

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

I have become obsessed with a TV show called Beforeigners. It's on HBO Max in the U.S. It originally comes from HBO Nordic in Norway. Now, this episode won't give away any major spoilers. But if you want to watch the show first, it's a quick binge, only 2 seasons, with 6 episodes per season.

When the first episode begins, we meet a police detective named Lars. He's called in for what looks like a refugee situation. A small group of people have emerged from the harbor outside Oslo. They're dressed from 1000 years ago. Lars can't understand what they're saying. And then someone tells him they seem to be speaking in old Norse. He starts to call a mental institution but then he notices an international news report on TV.

REPORTER: As we are hearing, these reports seem to confirm that this is happening all over the world. There is still no official explanation, but unofficial observations keep pouring in on social media and they seem to be pointing in the same direction, that individuals from the past...

There's a citywide blackout, and the harbor is filled with flashes of light and human beings popping up out of the water from the distant past.

That's the prologue. The rest of the series takes place several years later.

We learn that these time-i-grants are coming from three specific time periods: the Stone Age, the Viking age, and the Victorian age. Although we don't know why. The Victorians have had an easier time assimilating into modern society, even if they sometimes don't approve of it. Time migration has been harder on the Vikings. And most of the Stone Age people can barely comprehend what happened.

The Oslo police force has been criticized for the way they've dealt with Beforeigners. So, to appease their critics, they hired a woman named Alfildir who is the first Viking to graduate from the police academy. And the partner that they assign her is Lars, the police officer we met in the prologue.

It's a classic set-up: two cops from different worlds, in this case literally different worlds. At first, they don't trust each other, and eventually they trust nobody

except each other because they're uncovering all these mysteries and conspiracies.

Now, most of the show is in Norwegian, so I can't play many clips that I would understand without subtitles. But to give you a sense of what they sound like there are a few scenes in English. Here is Lars and Alfildr questioning a suspect in a murder case who originally came from Victorian England. This is Alfildr.

ALFHILDR: Answer the question, please!

And this is Lars.

LARS: Let's begin by clarifying your whereabouts before you showed up at our offices with Miss Obeke.

ISSAC: Let's skip the mundane part, why don't you ask me about the book.

LARS: You're being questioned in a murder investigation. I strongly advise you to cooperate.

ISSAC: If you continue with that approach, you will reap a harvest as barren as your colleagues found.

Beforeigners was recommended to me by a few different listeners, who know that I love a good sci-fi metaphor. And the show is a really clever way of exploring issues of immigration, assimilation and national identity with some of the coolest worldbuilding and character development I've seen in a long time.

The show was created by Eilif Skodvin and Anne Bjørnstad. And I was very happy that Anne was available to do an interview.

One of the first things I was curious about is why is the show called Beforeigners? It's a great pun, and a portmanteau. But it is an English language word.

ANNE: The idea to call it Beforeigners was due to the fact that it's like, uh, a global phenomenon, that it is kind of natural to have the English, um, name. It works really well because the first time you hear about them, I think they're called Beforeigners like in the show also.

Beforeigners is not the first big series that they created. In 2012, they launched a show on Netflix called Lillehammer, where Steve van Zandt played a New York mobster who went into the witness protection program. And he asked to be sent

to Lillehammer, a place he had never been to, but he thought it looked beautiful when he watched the 1994 Olympics.

So, they are no strangers to high concept ideas or social satire. But Beforeigners was their first science fiction show.

ANNE: We always have like a very sort of soft spot for the, the grounded sci-fi genre and felt that that would be super interesting to do in a Scandinavian context. And we had been trying several times to come up with an idea or a premise that was interesting enough to go for it. And, and we tried for years and failed, but then one day Eilif just came to our, our joint sort of idea session and said, you know, what, if people start arriving, not from distant locations, but from ancient times, what kind of society would we live in then? And it was, um, a huge moment for us because it was so, yeah, it was right up our alley <laugh> we immediately started to, to see the world of Beforeigners, you know, uh, not only that, it's kind of funny to think, you know, what would it be like to have a stone age neighbor and all that stuff, but also the idea that, you know, how, what would they think about us?

