



HISTORY Girl

East London actress Maude Hirst on why Vikings is a cult show like no other, and why she's protective of London's thriving arts scene

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Maude Hirst, born and raised in Hackney, has always followed her own path. Before her role as Helga in the History Channel's binge-worthy drama *Vikings* came along, she founded her own production company, Tuppence Films, to write strong female leads and to give women a voice in the British film industry. Her personal heroes include such mavericks as Caitlin Moran and Tracey Emin.

As the daughter of English screenwriter and producer Michael Hirst, best known for his films *Elizabeth* (1998) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007), she tells me that she has a creative gene that she just can't escape from. 'Whether

it's writing, acting, TV, theatre or film, I'm happy to work in any medium. I just love collaborating.'

After winning a scholarship to the prestigious Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts, she sought an agent early – and soon took on the role of Kat Ashley in popular historical drama *The Tudors* alongside Jonathan Rhys Meyers and Natalie Dormer.

But it's *Vikings* that has really allowed

her to develop both her technical and emotional range. 'Playing one character for that long – four years – is very rare, but you grow and develop with that character. For me, that's been a huge learning curve,' she says.

The show itself has transported addicted viewers to the Middle Ages for four seasons so far. It's a period of history that Hirst feels has not yet been sufficiently explored in popular culture. With season five currently being filmed, it looks set to continue to do so. As a fan myself, and as someone who took two modules in Old Norse at university to study the language and literature of the Vikings (it was either that or French, and I fancied going a bit leftfield), it's been a fascinating journey so far.

Hirst's character Helga is the wife of Floki, a boat builder and incorrigible trickster who also suffers with mental health issues. 'She was first introduced as a kind of Viking hippy, a carefree character. Over the years – there's a big time frame within the script – she suffers huge trauma, losing her daughter and dealing constantly with a troubled husband. She certainly hasn't had an easy ride, so I think that she's grown in strength and become quite a deep character.' The relationship between Helga and the rather complex Floki is never simple, and Hirst promises more drama to come.



Hirst stars as the ethereal Helga in the History Channel's *Vikings*

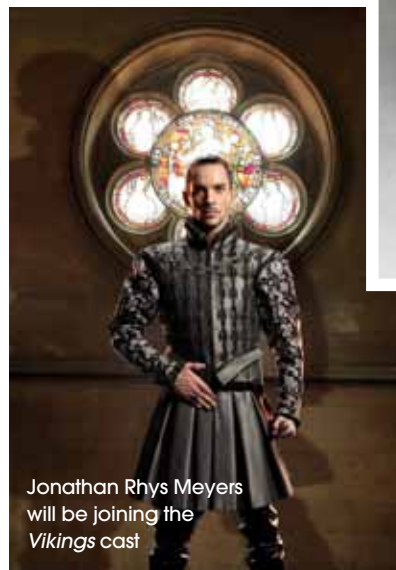
Hirst has always been a big fan of Brick Lane and the east London arts scene in general



Vikings has been lauded for portraying strong, independent women in a society that is in some ways similar, but also extremely different to the modern world. Would Hirst say that the struggles the women in the show face also apply to women today? ‘Absolutely,’ she affirms. ‘People suffer with the things that Helga goes through all the time. Mental health issues and the loss of a child are two huge subjects that are still very relevant today, so it’s important for me as an actor to be able to portray them as realistically as possible.’

Other characters in the show that Hirst finds particularly interesting include that of George Blagden (also well known for playing Louis XIV in the BBC’s racy drama, *Versailles*) who plays a priest – ‘I thought he was the eyes of the audience, as an outsider to society looking in’ – and the two central female warriors, Queen Aslaug and Lagatha. ‘Aslaug comes into a family that’s already established as the second wife, which is always a difficult part to play. Both are strong in a physical way, but also within the hierarchy. The Vikings were forward thinking in many ways. Women could divorce, own their own land and become leaders.’

As well as its profound characters, Hirst also feels that the show is visually unique. ‘Every few episodes we have a new director, which is such a privilege,’ she explains. ‘Period dramas are often huge scale productions, but *Vikings* is filmed almost as if every episode is a



film in itself. The battle sequences are epic, and it’s set in the Wicklow Mountains in Ireland.’ The landscapes, she adds earnestly, are so vast that they blow her away, and she pinches herself every time she drives onto the set.

Back at home in London, Hirst is enthusiastic about the creative scene, and protective of it. ‘I spend time between London, LA and Ireland filming, so it’s good to have a base in all of those places – but I love London and I want it to be my home. I hope creativity continues to be explored here, because things are changing politically – and sometimes the arts can get forgotten about. East London especially is close to my heart. I used to love Brick Lane when I was younger. It was very different to how it is now, but it’s

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still full of amazing Indian restaurants. Victoria Park and Well Street are amazing places. I suppose it was always quite arty and cool, but now it’s definitely been gentrified. Loads of my friends who would never have dared to come to Hackney live in east London now.’

Season five of *Vikings* will premiere this year across the pond, also starring Hirst’s younger sister Georgia, and their writer father (attention: spoiler alert) will be introducing his old protégée Jonathan Rhys Meyers from *The Tudors* into the cast as what he has described as a ‘wild card.’ We can’t wait to see how it all plays out...

UK viewers can watch *Vikings* up to Season 4B on Amazon Prime