



BEOWULF

— RETURN TO THE SHIELDLANDS —

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Press release

Kieran Bew leads a stellar cast in ITV's epic re-imagining of one of literature's greatest and most enduring heroes Beowulf.

Kieran stars alongside multi award-winning actor William Hurt (*Humans, Kiss of the Spider Woman*) who plays Hrothgar and acclaimed actress Joanne Whalley (*Wolf Hall, Jamaica Inn*) who takes the role of Rheda.

Created by James Dormer, Tim Haines and Katie Newman, this action-packed 12 part drama series produced by ITV Studios is set in the mythical Shieldlands, a place of spectacle and danger populated by both humans and fantastical creatures.

Essentially, a Western set in Britain's mythic past, the story unfolds on a huge canvas, filmed amongst the breathtaking beauty of England's north east.

Beowulf: Return to the Shieldlands also stars Edward Speleers (*Downton Abbey*), David Ajala (*Black Box*), Ellora Torchia (*Indian Summers*), Gisli Orn Gardarsson (*Spooks and Spirits*) Laura Donnelly (*Outlander*), Elliot Cowan (*Da Vinci's Demons*), Ian Puleston-Davies (*Coronation Street*), David Harewood (*Homeland*), Joe Sims (*Broadchurch*), Lee Boardman (*The Interceptor*), David Bradley (*Broadchurch*), Ace Bhatti (*The Shadow Line*), Gregory Fitoussi (*Mr Selfridge*), Susan Aderin (*The Last Detective*), Kirsty Oswald (*Ripper Street*), Edward Hogg (*Indian Summers*), Alex Price (*Father Brown*), Jack Rowan (*Silent Witness*) and Itoya Osagiede (*Okora: The Prelude*).

The opening episode sees Beowulf return to Herot, after many years wandering as a mercenary warrior, to pay his respects to ailing ward and Thane of Herot Hrothgar (William Hurt), and to set right past wrongs. But when Herot is attacked by the terrifying monster Grendl, Beowulf has no choice but to hunt it down, winning favour with Herot's new female Thane, Rheda (Joanne Whalley) and the wider community, in the process.

And so begins a personal journey that sees this mighty, capable and somewhat isolated man slowly reconnect with his family and home.

Beowulf: Return to the Shieldlands is a series about courage, greed, betrayal, revenge, loyalty, power, man versus wilderness and, of course, love. It is a series that explores the notion of good and evil, heroes and villains. However, beyond these wider political undercurrents and inner personal turmoils are the excitement, danger and sense of adventure of any great Western. Epic fights, thrilling chases, raids, celebrations and battles are an essential part of the promise.

James Dormer (*Strike Back, Wallander, Outcast*) who has written and executive produced the series said: "Hundreds of years ago our ancestors listened to the story of Beowulf because it was a great adventure story - it scared them, thrilled them, made them laugh and cry. But they also listened because they recognised themselves and their fears in it.

"By holding a mirror up to them this story helped define them and thus - us. It's incredibly exciting to have the opportunity to make it relevant again for a wide audience - to let them own it again. To let them see themselves in it."

Press release continued:

ITV Studios' Creative Director of Drama Tim Haines (*Primeval*, *Sinbad*, *Walking With Dinosaurs*) is executive producer alongside ITV Studios' Executive Producer of Drama Katie Newman (*Primeval: New World*).

Stephen Smallwood (*Ripper Street*, *The Day of the Triffids*, *DCI Banks*) has produced the series on location in County Durham and Northumberland. The production's choice to use the spectacular locations available in Durham and Northumberland was encouraged by the enthusiastic support of the various Councils of the north east.

Beowulf: Return to the Shieldlands has been commissioned for ITV by Director of Drama Steve November.

"Beowulf: Return to the Shieldlands is a series with a charismatic protagonist at its heart," said Steve. "Equally it's a spirited and fascinating ensemble drama with each character taking their own emotional and sometimes perilous journey."

Tribe, character and creature biographies

TRIBES

HEROT

The iron heart of the Shieldlands, Herot's Thane is by far the richest and most powerful in the Alliance. As a cosmopolitan settlement, its people are drawn from different backgrounds that settle, forging their trade as smelters, craftspeople and merchants.

BREGAN

The coastal settlement of Bregan is the gateway to the Shieldlands. Home to fisherman and warriors, its people are tough, independent and together, over generations, banded into a single people with a single set of customs to found Bregan.

WISDETH

The Wisdeth are a farming people, well known for their peaceful nature yet, whilst they may rely on the other, more-warlike tribes for protection, their supply of food and grain is essential to the survival of the Shieldlands.

BANNING

The Banning are a forest people. Living in small interconnected groups deep in the woodlands, they are proficient hunters and extremely self-sufficient with a fondness for mead.

MERE

Some twenty years ago, the Warig - a fearsome Mudborn species, drove the peoples of Mere from their lands after its Thane sought to clear the local Warig war bands from his lands, but his actions provoked the Warig to combine their forces and massacre the Mere. The Mere survivors fled the massacre and sought refuge with the Banning.

VARNI

A warrior people and muscle of the Alliance, the Varni pushed north of the Shieldlands, carving out their own territory through which to roam. They live a relatively nomadic existence where men, women and children old enough to hold a sword are trained to fight in the traditional Varni way.

Tribe, character and creature biographies continued:

CHARACTERS

BEOWULF (Kieran Bew)

Beowulf is a heroic legend, a flawed but fearless warrior, who has long lived a nomadic, itinerant life across the Shieldlands and beyond. He is a solitary figure, whose experiences of life are greater than the sum of his years. Now, trying to rekindle hope, love and friendship, Beowulf returns to the place that was once his home but in an ever-changing, hostile world, that home needs a protector more than ever.

THANES OF THE SHIELDLANDS

RHEDA – Thane of Herot (Joanne Whalley)

A leader, mother and sister; Rheda is considered, intelligent and steely. As the newly appointed Thane of Herot, she makes clear her intentions to become Jarl and ruler of the Shieldlands. With many doubting her abilities domestically and afar, her journey is a dangerous and complex one. A woman striving to lead in a man's world, it takes deep sacrifice, equanimity and true grit to fight for her place, her people and at times her life. Whilst many leaders rule with an iron fist, Rheda remains determined to be a more judicious, progressive Thane, placing equal importance on head and heart – but if pushed, Rheda can be every inch as brutal as the traitors who surround her and a match for any man.

ABRECAN – Thane of Bregan (Elliot Cowan)

A noble man, gifted warrior and loyal brother, Abrecan is a natural leader of men with a gift for rhetoric, a keen intellect and an instinct for the politics of power. He presides as Thane, over an ancient coastal tribe named Bregan, which sits at the gateway to the Shieldlands and the Farlands beyond. Abrecan is an ever-present source of love and support to his sister Rheda, taking a brief pause in his tribal affairs to support Rheda through her grief and early days as Herot's Thane.

GORRIK – Thane of Mere (David Bradley)

Gorrik, aging Thane of Mere, is a proud, cantankerous and unforgiving man, who puts duty before heart. His mature years have not diminished his ability or courage when meeting men half his age in direct combat, when the occasion arises. Gorrik values sincerity and truth, rather than the politic and above all else, wants to provide for his family and people.

Tribe, character and creature biographies continued:

THANES OF THE SHIELDLANDS

LAGRATHORN – Thane of Banning (Ian Puleston-Davies)

As Thane of the Banning, a forest people living deep within the woodlands, Lagrathorn is a proud, humorous and determined leader, who is partial to a drink or ten, with the capacity to be unpredictable and dangerous in the face of defiance and disappointment. A man of tradition, Lagrathorn does not take too kindly to change but, despite being set in his ways, he still has the capacity to surprise where one would least expect it.

SCORANN – Thane of Wisdeth (David Harewood)

A born warrior, fearsome fighter and man of great honour. Varni blood pulses deeply through Scorann's veins but, to strengthen the Alliance, he did his duty and married a Wisdeth bride, of a farming tribe, had farming children, and henceforth, served their sedate tribe as Thane leaving behind his life of danger, bloodshed, and exhilaration, thus abdicating his Varni legacy, to his younger brother Rate.

RATE – Thane of Varni (David Ajala)

As Thane of the Varni, a warrior tribe and muscle of the Alliance, Rate is a man of strength, honour and courage. Highly intelligent, sometimes terrifying, this Thane is an unquestionably powerful leader of people. A man who can in one breath take a life, but surprisingly, with the next, make you smile with his dry, impromptu wit. When the race for leadership over the Shieldlands presents itself, Rate quickly sets his sights on filling the void over the other Thaness.

HROTHGAR – Past Thane of Herot (William Hurt)

Hrothgar was not only the Leader of the Alliance in the Shieldlands, he was considered one of the last of the great heroes and a strong protector of his kin and people. Through courage, bloody-mindedness and force of will, Hrothgar helped forge the settlement of Herot into what it is today - the beating heart of the Shieldlands. To symbolise this, he had a vast gilded hall built on the hill above it. From here he not only ruled his people, but with them, shared Herot's wealth and wisdom.

Tribe, character and creature biographies continued:

HEROT

SLEAN – Rheda and Hrothgar's son (Edward Speleers)

Ambitious, complex, intelligent, but never quite the fighter his father was or Beowulf is. Slean has spent his life at the foot of his father's shadow, even now as he lays dead. Brave but impetuous, with a burning desire to be Thane, Slean's birthright has been denied him by his late father and instead given to his mother Rheda.

ELVINA – Herot's Healer (Laura Donnelly)

Strong, determined, stubborn and beautiful, Elvina hails from the mysterious Mere tribe. She eventually travelled to Herot, after her people suffered a brutal massacre at the hands of the vicious Warig creatures. As Herot's healer, Elvina is held in good esteem and relied upon in times of need and is a great source of strength and support in her community. Her journey is a complex one, particularly in matters of the heart, as she gradually becomes torn between two relationships when Beowulf arrives in Herot, complicating her affections for Slean.

BRECA (Gisli Orn Gardarsson)

Liar, thief, murderer, bigot, philanderer, but quick witted and courageous when it counts, Breca truly is the 'anti-warrior'. Beowulf and he are an unlikely pairing but despite Breca's shady and at times shocking acts, their friendship endures amidst the sea of politics, distrust and conflict within Herot.

LILA – Runs the Herot's Smithy (Lolita Chakrabarti)

Optimistic and warm, Lila runs the Smithy within the heart of the community alongside her blacksmith daughter, Vishka. Lila is a free-spirited widow, who speaks her mind, is comfortable in her own skin and can take care of herself and her own when the need arises.

VISHKA – Smith (Ellora Torchia)

Lila's daughter. Sassy and opinionated, Vishka is Herot's most skilled blacksmith – but she would much rather wield a sword than forge one. Drawn to rebellion, and constantly seeking adventure, she causes her mother no end of worry and, without a father, her mother carries the weight of her concerns alone.

Tribe, character and creature biographies continued:

HEROT

BRINNI – Huskarla of Herot (Jack Rowan)

Born into a family of Huskarla - Herot's guard led by Slean, Brinni was thrust into a fighter's world. Although he dutifully accepts his role, as played by generations of men in his family, he longs to choose his own destiny. Duty aside, this young and handsome Huskarla has a secret crush on Vishka, of which she is entirely unaware. He teaches her the swordsmanship and fighting skills she craves and their fiery banter and friendship plays across the series.

VARR – Rheda's Steward and Advisor (Edward Hogg)

After his mother took up with a Varni warrior, Varr was raised amongst this fearsome tribe, a culture who knew and valued nothing more than violence. As a quiet outsider, Varr suffered until he sought a new home in Herot where he now serves new Thane Rheda in the Great Hall, as he did her late husband Hrothgar. A discerning and sage advisor, Varr is ever loyal with an unwavering integrity and would lay down his life for his Thane and Herot.

GIL – Slean's Second in Command (Ashley Thomas)

A gifted and seasoned Huskarla soldier, Gil has some experience of the world and, whilst hardened by what he's seen, it has not dampened his spirits. Gil trains the Huskarla to the standards set by Hrothgar and his approach to his men may be more stick than carrot, but it is all with the intention of keeping them safe and, most importantly alive.

