

'The Last Kingdom': TV Review

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Courtesy of BBC America

BBC America's enjoyable Viking-invaders drama takes viewers back to the tumultuous birth of England.

There are admittedly few better ways to open an engagingly grimy and gory adventure show about the ninth century Viking invasion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms than with the title card: "Special Guest Star **Rutger Hauer**." Not that you should get too enamored of the ubiquitous Dutch actor's role as Ravn, a Viking poet and wise man with a rockin' face tattoo who is something of the doomed Obi Wan Kenobi to this new BBC America series' real protagonist.

That would be Uhtred of Bebbanburg, played by **Tom Taylor** as a Luke Skywalker-esque youth and **Alexander Dreymon** as a Jon Snow-ian adult. The premiere episode (of a total eight, adapted from **Bernard Cornwell**'s best-selling "Saxon Stories" book series) covers a lot of

ground in Uhtred's life. As a boy, he witnesses the beheading of his brother and the death of his father by the Danish invaders. And after an especially devastating battle (nicely staged by director **Nick Murphy**) he finds himself the enslaved prisoner of the Viking warlord Earl Ragnar (**Peter Gantzler**). Hauer's philosophical Ravn counsels the young man to be patient and transparent in his new situation, and Uhtred soon wins Ragnar's approval, becoming his surrogate son.

But as Goethe would write so many years later in *Faust*: "Two souls, alas, are housed within my breast, and each will wrestle for the mastery there." Is Uhtred more Dane than Anglo-Saxon or more Anglo-Saxon than Dane? Suffice to say that — once Dreyfus takes over the role midway through the premiere — he's at the very least smoking hot, which counts for a lot in a world where mud-and-feces-caked apparel is all the rage.

Good looks aside, Uhtred is also a born warrior and survivor, and after his surrogate pagan family is killed by one of the remaining God-fearing Anglo-Saxon tribes, he becomes an unwitting free agent. The first few episodes show him playing both sides against the middle, as it were. Among the Danes, he attempts to make nice with the unbalanced Ubba (**Rune Temte**), a warlord all too happy to torture, maim and slowly murder his enemies. (One expertly drawn-out scene climaxes with Ubba ordering his soldiers to execute an adversary in the arrow-puncturing form of Saint Sebastian.)

On the flip side, in the last remaining Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex sits King Alfred the Great (**David Dawson**, nicely walking the line between fey and aggressive), who longs to unite the disparate commonwealths into a single empire known as England. Uhtred also tries to endear himself to this powerful man by providing insight into Viking battle tactics and other kinds of espionage. It's a tall order given the general distrust of Alfred's advisers, though our hero does have a champion in Beocca (**Ian Hart**), a priest who knew him well as a boy. There's plenty of testosterone running through *The Last Kingdom's* veins, though there is a potentially strong female perspective courtesy of the character of Brida (**Emily Cox**), a slave girl who becomes Uhtred's lover, his closest confidant and an indispensable partner in battle. In one of the series' best sequences, Uhtred and Brida outmaneuver a cadre of assassins in a village. Each runs separately through the sludge-filled streets, dodging, weaving and disabling their pursuers, until they meet

up and mutually deliver the final killing blow. The duo's rapport nicely offsets the macho bluster that usually defines combat-infatuated shows of this sort, though there's no guarantee that *Brida* is long for a world that can dispense with several of its bigger names so quickly. Like tears in rain, girl.