



## *Lost in Iceland:*

*Freezing Rain, Blinding Sandstorms, Dead Sheep,  
Erupting Volcanoes and the Making of*

# BEOWULF & GRENDEL



Image courtesy of The Film Works

BY WENDY ORD



Gerard Butler as Beowulf

*Beowulf & Grendel*, a feature-film adaptation of the epic 8th-century Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, is a medieval adventure that tells the blood-soaked tale of a Norse warrior's battle against the great and murderous troll Grendel, who is threatening the kingdom of Hrothgar, the well-respected King of the Danes. When Beowulf arrives to help Hrothgar, he encounters Selma, reputed by locals to be a witch, who is key to deciphering the puzzle of the troll's rage. Directed by Sturla Gunnarsson (*Rare Birds, Such a Long Journey*) and written by Andrew Rai Berzins (*Rare Birds, Scorn*), Gerard Butler (*The Phantom, Timeline*) stars as Beowulf, Stellan Skarsgard (*Dogville, King Arthur*) as Hrothgar, Sarah Polley (*My Life without Me*) plays the witch Selma and Ingvar Sigurdsson (*K-19, The Widowmaker*) is the troll, Grendel.

The film is produced by Paul Stephens and Eric Jordan of Toronto-based The Film Works (*Love, Sex & Eating the Bones, Such a Long Journey*) and Sturla Gunnarsson in Canada, by Michael Lionello Cowan and Jason Piette of Spice Factory (*The Merchant of Venice*) in the United Kingdom and Fridrik Thor Fridriksson (*Angels of the Universe*) in Iceland. Prep began in Iceland July 4, 2004, and principal photography ran from September 6 to November 5, 2004. Wendy Ord, who was the first assistant director on the shoot, kept a production diary and daily blog.

From the beginning, Gunnarsson planned to shoot *Beowulf & Grendel* in Iceland because it is his spiritual home and birthplace. "I wanted to shoot a film where I was born, in the landscape that I first dreamed on," he said. During the writing process, Gunnarsson and Berzins made several trips to the North Atlantic isle to soak up the rugged and austere landscape that would stand in for *Beowulf's* world of 700 A.D. Iceland is steeped in history, tribal wars, mystique, superstition



and an oral tradition birthed of hardship and beauty. It is the perfect setting for the magical adventures of Beowulf and his men as they set out to quell Grendel.

**Iceland, October 20, 2004:** Day 33 of principal photography on *Beowulf & Grendel*. As dawn breaks, so does the cellphone silence. The overnight security watch reports that the base camp has blown away—again. This is the third time. Giant lunch tents have disappeared into the night. Tables and chairs, coffee pots and chaffing dishes are scattered across the lava field. Trailers are toppled, roads are washed out and equipment is bent and broken. Then the location manager calls me to say that the beach we are planning to shoot on is gone. Twelve-metre waves took the black sand out to sea. Nothing is left of the site except cliffs and water. We have to find a new place to film today's scenes.

I toss back some aspirin as the cellphone rings again. The driver coming from the city with the



cast has been turned back; the highways are closed. Nobody gets in or out from where we are, on the southernmost tip—and windiest part—of the island. The next call is from the second assistant director. The vans can't negotiate the winds and one blew off the road; we should only travel in low-profile vehicles. The 50 extras are being transported four at a time in cars to the motel. Hydro is out, but they are bringing in one of our generators to begin the makeup and wardrobe process. We are already hours behind schedule.

A short while later, Gunnarsson, along with cinematographer Jan Kiesser and designer Arni Pall Johannsson, show up at my door and take it all in stride. The disaster de jour doesn't faze them. They seem like grizzled, wild-eyed children delighted with today's adventure. I begrudgingly don layers of Icelandic long wolen underwear, neoprene, fleece and rain gear, and we pile into the four-by-four to meet the tempest that has been served up today.

The film has already survived more than its fair share of hurdles to date. The summer months were spent in the difficult task of securing financing, cast and crew for this Canada/U.K./Iceland co-production. As autumn loomed and the midnight sun became a memory, we were still

trying to organize cash flow and ice floes so that we could shoot our first day at the beginning of September. The call sheet read, Day 1: "Beowulf sails his Viking ship through the icebergs." Then in bold: "All crew must wear life jackets. If you fall in the water, you will freeze to death in less than 60 seconds." Gunnarsson, who had already



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*They seem like grizzled, wild-eyed children delighted with today's adventure.*



shot in the teeming streets of Mumbai (*Such a Long Journey*) and the steaming Costa Rican equatorial rain forest (*100 Days in the Jungle*), may have met his match.

