



AWARDS

A mischievous god, a reverend and a newly engaged man: Tom Hiddleston has been busy

BY BOB STRAUSS

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(Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

It hardly needs saying, but Tom Hiddleston is a much nicer guy than Loki, the supervillain he's played in six Marvel movies and an acclaimed Disney+ series, which just started shooting its second season in England.

And despite the Norse God of Mischief's ubiquity, the Cambridge and Royal Academy of Dramatic Art-educated actor does have other interests. His stage résumé is as impressive as the array of auteurs he's made movies with: Joanna Hogg, Steven Spielberg, Woody Allen, Terence Davies, Jim Jarmusch, Guillermo del Toro, Ben Wheatley. There's also prestige TV such as "The Night Manager" and now "The Essex Serpent," which launched in May on Apple TV+.

Still, "'Loki,' 'Essex Serpent,' they have occupied the last two years of my life," Hiddleston notes on a warm afternoon in an L.A. hotel garden.

Of course, there was more to the last several years than "Essex" and the first season of "Loki." Hiddleston found time in March to propose to Zawe Ashton, his co-star in a 2019 West End revival of Harold Pinter's "Betrayal."

"I'm very happy" is all he wants to say about that, perhaps gun-shy regarding personal matters since a super-scrutinized 2016 romance with Taylor Swift. But just get him started on the latest shows

"I love playing Loki, have loved playing him every time," the actor says about Thor's shape-and-loyalty-shifting brother. "In every story, there's been a different iteration, a different director, a different spin on the ball, if you like."



TELEVISION

Marvel's 'Loki,' explained: An episode-by-episode guide

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The "Loki" series takes place in a divergent timeline before/after he was killed in the last two "Avengers" movies. This trickster version is detained by a kind of cosmic bureaucracy, the Time Variance Authority, and stripped of his powers if not his arrogance.

"If you take away everything that the character knows and understands, what remains?" Hiddleston submits. "Something will be revealed to us and to Loki about

who he is. This idea of him undergoing an almost psychoanalytical interrogation with the TVA's Mobius, played by Owen Wilson, and being confronted with repetitive patterns of destructive behavior, which only resulted in his loss and loneliness, I found to be extremely exciting."



Tom Hiddleston in "The Essex Serpent." (Dean Rogers / Apple TV+)

Another first, for Marvel and Loki: He came out as bisexual to the series' other key frenemy, Sophia Di Martino's Sylvie, a female variant of himself.

"In my research into the character and the ancient stories, Loki's identity has always been fluid in his gender and sexuality," Hiddleston notes. "It was a privilege to touch on it this time. I'm aware it's a small step and there's further to go, but I hope that people felt represented by it."

Contemporary concerns are also represented in Sarah Perry's bestselling historical novel "The Essex Serpent." It's set in a scientifically advancing 1893, while superstitions still haunt the Blackwater Estuary on England's eastern coast. People

go missing, a big underwater thing is bumping into fishermen's boats, and some believe a folklore dragon has returned.

Claire Danes plays Cora Seaborne, recently widowed from an abusive marriage and an amateur paleontologist, who comes up from London to investigate. An attraction grows between her and the local, married vicar, Hiddleston's Will Ransome. All six episodes were directed by another of the actor's admired auteurs, Clio Barnard ("The Arbor," "Dark River").

"I loved this combination of her and the story," Hiddleston says. "It deals with some very resonant themes: uncertainty, fear and how fear of what we don't understand can sometimes collectively distort reality. There's an ideological debate between science and religion that's staged in the dynamic between Cora and my character, the very progressive but nevertheless faithful reverend of the community."



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"It felt like with the pandemic, we all had to manage so much uncertainty," he continues. "It's about that, but of course there's a very psychological metaphor about

the serpent, things that lie beneath the surface.”

Hiddleston tried to be a gracious host to his American co-star when they filmed in the Essex salt marshes 13 months ago but fears he might have gone too far.

“It’s windy and it’s muddy and it’s wet,” he says of the shoot. “Claire was incredibly game about all of that. I became a kind of cliché Englishman, endlessly promising that the weather would improve. Every day I’d be like, ‘It’s going to get better, Claire! Just you wait, the spring in England is lovely!’”

Cliché, or in actuality a particularly nice chap?

“I was very lucky when I was younger,” Hiddleston reckons, regarding his reputation. “I worked with some great actors, and I could see that they were very committed to the work and very kind, inspiring in that way. I was junior to Kenneth Branagh and Judi Dench and Chiwetel Ejiofor and Ewan McGregor; these are the best of guys doing it.

“I try to put my best foot forward,” he concludes, then adds with a sheepish grin, “It’s hard to address that.”



Jay L. Clendenin

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