

For the love of it – Glass talks to rising star British actor Adam Nagaitis

[Arjun Sajip](#) April 15, 2015 [Culture](#), [Don't Miss: Film](#), [Feature](#)

Glass had a great time interviewing Adam Nagaitis, the RADA graduate rapidly making a name for himself in the film industry. Born and raised in Chorley, Lancashire, Adam began his training at the prestigious [Stella Adler Studio](#) in New York at the age of 19; in the last two years he's appeared in Yann Demange's sleeper hit '71, *The Inbetweeners 2*, and the crime drama *Happy Valley*, a Netflix original.

Winner of the 2012 Carleton Hobbs Award for BBC Radio Drama, Adam was most recently seen playing the tortured, bitter Private Buckley in BBC drama [Banished](#), which centred on Britain's first penal colony in Australia in the 18th Century, and which he's hoping will be renewed for a second series. As well as being remarkably talented, he's enthusiastic and wonderfully erudite; read on to find out what he has to say about acting, Apartheid, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn.



We tried to interview you earlier in the month, but you were in South Africa. What were you doing there?

I was doing a Sky One comedy. It's called *Apocalypse Slough*, and I'm playing a white supremacist from Tennessee. It's just a fun cameo role, but they sent me to South Africa for a week to shoot it! That was fantastic.

How did South Africa compare to Australia, where you filmed *Banished*?

South Africa is completely different. I had a lot of days off, and spent most of my time trying to make the most of being in that place. I went to Robben Island, and did all the tourist things, but it's kind of a difficult place to be. It's still recovering from Apartheid, really. There's such a massive gap between rich and poor. It's not

an easy place to relax; it's a little bit strange. But I learned a hell of a lot that I didn't know before.

Apartheid is everywhere [there, but] it's also the most beautiful country I've ever visited, and I would want to live there. There's something about the atmosphere; every person I met there was so full of positive energy, and they're all bright and kind and generous ... But it is difficult to walk around and enjoy a place when you understand the economics underneath it, and what's really happening. There's just such an imbalance, and... I don't know where that will go, whether it'll get worse [or not].

In Australia, I was just doing the job. I was staying in Sydney, which is a very upbeat, wealthy place, and everybody's fine – it's a “holiday place”. It's not without its culture, but it's pretty westernised. Everybody was lovely, but I was really just there for the job. I was on set every day; I didn't really have a great deal of time to investigate Australia. But when I was in South Africa, I had only one day on set. I really wanted to get a sense of this place I knew nothing about, where one of the worst things that's ever happened is only a couple of decades [past]. So I just tried to get into the history of it. I'd love to go back.

You mentioned a rich-poor divide. Was that enshrined in South Africa's racial dynamic? Was there a strong sense of “blacks poor, whites rich”?

It was such an overwhelming thing to be dropped in the middle of Cape Town; I'd never been there before. I didn't see a lot of white people while I was there, to be honest, so I don't know – I didn't go around checking everybody's bank balance. But the general sense was that there was an incredibly large amount of poverty surrounded by what seemed to be tourist vacation area. So you have mass wealth, organic food shops and great big hotels, with all the tourists catered for by people who are really struggling to get by. That's what [Apartheid does]: it destroys a country.

But I don't really want to get into talking about the economics and politics of South Africa – anybody could pick up a book and read about it, they don't need my opinion on it! I'm not South African. I was there for a few days, and I've read a few books about it, but I know nothing. So I don't like talking about it negatively like that; it's presumptuous of me, and foolish, in a way. As a complete outsider who knew nothing about it, with no expectations [before I went there], I had the most wonderful time I've ever had anywhere.

You've done a lot of period dramas. How do you go about researching your role each time?

I just read as many books as I can get hold of, and not try to read every side of it.

I think *Banished* was the most difficult thing to find information on. There were really only a couple of [relevant] books that I came across. When it comes to things like *Banished*, when you're talking about the colonisation of a country and the displacement of an indigenous race, you want to make sure that you know what's what. But at the same time, the people arriving on those shores didn't have the same mindset [as we do], so [the research] isn't always that helpful. Most of them were struggling, starving, and impoverished.