Yeah. And the thing I love too about them coming from the past is that it, it takes out the question of nationality, because very often the backlash to refugees or immigrants as these people are from our other cultures, they don't understand us. And then, you know, they don't understand our deep history, but what if those people came from your deep history? I think it, it, it flips the whole idea upside down.

ANNE: Yeah. That was certainly a part of the appeal for us to make a situation where, you know, it's impossible to say, go back to where you came from because we were here first would be like, <laugh> the response to that. And also, we felt it was kind of, uh, interesting slash ironic that, um, in this part of the world, people on the far right, uh, often get their iconography from, from the old Norse, uh, times. And, uh, and that it would be interesting to have, you know, real old Norse people sort of come head-to-head with this, that type of person.

So, when you, now you could have picked people coming from any time period. And it's interesting that you picked three specific time periods that keep coming from the stone age, the Viking age and the Victorian era, what made you decide to, to limit it, did these specific three time periods that people would consistently come from?

ANNE: You of it all the, this show is, uh, an allegory for a multicultural society and, and in a society where you have people, uh, from different places, they come from specific places. <laugh> so, so we wanted to keep it in a similar to that in a sense. So, we didn't want everyone to come from one era and we didn't want them to come from, you know, just all over the place because we wanted that to be a number of groups that, you know,

like the majority would maybe see them all as one group, but they will not see themselves as naturally grouped to get the, like the Victorian age people will definitely not feel they have that much in common with the stone age people and the vice versa, I guess. And as for the, the time periods, you know, the, the Viking age kind of gave itself because I, I think it's because of the sagas, we know so much about the Vikings it's, it's so interesting. It's so super cool <laugh> to read the sagas and, and just the fact that they came from a time where society was kind of organized and people could read was interesting, I guess like also the Victorian era was interesting to us because it was the beginning of, um, modernity in Norway and a lot of stuff happened and, and we also wanted like a group that would feel superior maybe to, to, uh, contemporary people. ***You know, I, I, what's so interesting to me too, is that, you know, you could, I mean, I, I feel like any other, you know, this, this, um, premise, you know, you could imagine other countries in Europe having come up with it, but for Norway in particular, to have the Vikings, you know, from a, you know, in a, and, and also to the, the contrast of the Vikings being the toughest fiercest, you know, warriors, and I mean, people today are still fascinated by the Vikings, they're video games about Vikings, and then you have modern Norwegian society, which is, um, you know, a strong government that's very deeply invested in the welfare of its citizens that even the cops have to like sign up guns. It's just like, you know, it's very, it's very different from kind of the more, Wild West American sort of, uh, you know, system. And, and so that's such an interesting contrast, you know, to have, um, in terms of what would our ancestors think of us to go from the, the Vikings to a modern, you know, kind of socialistic state.***

ANNE: Yeah, that was definitely part of the, the appeal and when we made Lillehammer, we were very aware that, you know, on, on one level, it's just a show about a mafia guy who comes to a very cold place and he doesn't know how to ski and, you know, it's, it's all kind of slap sticky, but also on, on a deeper level, you have like this sort of social Darwinist predator from the urban jungle in The States who come to a very innocent place with a, um, social democracy where the, the response of the, of the locals and the government is that, you know, a newcomer is someone who needs help. We need to help this guy. So he is, he is labeled like, you know, a helpless immigrant, but he is, you know, not who they think he is. And, and you get all these clashes between like the welfare state and this sort of very macho <laugh> character. And, and you get kind of the same type of conflict between the, the Vikings and the <laugh>, the social democracy. I don't mean to offend mobsters or Vikings.

You know, a very high number of my listeners are mobsters and Vikings. So, you need to, you need to tread carefully on that.