If we thought we were already operating without a net, Gunnarsson drove the point home by declaring the film was going to be a CGI-free zone. No digital effects. No



painting-out of modern eyesores like hydro poles, cellphone towers or roads that would interrupt our shots. We would be hiking to where there were clean shots, free from modern clutter. Our monsters would be real, and the actors would perform their own stunts. We would not fix anything in post, so every frame had to be achieved physically on set. "It's all being done with real actors and real action bound by the laws of gravity. It's all

wardrobe and prosthetics before donning their snow-goose coats and hiking across knee-deep moss-covered mountains to the rocky lava outcroppings where the camera is precariously perched. It must be disconcerting for the actors to see the crew and gear tethered to the cliff or icy glacier, with the knowledge that *they* will not be. More unnerving are the 150 kilometre-per-hour winds and the horizontal rains.

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*"Can you get any closer to that big iceberg on your left?"*

*The captain speaks quietly so the cast can't hear him, "Only if you want to die."*

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historically rooted. The idea is to do something where the action of the piece feels very, very real," said Gunnarsson. Cast and crew wore this like a badge of honour.

No CGI also means that we have to get a massive, hand-made Viking ship into a landlocked iceberg lagoon 500 kilometres from where it is currently housed in a museum. This is the poster shot of the movie. The opening sequence. The proof of our recklessness. It is also the bane of my existence, and weeks of planning and hypothesizing, such as: "Would it float?" Maybe. "Could it sail around the most dangerous waters of the North Atlantic?" Probably not. "Could we close the main highway and trailer it?" Too wide to fit through the bridges. "Could we airlift it with four helicopters?" Doubt it. We are obsessed with this conundrum. Getting the Viking ship to float among icebergs with our cast on board becomes symbolic for getting the film out of development hell and onto the screen.

The intrepid cast are undaunted by the difficulties of the shoot. Every day they endure hours of period makeup,

It's now October 20, over a month-and-a-half after the start date, and the weather is beating up the production, and me, again. I have lost weight, my hair is turning grey and my face is constantly crumpled against the wind and the stress. We turn off the road and splash through a newly formed lake while I try to work on my laptop, giving suggestions as to what or where we might shoot today. The jeep bogs down in the middle of the lake and the tires spin. Sturla laughs with glee. We have found our lunch tent—under our wheels, five kilometres from our destroyed base camp, in three feet of water. Sturla turns to me from the front seat and reminds me that the weather will change—"wait five minutes"—and "if we can get a Viking ship into an iceberg lagoon, then we can weather this storm."

Yes, we did eventually get that monster ship into the iceberg lagoon mere hours before our early-morning crew call on our first day of shooting. Suffice it to say that it only happened by the sheer will and determination of many people, cranes, planes and automobiles. "But," I tell Sturla, "it leaks like a sieve."



One of my jobs on that ship is to lay on the floor and watch the water rising in the hold as we film. When we are filming, the three fire pumps—which are keeping us from sinking—have to be turned off. We sail among blue icebergs while the camera crew films from the shore, and my walkie-walkie crackles with directions from Sturla: “Can you get any closer to that big iceberg on your left?”

The captain speaks quietly so the cast can’t hear him, “Only if you want to die.”

Today Gunnarsson is right. The rain suddenly stops. The sun comes out, and we head inland to get away from the howling winds coming off the sea. Funnels of black sand curl up into the sky and tornado across the road in front of our jeep. As we push through the drifts of sand and start to climb the mountain, we turn back to marvel at the angry beauty of Iceland.

We find a new location and the crew begins to trickle in. They, too, are getting tired, grumpy and fittingly—because we’re in Iceland, after all—superstitious. Today, three vehicles have gone off the road on their way to set. There have been numerous accidents and flat tires, broken equipment, and last week there was that mysterious fire under our Mead Hall. Rumours are circulating that the

film is cursed. I overhear that a dead sheep, which was a prop on our last set, is to blame and the grips are planning to go back and burn it. There are mutterings that there is a *real* troll in our midst, or perhaps the gods are against us.

