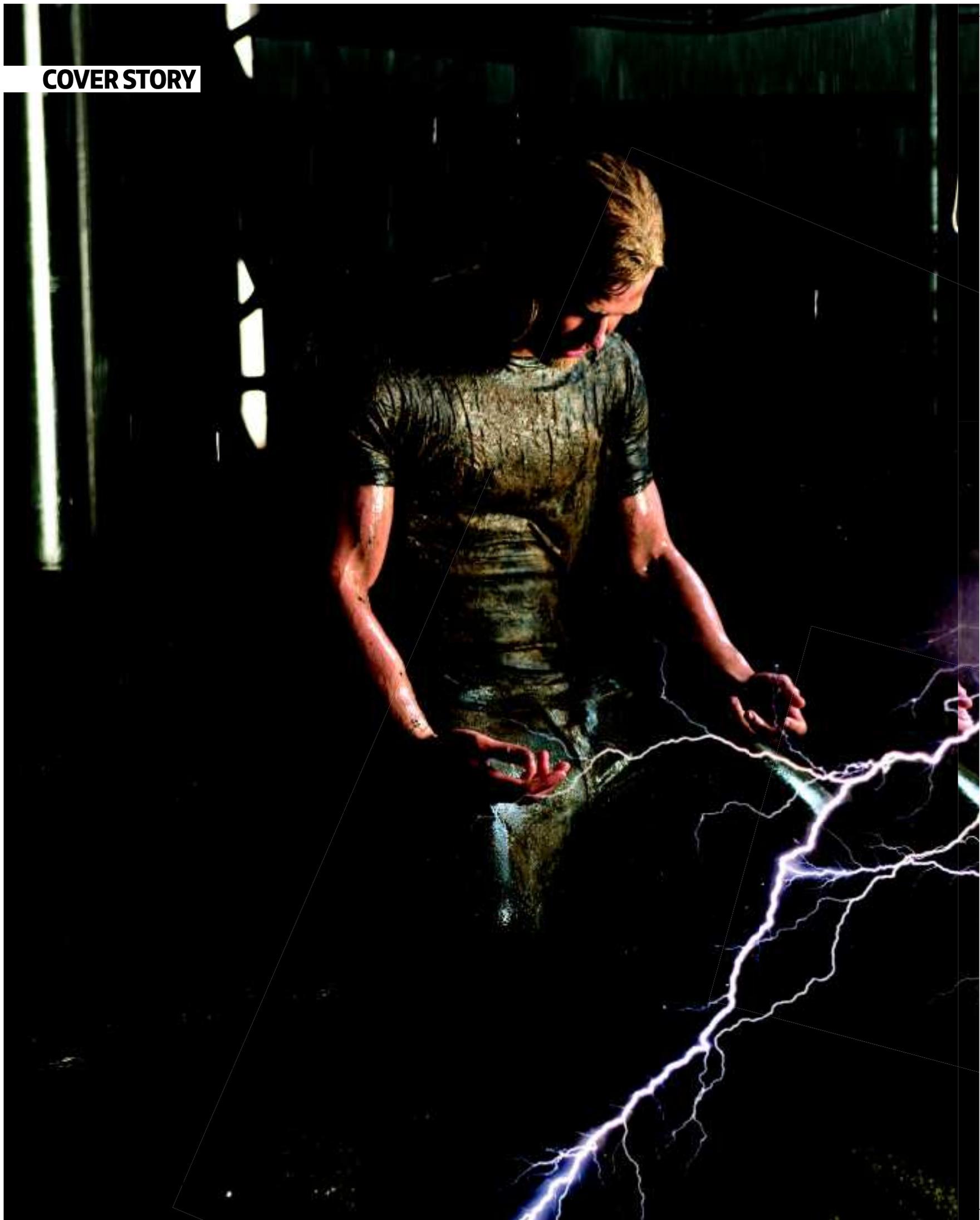


COVER STORY



YE GODS!

A Norse deity banished to earth with a giant hammer. Divine fisticuffs and world domination. Daft? Think again – with Kenneth Branagh promising stunning effects bolted to Shakespearean drama, Thor is part RSC, all OMG...