ANNE: <laughs>

Um, what's particularly interesting too. You're talking about how, um, you know, you have like the example of the New York mobster where people sort of see him

as, oh, oh, we need to help this guy. And, but he's really kind of a predator. I think what's also really interesting with the Viking characters is how they react to being seen as a protected minority, where sometimes they're a little offended by it. And sometimes they like it. And then sometimes they use it kind of cynically to their advantage. And then one of my favorite scenes is where Alfildr tells her, she gets her friend out of trouble at a museum by telling the curators that they should have put trigger warnings on the paintings because her friend recognized people in the paintings. <laughs>

ANNE: Like, you know, the, the Vikings were extremely cunning, you know, that's, uh, the type of thing that I think they would do, they would definitely not like to be considered, uh, helpless, uh, and in need of help. But if it was to their game, they would probably, uh, happy to take advantage, um, of that. Because I think that, um, I maybe didn't get into, was that we, we wanted to have like a, a man and a woman, but the cop duo and we wanted the woman to be a Viking and a man to be from the present time, uh, because we thought it was interesting that Lars, the man, he is a typical modern, uh, Norwegian man. He questions himself. He questions his masculinity. Uh, whereas Alfildr, she doesn't really, you know, she just goes for stuff she wants and she doesn't think too much, you know, she doesn't doubt herself like Lars does, but we also feel for her character that it's an interesting, uh, choice. Uh, when you come from a, a culture where blood is repaid with blood, it's kind of interesting to choose, to be part of the judicial system to step out of that revenge cycle that makes her kind of stand out from, from the Vikings.

So, am I pronouncing her name right? Alfildr? Is that how I pronounce it?

ANNE: I, I think because I, we have done, um, uh, very, uh, extensive, uh, language research, uh, in this, uh, show and the, the right pronunciation, according to my, uh, Norse expert is Alfildr.

I don't know if I'm get that – all-VILD-der.

ANNE: Okay, but you know, it, it's kind of a funny thing that it's such a difficult name, so hardly anyone in the universe pronounce it correctly. Like the chief of police constantly says *al-FILL-derrrrrr*, and, uh, you know, all kinds of different sort of wrong, uh, pronunciations. So, uh, so you're not, do not feel alone. <laugh>, it's kind of part of the, the game. <laughs> I think they're such good actors, we've been so lucky with the actors with the show. You know what surprised me is that Krista is from Finland, and the woman who plays her friend Urd is from Iceland, the fantastic thing is the guy who plays Tore Hund is Norwegian and when they speak to each other in old Norse, I just feel like they're from the same place, you know I'm completely convinced that is their common language even though none of them quite understand what they're saying. <laugh> For us the language work was really an important of the whole sci-fi toolbox because if you are a refugee you have normally a mother tongue and then there is the language that the majority speak and the way you speak defines so much of your character, and you

have a sort of different secret language that you speak with your friends and your family is also like part of that sort of multicultural experience that we really wanted to recreate.

Well, you mentioned a few times the research you've done I'm actually, I was actually really curious what was, I mean, I know that you said that, you know, generally speaking, you, you learn so much about the Viking era just growing up in, in Norway, but what kind of research did you need to do for the sake of the show that you, and what interesting things did you find in your research that you thought, oh, we have to use this in the show?

ANNE: I guess like the, the, the first, um, thing that's kind of, uh, obvious that came from research is, you know, in, in episode one, this scene where Alfhildr has to stop because, uh, she needs sanitary pads, uh, and she goes up, go goes over and picks up a piece of moss. This was, uh, straight from research because they did some, uh, excavation in Badingham, and they found that it was this huge amount of moss that they couldn't quite explain. And then they realized, oh, you know, that it was used for sanitary pads. Uh, and this was of course, you know, a kind of super interesting mundane detail that really sort of stuck with us. And we thought that it would be so great to have it in the show. ***Yeah, it's a great moment in the pilot where Lars, and she start to bond and he buys her modern-day sanitary napkins. And he just leaves it on her desk, you know, as a way to say like that they're, they're starting to bond and trust each other.***

ANNE: Yeah. That was, uh, that was, we felt, that was a good, good idea. What's interesting is that I got the sense that when this show was aired, like in Spain and, um, and some other parts of the world, uh, they felt that it was, or it was conceived as more feministic I guess, than we thought of it, because people in Norway thought it was really funny, but, uh, people, some people, other places felt like it was really sort of bold or like, you know, that it meant something more than we actually, you know, deliberately thought of when we put it in. And, uh, and I think that's very cool.

I was actually going to ask you, did you have any interesting or unexpected reactions to the show in Norway or, or other parts of Europe?

