

Jessalyn Gilsig as Siggy in History's "Vikings"

Written by Jamie Ruby
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March 3rd the new drama *Vikings* premieres on History. The series follows Ragnar Lothrok (Travis Fimmel) and other Vikings from history, in not only battle and other adventures, but also in their day to day lives. Ragnar's is determined to sail to the west to find untold riches, against the wishes of the earl. Earl Haraldson (Gabriel Byrne) and his wife Siggy, played by Jessalyn Gilsig, have one daughter and are devastated by the loss of their two sons. Siggy is encouraging to the earl in his attempts to best Ragnar, but she may not be completely loyal to her husband.

Gilsig recently talked to the media about her role in the upcoming History series, which premieres March 3rd.

History Conference Call
Vikings
Jessalyn Gilsig

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3:30 pm ET



QUESTION: Can you tell us anything about why History has decided to go into a scripted series?

JESSALYN GILSIG: Well, I don't know if I could speak on behalf of The History Channel, they didn't tell me but I think it's really exciting. It's such an illustration of where television is and television right now is at such an exciting moment where there's so many platforms and people, viewers have been very specific about ((inaudible)) down material that they respond to and there's so much choice now.

And it seems natural that The History Channel seeing so many period dramas that are doing so well on other networks, let's say, "Hey we have this open audience of people who are passionate about history, let's marry that with scripted material and give everybody the best of both worlds." And it just seems like a good, natural evolution for television and one I think we all benefit from.

QUESTION: So can you tell me a little bit about your character?

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JESSALYN GILSIG: Sure. So I play Siggy Haraldson who is the wife of Earl Haraldson, played by Gabriel Byrne and it's such a fantastic gift this character, she comes in with a lot of backstory having lost their son in battle and having only a daughter and they haven't been able to produce an heir and so she's in an incredibly vulnerable and precarious position. But the way that we conceived of her was that she also really has always lived a life of privilege and a life of power and status and it's incredibly natural to her, it's something that she feels she's inherently born into.

And there are many, many obstacles that she encounters as the series goes forward as perceived but she's driven by this really inherent belief that she's a woman of importance and a woman who needs to survive and has incredible strength and conviction and I just felt very lucky to get to play her.

QUESTION: When you were working on this series, did you learn anything about Vikings that you didn't know before?

JESSALYN GILSIG: Absolutely. I learned so much. I had to throw out all my preconceived ideas. From the vantage point of my character, one of the resources that they gave me was there had been a burial site that they had found that would have been - they believed were the woman's - who would have been in my position, the wife of an Earl or somebody of great importance and a lot of what we learned was first of all that there was this stereotype of Vikings that they're this filthy, ruthless, totally unkempt people.

And in reality we saw a lot of evidence that they practiced really good hygiene and this woman, they always had a change of clothes, they were buried with a change of clothes and that a woman in her position had very intricate and complex hairstyles and that there was evidence that they had used very primitive make-up.

And so for me that suggested that as the day, a woman had a public face, that there was something very deliberate about her appearance and that she was communicating through how she chose dress and what she wore and how did her hair and that sense of there being a public self was really helpful for this role and that all came out of artifacts that they had found in burial sites and information that was shared with us.

QUESTION: I was wondering if there's any difficulties being gained through this character of being a chieftain's wife?

JESSALYN GILSIG: There were great challenges, I felt really lucky that there's so much that I got to do in this that I've never done before but always, when you become an actress it has a lot of the elements that you hope for as an actress. Anything from the period to the accent to as you say playing a role that doesn't even exist in modern society. And so to find a way into the character but then to also make sure that these were human beings that had all the complexities of any mother, wife, woman and to marry those two things.

I feel like Michael gave so many great markers for me to hit because I feel like the relationship with the Earl was so specific and wasn't just man on a throne and the woman who sits beside

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him but more that there was a deliberateness and a specificity to what their relationship was made of.

And then they had a lot of touchstones with the character having lost her son and the vulnerability of her daughter and how the daughter becomes a - to marry her would be significant to how our position would evolve but then also the love of your child, you want to put your child in a healthy, respectful marriage.