WORDS MATT MUELLER

Kenneth Branagh recalls the exact moment he first encountered *The Mighty Thor*. He was a kid in late '60s Belfast, dispatched with his older brother to Sunday school with a few coins for the church collection plate ("clearly guilt money because my parents didn't go..."). On their way back, Ken and William Jr stopped off at a sweet shop that opened briefly on a Sunday – and there he was, Marvel Comics' blonde, hammer-swinging Norse god standing out bold and bright on a grey Belfast day. "I can remember it so vividly," muses Branagh now, over a cup of tea brewed by his British publicist in an LA photo studio. "It seemed to me – My God! That's America, that's excitement, that's

exotic... here was this Samson-like character who seemed like he was carved out of granite and the idea of a man who was so strong and how do you control that strength? That stuck with me."

Branagh didn't buy the comic book – he opted for his usual sugary purchase and the collection money *bad* gone into the plate. But from that early encounter, the Northern Irish boy did fall under the spell of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's fusion of Norse mythology and cosmic melodrama ("not obsessively, but it was my favourite comic") – along with a certain English playwright. Perhaps it was the gods themselves that saw Branagh go on to flourish as one of our finest purveyors of Shakespeare before leading him back into the Norse-god superhero's mighty embrace?

Natalie Portman admits that she found it "super-weird" to hear Branagh was directing *Thor*, and he too was surprised when Marvel came courting in late 2008. Branagh's only previous >>

COVER STORY



THOR POINTS

A potted guide to Mr Thunderous...

Thor is the child of Odin and Gaea, earth goddess, and was raised in Asgard by Odin's missus Frigga. Odin gave Thor a hammer for his eighth birthday. Not quite an iPhone, is it?

Instead of doing a bit of DIY, Thor engaged in heroic deeds but brought about his own downfall when he caused a ruckus with the Frost Giants, prompting his miffed old man to exile him to earth with memory and powers wiped.

Thor's alter egos include surgeon Donald Blake and construction worker Sigurd Jarlson.

An alien invasion of earth prompted Odin to reboot Thor's powers, which include heightened senses, imperviousness to pain, an ability to travel through space and time and powers of regeneration. His hammer, truly a godsend, enables him to bounce bullets and command the elements.

Thor's nemeses include deadly alien stone men the Kronans, fire demon Surtur, Skurge The Executioner, the Dark Elves of Svartalfheim (no, seriously), Radioactive Man, Mephisto, Onslaught and dragon Fin Fang Foom (Worst. Dragon. Name. Ever).

Most troublesome is his half-brother Loki, a trickster who caused trouble between Thor and Hulk but in the process sparked the formation of The Avengers.

Thor's love life is all a muddle. As Blake, he got involved with nurse Jane Foster, but as his Asgardian memories returned, he remembered that he was also involved with fellow warrior Sif back home. Try explaining that to Ms Foster...



Hammer time: (above left) Kenneth Branagh on set; (left) Thor (Chris Hemsworth) romances Jane Foster (Natalie Portman).

grand-scale film was 1994's *Frankenstein*, and we all know the fate that befell that Mary Shelley adap: it was savaged as self-indulgent folly. Branagh insists it hasn't taken Hollywood 14 years to forgive and forget, that "numerous things have come up along the way", but only *Thor* "had the opportunity to be very, very hands on". Marvel have been demonstrating a forensic cunning for twinning the right directors and actors with their superhero assets, and if you're going to reboot a dynastic saga rooted in ancient mythology about a conflicted being who's given to declaiming in old-English verbiage for the big screen, why not seek out a man who's run the Shakespearean gauntlet?

"They didn't want anybody coming in just slightly steering the ship," says Branagh, "and that's ballsy of them. Certainly Jon [*Favreau*] and Robert [*Downey Jr*], they just let them run with it [*on Iron Man*]. We took about three months of dancing around each other, asking, 'How does this work? How do we arrive at decisions?' It feels as though this is as much a picture of mine as any of the other pictures I've directed."

Some internet buzz-makers wailed at Branagh's selection, but it swayed one freshly crowned Oscar-winner into joining the fold ("Ken was like, 'We're going to work on this as if it were Shakespeare,'" says a giddy Portman). And surely Branagh's Shakespearean intentions could bring depth, inventiveness and intelligence to what is arguably one of Marvel's most daft characters, and crucially help him batter his way into the hearts and minds of moviegoers not versed in Thor-lore. (Marvel president Kevin Feige says the way Branagh made *Much Ado About Nothing* buoyant and accessible "for a comic fan like me" convinced him.)

