



AT PLAY IN THE FIELDS OF ODIN: SHOOTING

BEOWULF

By LESLEY KRUEGER

The scene is set at the top of an Icelandic mountain. This isn't fog. You're inside cloud, and the rain is blowing horizontally, the wind rising. Knowing it can blast 180 km/hr up here, you retreat to the mead hall – a Scandinavian longhouse built like the upturned hull of a Viking ship. Slipping inside, you find it's already sheltering two or three dozen people who seem to have come from a couple of different eras. Chain mail mixes with Gore-Tex as they mill around, working, chatting, coughing sometimes from the smoky fires.

Things go quiet. A group of tall, well-armed warriors drifts toward the centre of the hall. Others shuffle out of their way, letting the warriors take their places on the wooden benches and chairs. Where they're sitting, it's now AD 600. The warriors' chain mail glints in the firelight. Swords are laid aside as they slump into their seats, drowsy, quiet, falling asleep.

"Beowulf! What's that?"

The call comes from a tall blond Viking in jeans: director Sturla Gunnarsson.

A dark-haired man stirs in his chair. Beowulf – now you recognize Gerard Butler – leans forward and frowns at the double doors of the mead hall.

"Yeah, there's something at the fucking door," Gunnarsson says.

Beowulf stands warily. Throughout the mead hall, warriors rouse themselves just as silently. "Time to get on those helmets. Better grab those weapons," Gunnarsson says. "Gerry and the Pacemakers – time to get up."

Sword drawn, Beowulf walks softly toward the door, his warriors falling in around him.

"Beowulf in front. You're heading for that door." Suddenly, Gunnarsson claps his hands. "Hear that? Fuck! There really is something out there. You look at each other. You get those weapons ready, ready... Now rush that door!"

Roaring, the warriors run for the door. Then stop. "Thank you, gentlemen. We'll try that again," says first assistant director Wendy Orde, who's been watching the rehearsal closely. "Please try not to spear each other or small ADs. And Sturla? Can you stand over here? I'm looking for an upgrade, but not on this picture."

We're on location with *Beowulf and Grendel*, a \$17-million co-production that's one of the highest-budget Canadian flicks in history, and the biggest movie ever made in Iceland. Written by Andrew Rai Berzins, produced in Canada by Paul Stephens and Eric Jordan, and directed by the multi-award-winning Gunnarsson, the intimate epic focuses on Beowulf's early adventures, when he battled the troll, Grendel. Its lead, Gerard Butler, is the rising Scottish star who most recently scored in the indie hit *Dear Frankie*. He's joined by Swedish master Stellan Skarsgard, Canada's limpid Sarah Polley and the actor whom Gunnarsson describes as Iceland's Robert De Niro, Ingvar Sigurdsson.

Beowulf is, of course, the first poem in the Old English language, an oral tale written down sometime between the late-seventh-century AD and the year 1000. But it's really a Norse saga. The historic Beowulf was a Geat, a high-born member of a Dark Ages tribe living in southwestern Sweden. He and his band of Viking warriors sailed off to Daneland – Denmark – to aid the Danish king Hrothgar. Hrothgar's people were under attack from some big mother of an adversary who's come down to us as a troll, Grendel. Beowulf and Grendel did battle. The rest is history, myth – and shockingly modern.

"On a certain level, it's a ripping yarn, a campfire tale," Gunnarsson says, back home in Toronto after the difficult shoot. "It's got a prototypical hero-quest story that's embedded in practically every film we've ever seen. It's a John Ford movie, or a Kurosawa movie."

Gunnarsson leans forward on the sofa, a glass of red wine in his hand. "So you take that," he says, "and you ask how it's relevant today. That's where it gets really exciting, because you examine the idea 'What is a hero?'"

You've got a warrior who heads overseas to fight what he thinks is a religious war. And he finds himself in the middle of a blood feud. – Gunnarsson



Beowulf
Sturla Gunnarsson
(Canada, 2005)



What is a villain?' And if you look at the genesis of *Beowulf*, you come up against the fact that the Norsemen who first told the story were pagans. In their sagas, the heroes were complicated and the villains even more interesting. But when it was written down 300 years later, the writer was a Christian caught up in the idea of a good hero who battles the son of Cain.

"So you put it back in the original environment, in a pagan universe, and ask, 'What if the troll wasn't a supernatural creature, but one ruled by the laws of nature?' Then it becomes a tribal tale of blood feuds. And what happens? You've got a warrior who heads overseas to fight what he thinks is a righteous war. And he finds himself in the middle of a blood feud, and nothing is as simple as it seems."

