

Erik the Viking ★★

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: Skip It

As the opening credits rolled for *Erik the Viking*, my worst fear was that it would be as boring and charmless as *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. My highest hope was that *Erik the Viking* would live up to the lunacy of a Monty Python movie, since its director is Python alum Terry Jones. As the closing credits rolled, I was both relieved and frustrated: *Erik the Viking* is far more pleasant to sit through than *Munchausen*, but as Jones puts it: "Anyone expecting a wacky Python movie all the way through is going to be disappointed" (from the press kit).

Orion Pictures, the American distributor for *Erik the Viking*, dumped the movie into theaters with very little publicity and an advertising campaign which was next to nil. And probably for good reason—the studio undoubtedly knew it had a loser on its hands, one which would appeal only to a very limited audience: people (like me) who are desperate for any product even remotely related to "Monty Python's Flying Circus."

Erik the Viking is set during the Age of Ragnarok, a notorious period in Norse mythology in which Fenrir the Wolf-God has swallowed the sun and brought about a Great Winter. Tim Robbins stars as Erik, a reluctant Viking. His peers are violent, wine-swilling barbarians. Erik, by contrast, is a gentle soul: raping and pillaging just aren't his style. A pacifist in a brutal age of swords and battle axes, he would rather see the Vikings channel their energy into something constructive.

Erik's village lives in perpetual snow flurries, and—horror of horrors—he has never seen the sun. Erik decides to do something about this depressing predicament by leading his fellow Vikings on a dangerous expedition. Their perilous journey involves a bunch of silliness about traveling to Hy-Brasil to blow the "Horn Resounding" three times. The first blow will take Erik and company to the edge of the world, the second will awaken the Gods, and the third will take them home. It seems like a lot of hard work just to see the sun.

Jones is essentially trying to combine the humor of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* with the adventure *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The result is an awkward hybrid. *Erik the Viking* misses the boat as an adventure, but as a comedy, it fares a bit better, at least managing to leave the harbor.

The loosely-structured plot is really just a collection of sketches. About a third of them don't even

try to be funny, a third of them try and fail, and the remaining third are genuinely amusing. One of the best scenes involves Erik's futile efforts to come up with a successful seating arrangement in the Viking rowboat.

The funniest moments occur in Hy-Brasil, a peaceful kingdom cheerfully ruled by Jones, who steals the show with his hammy performance. It's great to see him on the screen again, acting with such relish. These scenes in Hy-Brasil almost fooled me into thinking I was watching a bona fide Monty Python movie.

Unfortunately, the film stumbles whenever it gets away from comedy. Jones has more on his mind than producing laughs. Monty Python movies never made the mistake of taking themselves seriously—that was their charm. *Erik the Viking*, on the other hand, often abandons comedy and puts on a straight-face. Jones actually attempts to infuse into the story line a profound lesson about man's inhumanity. I'm sorry, but a campy British comedy is no place for preachy moralizing. *Erik the Viking* would have been far more appealing as an irreverent, full-blown comedy—in other words, as a Monty Python film. This is but a pale imitation.

Jones is working with a modest \$15 million budget, and it shows in the special effects—which is one reason the movie comes up short as an adventure. The back drops are so obviously painted they make you cringe. The menacing sea dragon is one of the worst effects I've seen this decade: you can hardly see it through all the fog and what you can see is embarrassingly rubbery. The poor effects sometimes make the movie seem even more low-budget than it actually is. Thankfully, the imagery improves as the picture progresses. Some of the effects towards the end are strikingly clever, like the Viking rowboat perched on edge of a gigantic waterfall.

Like the special effects, the performances in *Erik the Viking* are uneven. Robbins is adequate as Eric, but the role really calls for someone like the late Graham Chapman, who succeeded with a similar character in *Life of Brian*. If you're interested in Robbins, you'd do well to check him out in *Five Corners* or *Miss Firecracker*. *Erik the Viking* is not the actor's best work.

If you're expecting John Cleese to save the day, forget it. Cleese's role as the film's villain, Halfdan the Black, is nothing more than a cameo appearance. What a waste! Mickey Rooney, on the other

hand, has a hilarious bit part as Erik's grandfather. The shock value of seeing Rooney decked out in Viking gear is good for a few laughs.

For the most part, the supporting cast lives up to the challenge of playing characters with names like Ivar the Boneless, Sven the Berserker, and Ragnar the Maddeningly Calm. Freddie Jones is delightful as the befuddled, soft-spoken mission-

ary who in 60 years has not converted even one person to Christianity. Erik's love-interest is played by Imogen Stubbs, a blue-eyed beauty with scorching screen presence. Fans of the TV-series "Batman" should recognize Eartha Kitt, better known as the Catwoman, in a small part as a wise, old sage.

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