And so it came to pass... Shakespearean connections became rife and rampant in the making of *Thor* (see box, right): Branagh even made star Chris Hemsworth learn Henry V's declamatory rousing-the-troops monologue in pre-production. "I felt like I'd been a handed a math test!" laughs the Aussie actor formerly known for his five-minute cameo as Captain Kirk's dad in J.J. Abrams' *Star Trek*. "My experience in Shakespeare was limited to one

high-school play." Hemsworth famously blew his original *Thor* screentest, then watched as brother Liam made it to a final five that also included Alexander Skarsgard, Josh Hartnett and Tom Hiddleston (who eventually slotted into the role of Thor's brother Loki) before emerging phoenix-like back into the frame thanks to an audition video shot by his mum in the kitchen of his 15th floor Vancouver hotel suite. "I look back at that whole period and go, 'God, I don't know how it happened,'" he smiles now.

The *Thor* script Branagh was initially handed was anchored in Viking times, but "I didn't want to do that. I wanted it to have a contemporary Earth quality - at the very least you'd get some funny fish-out-of-water possibilities of Thor visiting Earth." In the draft that was eventually shot, the arrogant, wing-helmeted thunder god is exiled from Asgard, majestic home of the Norse gods, to modern-day Earth by his father Odin (Anthony Hopkins) after his reckless, petulant actions

YOU'RE IN ARMOUR
AND THE CAMERA'S
POINTING AT YOU
AND YOU THINK,
"OH, I'M GOD"

ANTHONY HOPKINS

WHEN TWO WORLDS COLLIDE

Why Shakespeare and superheroes go together like hammers and gods...

reignite an ancient war. Stripped of his powers on Earth – a parallel realm to Asgard, whose dwellers are more fantastically advanced species than actual deities – Thor must learn humility to reclaim his power (and, of course, his trusty hammer, Mjolnir), while his evil-trickster brother Loki gets up to no good back in Asgard, and eventually on our planet, too.

Alongside Hemsworth and Portman, Branagh risked ire by adding Idris Elba to *Thor's* mix, *The Wire* star's casting as Asgard defender Heimdall fomenting consternation in unevolved fanboys, furious at Branagh's colour-blind casting (Elba's response: "Hang about, Thor's mythical, right? He has a hammer that flies to him when he clicks his fingers. That's OK but the colour of my skin is wrong?"). Anthony Hopkins' recruitment as Odin wasn't nearly as contentious. Ask Branagh if he required any special powers to convince Hopkins to play the God of Thunder's father (beyond his customary large paycheck) and he just laughs: "He gets to play the all-powerful lord of the universe who, rather like at the beginning of *King Lear* when

NEFARIOUS NASTIES

Branagh compares Thor's jealous adoptive brother Loki to Cassius from *Julius Caesar*. "Such men are dangerous," said Caesar. Hold that thought...



ELEMENTAL CONJURING

As surely as King Lear tempted the weather ("Spit, fire! Spout, rain!") and *The Tempest's* Prospero magic'd up a sea storm, the God of Thunder makes it rain...



BAD DADS AND REJECT KIDS

Just as Lear turfed out Cordelia, Odin banishes Thor to Earth. Such family matters stirred Ken's blood as a boy: "I liked all the dynastic drama," he says.



ROUGH AND TUMBLE

Shakespeare loved a dust-up. Luckily, Ken's sword-clashing experiences on *Henry V* helped him compose *Thor's* climactic "huge fight".



WEIGHING IN

Larger-than-life warrior Volstagg (Ray Stevenson) is inspired by a Shakespeare regular – Falstaff. "He's an all-round good egg," reckons Ray. "Big egg but a good egg."



ANIMAL MAGIC

Will's world is full of beastly metaphors. Thor's is a menagerie of mad creatures, from Man-Beast to, er, Mongoose, all available to Mr Branagh if he does a sequel.



the king has to divide up his kingdom, unleashes all kinds of excitement when he says, 'I'll be going soon... My two sons, which one of you is going to get my job?'

Hemsworth recalls he and Hopkins emerging in their polished deity get-ups for the first time together, and turning to look at each other. "Wow, there's no acting required here, is there?" the elder statesman chuckled to his younger co-star. The combo of chiselled armour and vast

Asgardian sets – a mix of ancient and modern architectural influences that Branagh calls "super sci-fi Viking" – was quite enough to get Hopkins channelling his inner omnipotent. "You're in armour and the camera's pointing at you and you think, 'Oh, I'm God,'" he says. Of course, his 72-year-old body could remind him otherwise: "They had steep steps and you're carrying 25 to 30lbs around with you all day and you can't take much of a rest – it was quite tiring." >>

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Godly: (below) Anthony Hopkins's Odin with sons Thor (Chris Hemsworth) and Loki (Tom Hiddleston).



