and so the result is very affecting. It hits you when you watch it because you're seeing raw emotions right there in front of you.

Did you think it was going to be as big as it turned out to be?

I mean, I was a Les Mis diehard fan since I was a child, but I had no idea about the worldwide support it had and the ecstatic fandom that it has created with all of its love and support. I think when you do something new, like how History is attempting very original and new with Vikings, it's very exciting because you don't know the format and you don't know how things are

going to pan out. No one really knew whether this whole live singing thing was going to be a success. You just don't know until you take that risk and you make that leap of faith, and let people see it. It was quite nerve-racking to start with, but I like it. I like being a part of things that are original and haven't been done before.

What kind of project would you like to be a part of that you haven't done yet?

I've always said that I'd really love to be a Pixar animation character. I find animation really fascinating and I love Pixar films. Whenever I go to watch them, I always think it must be such an interesting challenge for an actor to just act through their voice, really. I know animation's

come such a long way, and I'm sure that a lot of the animation features that happen now have motion capture face recognition, I see things like Tintin where all the facial expressions are done with these 750 cameras, or whatever around the actor's face, so I know it's not all through the face, but it would be really interesting.

Have you done voice over work?

No, never. I'd love to. Who knows, maybe I could read the Vikings' audio book.

The Viking cartoon? Tell me about The Philosophers. I watched the trailer, and it has a really interesting premise.

Yeah, it was my first job out of drama school, and it's a very, very interesting concept. Basic-

ly the whole action of the film is a one hour philosophy class, 20 philosophy students and their teacher, and he asks them to engage with these thought experiments in which they imagine themselves in certain situations debating big philosophical issues. The thought experiment that we engage in in the film is an apocalyptic world where there is a bunker where 10 of the 20 of us get to survive in the bunker in the event of a nuclear fallout, and we have to decide which 10 of us, based on skill sets that we're given, would be allowed to go and live in the bunker. It kind of starts out as something maybe like The History Boys or Dead Poet's Society, but it goes into psychological thriller.

When is it coming out?

I know it's just been to the Berlin Film Festival, and it had some great reviews there and did really well, apparently. Fingers crossed for theatrical release this year, it's a great film.

Just for fun, can you tell us something that nobody knows about you, or something that your fans don't know that you would like to reveal?

Unfortunately for me, I've shot myself in the foot, really, because whenever anyone asks anything about me on Twitter, I respond and tell them.

Do you plan to make L.A. home one day?

I can definitely see myself living here at some point in my life with this kind of weather. Someone said, 'It only rains three days a year' or something bizarre.

Where's your favorite place to hang out in Los Angeles?

Believe it or not, I've been here three times now, and I've never been up Runyon Canyon and I went for the first time a few days ago. There are places in the world where people say, 'You gotta go! Everyone goes, you gotta go up Runyon Canyon!' and you think, 'Okay, well everyone said I've gotta go to Runyon Canyon.' Then you get there and you completely understand. You're like, 'Okay, wow' and

'Why haven't I come here before?' It's just a great thing to do, and it's got this environment of bonding with people going for a hike together.

It's our selling point!

Yeah! And the views are amazing.

Watch the video interview [HERE](#) and don't miss George on Sunday nights at 10/9C on HISTORY. www.history.com/shows/vikings