And so I love finding the balance of the culture, which was born from ours, but then the humanity, which is universal.

QUESTION: After doing *Glee*, *Heroes*, *Nip/Tuck* and more contemporary roles, what's it like to take on a project with so much history in it, especially filming in Ireland?

JESSALYN GILSIG: Sometimes when you come home as an actor and you're waiting to find out what your next move is going to be, you try to make up what you would like it to be and *Vikings*, although I never imagined necessarily *Vikings*, but the idea of really being on a cable - what I like so much about cable these days is that they're building worlds that are completely seamless and so thorough. Where you can't feel the edges of the set and *Vikings* in a way fulfilled that dream of mine of that really they built the world and then we step into it and we have to go through the looking glass into a different world and a different time. There's so much on this show that supports us as actors, the production design is absolutely transformative, the wardrobe, the commitment of the hair and make-up department, it's standard of the other departments and the determination to create a world that the audience could buy into.

And that we would really love the expectations, it was infectious and I think as actors in a way we really leaned on those departments to complete that picture and felt really lucky that we were supported that way because it was a big leap taking on a subject that has a lot of preconceived ideas and then we want to carry people into an experience where they can't feel.

And you want to bathe in that and I hope that we give people that same experience where just for a second you're transported and then you have to bring yourself back down into reality.

SCIFI VISION: So can you talk about how you got the role and why you chose to do it?

JESSALYN GILSIG: Well I heard about it, as we always do, through my agent and I heard that Gabriel Byrne was involved and that sounded really exciting and I had actually been thinking a lot about what I wanted to do after *Glee* and I had this fantasy for myself that I would get involved in a show that I really associate with cable and that are doing so well in cable. I think of *Downton Abbey* or

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I think of

Breaking Bad

or

Sons of Anarchy

, these shows where you can't feel the edge of the set.

Where you really feel like if you went down the road and turned the corner, even when we end the show life continues. I think we all like to believe that they're all in *Downton Abbey* right now and about to serve dinner and you just don't feel the construct and so to me I thought, "Wow, this is a huge undertaking," but we knew we were in good hands with Michael Hirst.

And I just thought that would be scary but that could be life-changing to be able to participate in a show that was willing to take on the story of Vikings specifically for The History Channel where we knew that people's expectations would be very high.

QUESTION: I just wanted to know about working with such a great cast and your experience working with all of them?

JESSALYN GILSIG: That's a great question. It is an exceptional cast and I feel like everybody - it's always exciting when people come ready to play because then it pushes you to push yourself and obviously I was really lucky, I got the jackpot because I got to sit all day every day beside Gabriel Byrne and he really came ready to collaborate and that was such an exciting realization that I had when we really work together to figure out who this couple was and to make sure that it was very specific and very deliberate and that we had a lot to work with.

And that was amazing and then it was really fascinating for us to sit up on our thrones and then just be Travis and Katheryn who play Ragnar and ((inaudible)) who plays the next generation and almost like the new order of Vikings and had a completely different approach to their ambitions and to their hopes, which goes in contrast to ((inaudible)) a more traditional friend.

And everybody just brought so much so you had so much to play against and that always makes you feel like you can take risks because everybody around you is going for it.

QUESTION: Would you say that your character is more of a bad girl than not, I couldn't tell too much from the promo I saw?

JESSALYN GILSIG: Well, she's not a good girl for sure, she's not a good girl but - yes, no I wouldn't play her if she was a good girl. She's a survivor and she's ambitious and I don't think that necessarily makes her a bad girl but it will make her controversial, which I always enjoy and I think it's just always entertaining.

QUESTION: So do you think that at this point in your career you probably wouldn't play the "good girl?"

JESSALYN GILSIG: No, I played the, "good girl" before I guess, maybe more sympathetic

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would be - if that's what you're asking, I always try to work a little contradiction into my characters, I just feel like sometimes women are reduced to that Madonna/whore concept, and in reality of course anybody who's a woman knows that you got your good days and you got your bad days like anybody else.