ANNE: When the show premiered, it seemed like the, the countries or the, the territories that were most directly affected by the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean refugee crisis and the European refugee crisis were the ones that responded most strongly, uh, to the show. I just wanted to mention also that very many American viewers react so strongly to the fact that the police are not armed. It's like, they feel that that's like the most, the strongest sci-fi element in the story to them.

That's really interesting.

ANNE: No, it's just that it's so fun to see the response like, oh God. Is this a parallel universe? You know, where cops don't have to wear guns and they actually arrest people without being armed. And, uh, yeah, it's, uh, it's a very interesting, uh, response. Also in Hungary, we kind of got like great reviews from, you know, the, the more right

wing side of the spectrum and the left wing side of the spectrum. Like, it's interesting to see like how some people feel that, uh, oh, this is like, you know, it's a dystopia that shows how, uh, ruined the society, if you allow people to enter. And other people feel like someone said, like, this is a very effective vaccine against xenophobia. So, so it's kind of interesting that you can get so different responses from the same show. But, uh, I think, um, we kind of like that the task at hand is not for us to give answers. You know, we, we're not that smart. <laugh> what we hope to do is to, to raise interesting questions.

Yeah. It's funny. I thought of another thing about the refugee a refugee situation or an immigration situation that rang so true to me was the like Tore was a, um, he was like a warrior clan leader, his time. I mean, you know, would lead people to battle. And now he's in like, an Uber Eats delivery guy on a bike, you know, and it just reminded me of so many stories you hear of people saying I was a high level engineer in my old country, and now I'm, I'm cleaning toilets, but I'm, you know, it's, I'm doing this for an important reason. And it was so interesting to see, you know, or King Olaf, you know, from the 11th century has to take a driving test. You know, it's like, it's so many things that they feel is beneath them. And yet as they're trying to adapt to modern society and there's nothing they can do about it, I think is so fascinating.

ANNE: Yeah. And that also goes to, because we, um, you know, the, the Beforeigners when they arrive the time travel does something to their memories. So you have some people who remember nothing from the past and some, a little bit, and some, um, remember quite the bits about who they were and, uh, where they come from. And, and we felt that this, you know, that all the different, uh, before and a character have their own strategies for survival. Uh, and it has to do with, you know, the type of identity that you form in a new country. Tore Hund, he remembers nothing. He, he, he has even forgotten his, um, mother tongue. He just wants to be a regular guy who leads, uh, very normal life here and now, and no questions asked. And then you have Urd on the other side, who she's so disappointed by this, uh, time and the, the society. Now, she only wants to go back, and she feels that the, the past is what matters in the past is, uh, where it really, uh, worked. And then you have Alfildr in their middle who feels like, you know, okay. So, there were good things and bad things in the past, and there are good things and bad things now, and try to sort of balance out her attitude. And we also try to reflect that in how people dress, you know, how that some people will sort of embrace modernity and others will stick to their traditional clothing and so on.

Yeah. I thought that was fascinating. Um, I mean, first of all, you're talking about earlier about how you wanted to have the Victorians, uh, be the people that actually kind of looked down on modern society. I thought it was fascinating how many of them refused to adapt and insist on still wearing Victorian clothes as a statement of disappointment <laughs> with modern society to some degree.

ANNE: Yeah, they definitely feel like, uh, you know, the people who were, they, maybe they were at like the opening night of Ibsen's plays, and now they come to Oslo and they feel just disgusted by the whole thing, and everything is kind of ruined. And, and they feel that you, you have to cling to certain standards and just don't let go of your corsets, because that's the last thing holding you back from, uh, from being, you know, just an animal or something like that.

What kind of choices did you make in terms of the, the, uh, the Vikings? Cause I think with, with the Victorians, it's a pretty simple choice in terms of, well, you know, they just decide to keep wearing their Victorian clothes, but with the Vikings, you know, uh, they're not full-on Viking clothes, but some of them have come up with sort of like halfway Viking clothes or they've found modern clothes that feel Viking to them. Like, what kind of choices did you make around that costume design?

ANNE: We, we felt like the Vikings probably were, uh, very it proud. So, they wanted to keep like part of their, um, you know, the, the clothes that they were used to wearing, but also that they were quite pragmatic. So, we felt like for some reason we felt that the, like, you know, the, what do you call it? Like a Parka vest is something that a Viking would probably like. So, we had like, um, some guidelines, but it's also quite sort of intuitive for, you know, just what kinds of things would this character fall for? For instance, we have also like the, the stone age people are really into fleece and, you know, crocs, they're very sort of practical plastic shoes.

