

Shakespearian super-luvvie, small-screen Scandinavian sleuth and esteemed cameo performer: the old Ken Branagh is smashing his image to pieces with the blockbusting 3-D Thor, says Christopher Goodwin

Natalie Portman put it in a nutshell: “Kenneth Branagh doing Thor is super-weird.” Britain’s most celebrated living interpreter of Shakespeare has been in California for more than two years, directing a \$150m, big-screen, 3-D version of Thor, the Marvel comic-book character. Portman — who says the weirdness of Branagh’s involvement is what attracted her — plays Thor’s human love interest, the scientist Jane Foster. The superhero himself is played by the little-known but incredibly muscly 27-year-old Australian hunk Chris Hemsworth, previously seen as George Kirk, father of James T, in the 2009 reboot of Star Trek.

Branagh says he was flattered when he learnt, late in 2008, that Marvel had him in mind. A number of other Marvel characters, including Spider-Man, Iron Man and the Incredible Hulk, had already been transformed into flourishing cinematic franchises. Thor would represent a key stage in uniting all the leading characters from Marvel’s Avengers series, so he knew it was a huge deal for the company.

Branagh and I are sitting on a bench outside the Thor post-production offices on the 20th Century Fox lot in west LA. In a dark blue blazer, light blue shirt and jeans, his brown hair now greying, Branagh looks weary, jowly and unshaven — very “Wallander in Babylon” in the mid-afternoon sunshine. He insists he’s confident, even exhilarated. Thor is just a couple of weeks from being “locked”. In a darkened, high-ceilinged room in Building 29 is a team of eager young editors at computers; visual-effects houses across the world, working round the clock, feed them finished sequences. “I always feel you never finish a film, you abandon it,” Branagh says as the relentless deadline looms. He has just shown me about 15 minutes, the fourth reel, on a large computer monitor. It includes sequences both on Asgard, the imaginary world (I am reliably informed) from which Thor hails, and on earth, in a small town in New Mexico to which Thor has been banished by his father, Odin, played by Anthony Hopkins.

According to the press notes from the studio: “Thor is the tale of one man’s mythic journey: from a petulant prince, born to inherit the throne, to a humble superhero who earns the right to lead.” Which, some might say, mirrors Branagh’s portrayal of Henry V; even, perhaps, the arc of his own life and career.

“Marvel were looking for someone who was unafraid of the tonal challenge,” Branagh says. “How do you make a film that is a serious look at character, a fantastical look at adventure, a sort of semi-historical evocation of the Vikings, a space-age drama, but that could co-exist inside something bookended by real Norse myths and the Marvel treatment of those Norse myths? It did seem to me there was definitely a way to do it that could be entertaining.”

Branagh can talk the hind leg off a donkey, and I get a sense of the compelling pitch he must have made to Marvel 2½ years ago. It convinced them that this apparently highbrow British classicist, who had had no great cinema successes beyond his Shakespeare adaptations, was the right man to give their apparently lowbrow, but incredibly valuable epic the refined gloss — in particular, the attention to character and story — they felt it needed. It convinced them, in other words, that having Kenneth Branagh direct Thor was not the least bit “super-weird”.



IF I HAD A
HAMMER

Wallander in
Babylon: Kenneth
Branagh. Below
right, Chris
Hemsworth as Thor

"I reckon I started in action movies," he says, referring to his acclaimed adaptation of *Henry V*, made when he was 29. "My first film was a bunch of European savages fighting each other. I've always felt with Shakespeare that it should be fun, and, when I got this, I felt it should be fun."

Was Thor the only American comic book he had read, as he told Marvel? "Well, I knew Thor," he says, a little uncertainly. "I was a British comics guy — Beano, Dandy, Victor, Hotspur — but I liked Thor. I did like Thor. I liked the sort of Samson-like look. Belfast. That's where I remember American comics. Much as I love Belfast, in the winter it can be bloody grey, lots of rain, and I remember the colour of these comics yelling out from the shelves of our little local sweetie shop. I associated it with something very glamorous and far away — and so it turns out to be." The last spoken with irony, it should be said.

To my amazement, Branagh tells me he even quoted from TS Eliot's *Little Gidding* at that pitch meeting, which has to be a Hollywood first: "We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time."

"It seemed to me that, like Thor's journey through this picture, Eliot was talking about an archetype, the mythic journey of a 'hero', and that we should be looking for something as classical as that," Branagh says.

"Ken said, 'Look, it's about a grand epic adventure that spans from earth to Asgard, but, at the end of the day, it comes down to fathers and sons and mothers and daughters,'" recalls Craig Kyle, the film's co-producer and a top Marvel executive. "It was just, like, woohhh. So articulate, obviously, so clear-minded. It was really a transformative moment." I'm sure.