The crew becomes more cantankerous as Sturla proclaims it a “perfectly sunny day” with winds that are gusting to 160 kilometres per hour. They are all wearing swimming goggles to keep the sand out of their eyes. The camera is wrapped in garbage bags and wobbles, despite the three grips who try to steady it. Actors valiantly fight to stay put on their marks as their wardrobe flies away, hair whips their faces and sand stings their skin. The driver captain tells me that flying sand is scraping paint off the cars and that rocks hurled off of the mountain have broken eight windshields of the vehicles in the parking area.

The weather report indicates that a sandstorm is headed our way. “Aren’t we already in one?” I suggest. Gunnarsson, Jan Kiesser and I climb to the ridge and stand in awe. A brown wall of sand, probably 10 kilometres away and 10 kilometres wide, whirls toward our set. We discuss whether the storm will hit us and whether we should batten down or get the hell off the mountain. As Gunnarsson and Kiesser climb into our jeep, a gust of wind hits us. At 50 kilograms, I am lifted off the ground

Sarah Polley as Selma, the witch





and thrown about three metres onto my face into the dirt. Sturla rolls down his window and casually asks, "Want a ride?" We finally pull the plug this day.

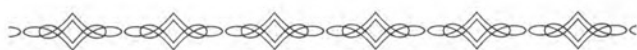
**Iceland, October 30, 2004:** A week left to shoot, and a volcano erupts 75 kilometres from our set. The eruption of heat and ash shoots 15 kilometres into the sky and all international traffic is diverted around Iceland's airspace. The production report today reads: "Filming was not interrupted except to stop and turn our cameras on the rolling black clouds in the sky and later to enjoy the most amazing northern lights I have ever seen." Andrew Rai Berzins sends me a note: "My little theory: the trolls are actually trying to help out—and, knowing that chaos is a cool thing on screen—they're offering you everything they can. But it's just a theory."

**Addenda:** The story of *Beowulf & Grendel* is about chaos and monsters, real and imagined. And in bringing this ancient tale to life, all of us who worked on the picture met a few of our own. The weather continued to wreak havoc on us right until the end. Hailstorms, more hurricanes, sleet and snow threatened to shut us down. We were exhausted. I wanted to quit, and many of our crew did. Gunnarsson said, "The idea of the adaptation was to take the epic and put it into human terms. It is about how we make monsters of the unfamiliar. There's a point in the film when Beowulf stops calling Grendel 'it' and begins to call him 'he.' But by then it is too late, the forces have been set in motion."

**Later, in Toronto:** Months later, in Canada, I watch the first test screening of *Beowulf & Grendel*. Shooting in

Iceland meant that we didn't get rushes until a week after they were shot. It also meant that we were all too wet, cold and tired at the end of the day to watch our efforts. This is the first time that I will get to see what the camera saw. The lights dim. The audience is hushed. The music swells and there, on the screen, is our beautiful Viking ship in the iceberg lagoon.

As the film unwinds, I finally understand what Sturla Gunnarsson has always known. The horrible, unnerving, freezing cold, soaking wet, dangerous, insane and beautiful weather is all over the film. It is a cinematographer's joy. A designer's wish. A director's dream. The wind and the rain, the mud and ice make the story come alive with the harsh reality of *Beowulf & Grendel's* ancient world. Superlatives seem trite to describe Kiesser's lensing of the picture. With Johannsson's sets built entirely from driftwood, sticks and stones, as per the period, each frame looks like a painting.



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**Much later, in St. John's:** As the rain pours down outside a small café in Newfoundland where Gunnarsson is preparing to shoot his next project, he reflects on the weather in Iceland. "This is why Icelanders are fatalistic. You can't plan ahead because the elements can change everything in a moment. The Norse gods are personifications of the elements. We chose to put ourselves, and our characters, into the path of those gods and we danced with them." When asked what in the original poem the film remains true to, writer Berzins answers, "The bones of the story. The horror. The beauty. The doom. The weird." I can attest to that.

*Wendy Ord has worked in the Canadian film industry for 25 years. As a first assistant director, she has worked on over 30 projects. Her first feature, Black Swan, was distributed by Lions Gate Films. She is currently in the final stages of development for a second feature, Cryin' Time.*