Nothing is at all simple on the shoot. Iceland's weather constantly threatens to overwhelm the production. The film is being shot on the south coast during the island's spectacularly unstable autumn, its headquarters located in the tiny town of Vík, a two-and-a-half hour drive from Iceland's capital, Reykjavik. And just as scripting *Beowulf*'s quest gets perceptions flowing back and forth between past and present, the roaring weather enters the film and changes everything.

Arriving on the mountaintop, you find the mead hall surrounded by persuasively dingy hovels, where peasants evidently live with their sheep and small, shaggy ponies under one inadequate roof. As the filmmakers work 14-hour days, windblown, soaked to the skin, it's obvious that the conditions are a lesson to both cast and crew about how nasty, brutish and short life really was in those Dark Age hovels, and how tough people had to be to survive.

This look of elemental extremity ends up permeating the film. Gunnarsson can't stop shooting in bad weather, since there's little else, so he makes a virtue of necessity, letting the wind narrow *Beowulf*'s eyes as he speaks and frame his carefully-scarred face with long, whipping hair. The peasant/extras huddle together convincingly in the rain. A line of warriors emerges like wraiths from the dense mist, and when a volcano erupts nearby – they have to contend with that, too – Gunnarsson shoots the warriors against the bloody sunsets

so their chain mail gleams like battle.

Base camp is blown away by a 180 km/hr gale. Winds overturn an entire row of production vehicles parked along a black volcanic road. Four actors standing in a row are all picked up by one strong gust and put down three feet away, still in the same row.

Gerard Butler: "This, of anywhere on the planet, is one of the most primal landscapes I've ever been to. The wind doesn't blow, it washes your equipment away. I've been working in the hardest conditions I've ever worked in. It instills something in you – the feeling that we're not like this anymore."

Stellan Skarsgard: "The weather becomes an actor – a good and strong actor that gives energy to a scene, even if it does make it harder to be subtle. I'm not pulling up the theatre deliberately, but my theatrical background kicks in when I have to work not to be upstaged by the wind and rain and nature. So I don't mumble in this one."

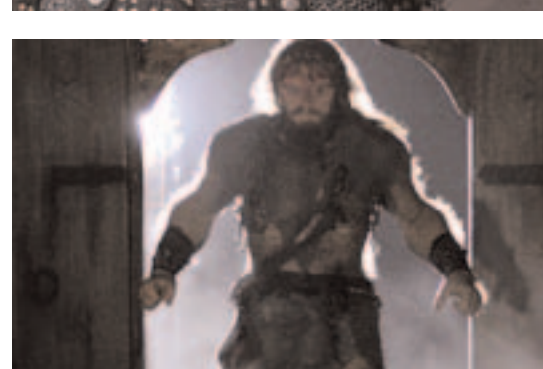
None of this is by design. *Beowulf and Grendel* was originally scheduled to shoot from June to August, during Iceland's mild summer of near 24-hour sun. But as a Canada-Iceland-U.K. co-production, the film is funded by four or five agencies in each of the three countries. Juggling their different, often competing, requirements led to a series of complex, interactive delays.

"In the end, the financing didn't close until three weeks after production," Gunnarsson says, months later. "Throughout the production, it was a little bit like riding around on a drunk three-legged elephant, hoping that you didn't crash. If you don't have cash flow, everything gets more expensive."

"When you're standing beside the north Atlantic and your base camp has blown away, and your actors are stuck on a boat and not even the safety people can get to them, [then] who gets what part, Toronto or London, is irrelevant. Yet it also governs your life."

Despite this, the multinational nature of the production ends up feeding the content almost as much as the weather. *Beowulf* is set during the so-called Age of Migration, when Vikings founded both Dublin and Kiev, and ventured as far afield as Baghdad. As costume designer Debra Hanson points out, Buddhas have been found in Viking-era Icelandic graves. With actors recruited from the Canada, Iceland and the European Union, there's a cacophony of voices on set. Yet Gunnarsson has decided not to homogenize the production by using plummy stage English, hoping instead to suggest the polyglot nature of *Beowulf*'s time through the use of different accents.

On camera, Butler speaks in his Scottish brogue, Skarsgard in dry Swedish-accented English, while many of the Vikings give voice to regional Brit, Welsh, Scots inflections and a



mad Christian missionary, Brendan – Berzins' invention – is unquestionably Oirish [Marc: *italics? is this on purpose?*].

Only Sarah Polley, Gunnarsson notes wryly, speaks without an accent.

It's the same with crew – although in this case, Gunnarsson faces the problem of getting three different film cultures to mesh. "You have to cast your crew right," he says. "No one can work the way they're used to working. Everyone has to change a little to click."

During the day, the formal politesse of your classic set keeps the production machinery ticking. You hear it as the crew dresses the mead hall for a post-battle scene:

Canuck: "How are we doing on body parts, please?"