I did notice a lot of the stone age people were wearing crocs.

ANNE: Yes <laugh>. Uh, and that feels, you know, because it feels almost like being barefoot. So, uh, so it's like the least amount of shoe that you can have and still, you know, have the benefits of a shoe.

The first two seasons of Beforeigners has each ended with a huge plot twist. What I love about these big reveals is that they're not there for shock value. They open up a whole new world of story possibilities. And since I just did an episode about headcanon which dealt with stories that were not planned very carefully so the endings were unsatisfying, I was curious, do they know how the show is going to end? Do they have the whole story mapped out already?

We'll find out, after the break.

BREAK

One of my favorite things about Beforeigners is the opening credits. It's usually Lars or Alfildir, or all-VILD-dur -- I don't know if I'm ever going to pronounce that right -- driving to work. As they look around, we see all these shots of

Beforeigners on the streets of Oslo mixed in with the mundane aspects of modern-day life. It actually reminded me of the montages in The Wire, and the opening credits of The Sopranos. And I wondered if those were their influences.

ANNE: Maybe not so much The Wire, but definitely the Sopranos. And also the, the, the song was in the script. Eilif found it and we just fell in love with at it.

SONG: *Ain't No Love In The Heart of the City*

ANNE: And it was so important to the whole, the mood and the feeling. And that was kind of very important from, for us.

I also love with the opening credits that they change a little bit every time, you know, and it's, it's, it's always some, some variation of them getting somewhere. And I just love the way, it, it all the different variations of the opening credits.

ANNE: Oh yeah. We really put a lot of work into that because we felt that we really love this world. We think it's so interesting and we want to show as much of it as possible. So that was how, how it was decided, but, okay. We make a special one for every, uh, episode, just to get a chance to show a little bit more of this universe. It's great to be able to, to, to show the world without having to have like a big plot thing about every little idea that you have, you can just sort of let your characters see how it unfolds.

Because it's so relatable because we've all had that experience of driving to work and you go through all these neighborhoods that you've never gone through and you see people on street that you realize, wow, that person's from a whole different world than me. So, it's so interesting the way that they kind of, when they're driving to work, you know, the way they're kind of glancing out the window and you see the stone age people foraging for berries along the side of the highway and, and they all wear those suits. You could tell that the government has issued these suits, the, um, these sort of jumpsuits, the minute that you arrive, like if they're still wearing them, it shows how little they've been able to assimilate to modern culture, which is never established. Nobody ever says that, but, but I've completely absorbed that by watching the opening credits.

ANNE: Yeah, that's really, that's really cool. We, we also made it like, uh, a dictionary for the universe that, uh, we used, like when we worked with season one and I don't remember if it's actually in the dictionary anymore, but we had this slang word for the Vikings used to call it like the armor <laugh> that, that track suit, that they got when they arrived. But it's great that you, that you get all that just from, from watching with a keen eye.

Uh, well, you know, the, the, the beginning of the, of the pilot, we, we learned that the, this phenomenon is happening worldwide. And then in the second season,

we start getting a sense of how it's playing out in England. Are we going to hear from other countries, do you think in future seasons, how it's playing out there?

ANNE: Yes. Um, that would be, uh, part of a part of the fund. Um, one thing that's particularly interesting is that, um, there were a lot of people, uh, from Scandinavia who immigrated to The States in, in Victorian times, you know, and of course, um, Beforeigners in The States would be super interesting, uh, and very sort of, I guess, extremely topical, uh, in a different way than it is here.

Well, yeah, I mean, if you have people coming from a thousand years ago in the United States they're going to be native Americans and that's going to be a, a very different storyline.

ANNE: Yeah. So that would be the case, like in many places in, in the world. And, uh, yeah, and I think, you know, it would be, it, it's kind of, um, an interesting person that would work, you know, almost everywhere.