Hemsworth also found the godly attire restrictive, and reveals that a few suits broke along the way with all Thor's hammer-swinging and creature-battling. But one gossip column last year spun a rumour that Hopkins wasn't just tired, he was fed up of greenscreen and supremely dismissive of Hemsworth's talents. The beknighted Welshman issued a statement rubbishing the story, labelling *Thor* "one of the great experiences of my career". Hemsworth tells *Total Film*, "He rang me afterwards and we had a good laugh about it. He said, 'Look, you can't take this stuff too seriously,' and told me a bunch of stories about ridiculous things that had been written about him over the years. You always assume there's some truth in it but on every point in that article they got it wrong..."

There were no such controversies to douse with Portman, who calls Hemsworth "a sweet guy, unaffected by all this hoopla and a total pleasure to work with." Her character Jane Foster has been bumped up from the comic's lowly nurse to an astro-physicist who's exploring connections between dimensions and whose scientific endeavours get a fillip when, literally, Thor plummets into her path. All well and good, although *Total Film* puts it to her that the gorgeous lady scientist is a hoary cinematic cliché. She agrees wholeheartedly, but explains she felt in safe hands when Branagh and Marvel reacted in horror to her first hair and make-up test, instructing the offending slap-artists to "tone it down"... "I was like, 'Wow, they're not trying to hot me up!'" she exclaims. "The whole point was to make her a believable character. I was wearing a flannel shirt and sweatpants a lot of the time and there were no body-hugging dresses..."

No, fans of exposed flesh and skimpy costumes will have to make do with Hemsworth's sculpted-and-frequently-on-display physique in *Thor*. Even if you're not a woman, gay or just a little bi-curious, you can't help marvelling at the mental and physical discipline it must have taken to give the ex-builder the body of a Norse god. "I was >>

HEAVENLY CREATURE

She's a Harvard grad, a political campaigner and an Oscar-winning actress who excels in drama, action, comedy (and stoner gross-out). No wonder Norse gods – and audiences – fall in love with Natalie Portman...

WORDS JANE CROWTHER

ADDITIONAL REPORTING MARTYN PALMER

Natalie Portman turns 30 in June. By that milestone the native New Yorker will be able to cradle two important life achievements in her arms, a brand new baby and an Oscar statuette for her electrifying role as a crazed prima ballerina in *Black Swan*. Perhaps not so surprising a feat for the high achieving former child actress who won places at both Harvard and Yale (she chose a Harvard degree in psychology), went

backpacking round the world alone and staunchly stuck to her guns on her personal beliefs (she campaigned for Obama, is a strict veggie, refuses to do nudity and has only just moved to LA).

That she would succeed appears to have been written in the stars since wowing critics as a precocious 11-year old in *Leon*, but Portman has up to now remained something of an enigma – a skilled but fiercely private actress who could dramatically convince as space princess, stripper seductress, Boleyn bride, serious short film director.

But recently her Method-esque turn in *Black Swan*, coupled with romping in sex-com

SONIA SIEFF/H&K/JIME PHOTO

No Strings Attached and her hugely anticipated role as romantic interest to a hammer-hefting Norse god in *Thor* have shown Miss P not only has considerable range – but a healthy sense of humour. And that’s not even taking into account her arse-flashing role as a medieval avenger in *Your Highness* – a film she gigglingly describes as a “stoner adventure comedy – like *The Princess Bride* with *Pineapple Express* thrown in!”

So why *Thor*? “One thing that I think Marvel really excels at is choosing really high quality people for their films and making interesting and daring choices. You have Robert Downey Jr playing Iron Man and Ken Branagh directing *Thor*. That’s very cool.” Indeed, but Portman is

also as much of a fangirl as anyone else – she admits to being a huge fan of Branagh. “I must have watched *Much Ado About Nothing* like 500 times, I love that film so much,” she laughs. “He was one of the first people I’ve met that I was excited about when I met them. When I worked with him, it exceeded my expectations.”