Brit: "We're doing grite body-pots-wise." With a rumble, the smoke machine spews out a dense cloud.

Canuck: "I need wafting in the middle of the hall. Can someone waft please?"

Icelander: "Check. Wafting."

In the corner, a multi-accented crowd of women giggle about someone's plan to make a move on Gerry Butler (who, for the record, is single). For a moment, an Icelander looks uncomprehending. Then she gets it. "A hunt. You're going on a hunt. I luf a hunt!"

Yet at night, most people stick with their homeboys to chew familiar bones. In the dining hall, you hear the Brits at one table bitching about the grueling hours. A Canadian stands up to complain about indoor smoking. Meanwhile, the Icelanders look at both the Brits and Canadians as if they're crazy, and order another round of beer.

"It's not the best way to make a film," Gunnarsson admits. "But it's also the only way to make an independent film of any scale."

Yet why make it in Iceland? Okay, you need co-production money, but the delay in getting it brings the weather down hard. Why not shoot somewhere else?

Answer number one: Iceland is stunning. It's unlike anything you've ever seen—a volcanic landscape deeply riven by glaciers. On the southern coast, the mountains fall abruptly onto grassy coastal plains that give, in turn, onto black sand deltas receding out to sea. Waterfalls tumble off the mountains, long silver ribbons overarched by rainbows. Geothermal steam vents miscellaneously from meadows, geysers erupt, the grassy, sheep-cropped landscape is punctuated with extinct volcanic cones containing perfectly round turquoise lakes.

You see hardly any trees, just a handful of dwarf willows. But there's all manner of heather and lichen and moss growing on the volcanic crags. Just down from the mead hall, in a place the crew calls Grendel's Valley, the moss is so thick on the hillside, it hangs like folds of skin off a bulldog – off the belly of a

woman who's just given birth. To get here, you need a four-wheel drive to ford a river that constantly changes course. Icebergs float in a nearby lagoon. Black swans swim offshore.

Culturally, Iceland was settled by Vikings around AD 860, and years of isolation mean the language remains almost identical to the Old Norse that *Beowulf* spoke. Icelanders can still read the famous Sagas in the original (try reading *Beowulf* in Old English) and Gunnarsson says he came here, in part, hoping to tie into the culture of adventure and innovation that continues to define the island.

Gerry Butler: "I've never been so charmed with a country, with the landscape and the people as I am in Iceland. It really speaks to my soul. I get such an energy from this place, from this landscape. There's a whole bunch of boiling, raging energy and force right underneath the surface, and I feel it filters through and comes right into you."

"And the people too. They're poetic and philosophical and crazy. They love to drink, to get fucked up, and the women are just as strong as the men. They're cool; there's no game-playing. They retain their femininity – you see it in their faces and eyes – but they're strong. They're alive."

Answer number two: Gunnarsson was born in Iceland, and while he came to Vancouver with his parents at age six, he spent many of his childhood holidays on the island, and worked on a fishing boat one summer after university off the southern coast. He's fluent in Icelandic, even though he speaks English with as little accent as Sarah Polley.

And so, Gunnarsson says, he's long been drawn to the story of *Beowulf* as the place where his Norse and Anglo cultures briefly met. He's also spent his career hoping to make a film in Iceland. Almost five years ago, these two preoccupations began to coalesce around Andrew Berzins' script.

Then he started shooting.

"Every day I thought: 'What was I thinking?'" he says, back in Toronto. "But it's perverse. The more horrible it became, the more beautiful it became. Being out in the elements is so energizing. I could have done without losing four base camps over the shoot, and eight vehicles in one day, and four shooting days because of the wind. But I feel that it appealed to my strengths as a filmmaker, because at heart I'm a

Beowulf and his guys in their gear are like a pack of bikers.
—Gerard Butler



documentarian.

“So you put yourself in this extreme situation and you react. It will create something, and whatever it is, it will be more interesting than what you would have cooked up on your own.”

If this is a story about consonance, there's another big one. Gerry Butler plays Beowulf at a turning point in his life. The young warrior confronts the unknown in the figure of Grendel — or if you go all Freudian, he confronts his own inner beast — then fights his way into maturity, preparing for the challenges he'll face when he one day becomes king of the Geats.

Butler himself is at a turning point. There's a loud buzz around the 36-year-old actor. He holds the screen with Angelina Jolie in *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*, takes the lead as the phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera*, and his role as the unnamed stranger in the touching *Dear Frankie*, directed by Shona Auerbach, establishes the Scot as a star presence. Back in Toronto, a producer says off-handedly, “He's going to be a movie star.” A 20-year-old girl says, “Gaaaah! Hunk!”