BAYEN – Reeve of Herot (Nigel Cooke)

As Herot's long-serving Reeve and Shieldsman, Bayen's loyalty to Hrothgar, Herot's Thane, was unquestionable and unyielding. He continues to protect the walls of Herot under new Thane Rheda.

KOLL – Herot's Deputy Reeve (Alex Price)

As the Deputy Reeve of Herot, family man Koll has sworn to protect his tribe and people from danger and serves under Bayen's command.

KENDRA – Smelter (Susan Aderin)

One of Herot's longest-serving Smelters. Highly opinionated, Kendra is no push over. Yet, beneath her tough exterior she hides a soft centre and cares deeply for Herot's Troll, a Mudborn, which most fear or treat with disdain.

Tribe, character and creature biographies continued:

BREGAN

HARKEN – Bregan's Head Councilman (Ace Bhatti)

Harken is an enlightened, principled Bregan council member and longstanding mentor to Bregan's Thane Abrecan. He is wise and intelligent with a great understanding of both military strategy and politics, in Bregan and beyond, but notably, without a personal ambition and desire for power.

HANE – Bregan's Healer (Lee Boardman)

As Bregan's Healer, Hane is more of a battlefield medic than a herbs and poultices man. He is ambitious, tough, politically sagacious, fiercely loyal and through years of service to his tribe, is now Thane Abrecan's right-hand man.

SARAY – Abrecan's Companion and Unofficial Advisor (Sarah Macrae)

Saray is an intelligent woman with an arresting, beguiling beauty. She was born to an impoverished family from a coastal village in the Farlands and was sold at a young age to a slaver by her desperate parents. Eventually finding Abrecan, Saray fell in love and since then has had an overriding desire to protect him.

VLADE – Abrecan's Henchman (Keith Dunphy)

Once Abrecan's right-hand man, Vlade has remained loyal to his Thane, despite no longer being on the inside of Abrecan's close circle.

MERE

KELA – Gorrik's daughter (Holly Earl)

Despite being the daughter of Gorrik, Thane of Mere, Kela has lived in the shadows as her elder sister Mara took pride of place in their father's eyes. Kela's relationship with Gorrik is a fractious one; whilst a deep-rooted resentment is clear, Gorrik relies on Kela as his political compass and moral guide. Yet, Kela's spirit remains unbeaten and beneath her virtuous demeanour lies a shrewd and resourceful young woman, who has used her years spent in the shadows to her gain.

Tribe, character and creature biographies continued:

MINERS

GREFF – a Miner of the Shieldlands (Joe Sims)

Greff is a miner who spends his days digging for iron ore in the forests. Whilst he appears to be the joker, this plucky miner is nobody's fool.

WULFINGS

JOGAN - Headman of a Wulfining Clan (Jefferson Hall)

Jogan is an intelligent but unrelenting, fearsome leader of his Wulfining Raiders, who knows that rash and hasty decisions are often followed by failure. Instead, he strategises and schemes his plan of attack with precision and, in most cases, leaves his enemy face down in his dust.

ARLA – Wulfining Raider (Allison McKenzie)

This Wulfining Raider is ferocious and determined, but despite this ambition she still executes a sense of caution and reality, often providing the voice of reason amongst her Raiders.

DRAVEN – Wulfining Raider (Liam Ainsworth)

Strong, cunning and brave, Draven is a dangerous Wulfining Raider but one who is often impeded by his impatience and recklessness. A young man with an angry heart and a vengeful spirit make him a dangerous foe of Herot.

SKELLAN – Headman of a Wulfining Clan (Emmett J Scanlan)

Skellan, Warfather of one of the Wulfining clans and brother to Jogan, is an imposing and formidable leader who takes any steps necessary to bring about success for his clan in battle.

WARIG

KRAGEN – Warig Leader (Liam Scott)

Kragen, brutal leader of the Southern Warig Warband, rules his Warig followers within the forests of the Shieldlands.

Tribe, character and creature biographies continued:

OTHER KEY CHARACTERS

RAZZAK (Gregory Fitoussi)

A spice trader from the Farlands, Razzak is a fiercely intelligent and inescapably magnetic figure.

CREATURES

GRENDL

Grendl is a creature who inhabits the dark hinterland between the human inhabitants of the Shieldlands and the Mudborn creatures from which they conquered it hundreds of years before. A thing of the dark, Grendl too is searching for a place to belong.

SKINSHIFTERS

A race of powerful human-like creatures that can change their physical appearance at will. Many years ago, most were driven by men from the Shieldlands. They were formerly a druidic class, guardians of the rituals for the Giants that once ruled the Shieldlands. However, once the Giants fled, centuries of persecution followed that forced those that remained to hide and assimilate amongst settlers disguised as humans. They age slower than humans, living for up to five hundred years, meaning they often live a nomadic and solitary existence for fear of exposure. In recent times, few have presented a threat, but historical prejudice against them runs deep because they deceive by their appearance.

TROLLS

Fully grown, these powerful animals stand about ten feet tall and tower over humans. Both males and females sport large ridged horns growing from thickened skulls but the males can be clearly identified by their thicker back pelt. Trolls live in loose clans often dominated by a matriarch and avoid contact with humans. Originally Cragfall Mudborn, they spread into the Shieldland plains where they adopted a more carnivorous diet to compensate for lack of mineral salt available in the mountains. The spread of human settlements frequently brings them into conflict with the Trolls but, by providing salt-licks, men have learnt they can avoid bloodshed.

BARGHESTs

These are descended from prehistoric dire wolves but they are larger and smarter than ordinary wolves. Rather than pursuing prey, they evolved strong front limbs adapted for ambush in the dense forests of the Shieldlands. Their jaws are immensely powerful suggesting as a pack they might well take on a lone Troll, although no one has ever witnessed this. They have long black hair and stand about four feet at the shoulder. They also have good night vision with deep red eyeshine that gave rise to the myth that they have fire in their eyes.

Tribe, character and creature biographies continued:

CREATURES

WARIG

These highly-social Mudborn were originally from the far north but spread south millennia ago. They are humanoid in form and distinguished by their animal skin clothing and thick eye protection, which they wear because of their sensitivity to daylight. There are several 'tribes' or troops geographically dotted across the Shieldlands but their conflict with human settlers has led to some uniting into war bands. In particular, several bands united to attack the Mere two decades ago almost wiping out their entire settlement. The Warig are bound by a primitive but complex set of faiths, rituals and customs meaning that, although bands are usually led by an alpha male, he will frequently defer to a priest-like individual chosen through one of their ceremonies.

SAND WYRM

These unusual creatures are large obligate carnivores that live under the mud and sand flats on the east shores of the Shieldlands. About a meter wide and several long they are a danger to animals even as big as humans and Warig, although there has been no recorded case of them attacking Trolls. They spend most of their time just beneath the surface of the sand waiting to pick up the vibrations of prey moving above ground. Usually, they ambush predators but when needed, they can pursue prey with remarkable speed through the sand. The amount of food they get depends on the area they patrol, therefore they are fiercely territorial, which leads to frequent intra-species confrontations that can last hours, although are rarely fatal.

PANDIRI

These large heavily scaled fish are famous for their late summer migration from the Stone Sea up the southern estuaries of the Shieldlands. Many local tribes, in particular those at Bregan, depend on this annual bounty for their survival. Once they have spawned in the upper forest reaches of the rivers, a large number of the older adults die but most return performing the seasonal journey up to a dozen times. Unfortunately, in their usual habitat, the pandiri are voracious predators, each equipped with a fearsome set of serrated teeth. Once they gather in numbers they can strip prey of its flesh in minutes. As a consequence, it takes an enormous amount of skill and not a small amount of bravery to catch them.

Production interview

Q&A with Co-Creators & Executive Producers Katie Newman and Tim Haines

Q: What were the origins of the production?

KN: “Tim and I were looking for our next series to produce and Tim suggested Beowulf. I read the poem (the Heaney translation) and was not only utterly captivated by the characters and the world, but surprised how relevant it seemed.

“We then tackled the question: ‘How do you turn an epic, ancient poem into a gripping, returnable television series for today’s audience?’ The epiphany came when we were in Cannes of all places. At the time I was a massive fan of Deadwood and I said to Tim: ‘What if we make it a Western where Beowulf is the Reeve (8th century sheriff), defending Herot against the hostile forces from without and within. That was the key we were looking for. I wrote a 2 page pitch which luckily chimed with James Dormer enough to want to join forces and it evolved from there. What has been fantastic about this creative partnership is that our quite different lives and experiences have all influenced the final creative vision. For James ‘the fear of the other’ had huge resonance because of his family. Tim is an extraordinary producer but his background in zoology and science can be seen in the brilliance of the creatures. And for me, I’m Australian and so creating a world where humans inhabit a frontier land that is both breathtakingly beautiful but inherently rugged and dangerous was something that I connected with very strongly.

“Beowulf, the character played by Kieran Bew, is obviously our ‘hero’, albeit one for today’s world. But we always wanted to create an ensemble show with fascinating characters having journeys in their own right.”

TH: “We use the word ‘Western’ in a dramatic sense. Relating to the fact you have your central precinct, your hero defending home and dangers outside the town. That, from a story point, was a real changing moment.

“It’s always a challenge to do an eponymous returning series. The development of the community which gives us more layers, more intrigue and more relationships helps build a more complex and interesting world. With all of these things you want to give the audience something they can immerse themselves in and go back to every week. So that has been our biggest task.”

Q: How does the TV series relate to the original epic poem?

KN: “It is inspired by the poem. Key elements of the poem are in the series and have influenced us, and I think the soul of the poem has remained true, but most of our characters and places are original inventions. Creating the mythology and ‘rules’ of our world has been ambitious and challenging but a fantastically creative and rewarding experience.”

TH: “Even though our drama is set in an ancient land, it is a fantasy. We’re not trying to re-create the history of the past. We make no bones about that. The story of Beowulf has changed over the years. It’s only because someone wrote it down at one point that it stopped evolving. So it very much has been a live story from English history of the hero and the monsters. But by updating the sensibilities, we’re very faithful to the living poem.”

Production interview

Q&A with Co-Creators & Executive Producers Katie Newman and Tim Haines continued:

Q: What other key decisions did you make at the outset?

KN: “The poem is essentially the story of a man’s life but we decided from the start we didn’t want to do the 21-year-old on the cusp of adulthood version. We wanted our Beowulf to have been a man who has lived, who’s had a family, who has the scars of life to overcome in some way, a character who had a real gravitas to him. Tonally, we wanted to create a compelling action, adventure show but with real depth and heart to the drama.”

Q: Was it difficult to find your Beowulf?

TH: “We came across Kieran Bew almost within the first few weeks. He had been in a number of dramas and is an actor whose career is taking off. We wanted someone who, when in a fight, you would think was formidable. And Kieran has brought that, partly because he is an ex-fencing champion and does his own fights and is very good at that. But also, aside from the physicality, we liked the fact he had a softer side. He’s been a great person to have play the central role.”

Q: What about the casting of other characters?

KN: “Everyone thinks of Beowulf as quite a male-skewed poem and hopefully we’ve delivered some cracking male characters who will both delight and surprise, but it was also very important to us (and to me as a woman) that the female characters were equally multi-dimensional, interesting and riveting in their own right. Joanne Whalley plays Rheda, the Thane of Herot, who loves her family but has to navigate her way to rule in a ‘man’s world’. She is an incredible actress and is divine in the part.

“There is a lot to discover about all of our characters. A lot to unfold. We slowly peel their layers back over the course of the series.”

Q: How did William Hurt become involved?

KN: “Hrothgar is such an important and seminal character in the poem and our casting director, Sam Jones, was tasked with finding us someone fantastic. William was not only perfect but also, rather remarkably, a massive Beowulf fan. We were over the moon to get him and he is superb in the role.”

Production interview

Q&A with Co-Creators & Executive Producers Katie Newman and Tim Haines continued:

Q: Are the themes in Beowulf relevant to today?