But generally, [the research is] just reading. And you can fill in the gaps using your imagination.

***Banished* is about a fascinating time and place in history. What do you find most interesting about the show? And why does your character – by all accounts a dark person, and not particularly sympathetic – behave in the way that he does?**

I found *Banished* interesting because it's about something that hasn't really been touched on before – and also because Jimmy McGovern wrote it. The moment I read the script, it was clearly going to be something that everyday people could relate to. [McGovern] didn't stray from his usual focus: even though it's a historical drama, he doesn't stray from the human element, which is why it's interesting to me.

But I would disagree that [my character] is not sympathetic. You can't really know whether he's sympathetic or empathetic by watching him. He does do a few things that are disgusting. The way he treats Elizabeth, for example, is terrible. But whenever you look at someone's actions, it's very important to me not to necessarily focus on what they are, but on why. Why does he do that? Where does that come from? What has happened to this person that has sparked this behaviour? And that's why [Buckley was so] interesting to play. It's much more interesting to play people who do things you might find difficult to swallow, things you might not do yourself.

The most interesting part of playing Buckley is that once I read [the script], it was clear he has an amazing journey. He changes. You very rarely find a character that's written like that, who has such an epic conflict going on inside him. He's a person cut off and isolated from everybody. Nobody knows who he is, really, and he starts to form an opinion of himself based on what other people think. And his behaviour, his outbursts of rage, and all the frustration and pain and torment and suffering inside him, when he's in this camp being despised by everybody...

I mean, the audience don't know what happened onboard the ship during the nine-month journey before [the arrival in Australia], so they don't know what happened to make people despise him. Was he perfectly nice, and then everybody hated, and then he changed? Or did he always do things that people considered cruel, so they gave him that label? Nobody knows. But the sense is that when he arrived eight weeks ago, it was a lottery as to who'd get the woman and who wouldn't, and he wasn't lucky enough to get one. And he's been walking around with that ever since.

But it's really much deeper than that, than just "not having a woman". It goes way, way back. He hates himself. In Episode 3, he exposes himself and says, "I don't want to do this anymore, can somebody help me?". And that was challenging and interesting to do.

You trained at drama school, but have been in a lot of TV and films. What have you been up to on stage?

I've done theatre my entire life, since I was 19. Only since I came out of RADA and started working professionally in London have I not done any theatre. The film and TV jobs came rolling in, and, to be honest, I really wanted to get a good handle on that medium. Film is a passion of mine, and "film acting", if there is a difference [between film acting and stage acting], is something I'm incredibly interested in.

So I've [remained] in that medium for a while, and not always by choice! A play can sometimes [make you dedicate yourself] for at least a couple of months, and it just hasn't happened yet. I'm looking to do some theatre this year, but we'll see. It's not for lack of love. I love theatre; it's something I've done my whole life. It's just about finding the right time.

You trained at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in New York City. How does American training compare with British training? Do Americans approach acting in a recognisably different way?

I've had that question a few times. Acting training is a very individual thing. It's all about what age and what place you're in when you go into that training. You'll get out of it whatever you're ready to get out of it.

When I was at Stella Adler, I was 19, coming from Chorley in Lancashire; I'd had an interesting beginning, so to speak. So I just threw myself into the deep end. I was meeting people [the likes of whom] I'd never met before. So I had to decide: do I want to close off, or do I want to open up to anything and everything that's different?

"American training" is a bit of a generalisation. I understand what you're trying to ask, but Stella Adler is a very specific type of training. It's Stanislavski-based, which is the same technique [they teach] at RADA. Everybody tends to teach a version of Stanislavski anyway. So there are certain overlaps.

The way the school was conducted, and the whole environment, were very different, though. Stella Adler's motto is that growth as an actor and growth as a human being are synonymous, and that is drilled into you when you get there. I remember Jimmy Tripp, a Master Teacher there and a genius; he was our Shakespeare and Chekhov teacher. The first thing he said to us was that [the Studio] was our home, and that we mustn't be afraid of anything, and that we were all family. It was very intimate, and... incredibly safe. It was not about your career outside of [the Studio], because not a great deal of people expected to have a career in acting.