The six-foot hunk sits in the dining room of a rural Icelandic hotel nursing a cola. He's a nice guy, conscientiously boosting the film, and clearly trying to master the art of answering questions while also evading them, protecting at least some small private part of himself from scrutiny.

“Beowulf and his guys in their gear are like a pack of bikers,” Butler says. “Nice guy bikers, but bikers on a journey.... He's not necessarily someone who would have chosen this life. He's like a lawyer” — Butler studied

law, and quit just before graduation to take up acting — “or like an accountant, say, someone who's very good at numbers, but when he retires at 65, he says, ‘I hated accounting.’

“I think there's part of that in Beowulf. You get the feeling that he's not good with women because he's out there on the road with his buddies all the time. Maybe he would have preferred to have a farm, a wife, not be out there cutting off people's heads, but that's not how it's turned out for him. It's not been possible. Part of him enjoys that. He loves it, he loathes it. It feeds him, it hurts him.”

Like the prospect of stardom? you ask.

“I've never been happier,” Butler says. “But you lose continuity in your life because you're very rarely at home. You see a friend and say, ‘It would be great to see you. But I'm in Iceland, then New York, L.A., then for two days in London’”— Butler rattles off a long itinerary, until he hears

himself and looks rueful.

“An added factor is that people expect more things of you. Before, you were lucky to get a lead role in a movie. Now you have to finance it. Now you're involved at a much earlier stage, involved in money and casting — which I love. But still,” Butler says, trailing off, and waiting for another question.

Does this all inform his portrayal of Beowulf?

He nurses his cola, silent for a moment, thinking it through.

Doesn't matter. You've seen the rushes. It was a rhetorical question, anyway.

By mid-October, a cascade of weather delays has backed up production so far, Gunnarsson has to shoot five major scenes in one day. “It's getting to be like television,” says Stellan Skarsgard, dressed in the weathered silk robes and long reddish wig of King Hrothgar. “I think I'm shooting most of my scenes today. It's quite interesting, actually.”

Budgetary problems also mean they don't have a set for one of the scenes scheduled to be shot that evening. At Gunnarsson's suggestion, the Icelandic set dresser moves a pair of tables to a corner of the mead hall, stacks them with plates and cups, and throws hangings over the rear walls to create a separate chamber. “I'm in my element,” she cries—although later, when the exhausted director tries to block the scene, he has trouble finding an approach that works in the cramped corner.

Gunnarsson finally slumps into a crouch. “Okay, I'm out of ideas here. I'm asking for ideas.”

Stellan Skarsgard steps forward. “What about if I....” Skarsgard proceeds to act out a big scene that occupies a tiny space. As you watch repeated rehearsals, you wonder how he can appear to move in a wide arc, both emotionally and physically, while taking only four small steps.

Later, Skarsgard shakes off the technical problems, joking that his most difficult experiences in film occur when he's shooting in Sweden in summer and has to pretend to be warm. In fact, he says he's a fan of the unexpected, of nuance, the off note, seeing it as a route toward complexity — something that he and director Lars von Trier often play with on set.

“On *Dogville*, in the scene where (my character) rapes Nicole Kidman, Lars came over and said to me” — imitating von Trier's high nasal voice — “‘Can you do it as romantic comedy?’ Of course I can't. But maybe for one second, something comes through.

“So when I work, you never hear me say to a director, ‘My character wouldn't do that.’ Because you never know. The very essence of life is contradiction and irrationality. There's not a human being out there without them.”

Maybe that's what you see in the rushes at night. The budgetary pressures, the godawful weather, the newly rising star, daily production crises and intercultural coping — all combine to make this epic feel unmistakably human. No computer generation here. You get emotion instead.

Back home, over more red wine, Sturla Gunnarsson can be philosophical about the difficulties of the shoot.

“People who've seen the film say you never doubt that you're in the sixth century — that these are people who live on the land, and it dwarfs them. They're living at a time when the world is uncharted, and they're going out into the unknown, not just geographically, but in terms of the creatures they might meet. Why can't they meet a troll? Who knows what's out there? Who knows if they're going to come back? That's why their god is Odin, a god who gets drunk sometimes and wrecks the house.”

Gunnarsson laughs. Odin kept showing up in Iceland, overthrowing plans, demanding that the crew improvise, forcing actors to shout above the wind, to emote big or play their scenes in small cramped corners — to insist, above all, that they be spontaneous.

But isn't that the thing about gods? Aren't they supposed to know best?

My friend Odin,” Gunnarsson says.

Lesley Krueger was born in Vancouver, BC. She later lived in the US, Mexico and Brazil, and now lives in Toronto, where she teaches at Ryerson University. Her latest novel, The Corner Garden, was published by Penguin Canada and she also works regularly as a scriptwriter.