KN: “Yes - many of the themes in the original poem are relevant. One of them is the fear of the other - in the poem it was ‘man’s fear of nature’. Beowulf represented modernity and progress, Grendl was the manifestation of hostile natural forces trying to preserve the past. In our show, Herot is an iron-mining town living an uneasy existence with the ‘Mudborn’ beasts. Beasts who inhabited the land before humans came and colonised it. Obviously this is very much part of the ‘Western’ motif but also our own heritage and an unease that exists in many parts of the world today.”

TH: “And there are themes about more personal things: love, betrayal, power, family dynamics. The anger of a son and his jealousy with Beowulf being a better warrior. We have unrequited love and the desire for, and corruption of, power. They are very much what we would recognise as modern dilemmas.”

KN: “If we were to nominate a theme at the heart of the show it’s probably family. When Beowulf comes back he’s quite jaded and a loner and his journey across series one is about re-connecting with family. And by family we mean not just blood relations, but society, the group of people you hang out with, laugh and cry with and - in our series - those you are willing to fight and, if needed, die for.”

Q: Why did you decide to film in the north east of England?

TH: “The starting point, which is wonderful, is that the government decided to give an English tax break. Our last three shows, were filmed in Canada, Malta and Ireland. All UK shows but we couldn’t film in England because we didn’t have the tax break. So that decision allowed us to film Beowulf here.

“I knew the darkest skies in England are in Northumberland and we also chose Northumberland and Durham because we want to represent a big and varied landscape. England gets very thin there, so you can go from the high moorlands right down to the sea, through lakes, forests and rivers, in a very short space of time. And we knew we had to find wilderness everywhere. We couldn’t even have farmhouses or field walls as they didn’t exist at this time. So that seemed to be the best place to go, with the internal sets at Blyth in Northumberland.

“Our production designer Grant Montgomery fell in love with the high quarry site at Eastgate in Weardale and that’s where he built the huge Herot set. You can point a camera in every direction there and it’s not a problem. You have got to feel like this is a world that goes on and on forever.

“It has been challenging because the wind whistles round up there and the weather changes in the blink of an eye from sunshine to pouring rain. It can turn very nasty very quickly. When it does get bad it definitely slows you up or can stop filming completely. But we managed to complete 12 hours of drama before winter arrived.”

Production interview

Q&A with Co-Creators & Executive Producers Katie Newman and Tim Haines continued:

Q: What can you tell us about the creatures in Beowulf?

TH: “First of all, there is no magic. They are all biological. They’re all straightforward creatures and, therefore, are very familiar to the humans that live there. Just as bears and wolves would have been. In that respect they become part of the ecology of this world. That gives us more layers to explore.

“They come in different sorts from the intelligent down to your grizzly bear types. The Trolls are the grizzly bears. They sit around quite happily not bothering anyone but they are the most dangerous animals when annoyed. Grendl is a strange creature because he’s actually neither. He is half-human, half-monster. The Barghest are giant wolves. They are just some of the creatures we will see.”

Q: You also have different tribes?

TH: “Yes and costume design was extremely important in differentiating them. All our tribes have their own design and colour to represent where they are from, whether it’s the woods, the coast or the plains. Our costume designer Ralph Wheeler-Holes has been unbelievably imaginative and done a fantastic job.”

Q: Is this a drama with global appeal?

TH: “Beowulf is a series crafted for a British audience but that’s what, hopefully, the international market will love about it. We have in this country a whole mythology of creatures; Arthurian, medieval legend and that can be exported around the world.

“*Game of Thrones*, for example, is a great series but many people, including younger viewers, can’t watch it because of the level of sex and violence. ‘Beowulf’ is a show that delivers epic fantasy, danger and excitement but that three generations can enjoy and, we hope, find fascinating for many series.”

KN: “Beowulf is more *Lord of the Rings* for television than *Game of Thrones*. Its universal themes, breathtaking locations and settings, feature film quality CGI and phenomenal cast will hopefully appeal to a broad, global audience.”

Production interview

Q&A with Producer Stephen Smallwood

Q: What major decisions did you make before filming began?

“The decisions you make early on are crucial for what is a 27-week shoot. The principal one is the choice of where you film. I thought of Ireland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Romania. The poem is believed to have been set in Denmark but was written down by somebody who is deemed to have been a monk from the north east of England whose only knowledge was probably of the English landscape. Northumberland and County Durham provide some fantastic landscapes so we decided to film it there. We needed remote locations where you can see no evidence of the intervening 1,300 years between the recording of the poem and now. And that’s quite difficult to find with no evidence of fields, stone walls, buildings or civilisation. They all have to be missing. Then you have to be within striking distance of a metropolitan centre where everyone can stay and drive to and from. So somewhere within about 30 miles of Newcastle upon Tyne was the aim and that’s what we’ve done.”

Q: How did you find your main exterior location?

“The location manager and production designer looked at a range of different places. We wanted a frontier badlands location and always thought we’d find this in Northumberland. But interestingly the upper reaches of the rivers of County Durham, namely the Tees and the Wear and the Tyne, provided interesting landscapes which were just about within reach of our metropolitan centre. Weardale has been heavily worked since the 19th century in lead mining and finally limestone mining and it provides great scars in the walls of the valley, of which a huge former quarry high up in Eastgate is one. That provides a site with spectacular cliff walls as well as moorland vistas.

“In the heart of the quarry we have built Herot, the frontier town at the heart of the story. The place where Rheda (Joanne Whalley) is Thane, having acquired this title at the death of her husband Hrothgar (William Hurt). This is a place, as described in the poem, of great wealth. And great wealth at that time constituted a building, which is lined with a gold interior. So we have the exterior set of the great Mead Hall there. The village around it comprises the buildings in which some of the wealthier residents live. Then we have a great area of industrial endeavour where Smelters of iron work, who provide the source of the wealth for the people up the hill. So it’s in two parts. The village and the not so posh end where the people do all the hard work smelting iron. And they are separated by an expanse of water.

“We’ve also filmed on beaches at Bamburgh, Druridge Bay and Seaham. And we’ve been over near Middleton-in-Teesdale in the forest and at Derwent Reservoir, which represents an inlet from the sea.

“Our interiors are filmed at Blyth in Northumberland, just north east of Newcastle. We found a large empty warehouse which had sufficient height to replicate the size of the Mead Hall built out in Weardale.”

Production interview

Q&A with Producer Stephen Smallwood continued:

Q: Did the weather provide a challenge?

“The weather has been a great trouble to us in many respects. Principally what we find slows us down is the intense and unpredictable winds that come whistling over the moors from the Pennines. They prevent us putting cranes up to place the camera and lights on. And there’s nothing filmmakers hate more than unpredictability because we have to plan ahead.

“It also rains sideways. We spent one day next to Hadrian’s Wall where we had sleet coming at us horizontally whilst the actors are trying to act. On those occasions their hair gets blown in front of their faces. Their cloaks blow around their head and they get very cold. They and the crew can be out in this kind of weather for 11 hours a day. So it’s tough.

“Our production office is in Consett and they scrutinise the weather reports so that filming can be switched from the exteriors at Weardale to the interiors at Blyth when the forecast is really bad.

“But the fact of the matter is you cannot shoot a show like Beowulf in benign domestic areas. We’re at the extremities of known civilisation and there the wind it doth blow and the rain it does fall. The positive side to that is the series looks great.”

Q: Did you make use of local talent and resources?

“We hire as many crew as we possibly can from the locality. Newcastle has a film and television business and we had lots of people from there working on the production, as well as people making costumes. Also a lot of local labour to help build the sets. Although we brought in skilled, specialist labour to build the sets in Weardale, which were constructed right through the winter. We source all the materials locally and there’s lots of add on skills that we use as much as we possibly can. Financially it’s incumbent upon us to try and use as much local labour as possible and morally we feel we should anyway.

“The production also brings a lot of money to the local economy. There are many services used: Hotels, restaurants, bars, taxis and all sorts of other ancillary services that we sourced locally. The local councils, which were very helpful in our initial set up time, recognised this entirely and were very assiduous in helping us push through what we needed to do, like planning permission in Weardale and all of those things. They were very keen for us to come and they’ve been great.”

Production interview

Q&A with Producer Stephen Smallwood continued:

Q: How did you find your Beowulf?

“Beowulf is a man in his thirties who has had some experience in life and is renowned as a warrior and sword-fighter. A robust, energetic, physical character. Kieran Bew has a long tradition of acting in serious roles, was well known in the theatre and had done some work on *Da Vinci's Demons*. But he is not particularly well known - yet - to the television audience. In his youth Kieran had been a skilled sword fighter. That wasn't the requirement for the job but does help enormously because the character does a lot of fighting. And while all actors are trained to fight, not all of them look good doing it. Kieran's background in fencing has been a great asset.”

Q: What about other main characters?

“Rheda, played by Joanne Whalley, is a very empowered central female leading character. That will possibly be surprising to those purists expecting a faithful adaptation of the poem, which this is not. This is a re-imagination for television. A spin-out from the poem. But in a way that people who know the poem will recognise. We were also keen to have a diverse, multi-ethnic cast and that is reflected in the choice of some really strong actors like, for example, David Harewood (Scorann) and David Ajala (Rate). We have really good actors of all ethnicities.

“We also have other strong guest cast all the way through the series. Gregory Fitoussi joins us, a French actor who ITV viewers will know from *Mr Selfridge*. We've had many notable visiting actors.”

Q: What was it like working with William Hurt, who plays Hrothgar?

“He likes to sit down with the director and discuss at great length the content and substance of the scenes he's going to shoot, long before he hits the floor to shoot them, so that he can prepare properly. Hrothgar is dead at the start of the series so he appears in flashbacks in our stories. William said he had enjoyed himself so much that he hopes to return to film more, if we are lucky enough to get a second series.

“I think the reason he took the role was because he is completely obsessed with the poem. He knew all about the person he was playing and was longing to come up to the north east to see Lindisfarne and, indeed, Bamburgh where we shot his scenes on the beach. He loved the whole process. He loved the sets. And just adored getting to know the world of Beowulf, which he had been so fascinated by for quite a long time.”

Production interview

Q&A with Producer Stephen Smallwood continued:

Q: What about the creatures we will see on screen?

“The original poem had beasts in it and the television series does too. These are digitally created aside from one set of creatures that are more human than beast. We used stuntmen and prosthetics for those. But everything else in terms of the world of beasts is CGI.

“Actors are increasingly used to it but they are acting against something which they cannot see or which may be represented by a green tennis ball on a stick. But you will see that Kieran Bew was totally committed in the scenes when Beowulf is fighting beasts. You would never know he was facing either a tennis ball on a stick or a funny looking man in a green suit on a pair of stilts.”

Production interview

Q&A with Writer and Executive Producer James Dormer

Q: How did you become involved in Beowulf?

"I was approached by executive producers Tim Haines and Katie Newman and was intrigued. I'm a historian and a storyteller. There are a lot of historians who get fixated on the fact Beowulf was written down. So that's like a holy text. But as far as I could see it was an oral story told by Scandinavian immigrants that came to this country about their homeland and it had Christianity imposed on it. So it was basically a story told for the people of the time to fulfill the needs they had but adapted to fit the changing world around them."

Q: So how does this new TV drama relate to the original epic poem?

"It seemed to me that to tell a story, a popular version of Beowulf again, relevant to the people of Britain today, we needed to hang on to all the elements of it but move away from the specific locations of Scandinavia. Moving it into a more fantastical world enabled us to open up the world and have a multi-ethnic cast, making it more relevant to today."

"It was always a sense that you can have a bit of fun with the fact you're telling a story. So in the opening voiceover it says, 'Some people say that heroes are born and some that they're made.' You're looking at something from a slightly different perspective. A sense of stories within stories. We have a very clear idea as to the larger story arc and how that can play out. But we want to stay as true to the poem as we can."

"You can't compete with something like that and as a storyteller I always have to tell it my way. There were probably endless bards who told versions of the story and it developed as they went off in their own way. So I'm just like the one who is at the end of the line at the moment. I'm simply in that queue of storytellers."

