

# Shogun (2024)



English pilot John Blackthorne is assigned Lady Mariko as his interpreter.  
(c) Hulu

Set in the 1600s when Portuguese Catholics have been trading with and have converted a few Japanese, this second adaptation of James Clavell's historical novel, created by Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks is so mesmerizing that it demands binge watching. Thus far you can watch on Hulu the ten sessions already produced, with two more seasons promised.

The story begins with the arrival of the Dutch trading ship Erasmus in the hope of breaking the Portuguese trade monopoly with Japan. The ship has been out of food and water so that the crew, barely alive, were in despair. Some want to return to the Netherlands rather than to press on. The Captain commits suicide, leaving the English pilot John Blackthorne (Cosmo Jarvis) in charge of the hand-full of survivors. They arrive at the shore of a small fishing village and immediately taken prisoner.

The local Jesuit priest wants the Protestants executed on the pretext that they are pirates, but the local ruler takes the newcomers into custody in the hope of using them for his benefit. He does choose one unfortunate wretch to be turned over to be boiled alive, his prolonged death screams being one

of the most difficult portions of the film to watch.

Blackthorne soon is taken by a higher official, Lord Yoshii Toranaga, with Lady Toda Mariko, a highborn Catholic convert, assigned to be his translator. Toranaga is one of the Five Regents who rule Japan during the childhood of the young heir to the throne. The Dutchman is referred to as the "Anjin," the barbarian. One of the Five regents, Ishido Kazunari (Takehiro Hira), is head of a conspiracy to seize power and eliminate Toranaga by impeachment and execution. There follows a series of attacks and acts of deception that result in a great amount of bloodshed. Blackborne will be caught up in it as Toranaga becomes impressed by his usefulness and promotes him in rank. The latter's knowledge and skill with the cannon from the Erasmus will play an important part, and so will Lady Miko, who surprises us with her martial skills. The latter will develop feelings for the Dutchman and prove her loyalty to Lord Toranaga.

As I have written many times, I love a film that immerses us in an unfamiliar culture, and this one certainly does. We learn of some of the ranks in Japanese society of the time and the customs, especially of loyalty and what the Japanese call seppuku, the latter a form of suicide in which a second is appointed, whose duty is to immediately cut off the person's head as he disembowels himself.

There are so many characters to keep track of that I recommend you go to the [Wikipedia article](#) and copy the list "Caste and characters" that is divided into three sections: Main, Recurring, and Guest. This contains a brief description of the characters that will be helpful as the story progresses. This article also has a synopsis of each of the ten episodes that will be invaluable for referring back before watching the next episode. (You will need to resist the temptation to look ahead, lest you spoil your viewing!)

This series takes place a few years before the events in

Martin Scorsese's great film [\*Silence\*](#), a film which I think you will want to see after this one. The latter is set in the aftermath of the purge of Christians in the 1630s when any sign of being a Christian would result in painful execution. The cross that Lady Mariko and several other of the Japanese characters would have resulted in death.

A teachable scene is the one involving Blackthorne and the friendly priest Fr. Martin Avito (Tommy Bastow). The Dutchman is leaving Osaka by a road leading through a forest. As Blackthorne sits to rest, he speaks of recent events, he mentions that he has prayed for Lady Miko, not to "Your God or my God, just God." Looking up at the priest, he asks, "Do you think it was acceptable?" After assuring him so, the priest adds, "I think it would have pleased her seeing us being civil." Blackthorne chuckles, "Yes, you may be right." Fr. Avito says, "Perhaps there may come a time when we can set aside our differences." Blackthorne laughs as he replies, "Yes, all this nonsense, Catholic and Protestant and Calvinist, and every other sh-tist. It's only a shame that day will never come. Will it, Father?"

Another moving scene is when Lord Toranaga and Blackthorne are at the village of Ajiro where the latter's ship had been anchored and then burned one night. Many villagers have been punished with beheading in the search for traitors who had assisted the raiders responsible for the ship's destruction. Blackthorne, fond of the villagers, pleads with the lord to spare the village. He offers his own life as he unsheaves his sword and points the blade toward his stomach.

Though neither British actor Cosmo Jarvis nor the Japanese cast may be familiar, their performances are completely convincing, transporting us to an unfamiliar and exciting era. The costumes and settings are sumptuous, showing that a production for the home screen can be as impressive as a big screen blockbuster. As a parable of loyalty and courage, this is an unforgettable series!

*This review is in the August issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.*