In New York, it's a very different environment: very few agents come in your third year to pick you up and get you to work. So we were learning to train for the sake of learning to train; it was acting for the love of it. It was more about becoming an artist than working as a professional actor; it prepared you for a long haul.

RADA was very different. They absolutely expected us to work in the industry and have a career as an actor. They told us as much. The benefit of this was a gradual boost in confidence, which is crucial for any artist, but the downside was a tremendous pressure I sometimes felt with regard to the industry. All that focus on the industry can sometimes distract you and waste a lot of your energy. It can also create competition, which destroys the cohesion and makes it more difficult to learn from each other.

In terms of the training, it's difficult to say, because there is no one way to train. RADA offers you everything, and you can take what works and leave what doesn't. That is one of the greatest things about RADA. To be completely honest, I developed a lot of my character and acting training from Stella Adler; that just never leaves you. But in terms of voices and movement training, RADA was like nothing I had experienced before. So for better or worse, [RADA] puts one eye on the profession. And that's mainly how it's different.

[†] It's funny – talking about it out loud to you for the first time, I've just discovered – that is the key difference!

Out of all your projects, which one has meant the most to you?

Banished has meant the most to me. It was my first opportunity to play a character over a long period of time, with an actual arc, where the camera was at some points actually pointing at me. It's very difficult to throw yourself in when you're only on set for a week or a few days, but on Banished I was on set for five months. So suddenly I could practise all these things I hadn't practised before. And the character began to change me. I got to ask questions of myself that I wouldn't have asked otherwise, and I got to test myself... I got to open up in it, that's why I do it.

And the people around me – I doubt I'll ever meet a group of people like that again. The cast, the crew, and everybody involved with it... they're family now. And it's not just the length of time; it's also feeling part of something that Jimmy McGovern has written. There's always a heart to it. You can feel that he has a love behind whatever he's writing, [even] when he's writing about these conflicts – because he loves these characters he's created... he loves their humanity. It brought us all together.

If you had to choose one real-life person to play, past or present, who'd it be?

[Thinks for a while] You know what? I would play Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Interesting. In previous interviews, you've compared Jimmy McGovern to a dissident writer in Stalin's Russia.

[Laughs] I didn't even notice that! You know what, [a Solzhenitsyn book] just so happened to be the book that was right in front of me and I thought, "Absolutely, that's definitely a character I'd like to play."

So are you interested in that period of history, or in dissident characters in general?

I've recently read a lot of Solzhenitsyn, and it got me thinking about that period in time. But it's not necessarily that one period ... I think [I feel an attraction to] people who are put in the worst possible environment and have not only survived, but have created something from that. It's about people just fighting the pressure in general, and Russia under Stalin is a great example. And now we've got other great examples of propaganda and oppression all over the world. I can't wait 'til people start writing about those. Not necessarily ones that you might think of, but ones that are closer to home.

So yeah. Wrongful imprisonment and all those sorts of things are very interesting to me ... what's the worst thing you can do to a human? You can imprison them and enslave them, and treat them like they're less than human – give them no representation, no voice, try and break their spirit – and see what happens. [Whatever the] division – whether it's race, or wealth, or class – it seems to be a story of humanity that never ceases. People keep wanting to see what happens when you imprison or enslave people. And I love seeing what happens when the enslaved and the imprisoned and the wronged fight back and ... create something beautiful. Because they always win in the end, you know? They always win in the end.

What recent films and TV programmes have you been digging?

Love Is Strange, with Alfred Molina. It's a gorgeous film about a couple in New York who are reaching retirement age, and they get married. I'm not going to give you a whole synopsis, but basically they get married, and one of the guys is a teacher at a Catholic school. And once the priests find out that he's got married to a man – he's gay, by the way – they fire him. And it's about the struggle the couple go through to try to maintain the lifestyle they've had for so long with much less money, and about how the squeeze of certain economic policies and of people's greed causes love and people to struggle.