"We stay true to the poem in that it's the story of a hero, warriors and people who believe the way they die is more important than the way they live. But hopefully, because of the world we live in now, we're able to look at it from a different angle. So you can see that's what they believed but also what the consequences of that can be."

Q: How did you approach the character of Beowulf?

"Right from the start we didn't want to cast a boy. We wanted to cast a man. And if he's a warrior then that inevitably comes with a certain weight. Because he has obviously killed people. We wanted a hero who had been through the mill, was damaged and had lost family and home in his past. Beowulf comes back to see the dying Thane Hrothgar (William Hurt) but is also being drawn back to a home. Like most decent TV, it's about family and home."

"We were very worried, initially, whether we were going to find someone that would fit the bill. Then Sam Jones our casting director came up with Kieran Bew and we were immediately thrilled by the depth of his performance, his ability to hit the right notes but also the fact he has a vulnerability about him that comes across on screen."

Production interview

Q&A with Writer and Executive Producer James Dormer continued:

“We thought that was really important. Because if you’re presenting a warrior hero, you still want a way in for the audience. You want them to see that he’s a human being as well and that he really feels things.

“Beowulf is a hero. But we live in a world now where we question our heroes. So I wanted him to be a hero with an edge to him and sometimes you’re not quite sure. If you looked at it from another angle he might be a villain. Sometimes you might also do that with the ‘baddies’, see their point of view and have some sympathies for them.”

Q: Who takes over in Herot after the death of Hrothgar?

“Rheda, played by Joanne Whalley, becomes the new Thane. As well as creating a multi-ethnic world we wanted to create a world that reflects the truth of life and that half of us are women. I’ve got a track record with strong female characters. I’m drawn to those. I married one. So I can’t escape it.

“Rheda was there with Hrothgar when he ruled and that’s the way it often works. Those men are seen to be in charge and making the decisions. But when they’re not allowed to be up front, women are still making key decisions behind the scenes. Then given the chance they can step forward and do as good as, or better, than the men.”

Q: Where does Beowulf take place?

“We are in a frontier land called the Shieldlands. It’s at the edge of what the humans have taken over. Prior to the arrival of the humans it was inhabited by what we call the Mudborn, who are the creatures who lived there before. The humans drove out these creatures and the giants that ruled over them and took the land for themselves.

“At the centre of this land you have Herot, which is a town driven by industry, the forging of iron. That’s the kind of place that attracts immigrants coming from the Farlands. So a lot of the people aren’t actually from Herot. It’s like going to a mining town on the frontier in the west.

“Around that you have various other tribes, some of which live in the woodlands. Up in the north you have the Varni, who are a horse people. Then on the coast you have a place called Bregan, which is inhabited by people that make their living from the sea. So Herot is the centre and around it you have these other tribes that form a human alliance.”

Production interview

Q&A with Writer and Executive Producer James Dormer continued:

Q: Does the world created for the production inspire your writing?

"We initially went up to the main quarry site of the external locations in Weardale when there was nothing there. So then to see the set they have built was amazing. What production designer Grant Montgomery created for the sets inspired us all and fed into the story process. They help create this world.

"As did having such a good cast of actors. That spurred us on to deliver as high a quality as we possibly could. I watch the rushes most days and so the whole time you're watching what everybody is doing with what you're writing and what the other writers are writing. It totally impacts on you because the actors make the characters their own and breathe life into them. Then you have to adapt to work with that."

Q: Do the themes in Beowulf have any relevance to today?

"That was one of the key things. You're always looking for a way into a story. I married a woman who happened to be Muslim and then 9/11 happened. I've got three young kids who are growing up in a world that is defined in many ways by fear of other people. You only have to look at the refugee crisis. So because we've created a world that slightly reflects our own what happens then naturally is the parallels come up. If you're telling a story about war and the movement of people you're inevitably going to get those crossovers."

Q: How did William Hurt become involved?

"Sam Jones the casting director suggested William Hurt as a possibility to play Hrothgar. We were all slightly disbelieving. But it turned out he had a passion for Beowulf. He was over in this country filming so I ended up being given the job of going to see him to try and persuade him to do this.

"He was absolutely lovely, charming and deeply knowledgeable. It was like sitting down with some guru for two hours and seeing the meaning of life. Eventually we managed to get him on board. I don't think it hurt that he had been in The Incredible Hulk movie and my kids drew pictures of his character in that, which I gave to him. That might have helped. He is a hero of mine so it was a fantastic experience.

"Although Hrothgar is dead it worked well for the story because I wanted to create - a bit like Hamlet's ghost - this presence that hangs over everything. He informs the choices that Beowulf, Rheda and Slean (Edward Speleers) make. What he's done, good or bad, is what we're exploring and hopefully that all comes together by the end of the first series."

Production interview

Q&A with Writer and Executive Producer James Dormer continued:

Q: How did people view themselves at this time?

“We always think we’re at the cutting edge. Back then they probably thought they were the cutting edge. Even though there had been the whole Roman era before them. That’s something else we picked up on. The Anglo Saxons were haunted by the past of the Roman world. But they didn’t see it as a great civilisation that had preceded them. They had myths. They would avoid the Roman roads. Because they ran so straight they thought it was an easy access for ghosts.”

Q: What is it like seeing Beowulf arrive on screen?

“I have a growing sense of achievement. That together we’ve all managed to create this drama. It’s a gradual thing. When you see the actors bringing their lines and the characters to life, that was a huge moment. Then the creation of the creatures and the CGI. Those are the two huge moments.

“It has been an amazing experience for me as an executive producer. I have been welcomed in and allowed to be a part of the wider decision-making process. It’s been really liberating.”

Cast interviews

Q&A with Kieran Bew (Beowulf)



Q: How did the role of Beowulf come about?

"I was really excited when I got the script. I learned it over two days, taped it and sent in a couple of scenes for the casting director and executive producers to view. I had a recall, then a meeting. I went to ITV for a chat with all of the executives and they offered me the job about an hour later. I was at my agent's office when the call came in and they told me. I was thrilled. All of that happened in less than two weeks."

Q: What about filming in the north east of England?

"As a local lad from Hartlepool it was a huge bonus that Beowulf was filming in the north east. I've only ever worked in the region once since I left which was for an episode of George Gently a few years ago. London is where all the castings happen and you have to be there. It's tough getting back home because either I'm auditioning, rehearsing, filming or doing a tour somewhere. So to be able to come and work back in the north east and be based in Newcastle is amazing. It's half an hour from the main exterior location to my parents and my grandad. I didn't have a huge amount of time off but I managed to get a couple of Sunday dinners with my mam."

Q: Did you know much about Beowulf before this drama?

"I did. About 10 years ago, in between acting jobs, I gave myself a pet project to try and write something about the Norman Conquest. Then I started looking further back to the Vikings' conquest and looked at all the sagas and Icelandic poetry which led me to Beowulf and Anglo-Saxon Britain. It's a brutal time and the stories are so rich and dark. I'd read the Seamus Heaney translation of the Beowulf poem and recently looked at the Tolkien one as well. So that was really lucky."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Kieran Bew continued:

"ITV had no idea I'd already done all that research and I was like, 'Oh yeah, I've actually named my cats after characters from the era.' One cat was called Tostig, after Tostig Godwinson the Anglo-Saxon Earl of Northumbria, and my other cat was called Saga. I became obsessed with Nordic gods and all the rest of it because they're just great stories. It's part of our history as Britons. The Beowulf poem itself spawned *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. And for us in our world, there is so much room to grow and fill with all these great ideas from brilliant writers. It's really exciting."

Q: Who is Beowulf?

"Beowulf was banished from the town of Herot as a young boy and has since been roaming around, living various different lives. When we first meet him in this story he is returning to Herot, having been away and alone for some time. He's had a pretty difficult life, as most people have in this tough landscape. Beowulf has spent a lot of time protecting himself and protecting those around him. He is deliberately keeping himself a loner.

"He's enigmatic with quite a few secrets. An honourable man and pragmatic. He doesn't dwell on things. In the poem he's very decisive and front-footed and he's the same in our drama. I don't want to give too much away about what's going on underneath it all but he is complicated and conflicted. Now he's returned there is unfinished business to deal with.

"You will see all the different facets of who he is. Beowulf is a tough warrior but it's not as simple as you think. He's a human being and has reasons for doing everything he does. What the writer James Dormer has created really well is a world where characters do display good and bad attributes.

"You're living in a town where outside the borders there are very scary, dangerous creatures. It makes people paranoid, brittle and reactionary because they're defensive and have been hardened by it. There are times when Beowulf wants to do the right thing but has to make decisions he doesn't want to make because of the circumstances he's put himself in.

"This is a fantasy show but it's based in some historical fact. During the period of time in the poem of the Dark Ages certain pockets of Britain had lost the knowledge the Romans had brought. People found swords in the ground which were of a better metal and better forged than anything they could produce and so these were magic weapons. The poem is full of magical fantasy which is actually based on historical fact. But this is a human world and I think everyone will identify with various elements of it."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Kieran Bew continued:

Q: What was your initial reaction to the main filming location?

"The first time I went high into the quarry where they built the sets for the town of Herot, the thing that struck me more than anything was how ominous the place seemed. It was very wet and there was a deep, thick cloud hanging over the entire set. Our Mead Hall was sticking out of the top of this cloud and looked like something that had been there for hundreds of years. It's just an hour outside Newcastle in County Durham and Weardale but it's like another world. It's the biggest set I've ever been on. Quite incredible.

"Because of the particular position of the quarry, the wind rushes in. The climate essentially changes every half an hour. I can't quite believe that it was constructed through the winter. They all deserve medals for enduring that. It was brutal when we got there as a cast in March by which time all of that stuff had been constructed by quite a small team of builders in the harshest of conditions. There's no GGI. It all physically exists.

"You really feel as if you could be back in the Dark Ages up there. You quickly realise that if you don't have access to electricity or hot running water then you have to stay pretty wrapped up all the time. In the first couple of months the cast and crew had nowhere to hide from the elements.

"Everybody was discovering just how good their thermals and jackets were. It definitely helped us really think about the brutality of living in a period of time where there were none of our modern creature comforts. Because we simply didn't have any. We all had to huddle together. All of which was helpful in terms of transporting us back to a different time.

"My parents have been up to the quarry and my brother and some of my nieces came up and tried on some of the armour and costumes. It was pretty special for my family to see it and understand why they can never get me on the phone. It's like a Beowulf black hole because there's no phone reception in the quarry, the forests and the beaches we've been filming on."

Q: You have some experience in fencing?

"I've been sword fighting for a long time. I began fencing at the age of nine. I'd been fascinated by that scene in *The Three Musketeers* where Oliver Reed gets his cloak stuck in the water wheel. My dad said, 'If you're going to do something, do it right.' My family were all sports people, all swimmers. So even then at that age I'd already been training every night and swimming competitively. Then when I went fencing I just loved it.

"By the time I was 14 I was on the British squad. Which is quite strange for a lad from Hartlepool. It's normally a sport people do in private education. But I was lucky. Between then and leaving to go to drama school I went around Europe every year: Switzerland, France, Germany, Hungary and Sicily. I was placed 21st at the World Championships, which I wasn't happy with. I'd come third in the last international I'd been in and I was like, '21st is not good enough.' I look back now and think that's great. But at the time you're fiercely competitive.

Cast interviews

Q&A with Kieran Bew continued:

"Then I went to drama school at LAMDA and they are really hot on stage combat. They're also connected with William Hobbs, who arranged the fights for *The Three Musketeers*' movies I had watched growing up. So there was this crazy connection. Just by chance I got a job choreographing and teaching the fights for Mark Rylance doing *Hamlet* at The Globe in London. Aged 19. Mark let me sit in during rehearsals and then they made me fight captain. I watched *Hamlet* about 25 times, which was amazing because Mark would do it differently every night.

"I'm one of five kids, so we didn't have a huge amount of money by the time I got into drama school. Dad said, 'Just go for the first term and we'll have to work the fees out as you go.' The income from the fight work kept me in LAMDA. They employed me to do the fights for *Romeo and Juliet*, involving students across two different courses, including mine. A total of eight casts. And they paid me money to do that. The head of drama once said to me, 'Kieran, are you going to do any acting?'