Yeah. So, uh, the second season got a lot more into science fiction and fantasy. Is that something that kind of, I mean, without giving away any spoilers of what happens, is that something you thought about as you went into the second season that you thought, you know, we could actually go much deeper into the fantasy sci-fi elements or, uh, did you always know from the beginning, like as you progressed, you've, you've got a much bigger plan in mind?

ANNE: Uh, we knew from the start, you know, that the sort of main engine of the entire series is the mystery of "timigration." Why does it happen? And in season one, we focused very much on like what happens to the present society when the past comes along. <laugh> every sort of stumbles in, uh, and, uh, and we knew that we would, would want to go a bit deeper into it in the second season, but we didn't know exactly like how and, uh, and why.

What I am actually curious about is, again, without giving any spoilers, you, you seem to know like every season, especially this season seems to give more and more hints as to not only why this is happening, but how many people out there seem to know a lot more than our, than our protagonists about why this is happening and our protagonists need to find those people and, and learn from those people, what exactly they know that they're not telling everybody else. Do you know, do you have the whole thing mapped out, you know, the two of you in terms of what thing is and, and, and how, how, you know, how you're going to get there eventually and how much information the protagonists and the audience are going to learn over subsequent seasons?

ANNE: I think, you know, different, uh, writers probably work in different ways. And, uh, I wouldn't say that we have the whole thing like mapped out, but we have like a number of alternative maps that, uh, that can be followed. So it's not like we have, you know, I've read some writers who say that, oh, I knew from the start where it was going to end. Uh, and we don't really know, you know, exactly because then it would be really easy. It

sounds, uh, perfect. You know, you can just sit down and just write it. But, uh, to us, it's more an exploration. And we had like, from the starts, we have an idea where it's going to go and we have like a number of different theories. We have like, uh, our favorite theories <laugh>. But, uh, but it's not like we're dead set on, you know? No, it's, uh, it's still, um, evolving, we have plans, but we don't always follow them.

Hmm. So, if you have, uh, a few alternate timelines in your mind that you could choose between, what do you think is going to make you commit to one over another? Is it, are you going to see, uh, how storylines evolve, how they actors inhabit the characters? Like, what are you, what gut instincts are you going to be following as you keep going?

ANNE: It's, uh, it's definitely the, the, how it all evolves because when you have, when you start writing and you have a number of ideas for different plot lines, I don't know if this is like common, but this is how we experience it. Then sometimes when you start writing, you're so surprised by how it kind of explodes when you start writing certain types of storylines and you get like millions of ideas and it's so much fun. It's so interesting. And then other lines that you had high hopes for, you feel like, oh, but this doesn't quite, you know, it's kind of, isn't this, you know, isn't this a little bit, I don't know, dull or wrong or something like that? And then, then we tend to sort of follow, follow the stream <laugh> or follow, you know, where we feel that the life is in the pipelines that we have planned.

So, uh, do you have a, a set amount of seasons in terms of like, you know, some people say I can only, this storyline couldn't go beyond four or five seasons and then I'm done, or do you feel like there's so much to explore that you can kind of, as long as the show keeps getting renewed, you can kind of keep, keep exploring it?

ANNE: I think there is no definite and to it, it's not like, uh, like it has to be two or three or four. I think it's more like, as long as the, it feels like fresh to us, we can keep going because there are so many doors to open. You know, that sometimes when you work with a different type of show, you will feel like, oh my God, how are we going to make another season out of this? <laugh> but this is know, it's not the case at all with Beforeigners because there are so many ways you can go so many places you can go times you can go to, there are a lot of ideas that are yet to be explored.

I can't wait to see them.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Anne Bjørnstad. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook and Instagram. I also tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod.

If you really like the show, please leave a review wherever you get your podcasts, or a shout out on social media. That always helps people discover Imaginary Worlds. And if you're interested in advertising on the show, drop us a line at contact at [imaginary worlds podcast dot org](http://imaginaryworldspodcast.org), and I'll put you in touch with our ad coordinator.

The best way to support the podcast is to donate on Patreon. At different levels you can get either free Imaginary Worlds stickers, a mug, a t-shirt, and a link to a Dropbox account, which has the full-length interviews of every guest in every episode. You can learn more at [imaginary worlds podcast dot org](http://imaginaryworldspodcast.org).