

Elle.com: Bly Manor's Kate Siegel On Why Love-Not Rage-Drives the Lady of the Lake

By Emma Dibdin November 13, 2020



It's now been a full month since *The Haunting of Bly Manor* swept onto Netflix and became everybody's favorite spooky, psychologically unsettling fall binge. If the show has been living in your nightmares rent-free, you're not alone. A big part of the reason why is Viola Willoughby, aka *The Lady in the Lake*.

As played by Kate Siegel, Viola/*The Lady in the Lake* is a force of nature in every sense—a vibrant and ambitious woman whose stubbornness is both a gift and a curse. After developing a fatal lung disease, Viola refuses to accept her own fate, languishing in a hellish limbo between life and death for years before finally being murdered by her own sister. But even in death, she endures, returning as a vengeful spirit whose presence is so powerful she creates a "gravity well" at Bly Manor, dooming everybody who dies on the property to be trapped there forever. Siegel—whose husband is the series creator Mike Flanagan—is one of many *Haunting of Hill House* alums who returned for the new season (alongside Victoria Pedretti, Oliver Jackson-Cohen and Carla Gugino). She jumped on the

phone with ELLE.com to delve into Viola's haunting arc, some of the mysteries surrounding *The Lady in the Lake*, and the uneasy parallels between Bly Manor and Donald Trump's delusional response to his 2020 election loss.

What kind of conversations did you have with Mike about returning for Bly Manor after playing Theo in Hill House?

Early on, Mike was prepping for the new season and he was talking to me about what it would be, but at a certain point I stopped asking about it. Not for any professional reason, but more for a personal reason—my husband knows I'm an actor and obviously I want to be on season 2 of *The Haunting*, because it was a joy and it's a great show! But I didn't want to force myself into something that he didn't need me to do. Then, of course, I found out I was pregnant during season 1, so I had a brand new baby when they were going into production, and so I wasn't sure that I was even going to be involved. But then it really paid off beautifully, this maneuver, because I was brought into the writer's room and I was told the story of Viola and this one beautiful episode that I was going to get to shoot in black and white. It was described like a little short film. And it was a real gift—a push present, if you will!

Viola's story took on a different meaning for me than it would have in a non-pandemic year. The fact that she just wakes up, walks around, goes to sleep—essentially lives the same day over and over again—has big lockdown energy.

At the time I found that to be the scariest part of her story. It's not something that's as scary as the jump scare, like the arms through the wedding dress when she strangles her sister. But that feeling of the repetitive nature of time just eating away at you, it was terrifying to me before we shot it. And I think it's doubly terrifying now. Just the world continuing without you.

The scariest part of the season for me is the way it deals with dementia, and how these ghosts slowly lose all their memories as their faces are eroded by time.

I think that's why *Haunting* is a TV show and not a movie. Because when you deal with that concept over two hours of a film, you can't quite get into how deeply haunting it is. But when you have nine episodes of TV, you can get that feeling of time eating away at these people and what they're losing, how they're losing their mothers, how they're losing the memories of their parents, of their children, of their spouses. And this loss of identity, just being stripped away from you by the cruel nature of time, is something that marches on through all of *The Haunting*.

Episode 8 is a real tour de force for you—Viola goes from being this force of nature, so alive and independent, to becoming a shell of herself when she's sick, to then becoming this malevolent ghost. What was it like to depict that incredibly condensed journey?

I think with scripts like these, both seasons of *The Haunting*, you really lean on the written word and what's on the page. There's always a phrase that helps me identify these characters. With Theo Crain, it was "she's a clenched fist with hair." That is such a visual and actable thing. With Viola, it was the concept of "gravity well." Her stubbornness creates a gravity well. And so I knew early on I needed to create a character at the beginning of the episode who was so vibrant and full of life and passion and stubbornness and vim and vigor, that you would believe that that personality would be a black hole for all these other personalities at Bly. And so I constantly thought, how can I make Viola more and more, almost swollen with the weight of her personality?

In your mind, what is the emotion that's powerful enough to sustain that gravity well? It seems like the combination of rage and grief over being usurped and losing her daughter.

I think it's so interesting that you describe it as rage and these angry emotions, when I always thought of it as, she just wants to spend one more night in bed sleeping with her daughter. Right from the very beginning, they carry her into the guest room and she says, "I want to be in our bed, Arthur. I don't want to be away from it." And that's the path she takes. She walks up to the bed because she wants to spend one more night sleeping next to her child. For me, that is so easily accessible, because I started to put my kids to bed and I complained to all my mom friends about how hard it is to get a toddler to sleep. But I will sneak back in there and smell his head and lay in bed with him and hold him with his little sleepy face, and lashes casting shadows on his cheek. And so for me, that's what creates the well—it's the love, not the hate.

Which I guess plays into the "It's you, it's me, it's us" phrase, which ends up being the key to unlocking Viola.

Yeah, Isabel was the only person Viola truly was loved. Viola uses everybody else. She used Perdita, she used Arthur, she uses the manor. She uses all the other ghosts. The only person she was truly vulnerable with was her daughter. And when Dani says that to her, she understands the depth of Dani's love, and again, I think that's the key here. Rage goes away, need goes away, envy goes away. It all fades in the wash. The thing that remains is a deep-rooted, almost violent love of connection.

Episode 8 is named after Henry James's short story, "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes," and obviously that trunk of clothes is hugely significant to Viola's arc. What is it about those dresses that have such meaning to her?



Well first, I need to talk about Lynn Falconer, who created all those gowns for Viola and Perdita—hours and hours of time was spent hand-creating each of those gowns that had their own corset and bustles and underskirts. The attention paid was amazing. I could not be more grateful for that.

As far as what the dresses mean, I think Viola is very into her identity as the lady of Bly, and she wants to be telling a story. We talked about her filling up the room with her personality. When that dwarf star collapses on itself and becomes a black hole, it made sense—we needed to expand it first, before it contracts. And since we didn't have a ton of dialogue or a ton of time, visual cues are extremely important. Having those rich fabrics and all of that construction and the way it held her body so tightly, you can then tear down the character and put her in a dirty nightgown at the end. It creates the visual experience of her disease, of her degeneration into the Lady of the Lake. You take this flower in bloom and then just wilt it until it rots.

It's also really interesting that Viola just refuses to die, and her denial about her own prognosis is powerful enough to propel her forward. It's similar to Hannah Grose—all these characters are in denial about the reality of their own mortality.

What I've always loved about that is this idea of reality being a personal experience—it's not something we all agree on, it's not something that is a given. We see that in our political climate, that there is a way to change reality for people through news, through communication, through storytelling, through lies, through social media. You can adjust your reality as you see fit. And if you take that and elevate it to a ghost story, you get Bly. The lies we tell ourselves, the lies we tell each other.

That feels extremely apt right now.

It's on my mind, because that's what Trump is doing. He's in there in the White House briefing room trying to create a reality that doesn't exist. And it worked so well for him for four years. He made up this reality that the media was out to get him. And that Antifa was a terrorist group and it wasn't just antifascist or that people, protestors, are burning down cities. These are all made up facts that people chose to turn into reality. And now we win! Reality wins!

Now I'm picturing Donald Trump in the Oval Office, like Viola in her bedroom, just refusing to accept that he's no longer there.

Wash away his face and his memories. Take it away. I hope we all forget his name and we never mention him again.

If anyone deserves to end up in a gravity well, it truly is him.

I would choke him so hard...