"Now I go to work every day and I've got a sword and a cape. It's hard work but a lot of fun. I started competing in fencing again in 2014 after many years out and managed to get my ranking up to 14th in the country. But I had to stop again to film *Beowulf*."

Q: Did you suffer any injuries filming the fights and other action scenes?

"I think it was Daniel Craig talking about doing James Bond who said, 'If you don't get bruised playing Bond, you're not doing it right.' We're making an action show. 12 episodes of horse riding, battling against monsters and various different tribes of humans. I'm fine now. My knee has healed, my eye has healed and my ribs have healed.

"I broke three ribs filming a fist fight in a big sequence with one of our very large stuntmen called Phil, who is a lovely bloke. It was a shoulder barge from Phil. I simply hesitated. I should have offered him my shoulder but I turned just a fraction the wrong way and offered my chest. In the split second of doing it I realised what I'd done but it was too late and he whacked me in the chest. He felt very bad about it, bless him. But he's just doing his job and it was my error. No-one else was to blame.

"I've broken a few ribs in my time so I instantly thought, 'Oh no, that's not just being winded. I'm pretty sure something has gone.' But I carried on and had to do the fight two more times after that. The thing about an injury like that is you really feel it the second or third day after it happens. But that's when I had to do a whole chase scene and also a fair bit of horse riding.

"I had an X-ray about a week after the injury and then an MRI about three weeks after it happened. But there's nothing you can do for broken ribs. You just have to take painkillers so you can keep breathing. I did have a very frank discussion with the doctor who said, 'If you hurt yourself you have to text me and I'm going to come and check you out. Because I don't want you pushing on with silly injuries.'

Cast interviews

Q&A with Kieran Bew continued:

"The trouble is, if I don't come to work then there's a lot of other people who also don't get to come to work. So I felt I had to soldier on. It happened in the third week of filming when I was looking at six or seven months' more of shooting. So I was a bit nervous about that. But I carried on. And people who thought I was just bruised and a bit of a softie changed their minds when we got the proper diagnosis back.

"We just had to slightly tailor some of the further action scenes. It's funny because riding a horse was fine. It was the getting on and off the horse that was painful. Just like sleeping at night or laughing or sneezing. Those are the most difficult things when you've got broken ribs.

"It's part and parcel of doing a role like this. In the day-to-day filming there are risk assessments and stuntmen. But these things happen. Even in competition, in sport, I've had these injuries. You roll with it and expect to get bumps and knocks in an action show."

Q: What were some of the other less painful memorable moments for you?

"Riding the horses with cast members on the back was memorable. I didn't horse ride before I began the job. So I've learned very quickly on stunt horses. I've had to gallop around with an actor or an actress on the back of the horse, which is a certain amount of responsibility.

"There was a moment with my co-star Gisli Orn Gardarsson, who plays Breca. We were going around these caves with flaming torches and swords and we just had a bit of a giggle. Because it's like being eight-years-old again. It really is such a pleasure to do this kind of stuff.

"Some of the sword fight sequences in the main battle are pretty stunning. And there's a sword fight which is similar to some of the sword fights I grew up watching from *Highlander*, *Star Wars* and other films. There's lots of homage to the movies we grew up watching, be it Westerns or the sword-fighting movies."

Q: Do Beowulf and Breca become friends?

"Beowulf has been a loner but he saves Breca from a lynching and they become unlikely friends. Breca is a bit of a cad, thief and a liar. Or he appears to be that. He's a trickster and possibly a con man but he has a very sharp mind and is very light and witty. That offers some very welcome levity for Beowulf who has a name and reputation that follows him around. Essentially Breca is Beowulf's only real friend.

"It's been great for me to have Gisli there. He is a renowned theatre director and actor and writes TV shows and musicals. He is always working on something. The highlight of the series has been working with Gisli because he's such an artist and is also hilarious. We've shared this whole experience together. Often he's had to stand around and watch me jump off horses and fight people. But he's always had a sense of humour about it. It's nice to hang out with people who are creative and funny."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Kieran Bew continued:

Q: What about working with William Hurt as Hrothgar?

"William is such an experienced and well read actor. He loves to delve into research before a job and that's what I like to do too. So working with William was great because we had a good old chat about the original Beowulf poem and various translations, poetry, theatre and so on. The thing that resonated with me was his enthusiasm. His love of language and history. That was something we shared.

"I'd done an awful lot of research in the past but also just before the job had started and, for me, that was a very personal thing given that I was playing the lead character. Then William came along and he could quote parts of the poem and he knew about the Icelandic poets I'd been reading and some of the history. He also wanted to talk about weaponry, which has been a passion of mine. It was wonderful to meet an actor who had accomplished so much in his career and yet still comes on to a job with all of that enthusiasm."

Q: Beowulf has a strong guest cast throughout the 12 episodes?

"We've been phenomenally lucky. I was really pleased to work with all of them, including David Bradley (Gorrik) who I'd seen in *Our Friends In The North* when I was younger. Getting to work with him was special. He has a fantastic reputation in the business for being the nicest bloke around, which he proved by coming up to me and asking if he could take a selfie with me. That was very humbling. And he was superb.

"We've had other people too like Gregory Fitoussi (Razzak). I'm a huge fan of the drama he did called *Spiral*, which is one of the biggest shows in France. Others have come in and played the most outstanding characters."

Q: How did you film the encounters with monsters?

"You have to act with huge green blocks and jump off horses and attack immovable green objects which will later become CGI monsters. I've seen some of the CGI and it looks phenomenal. But it's quite a strange thing to have to do a fight sequence with something there. And then they remove that something, whether it's a stuntman or a block, and you have to do the whole thing again with nothing in the frame as if that person or thing is there. So it can be quite a challenge. But the whole job is 'let's pretend' anyway. When you do anything in the theatre you have to pretend and you imagine. It's a very similar thing."

Q: What was the worst of the weather you faced?

"I was supposed to film a scene where I had to take my shirt off and I had been training all week. But then I broke those three ribs. We'd had a couple of sunny days and then came the day where I had to take my shirt off. I spent an hour in make-up and then when we opened the door the snow was going sideways. Our director of photography said to me, 'Kieran, we're not going to shoot that scene because, 1) we like you and 2) it's illegal.' So we couldn't do that.

Cast interviews

Q&A with Kieran Bew continued:

“But I had to do a scene later that day where I simply had to lie on the ground and then get up quickly when I see something happen. There was a brutal wind. It’s not just how cold it is. The wind is so powerful and when it blows at you all day during filming it becomes very draining. So the combination of the wind and the broken ribs meant getting up off the ground that day was probably the most taxing physical thing I’ve done in the whole shoot because it hurt so much. There’s not a lot of room to give when you’ve got broken ribs and you’re holding and bracing yourself against the cold. It hurt a lot.

“Yet two days later the quarry had dried out and the ground turned to sand. And then the wind came. So it became like Tatooine, the desert world from *Star Wars*, and everyone had to wear facemasks to cover against the dust. We were all like, ‘Whoa, what’s this? It’s a totally different thing again.’ The weather certainly kept us entertained and on our toes.

“The positive side to all of that is it looks really authentic on screen. You endure those days as an actor because of that. We’ve had a couple of days in other locations in the north east, up high on ridges and things, and we’ve not been able to use the drones or the cranes that we wanted to use to shoot because the wind has been so powerful. But then when you see the rushes, that violence in the air and the movement in the frames adds a very eerie, otherworldly quality which I think is definitely worth those days. And it feels good. It feels like we’ve all been on an adventure as much as the characters.”

Q: How do you look back on the six months of filming?

“It’s probably the hardest job I’ve ever done. The toughest shooting schedule I’ve ever worked on. I’ve been in every day. Even when I’m not in filming I still come in and rehearse the fights. So it has been non-stop aside from a two-week break in the middle when I was just desperate to rest and do nothing. So I went to Greece and Italy and lied down on a beach. But that environment breeds a real family atmosphere and everybody is very close as a result.

“The crew are the heroes of the series. I can’t believe how much they’ve endured. It takes an hour each way to get into that quarry and they have been phenomenal. If anybody deserves a huge thank you, it’s the crew. They have worked tirelessly day in, day out. So we’re very close.”

Cast interviews

Q&A with Joanne Whalley (Rheda)



Q: Who is Rheda?

“Rheda is the wife of the great leader Hrothgar (William Hurt) who, as the series begins, has just died. He was Thane of Herot, which is an area of the Shieldlands. They had a very good relationship and she was powerful in a behind-the-throne kind of way. Rheda was much valued by him for her intelligence and wisdom. Hrothgar leaned on her and they were very evenly matched and weighted. They found strength in each other and also respect and trust.

“Following his death Rheda is now in charge. But it’s not easy for her to assume this mantle. It’s not a traditional role for a woman and there are people who are not sure it’s a good idea. But it was what Hrothgar wanted. His are not easy shoes to step into and it is not a simple transfer of power. There are potential challenges to her position and she needs the support of leaders in the rest of the Shieldlands as she strives to move Herot forward.

“What’s great about playing Rheda is she doesn’t really know what she’s doing. It’s all very well being behind the scenes but to step out on to the stage is very different. That’s not within her comfort zone and she’s not sure she wants it. She has ideals she believes in and things she really wants to carry out.

“With Hrothgar that was easy because they could plan together, have these visions for the future and he was great at stepping out front. But now she has to do this alone. So it’s very interesting to watch her navigate her way through this situation, especially as a female.

“None of the relationships with the people who are close to her are easy. Nothing is straightforward or simple. Her rock, the shoulder she leant on, has gone. It’s a very lonely place to be. So she has a very difficult path to navigate and manage.”

Cast interviews

Q&A with Joanne Whalley continued:

Q: Warriors fight for power. But is that an option for her?

"She is not a warrior, but she's not a coward. Her physical strength may be tested. Who knows? We do have female warriors but she was not brought up to be one."

Q: Rheda and Hrothgar had a son called Slean (Ed Speleers). Can you give details?

"Rheda and Slean have a very complicated relationship. Slean resents her becoming Thane when he believed it was his rightful position. So that's difficult. Then there's the whole history in their family background with Hrothgar and Beowulf (Kieran Bew). There are loyalties and love but also some deep anger and resentment."

Q: How does Rheda feel about the return of Beowulf?

"She is not happy at all about the return of Beowulf. But then she needs him and his instinctive intelligence. Slean isn't ready to deal with this. She's right about that. There are challenges Rheda has to face and Beowulf can help her. She is very aware of who he is. Beowulf is deeply honourable and Rheda comes to have a lot of respect for him."

Q: How did you find working with Kieran Bew?

"Kieran is born to play the role of Beowulf. He is wonderful and has such a warmth about him that really shines. You know from his character he is a decent man. Also as a fencing champion all the fighting scenes come so easily to him. It's unbelievable. He is just Beowulf. I cannot imagine anyone else in the role. Kieran is such a good actor and you simply want to watch him. He's also so funny as well. It's a pleasure to work with him and the rest of the cast. Everyone has a sense of humour because you couldn't be up here in the wilds without one. So we've had lots of laughs."

Q: What did you make of the town of Herot, built high in a remote County Durham location?

"My first impression was, 'Can I go home now? It's too cold.' Then production team gave me thermal underwear and a nice warm cloak and that changed things. It's part of the job of being an actor. You're either too hot or too cold and you can freeze. Even when it's raining the camera doesn't pick it up. So you're getting wet and viewers don't know. You just have to get on with it."

"I was actually staggered when I first saw what they had done for the location of Herot. I can't believe what they've made. They have built a really extraordinary set high up in a disused quarry in County Durham. It's amazing. Exceptional."

"It was the same when I first went to the interior sets, built at Blyth in Northumberland. First days are always horrendous, just because you don't know anyone, you're wearing strange clothes and it's all not sitting right quite yet. Then I walked into the set which was Rheda's private quarters in Herot and it was absolutely beautiful. Gold walls with stairs going up to these huge double golden doors."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Joanne Whalley continued:

“Usually on sets, you open doors and then there’s just scaffolding and a sheer drop outside. But when I opened these doors I could not believe my eyes. I was expecting scaffolding and they had these two glorious chambers beyond - the Map Room and the Feasting Hall. I was completely gobsmacked. It looks amazing being there and this makes your job as an actor easier. You feed off it. It’s going to look incredible on screen.”

