



OUTLANDER

Released: 24 April **Certificate:** 18

Running time: 115 mins

Director: Howard McCain

Writers: Dirk Blackman, Howard McCain

Starring: Jim Caviezel, John Hurt, Sophia Myles, Jack Huston, Ron Perlman

★★★★★

A giant alien monster versus Vikings. A match made on a B-movie shelf, maybe, but this film is a whole lot better than it should be.

THE PITCH: A SOLDIER FROM another planet crash lands in Norway during the eighth century; in the hold of his ship, a ferocious alien predator. It survives and starts to kill. The soldier Kainan, dubbed 'Outlander', teams up with the local Vikings in order to defeat it.

There are two ways a film like this can go: awesome, or shit. There is no middle ground. Fortunately for us, *Outlander* is low-fibre, high-fat fun SF of the finest kind, the big screen analogue of eating a whole bucket of KFC by yourself. It'll do you no good, you might feel dirty afterwards, but while it lasts, it's heaven.

Outlander is a geek's dream film. For its genre blending verve, it's on a par with *Pirates of the Caribbean*. It's a great cocktail, and that's mostly down to the quality of the ingredients. There's some very fine film-making on show here.

The script is tight, full of good character beats and natty little SF touches. In a two-minute sequence just after the crash, the shocked and terrified Kainan (Caviezel) learns the local lingo and discovers that Earth is an abandoned seed colony from his emergency computer. This kind of lean exposition is characteristic of the film, and after several movies with fat lumps of 'So you see, Mister Bond' gristle to spoil the storytelling soup, boy, we are thankful for it.

The special effects perform beyond the call of duty for a mid-budget film. The monster, from Patrick Tatopolous' studios, is an original-looking thing. It's bioluminescent, so the sequences before the big reveal aren't just shadows in woods, but riots of sinister colour. Director McCain shows – in his first movie

– that he knows how to handle a monster better than many with more experience. A lengthy flashback sequence featuring a xenocide captivates. And what film that begins with a spaceship crash is bad?

Characters you care about, good motivation and good performances (Perlman's at his best as a local hothead chief) mean you totally buy into a film that really could have been five big blokes in horned helmets wrestling another in a rubber suit. But no, even the costumes are lovely, the Outlander's spacesuit especially cool. *Outlander* gets the big and little equally right.

Except it does annoy in places – usually when the otherwise meticulous detailing fails and the script wanders into emotional cliché. Mostly the film manages a passable facsimile of

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Dark Age Norway, but the names are lifted out of *The Lord of The Rings* and *Beowulf*. There's some sloppy history, an annoying 'make a sword in an

afternoon' montage, and a sequence with a stupid lava chamber. The lava really was too much (there are no volcanoes in Norway. If they'd wanted volcanoes and Vikings, why not set it in Iceland?), as if they were trying to get everything and the kitchen sink into the script. So what if most of the audience aren't going to spot it? People like us will, and then we'll tell everyone. Just a little bit of restraint would have knocked these rough edges off, and that's what really irritates – *Outlander* is nearly the perfect actioner. The most far-fetched SF needs the strongest basis in reality in order to make us believe it, especially when you are dealing with a potentially cheesy story like 'Norsemen fight space dragon'.

The number of endings gets out of hand round volcano time, but we exit grinning. It's this year's *Pitch Black*. As such, it's going right into my DVD collection. Director McCain is possibly going to direct and write the new *Conan* flick. If he does then, by Crom, we're in for happy times. **Guy Haley**