Her role on *Thor* also provided a change of tack for Portman, coming to it two weeks after a gruelling, life-changing shoot for *Black Swan*. “I love Darren [Aronofsky] and working with him was a deeply fulfilling experience but I just showed up for *Thor* spent. I probably should have gone into rehab!” Though a mental and physical trial, the *Black Swan* shoot also resulted

in Portman’s engagement to film choreographer and dancer Benjamin Millipied – and her subsequent pregnancy.

With *Your Highness* hitting screens in the same month as *Thor* and no less than four films to produce (her LA-based production company, Handsome Charlie Films, is named after her dog) in between diaper changes, this is, she assures, her settling-down phase. “At a certain point you need to kind of slow down...”

We can’t wait to see what happens when she gets back in the fast lane...

***Thor* opens on 29 April. *Your Highness* opens on 15 April and is reviewed on page 54.**

COVER STORY



I'M CONFIDENT THAT WE'VE TRIED VERY HARD! THE SIGNS ARE THAT WE MIGHT HAVE SOMETHING.
KENNETH BRANAGH

Days of thunder: (left) Branagh directs Portman and Hemsworth; Idris Elba as Heimdall.

carrying more muscle than I'd ever carried," says Hemsworth. "I felt pretty godlike, I guess." Maybe less so when he attracted "funny looks" around LA and New Mexico during the shoot, casual onlookers taken aback by his freaky combo of dyed blonde eyebrows and beard alongside his naturally dark hair when he wasn't wearing his Thor weave. Listing boxers, and Mike Tyson in particular, as the inspiration behind Thor's gritty, low-to-the-ground, hammer-smacking fighting style, Hemsworth – despite explicit instructions from his brother – forgot to steal his character's most important prop: Mjolnir. "He goes, 'Did you get it?' and I was like [smacks forehead], 'I forgot.' He was like, 'How did you forget?! What the fuck's wrong with you?!' I was going, 'I know – dammit! Next one, next one!'"

Thor will next appear in Joss Whedon's *The Avengers*, and should the clamour rise for further standalone adventures, Hemsworth and Portman are both signed up for two sequels. And while Branagh keeps his poker face on, he's insistent that contrary to reports, Thor's alter ego Donald Blake – a key ingredient in the comics – hasn't been jettisoned. "I haven't absolutely dispensed with it!" he



insists. "But... we futz with it. When you have 50 years of comics and thousands of years of myths, both of them doubling back on themselves left, right and centre, you keep doors open. You can't help thinking about ways in which storylines might develop in the future..."

He would say this, having hired him, but Branagh is convinced Hemsworth will blow us away with a suitably godlike turn. "He's a sensitive actor of depth and a charismatic leading man," says the director. "Without wanting to put too much pressure on him, in my view, he completely delivers as Thor – it's an impressive piece of work." Feige, meanwhile, is convinced that *Thor* is going to "redefine what a Marvel movie can be". Branagh's certainly due: his career has always had a loose-cannon, zigzag quality to it – hits follow misses, triumph usurps disaster... His last directing effort was *Sleuth*, so the time is ripe to

restore order, and he has an air of quiet confidence that he's nailed the supernatural spectacle and character-driven Shakespearian drama.

"Here's what I'm confident about," muses Branagh, who slots *Thor* on the Marvel-verse timeline after *Iron Man 2* and "bumping into and affecting" *Captain America*. "Every single day, I'm seeing the visual effects cooking, things that three years ago was a concept drawing, a conversation, 50 meetings. So I'm confident that great work has been done by that team, I'm confident that the performances are all extremely compelling, I'm confident that we found a way for it to be funny and that it wears itself pretty lightly... I'm confident that we've tried very hard! The signs are that we might have something." **TF**

Thor opens on 29 April and will be reviewed in a future issue of Total Film.



KAT'S PYJAMAS

Miss Dennings talks up Thor...

Women are usually lone wolves in superhero movies. Was it cool to be playing Natalie Portman's best friend?

Yeah, and my role expanded as we went through the rehearsal process, which was great. I really like our relationship in the movie. I feel like our love in real life came out.

How did you find working with Branagh?

He's someone that I always idolised for acting. I've seen *Much Ado About Nothing* like 800,000 times. He's so gifted and he has infinite ideas for how to attack something. I would find myself creepily watching him do things, just to try to steal a little genius.

How was the experience of working on such a big-budget project?

Pretty nuts. Everyone on the set was so good at their job. If you were like, "I could really use a piece of toast made out of rubber," somebody would be like, *Fwing!* I was like, "Oh my god! This is awesome!" **KE**