Q: What did you think of Rheda’s look?

“Rheda is the Thane so she has to have more costumes than everyone else. The clothes are beautiful. The costume designer Ralph Wheeler-Holes, has used really believable materials and I love how he has differentiated between the different groups and tribes.”

Q: Was death a part of life in the Shieldlands?

“Death at this time was about what you left behind, what you pass on and what you stood for. Storytelling was so important. There is a storyteller in episode one telling children the story of Hrothgar’s death, how he met it and the importance of a good death. It’s Hrothgar’s last gift to them. Stories like that turn into legends and we do hang on to them. They are ideals you pass on from your immediate world to your children and their children. But they endure and are spread across a larger community.”

Q: What else can we look forward to in Beowulf?

“I find the relationships between the characters very interesting. It’s a time of huge transition in Herot and the Shieldlands. So all of the relationships reflect what’s happening in their world. This upheaval affects everyone. Then we have the monsters who will look great on screen and the huge landscapes. And while we might be in a fantasy land, it’s not too much of a stretch to apply what goes on in Beowulf to modern day dilemmas.”

Cast interviews

Q&A with William Hurt (Hrothgar)



Q: How did the role come about?

“When something is really good luck, you’re not quite sure how it happens. I just got the script, read about three pages and I loved it.

“I studied the poem when I studied English Literature at college. Epic poetry and history. The Vikings is a great, huge civilisation that is, in some ways, lost to us. People are very attracted to it in terms of its grandiose proportions. Its artistic and cultural complexities were ornate and the lives were ruthless. A lot of the epic side of it has been prettified, in my opinion.

“Few people understand the importance of that volume of culture and this series introduces that to them. It’s a very important part of Nordic origins and it actually reflects life as it is when you get into the paradoxes it deals with. It’s very unlike a normal happy ending story - the ‘he’s good and he’s bad’ story. These characters are flawed, all of them. There is ambiguity in their lives.

“This is the primeval human epic of the beast - and the beast in us. The beast that evolved out of the things we loved. Who you fall in love with can turn into your greatest enemy or, maybe more shockingly, greatest friend. This storytelling, this epic telling, is monumental.”

Q: Who is Hrothgar?

“I think Hrothgar was a visionary, dealing with the politics of his time and a complicated relationship with his wife. He’s worried about keeping his people together. He’s worried about finding the best power to fight chaos with.

Cast interviews

Q&A with William Hurt continued:

"Hrothgar is, I think, instinctive and morally very mature. He has been dealing with a lot of paradoxical, conflicting powers for a long period of time and he knows he is approaching his end. That's one thing about these particular epics. They are extremely aware of endings. They don't flinch from the subject of death.

"I'm the flashback guy because Hrothgar is dead at the start of this story. So I get to play vignettes of his importance to others. The scenes in which you see Hrothgar are, in some ways, subjective interpretations of his character by other characters."

Q: Are the themes in Beowulf relevant to today?

"Yes, I think more so than a lot of epic work. There are aspects of Beowulf that make it really relevant in a world that we now live in. Moral oversimplifications are no longer possible for any of us.

"I don't think there is a more important ancient piece of writing. It's among the few most precious human artifacts, because it's the first of its kind, at least for this part of the northern European world, comparable to the Mahabharata and Ramayana, the tales from Sumer, the hieroglyphs, the Pentateuch, because, for some human blood lines, it's the first one. It is so much more about us, so much more of a treasure of a mirror of who we really are. It reflects our origin and those who lived then. We're reflecting on that. And it's telling us things that are easy to forget."

Q: Were you familiar with the north east of England before filming this?

"I have been there before, yes. For visits and passing through. It is a truly phenomenal part of the world. It's fabulous country, an immediate and undeniable landscape. I think it was essential to film Beowulf in the north east because of the texture of that environment. In the past it was a brutal world.

"Riding a horse on that big wide beach at Bamburgh was a lot of fun. Especially when you consider the history of Christianity in the backdrop.

"The local people are wonderful. They are all secret spirits. I also walked Hadrian's Wall a lot and liked that a great deal. But I wasn't there for long. I have friends from up there and have lived all over the British Isles."

Q: Did you film any other action scenes?

"The big action scene for me is teaching two young boys how to sword fight. I loved doing that. It was a lot of fun because the boys were so sweet and so apt. I loved filming that scene."

Cast interviews

Q&A with William Hurt continued:

Q: What else appealed to you about this TV version of Beowulf?

“That mix of heroism and frailty. That they abide in the same people. You have a mother doing the right thing to defend the rights of her child and her idea of power and responsibility coming into odds with the man she really loves. There are all these ironies at work. No matter how broad the strokes may be. That’s a very interesting and honest portrayal of the situation most people have to face.”

Q: Why are stories like Beowulf so important to us?

“They help us understand our lives. They help us grasp the meaning of our existence. It’s pretty essential stuff. I myself, as an artist, I don’t so much believe that it’s how we tell stories as how we live them. In other words, when you’re enacting a story, I spend a lot less time thinking of telling it than living it.

“I think people see the authenticity. Some people live events credibly and some don’t. Some people reflect the truth of those events in other people’s lives. And some don’t. That’s my responsibility: To imagine accurately.”

Cast interviews

Q&A with Laura Donnelly (Elvina)



Q: What appealed to you about Beowulf?

"I was familiar with the original poem and had studied Seamus Heaney's translation. So the idea of bringing this very ancient story to life in a new way sounded really exciting. Especially over the course of a series where you can really expand and do brand new things with it.

"The scripts are great and have so many elements to them. From the big, epic feasts and battles to the romance and the monsters. I was also intrigued by Elvina's story and where it could go. With all of those things together I knew Beowulf was going to be fun.

"Beowulf is one of the oldest stories we have. This form of story harks right back to ancient Greece and the very earliest stories. You have your hero who is stronger and braver than everyone else who comes in to defend the village.

"What I also love about this is it brings in other elements and questioning. What exactly is a monster? How do you define that? As the series develops I think people will recognise parallels to the modern world.

"It's also lovely to be a part of that tradition of storytelling. That's what we do as actors. There is one scene with a storyteller in Herot telling of a famous hero. That's exactly what we're doing. We're doing his job."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Laura Donnelly continued:

Q: Who is Elvina?

“Elvina is the village healer in Herot. At the beginning we don’t know very much more about her than that. She has a very strong sense of justice and what is right in the world. Elvina is not necessarily like everybody else in her views. For example, in this world we’re in, warfare, battle and heroism are seen as something very noble. Whereas Elvina would much rather be a peacekeeper and doesn’t really adhere to that mindset.

“We also don’t know a lot about her background. We find out she is from a travelling tribe. So she wasn’t born and raised in Herot. She has come to settle there. And through the course of the season it’s about finding out who she is and where she has come from.”

Q: What is her relationship with Slean, played by Ed Speleers?

“Elvina and Slean are lovers but it is a secret relationship. It’s very clear they trust each other. They seem to find a connection and almost what seems like a solace in one another. They have a history and an understanding between them that we’re not entirely sure of at the outset. And then Beowulf (Kieran Bew) comes along and throws a spanner in the works.”

Q: What does Elvina make of Beowulf?

“Elvina is instantly intrigued, if not attracted, by Beowulf. She spends a little time fighting that. She’s not a silly girl who is going to fall for the first handsome hero that comes along. But as they get to know each other she recognises him as a kindred spirit and realises they have more in common. Particularly their sense of justice and desire to do what is right. Along with their bravery in doing that. As a result she finds something different in Beowulf than she finds in Slean and there is a connection.”

Q: Elvina is an independent woman. Is that unusual?

“That was very unusual for this time. Also unusual in any period drama that you get to play a woman who is that strong and knows her own mind. But, of course, we’re not dealing with an entirely historically accurate world either because this is a world of fantasy too. Which is wonderful because it allows us to push those typical roles into something else.”

Q: What was your first day like filming in Herot?

“It was windy! It’s such an impressive set. The scale of it is mind-blowing. On the first day of our readthrough we got to look at some photos. But to see it with your own eyes is amazing. It’s incredible what they have built. It’s rare that you get a tailor-made village. When you walk on a set you don’t really have to do any of the imagining. It’s just all there and makes everything feel so much more real.

Cast interviews

Q&A with Laura Donnelly continued:

"I love the feeling of the bare rock in this disused quarry. It gives an eerie sense of the humans that have been here before and how this landscape was formed where our Herot now sits. There's something otherworldly about the atmosphere. It does feel as if Herot could have really been here once.

"The interior sets are also spectacular. My first scene was shot in the interior for the Great Hall and it's incredible. There's gold everywhere and these massive statues. Everything is on such a huge scale that it really helps us with the feeling we're in something epic."

Q: Does Elvina have action scenes?

"There are one or two stunts but they're not going to allow me to throw myself off a rearing horse. I did as much as I could. I enjoyed it and really loved the horse riding. I've done a little bit before now so this isn't my first time. We had great guys on the production who help us with all of that.

"I spend a lot of episode four on horseback. There's a lot of good action in that. The fun of these things is that Elvina can find herself in situations she wouldn't normally be in. Suddenly having to pick up a sword or whatever. Being with the horses, on the horses, all of that stuff helps towards the feeling of being right in the action."

Q: What can you tell us about Elvina's costumes?

"They are by far the most comfortable costumes I've had in a period drama because I'm not in corsets. My character works for a living so she's got to be very practical. She's up on horses and all of the rest. So her clothes are comfortable and warm, which is unusual when you're in these kind of climates.

"Elvina would have one or two outfits she wears regularly. And then there will be different ones for different things she has to do. Such as a party or gathering. But she would have to make them all herself."

Q: How were the scenes involving monsters and beasts filmed?

"You have something green in the scene to represent the monster which will be added later with CGI. But we don't have to act against a green screen because all of our backgrounds can be real. It's only the monster itself that needs to be formed. Sometimes we're acting with stunt artists who will, perhaps, be on stilts in a green costume. At other times you're staring at a ball on a stick and pretending you know what you're seeing. It always provides a challenge but it's fun. Then every so often it's our director instead, growling and leaping at us. Which is always good for a laugh. But the end result on screen will look fantastic."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Laura Donnelly continued:

Q: What was the attitude to death in Beowulf's time?

"It was a huge element of those times. Because of war and battle and also because of lack of medicine and medical care, people did not live into their 90s. Death is much more of an everyday reality for everybody. This is really pre-Christian as well. So they have very ancient beliefs about how one moves on after death and the elements of that. You can see that in how they deal with the body of Hrothgar (William Hurt), building a funeral pyre and the ceremonies they go through. It's a much more ancient world. And so their beliefs about these things aren't something we're as familiar with. I find all of that fascinating."

Q: Do the Dark Ages have anything to teach us?

"Absolutely. The themes we deal with are so universal that most would affect people just as much today as they would have then. And in terms of the knowledge they have, I found an interesting article the other day that said they have just discovered a medieval recipe for a treatment that is coping with a current hospital superbug. They discovered this from ancient medieval texts and realised it works. So they knew more than we think they knew. Of course we can feel like we're very sophisticated and developed today. But we're all looking to computers every day to figure out what we need to do. And left to their own elements, these people were much more resourceful."

Q: How would you describe your Beowulf experience?

"I've just been having a good time. Other than battling with the wind. When you have long hair it can be quite a nightmare. But I've been having a lot of fun. This is an epic project and that was a huge pull for all of us and why we got involved with it. This idea of being able to launch something on this scale. We all have a rough idea of our personal story arcs but we don't necessarily know where it's going. So every time a new script comes in there's instant excitement. I can't wait to see what's coming next."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Edward Speleers (Slean)



Q: What was your reaction when you first heard about Beowulf?

"My initial reaction was, 'I need to read the original poem.' Because I hadn't read it. Our drama is inspired by that but is very different. It's a beautiful poem but it's only just over 3000 lines long. That's not going to get you very far when you're making an epic TV drama. So this is a spin off from that. I loved the script and was intrigued. Slean is not a type of character I've had a chance to play before and I was excited by that.