So I felt really lucky working with Michael and I think I've been lucky with a lot of other shows in I've worked where they are comfortable with the idea that we're not just one thing and we can be contradiction but I certainly have I think specifically - like this film I just did, *Somewhere Slow*, I would stay in my character. Although she's got her shortcomings, is all-in-all sympathetic but then she's more the hero of the story.

When you're not playing the hero of the story then you have to know that you're always a foil for the good guy, so to speak, and I love playing that, I always think that that's an interesting place to be.

QUESTION: Did you have to do any kind of training or preparation for this role?

JESSALYN GILSIG: I don't do a lot - Katheryn Winnick does a lot of the - she's the shieldmaiden so I think she did a lot of sword training, I did not. We had the accent which we all had to immerse ourselves in and we all had to say. "Okay, let's go for it, we're doing this," and that was pretty exhilarating but no, I didn't have any of the physical training that a lot of the other actors had.

QUESTION: Do you have any other upcoming projects besides *Vikings*?

JESSALYN GILSIG: I do. I just wrapped an episode of *The Good Wife*, which I really enjoyed, I'm such a big fan of that show. And there's a film that I produced that is going to be doing the festival circuit actually starting in March called *Somewhere Slow*.

And I'm incredibly proud of it, I was a part of it since development and it was an amazing cast, we have Robert Forster and Lindsey Crouse and Graham Patrick Martin and Wally Langham and it's just something that's very special to me because it's the first time I've ever produced something.

And it was really fun. As an you're never there, well I'm never there from the moment of inception, where you ((inaudible)) the last element to the final piece and so to be there from the very beginning and to help crew it up and build the days and be a part of the edit and the mix and the composer and all of that. It wasn't that I learned so much but I also learned how much I already knew and that was really satisfying after having worked in the business for so many years. I'm so excited for people to see it.

SCIFI VISION: So on set, are they strict with the script? Do you adlib at all?

JESSALYN GILSIG: No, it is pretty strict. If you maybe made a substitution here or there but for the most part when you're dealing with something like this and it's always exciting when you work on a show that's written by one person because you know that their vision is so specific

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and I always think of it as an actor that it's my job, when you do a play you don't never act, you could change your mind and I like it when you work with a television writer who you think, "Gosh, this isn't sitting with me" - that's my problem.

I need to find out why this person has chosen ((inaudible)) of words to communicate this thought. So we stayed true to what Michael had written, we knew that he was very, very deliberate and that it was our job to meet his material.



QUESTION: I heard that you were excited to work on this project because also actor Gabriel Byrne was part of it but anyone else that you would prefer to work with?

JESSALYN GILSIG: Well I didn't know, I didn't know anybody else. I will say that it was really amazing to watch Travis work, he was so committed like you rarely see and he was completely integrated into the story and the character and the life and I think for those of us who were there in support of him, that was so inspirational. He went into almost like an athlete entering a marathon.

And I feel like he went underground into the story and didn't surface until we finished and we needed that because we couldn't have any goals, we all have to commit and so to see him commit so deeply I think really gave everybody else the strength to immerse themselves. And I think he should be given a lot of credit for setting that bar.

SCIFI VISION: Is there something specific that you're excited for fans to see coming up? Doesn't have to be real specific, I know you can't tell details.

JESSALYN GILSIG: Michael Hirst said something to me when I first met him and sometimes a writer or director will say something and it becomes your touchstone for as you go forward into your role. And he said there are all these assumptions that we make about Vikings and there are all these stereotypes and he said we're not doing a re-enactment, this isn't a documentary, this is a story told in a particular period.

And he said one thing that is universal from the beginning of time and has never changed, it doesn't matter where you are in time and it doesn't matter what culture you come from, we all love our children. And that told me exactly what we were in for as an audience, that these aren't people who are completely (unrelatable), their time is (unrelatable) just like *Downton Abbey* or *Mad Men*

and you think, "Gosh, it was so different then." People smoked indoors or didn't wear pants or all these things but ultimately we have a universal human experience.

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Which is we all want love and we all want acceptance and we all want security and we all want our children to do well and we all feel jealousy sometimes and we all feel resentment we all have irrational thoughts and that's all in this show and I feel like in a way it's the best way we could serve the Vikings or humanize them.