The story's about the triumph over these things. It's just a little slice of life, and it's just gorgeous. Brilliantly written and acted.

Oh, and Still Alice. Still Alice is fantastic as well. Gorgeous. Just gorgeous. Back when I was at Stella Adler – must have been 2005 – Julianne Moore came to talk to us. She just seemed like the most amazing human being. I love anything Julianne Moore does, but in Still Alice she's just perfect.

I spend most of my time at the Curzon; I don't tend to spend 18 quid to go and watch a Hollywood blockbuster ... I live around the corner from the Curzon in Soho, so every couple of days I go there and see what's on. That's my home-away-from-home.

What was the last book you read?

I tend to read about ten books on the go ... the last book I read was The Shock Doctrine, by Naomi Klein. I'm currently reading [Solzhenitsyn's] The Gulag Archipelago, an epic three-volume thing and, inspired by my South African trip, I'm reading a book called How Can Man Die Better, by Benjamin Pogrund. It's about Robert Sobukwe, a lesser-known political prisoner on Robben Island.

He was there for about ten years, from 1960 to [1969], and he was so effective as a revolutionary that he was basically kept in his own little hut on the other side of the island, where nobody was allowed contact with him. Nobody. He was surrounded by dog kennels. His words were considered so dangerous ... I've got to say, this guy was just unbelievable. An unbelievable character.

Everybody should read [The Shock Doctrine], especially now ... it's about the development of economic policy based on Friedman economics, based on the idea that if you shock a society enough with a terrorist plot or a natural disaster or whatever. You could push through all kinds of despicable economic policies that crush the poor even more, and nobody will notice. And if they did notice, they'd just swallow it, because when they're in times of danger, it's surprising how much a herd of people will swallow.

The CIA did a lot of testing in the '50s and '60s and '70s on how to break the human mind, and what happens when you break it. It goes hand-in-hand with the detainee policies and interrogation techniques that have been used to the present day... on a mass scale. Anything Naomi Klein writes is fantastic.

I've been getting increasingly interested in economics and finance recently, so that'll be on my reading list for sure.

I'm not interested in economics and finance at all, to be honest; it's purely art that tends to fill my brain. But it just gets me angry whenever I read these things. You've just got to read them, and find somewhere to put your grumbles, you know?

If you could choose a Mastermind special subject, what would it be?

The Shakespeare authorship question.

So where do you lie in this debate?

Everybody should read every book available on the topic, first of all, and then remain open-minded.

It's not that I want or don't want a single person to have written [all the works credited to Shakespeare]; it's the period of time that's so fascinating to me. I think it's just a great thing to read about, regardless of where you lie in [the debate].

I find difficult, given the evidence, that "the man from Stratford" wrote all those plays. But I know so many brilliant, wonderful people who disagree with me, and I enjoy reading about it, and getting some of the nitty-gritty detail that people don't tend to give you.

One of the better books about it is called The Man Who Was Never Shakespeare, by AJ Pointon. It was written from the point of view that [Shakespeare] didn't write the plays, and what the author [asks is] if this man didn't write them, is it not a shame that his entire identity has vanished? Who was this man called William Shakespeare if he didn't write all those plays? It tries to give his identity back to this person. It's really quite a good book, and it's full of interesting facts.

What kind of music are you into?

I'm trying to master the piano at the moment, so I've been listening to a lot of classical stuff to try and get that down. But I don't know if I've left it too late, or if my fingers won't do what I want them to do, or if they're too small.

If you had to name three artists whose discographies you could take to a desert island with a music-playing system, who would they be?

Queen, first of all. Got to take some Queen. I would take some Chopin, for some classical music. I would probably [also] take something in between. Hmmm... some Eddie Vedder, that's who I'd take.

What's next for you?

A second series of Banished would be great, but we'll see what happens with that. There's a couple of things coming up that I haven't officially [started] yet, but... we'll see.