"It's great to see a British TV network producing something like this. We've got the best crews in the world and some of the best actors. It shows huge ambition to embark on a drama of this scale which will also have international appeal."

Q: Most people know you as footman Jimmy in Downton Abbey. How does Slean compare?

"You could not get a more different role than this. Since leaving *Downton Abbey* I've been trying to do as many varied and different things as possible. This is a massive new challenge for me and I want to grab it with both hands.

"That's one of the advantages of being an actor. You get to experience all of these different worlds and people. Sometimes we take it for granted as actors and I can certainly be guilty of that. The one thing we want to do is create these worlds, characters and lives and be somewhere else and take ourselves somewhere else. And you get the chance to do that. I'm doing the one thing in the world I want to do."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Ed Speleers continued:

Q: Who is Slean?

"Slean believes he should be Thane of Herot instead of his mother Rheda, played by Joanne Whalley. Then he wouldn't be as angry. He is troubled. Slean has spent his whole life trying to prove to his father Hrothgar (William Hurt) than he can be the man his father wants him to be.

"He is a smart guy and politically minded. Now there is resentment towards his mother because she decided to take power when Slean thinks it is his birthright to be Thane. He is battling with that and people who don't believe in him.

"Then he has to deal with Beowulf (Kieran Bew) who suddenly turns up after his father's death. They have a history. Beowulf took all of his father's attention because he was better, stronger and faster. He has already caused Slean so much pain and now he's back. Why?

"Slean doesn't want Beowulf there. He was the reason everything went horribly wrong for him. There's distrust and a natural envy. Beowulf is essentially a decent, levelheaded grounded, salt-of-the-earth character that is immensely talented in everything he does. Slean also resents that. Perhaps there is room for healing but at the outset he wants nothing to do with this man.

"Slean is also having a secret relationship with Elvina (Laura Donnelly). She offers him real tenderness away from all the pent-up aggression, anger and resentment in his troubled head. That's when you see another, softer, side to Slean. She leans to his good nature and he is madly in love with her."

Q: What does Slean look like?

"I wanted something radical, as did our make-up designer. I was thrilled about that. It's a fantastical world so it's our own entity, albeit linked to the time of the original poem. So my hair is shaved all around the sides and at the back, something different to help create this character.

"Our costume designer Ralph Wheeler-Holes has also been smart. If you have a lot of characters, especially in early episodes, you want viewers to be able to pick them out and recognise who's who fairly quickly. So there are costume variations rather than lots of changes. I'm in a lot of green and my costume doesn't change that much to start with.

"A lot of it is loosely based on Mongolian and tribal influences. I like my costume and feel very strong in it. And I never feel strong, ever. So it's nice to have that. It's a very physical thing. I've had boots made specifically to every little detail of my feet. I feel like a real man in them."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Edward Speleers continued:

Q: Did you have any special training for the action scenes?

"We did some horse riding training. I've always quite enjoyed horse riding. In my first job I had to do a lot of riding and it's something I've embraced. I don't know if I'm good at it but I enjoy it. I love being up on horseback. It's a real buzz."

Q: What has it been like to film high up in a former County Durham quarry?

"My first day took me back to the first job I ever did which was called Eragon. We used a location in Hungary that was a disused volcanic crater. And this really reminds me of that. The drive up is very similar. It was like a weird throwback for me. The drive up across the Pennines to get here does nothing but inspire you to get into the character. It makes me feel like I'm going to war."

"I live in the West Country now and there are quite a few Iron Age hill forts there. You also feel like you're protected on the Beowulf set. You really can imagine what it would have been like back then and the location lends itself to what you're trying to achieve as an actor."

"Our interiors in Northumberland are also very impressive. Everything feels big and epic, like people are really trying to achieve something here. It gets me excited. I'm lucky to do what I do anyway for a living. And if you can get a chance like this, it's a great opportunity. As well as being fun."

"You also get to work with some amazing fellow cast members like William Hurt, Kieran Bew and Joanne Whalley. But then I could say that about anybody on this cast list."

"We spend so much time as actors working alone on auditions in your own room. I do it talking to my dog. Trying to work out what you're going to do. So when you actually get to be on location or on a set with a costume, holding a sword and riding a horse, doing a scene with a fellow actor, it's great. That's what you want to do all of the time."

Q: Slean faces opposition to his ambitions. Did anyone ever try and discourage you from becoming an actor?

"Yes. But I'd be surprised if there are many people who couldn't say that. I've been knocked along the way. I've been knocked more professionally than I was growing up. I wanted to act from a young age. I don't know why. Maybe it was because I wanted to be the centre of attention. I don't know what it was. But from the age of about 10 I wanted to be an actor. I was always getting into trouble at the same time and the only medium I seemed to be able to find to get myself back out of trouble was doing a play. I was lucky. I actually had some teachers at school that were very pushy. There was the other side of the school that really didn't like me but there were also certain teachers that were really pushy in making sure I did plays and things."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Edward Speleers continued:

Q: How would you describe the appeal of Beowulf?

“It will appeal to a wide audience, including families. There are certain shows they can’t watch together but this is something my brother can sit down with my 11-year-old nephew and really enjoy. There are serious themes but they are dealt with in a way that can be viewed by a family audience.

“There is a real sense of constant danger and fear of the unknown. We deal with mythical beasts and the idea that maybe not everybody is as bad as some might think they are. You can translate that to our lives today. The themes are universal.

“It’s also great entertainment with lots of special effects and a wonderful landscape. But the key is having stories an audience can relate to. When you strip back all of the fighting, adventure and beasts in this amazing world, the story is about family and relationships.”

Cast interviews

Q&A with Gisli Orn Gardarsson (Breca)



Q: Is the landscape of Beowulf familiar to you?

"I was born in Iceland but raised in Norway. I've been back and forth between the two countries for a long time. But Iceland is home to me. Our location in the northeast reminds me of Iceland with the strong winds and its barren landscape. This could be Iceland. It really does feel like home.

"I had been away from home for a long time, working all over the world. So I had planned to take a break. But when I was offered the part of Breca and looked at it with its creators I got very excited and knew this was something I wanted to do. I could sense this would be a really big production, with a lot of creative and exciting elements. It's been a wonderful experience to be a part of and a great character to play."

Q: Did you know much about Northumberland, Durham and Weardale before this?

"I'm doing a project with the National Theatre in London and we've been talking a lot about places like Lindisfarne and the north where the Vikings came. So I was excited in those terms because the Vikings used to roam around here. It's ancient history. My ancestors roamed these fields. And everybody in Newcastle is so friendly. You would have thought it would be colder and harder but there is a warm welcome here."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Gisli Orn Gardarsson continued:

Q: Who is Breca?

"Breca has been through many ordeals in his life and there is a lot hidden about him. He's from the dirt like they say. A loner who doesn't want to depend on anyone else. He doesn't trust anyone, which turns him into a selfish pragmatic man. Breca will do anything to get ahead. He wants to have it as easy as possible, so he will lie and cheat to achieve that comfortable life. He is an opportunist with an eye for the ladies. It's challenging to play on all those factors and it's been a good journey."

Q: What is Breca's relationship with Beowulf, played by Kieran Bew?

"Beowulf rescued Breca from a lynching and he has a noose mark on his neck. Breca has a history of trouble. Usually involving the betrayal of women. So that's how we find Beowulf and Breca together as the first episode begins.

"Their relationship instantly finds its feet. They find a harmony right at the top. And there is a friendship born through a sort of sarcasm. Like lost brothers having found one another.

"It's a bit like *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*. That Western analogy really does help. Us two riding together into town. They don't need to say a lot to understand one another and they don't judge each other. There's a nice level of lightness and humor between them, which is fun to play. And on another level, Kieran is one of the most genuine persons I've met, so it was easy for us to find a tone for the journey."

Q: What was your initial impression of Herot?

"It's huge, like a proper Hollywood-style set and super-inspiring for an actor to step on to a location like this. You don't have to imagine the world. It's there. So that's great. It helps with the character. You slip into the place and the time. And there was no phone signal or internet connection so it felt like being back in ancient times. The location is so sparse as well. You sense not a lot of people have been here. It's raw and you easily become affected by it."

Q: Are there many action scenes for Breca?

"There is horse riding and I'm happy to do my own stunts, when I'm allowed. I did gymnastics forever and competed in European Championships, plus I have horses of my own. So I certainly had the background for it. Of course horses are different, so you have to connect with them before galloping away, but I'm confident on the horses. I love being around them.

"The wind up here can be a challenge. It can be like riding in a hurricane. But there's no time to stop during filming. So we carry on. Occasionally we've had to change scenes and move them around. But that has more to do with the light than anything else. So we carry on, whatever the weather.

Cast interviews

Q&A with Gisli Orn Gardarsson continued:

“But it’s cool because it adds to the sparseness and rawness. You can see the wind is beating both the beasts and us. It’s real. We had a hot, sunny day last week so everyone showed up the next day wearing T-shirts and shorts. Everyone got fooled by that. The next day it snowed and there was a hailstorm.”

Q: Is there any difference working for a British television production?

“Filming is becoming so universal now. There have been many big productions shot in Iceland recently and I’ve certainly been fortunate enough to work in many countries. I think that because people work all over the world that it’s all blended together somehow. The borders have melted down. Thankfully. But if you didn’t have the tax initiative you have now in England on making films, this would probably be shooting in Iceland or Norway. Filmmaking is all one big international family.”

Q: The tradition of storytelling dates back to the original Beowulf poem?

“That’s why it’s great to be here - because of the history of the Vikings being here, you get infused by it. I was actually thinking I should stay in my trailer overnight on some nights up here. With the darkness and the stars out in the sky it wouldn’t feel that much different to the time when the poem of Beowulf was written. I once shot a film in the Sahara in Morocco and I stayed a few nights out there in the desert. It does funny things to you. In a good way.”

Q: The attitude to death at this time was very different to today?

“People actually believed the journey would continue after death. I don’t think there was any doubt about it. So it was perhaps less emotional. As long as you died with honor.”

Q: There are monsters and beasts roaming the Shieldlands.

“They look absolutely stunning. With all the mythology of Trolls and hidden creatures everywhere. When you have nature and surroundings like this it’s no wonder people imagined Trolls in the mountains and that the black ravens flying around the cliffs had a deeper meaning. I think it’s going to look stunning on screen.

“Beowulf is a great mix of the mythical saga and the actual poem that does exist. And the fairytale of it, with all of these creatures. It’s fun, it’s scary, and there is romance. It touches on a lot of colours and that’s what you want in an epic drama on this scale. It’s like being a part of the rainbow...”

Cast interviews

Q&A with Ellora Torchia (Vishka)



Q: Who is Vishka?

“Vishka is Herot’s blacksmith, having taken over from her father who died six years ago. Her mother is Lila, played by Lolita Chakrabarti.

“Vishka is imprisoned in a time and place that doesn’t allow her to fulfill her dreams. She’s grown up with the tales of warriors, monsters and slayers, and I suppose has always dreamed about her life being part of an adventure, she craves for the more extraordinary, rather than a manual job, and dull routine day in day out...

“Vishka is feisty, strong-willed, determined and out to prove a point. She believes women in general should be seen as something more than as the man’s possession. They should be able to fight for themselves and she stands up for that, working hard to put her money where her mouth is.

“At the same time she’s an adolescent who has a lot of frustration and pent-up emotion she struggles to place. Often this conflict within her self comes out in sporadic bursts of aggression. When we first meet Vishka, her emotional energy is faster than her intellect, and it gets her into tricky situations. She’s growing up, trying to deal with her past, her full on character at present, all her ambitions for the future, and the struggles to get there- at the same time.

“Vishka tries incessantly to be stronger than she is. She may be hurting on the inside but will tell everyone she is fine. She attempts to deal with everything herself, because for a lot of her growing up, she felt the need to be strong for her mother. It’s kind of a repressed rage; at life, at the way things are, at her inability to change it ...yet.

