

Chernobyl | Interview with Adam Nagaitis who plays Vasily Ignatenko

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Who do you play?

Vasily Ignatenko – he was 25, an ex-military fireman who had been invited by the Russian Government to go and live in Pripyat around Chernobyl. He was in the first group of firemen who turned up and they spent about six to eight hours fighting the fire. They all died; every single fireman died.

Are there any accounts of your character?

There's the propaganda party line about the heroes of Pripjat and that wasn't particularly useful. What was useful was reading a story written by his wife, Lyudmila Ignatenko. The story is not the actual fighting of the fire but the aftermath. He slowly deteriorates over the coming weeks and Lyudmila sits by his bedside and cares for him – even though she's not supposed to be there because it's very dangerous for her and her baby. The reason I wanted to do the role in the first place was the tremendous love story between these two people, their story deserves to be honoured and her courage and love should be recognized. Dying from radiation sickness the cells of the body are slowly disintegrating, your organs start to liquefy inside your body and you vomit your organs up. Lyudmila sacrificed everything for him, for love- she would literally clean out the organs that were coming out of his mouth. She kissed him and she held his hand and she loved him. Nothing could be more heroic.

How was it shooting something so intense?

Johan, the director, was fantastic – he's so original, he directs with such charisma, and he's such a fun-loving guy that it was a pleasure being around him. The writer Craig produced a fantastic script and then Jessie Buckley, who plays my wife, is a wonderful actress. She had a hell of a task because it's such a difficult role to play. Jessie and I knew each other from drama school so we already had a rapport. It was comforting to bring some lightness to those days because it was so bleak, but Jessie kept everything very light.

What research did you do?

We trained with firemen in Lithuania who would explain the gear and what the procedure was and how you deal with the hose, but the most important thing was the mentality of not asking questions, you're there to do a job and you do what you're told.

Where did you shoot?

There were two places in Lithuania – one where they built a makeshift version of the reactor and another set was an actual old reactor that I filmed on for one day. The environment was formidable in some way – it didn't look like it was necessarily in disrepair, but it certainly didn't look protected. I knew it wasn't a functioning reactor but I knew there was still an RBMK underneath all the concrete, which as we know now, is a real problem. Every actor working inside the plant had to strip down naked to have all their clothes checked. It was a very difficult environment to work in but definitely worth it.

What would you hope people take away from watching this?

I think the most important thing is to tell a new generation who have never encountered the Chernobyl disaster before, the stories of heroism and sacrifice and to honour the memory of these people. They were responsible for saving millions of lives across Europe and nobody knows who these miners, firemen and unknown soldiers are.