Branagh has an astonishingly agile and engaging mind, married to a poetic fluidity of articulation that must surely come in part from his Northern Irish background. As I listen to him, however, I wonder if his apparent glibness is what turns some people off. It's hard to find anyone who has worked with Branagh, or who knows him well, with anything bad to say about him. He's collegial, inspiring, self-deprecating. He has been prone to sometimes crippling bouts of depression, which makes him more endearing in my book.

Yet he seems to strum some people entirely the wrong way. In the early days, he was attacked for his apparent hubris. Despite his lowly Belfast origins, Branagh had dared to take on the mantle of the great Olivier, playing *Henry V*, setting up his own company and directing a raft of acclaimed and popular Shakespeare adaptations, all before he was out of nappies. Some found his apparently easy success hard to stomach, particularly when — as superluvvies "Ken and Em" — he was married to Emma Thompson, with whom he also worked. They had, according to one observer, "stuffed their gorgeousness down the public's throats".

Of course, the golden boy of British stage and screen attracted a great deal of *schadenfreude*, when his marriage to Thompson fell apart and, inevitably, when he started having flops, such as his big-budget adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1994) and his 1930s musical version of *Love's Labour's Lost* (2000). Branagh called the attacks "bruising and humiliating". Today, the critics seem to have it in for him not for the hubris they once chastised him for, but for his apparent lack of it. "Whatever the common touch is, he lacks it," one commentator snorted recently. "Now he directs films such as *Thor* and appears in middling TV movies and stars in Nordic noir. Maybe it's time for Branagh to take on *Macbeth* or *Lear*. Thor is beneath his talents."

Branagh begs to disagree. For him, making Thor has been a daunting and endlessly fascinating challenge. "The learning curve is so steep," he says, particularly of the complex technical skills he has had to master, or at least understand. "You do feel privileged to work on such a scale, with such a budget." He describes the first day of the shoot, in January last year: having to dragoon "40 ice creatures who had been in prosthetic make-up since two in the morning; getting the principal performers on the set when they all variously had trusses and harnesses and corsets of

MAARTEN DE BOER/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES

When highbrow meets comic book

Imagine Mike Leigh's *Iron Man*, low-budget, probably set in Enfield. Don't snigger. It's no odder than Kenneth Branagh bringing Shakespearian heft to Thor, a Norse brute played by an actor best known for dying early in *Star Trek*. Good luck, Ken — you're not the first niche director to be shoehorned into a blockbuster project, and history shows you'll need it. A prime example is **Ang Lee**, a finer director than Branagh. His *Hulk* ended up a dud simply because he didn't really do anything, spelling out his credentials through an enticing mix of split-screen and brooding. At least **Guillermo del Toro's** two *Hellboy* films didn't suffer from such restraint; but the Mexican director's vivid take on that comic recouped only \$260m worldwide, compared to the \$1 billion-plus for **Christopher Nolan's** two *Batmans*. So, unless Branagh can emulate the *Batmans* — Nolan's class acts and **Tim Burton's** 20-year-old gothic masterpieces — the hammer will fall on Thor. No bad thing: going back to what one knows must be a priority for **Michel Gondry** following the half-baked hash of *The Green Hornet*, a film where his breathtaking visuals were barely gifted a peek in a studio system more concerned with money than *Marvel*.

Jonathan Dean



lace-worked leather and metalwork; getting them into these superhero costumes, in which they then had to fight; a fight that we had to rehearse and choreograph, in which some of them had to fly, and in which we had to apply, on the floor, effects, snow, rain, wind... So, no sleep the night before that one. I said to my wife when I went into work that day, 'I'm nearly 50, but I might as well be six years old, terrified of the first day at school in Belfast.'

Branagh's second wife, whom he married in 2003, is Lindsay Brunnock. He says the time they have spent in LA while working on *Thor* has been liberating. "My parents passed away over the past four or five years, and I had stayed in England because I wanted to be with them. They came to live with us in the end. We've had a great time here. We've lived by the ocean, and we've loved it. We've made a lot of friends and created a genuine little life for ourselves, enjoying the weather and the water, and getting outside.

"You know," he concludes, with the equanimity that comes with maturity, "there is nothing that is going to happen with the fate of this picture that is going to alter the gravitational weight of my life."

Which, you will be pleased to hear, includes three more Wallander television films. He will start shooting in the summer. He's terribly proud of Wallander: "He gave me back my taste for acting." And he gave us back our taste for Kenneth Branagh. Mine, anyway. ☐

Thor opens on April 27