Cast interviews

Q&A with Ellora Torchia continued:

"I think that because of this, over the years she developed into a hard-shelled-stubbornness which although is often a wonderfully refreshing and bold characteristic, she sometimes pays the price of it also being detrimental to her inner angst. It's exhausting to always fight everything and everyone, and being young, her punchy approach to life is the only way she knows how to deal with things that have the potential to hurt her.

"Having said that, the few people who know her well, often read her like a book. Brinni played by Jack Rowan (her best-friend) can always see through her bravado, and though on the surface she, at times, mocks his sensitivity, his patience and understanding is probably her only consistent support. On a deeper level, she treasures that more than anything, and knows how lucky she is to have it, even if she can rarely muster up the courage to say it.

"Over the course of time you see Vishka grow up, trying to deal with a series of events, consequences and complex emotions that come with - guilt being a major one.

Vishka has to learn that patience is key - a difficult lesson for such an impatient soul."

Q: Which tribe does Vishka belong to?

"She is a Farlander and they are not from Herot, but she grew up in the village, and considers this her home. Her gift and her family's trade, together, make them well respected.

"The Farlanders have been established over generations but I think her loyalties to 'where she is from' or 'to whom she belongs' go deeper than on which land they settled in. I think Vishka more than anything, believes in a loyalty to herself and what she believes is right and wrong. For sure, her ancestral tribal ways would be different to those in Herot, but she is almost third generation in, and for her the morals of a Hero, surpass tribal differences.

"I think Vishka sees herself as different, proud of these differences and willing to use her beliefs for good."

Q: Does Vishka have a distinctive look?

"I had my hair shaved on one side to play Vishka, which I was extremely excited about. All of my jobs so far have wanted to keep my hair long, so I was really up for something a bit drastic and different. I thought they were going to chop both sides off, and was really looking forward to it, but they preferred a bigger contrast. Retrospectively I think that was the best call. She's a tomboy, yes, but it's not that she doesn't like her femininity, I think she just hasn't quite figured out what it is yet. Having long hair on one side, still allows for some softness.

"I also have quite a few tattoos that have to be drawn on. One on the side of my head, which is the tribal mark, a horse tattoo on my right upper arm and a mourning band for my dad... that one is my favourite."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Ellora Torchia continued:

Q: What can you tell us about your costumes?

"We had many discussions on what we wanted to say about her, with what she wears. I was very keen to not make her into too much of a 'boy' because as I said previously, it's not that she's anti-feminine. She's an empowered girl who becomes an empowered woman. Which is very different.

"Little details, like wearing trousers, but also wearing a skirt on top of that highlight her adolescent insecurities and her attempts to conquer them.

"As a blacksmith, she doesn't have the most glamorous range of clothes. They are practical and do the job. When we first meet Vishka, most of the time her standard outfit is a waistcoat, bottoms, a jacket she wears out and when she's working a blacksmith's apron. It's my favourite item, and it weighs a ton!

"Though Vishka's standard is her 'work –mode' she has a few moments where she makes 'an effort'. For instance at a feast where she wears this beautiful, high neck, black leather backless top with a wonderful beaded collar.

"There's a lot of leather on this, which isn't so great for me as I'm a Vegan, but aesthetically I think the designs by Ralph are beautiful, and I believe it's true to what these characters would wear.

"Leather stretches over time, so I'm usually very taped and sewn in to keep it all together. There's also quite a bit of action so the costume folks were smart to put little bits of stretchy material in hidden places to allow for more movement.

"I definitely pulled the short straw in March...wearing a sleeveless top, on a freezing Northumberland plateau, but it was lots of fun, and invigorating to have to work with the elements in the raw way we did!

"As an actor I'm fortunate Vishka has quite a progressive change in her story arc, to which costume and make-up follow, so I end up with some really cool things!"

Q: What was your first thought when you heard about this drama?

"I had studied it at school in English, and when I was at RADA there was a voice teacher called Robert Price who used extracts of the original Beowulf poem for voice warm up. My first thought was, 'This is crazy.' I was delighted to be able to do something that I had studied previously but in a completely different way.

"I knew this was going to be quite action based too, and was really keen to put the stage combat training I'd had at drama school into use. It's so much fun to be able to handle swords and so on."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Ellora Torchia continued:

Q: What did you think of the Beowulf world created by the production team?

"I'd never seen anything like it. It's magical. The shell of Herot constructed in Eastgate, and all its interiors set up in Blyth- together... it's an incredible world.

"Geographically, with the smelters in one area by the lake, and the Great Hall on the far side of it, it's interesting that the smithy, Vishka's home is in between the rich and poor areas. She can dip into both worlds."

Q: How are your blacksmith skills?

"I did an intense day course of blacksmithing before I started filming, with 'Fire and Iron' in Surrey. It's an art and a skill that takes years to master. Unfortunately I didn't have that luxury of time but I wanted to at least get an idea, and feel as though I knew what I was doing, in order to allow Vishka's confidence in it, out.

"It was a really interesting experience and not what I had expected it to be. Metal feels so wonderful in your hands. It was bizarre because initially it seemed like a very violent action, because you're hitting something. But actually the more accurate you are and the precision of the rhythm that you get when you're doing it, the more beautiful and the more fluid the process becomes.

"So it's a mix of brute force and breath. It's quite cyclical. It got me thinking that perhaps this is where Vishka zones out and is calmest, because I know I felt that.

"I left having made a knife when I was there, which I'm still secretly trying to get into the back of a shot."

Q: What is Vishka's relationship with Brinni?

"Brinni is her best friend. They've grown up together but he has always had the luxury of being two steps ahead of her, simply because of what he was born into. This makes her angry, and he recognises this. Brinni knows how passionate she is about wanting to have the same opportunities he has, and so in turn he teaches her what he learns. They spar and train together a lot.

"For Vishka, I think she gets on with him because he allows her to be herself, and even allows her to push the boundaries further. She often says it how it is, maybe too harshly, and yet, though Brinni sometimes takes offence, he always comes back. They both recognise the good in one another, so they have the closeness to forgive each other and try again.

"They have this fun, competitive, often flirtatious relationship but its also sometimes very brotherly and sisterly. They are both adolescents and are playing with discovering who they are and how they feel. It's easy to see how things might sometimes get confused and sticky. But I think in the greater scheme of things, Vishka has got far greater things planned, her future ambitions succeed any childish instant gratification."

Cast interviews

Q&A with Ellora Torchia continued:

Q: What was the attitude to death at this time?

“The landscape of ‘Beowulf’ is brutal and the people who live in Herot and the Shieldlands have to work hard to survive. Death is a part of that. Dying with honour and what it means to be honourable, are seeped in everyday conversation. The fights between good and evil are present at all times, and with that how one will die and for what cause... gives everyone a value for life. One either has a worthless death, or a death that will be remembered. Vishka, wants to be remembered, and to one day have died for the greater good.”

Synopsis

Episode one

Heroic legend Beowulf (Kieran Bew) gallops through the epic and mythical Shieldlands, to his childhood home of Herot, hoping to set right past wrongs.

Having left the rugged frontier town twenty years earlier, warrior come mercenary Beowulf, returns to pay his respects to ailing ward and Thane of Herot, Hrothgar (William Hurt). However, his gesture of goodwill soon opens old wounds. Beowulf is met with cold steel leaving him no choice but to fight his way into the Great Hall to be heard by new Thane Rheda (Joanne Whalley), wife of Hrothgar, whose appointment has caused controversy within Herot and afar.

With its defences fast fading, Herot falls under attack from within and when Rheda's loyal servant is killed, Beowulf vows to remain until the enemy is routed out, justice is served and Herot is safe once more. It's a race against time for Beowulf as he seeks to protect the town and catch the killer, be it human or beast...

Cast and production credits

Cast credits

Beowulf.....	KIERAN BEW
Rheda.....	JOANNE WHALLEY
Hrothgar.....	WILLIAM HURT
Slean.....	EDWARD SPELEERS
Elvina.....	LAURA DONNELLY
Breca.....	GISLI ORN GARDARSSON
Abrecan.....	ELLIOT COWAN
Lagrathorn.....	IAN PULESTON-DAVIES
Rate.....	DAVID AJALA
Scorann.....	DAVID HAREWOOD
Bayen.....	NIGEL COOKE
Varr.....	EDWARD HOGG
Vishka.....	ELLORA TORCHIA
Brinni.....	JACK ROWAN
Lila.....	LOLITA CHAKRABARTI
Red.....	JACK SMITH
Koll.....	ALEX PRICE
Sylvi.....	KIRSTY OSWALD
Kendra.....	SUSAN ADERIN
Ostan/Argat.....	JOEY ANSAH
Torr.....	TREVOR FOX
Vlade.....	KEITH DUNPHY
Isen.....	ROSS WAITON
Roth.....	RICHARD BREMMER
Axel.....	DOUGLAS RUSSELL
Malek.....	JACK SANDLE
Dayna.....	KEZIA BURROWS
Greff.....	JOE SIMS
Kela.....	HOLLY EARL
Shay.....	KATIE POWELL
Hane.....	LEE BOARDMAN
Saray.....	SARAH MACRAE
Gorrick.....	DAVID BRADLEY
Rowan.....	SAM HOARE
Mara.....	OLIVIA CHENERY
Arak.....	RICHARD BRAKE
Treece.....	CLAIRE-LOUISE CORDWELL

Cast and production credits

Cast credits

Gerd.....	ROGER WATKINS
Vorhelm.....	SAMUEL EDWARD-COOK
Draven.....	LIAM AINSWORTH
Jogan.....	JEFFERSON HALL
Arla.....	ALLISON MCKENZIE
Razzak.....	GREGORY FITOUSSI
Harken.....	ACE BHATTI
Quinn.....	KARL WOOLLEY
Skellan.....	EMMETT J SCANLAN
Gil.....	ASHLEY THOMAS
Storyteller.....	MARK LEWIS
Young Beowulf.....	JACK HOLLINGTON
Mortane.....	ISLA MCMONIGLE
Aaron.....	RUBEN LAWLOR-LECKIE
Young Slean.....	GEORGE KENT
Young Girl.....	ELOISE KNOWLES
Kragen.....	LIAM SCOTT
Kye.....	SAMMY WILLIAMS

Cast and production credits

Production credits

Executive Producers.....JAMES DORMER
.....TIM HAINES
.....KATIE NEWMAN
Writers.....JAMES DORMER
.....GUY BURT
.....JACK LOTHIAN
.....MICHAEL WALKER
.....JON COOKSEY
Producer.....STEPHEN SMALLWOOD
Line Producer.....WILL NICHOLSON
Directors.....JON EAST
.....JULIAN HOLMES
.....STEPHEN WOOLFENDEN
.....COLIN TEAGUE
.....CILLA WARE
.....KERRIC MACDONALD
.....MAREK LOSEY
Script Editor.....ALLIEA NAZAR
Directors of Photography.....OWEN MCPOLIN
.....MIKE SPRAGG
.....JEAN PHILIPPE GOSSART
.....ADAM ETHERINGTON
.....NIC MORRIS BSC
.....JAMES WELLAND
.....JAMES FRIEND BSC
Casting Director.....SAM JONES
Costume Designer.....RALPH WHEELER-HOLES
Editors.....DAN CRINNION
.....EMMA OXLEY
.....BEN DRURY
.....PHIL HOOKWAY
.....YAN MILES
.....MIKE JONES
Gaffer.....CHRIS SOWDEN
Location Manager.....ANDREW BAINBRIDGE
Make Up Designers.....CHRISTINE CANT
.....SUE MICHAEL
Production Designers.....GRANT MONTGOMERY
.....DAVID BUTTERWORTH
Prop Master.....DEREK ROBERTS

Cast and production credits

Production credits

Sound Recordists.....STUART WRIGHT
.....REG MILLS
Stunt Coordinators.....IAN VAN TEMPERLEY
.....TONY LUCKEN
SFX.....IAN ROWLEY
.....ROB ROWLEY
.....STEVE BREHENY
Head of Production.....GAIL KENNETT
Production Executive.....GARY CONNELLY
Production Coordinator.....FAHIMA CHOWDHURY