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Banished – Adam Nagaitis interview (exclusive)

ADAM Nagaitis talks exclusively about playing the role of Private Buckley in Jimmy McGovern's new series, **Banished**, and what it meant to him and his career.

He also reflects on the research he carried out on the First Fleet and the first penal colony in Australia, as well as his experience of working on last year's acclaimed thriller *'71* and the forthcoming movie *Suffragette* alongside Carey Mulligan. And he talks about his time at both the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in New York and RADA in the UK. *Banished* airs on BBC2 at 9pm from Thursday, March 5.

Q. What appealed to you about playing the role of Private Buckley in *Banished*?

Adam Nagaitis: He's the antagonist, I suppose. He really goes on a journey in the series and that's rare. It's rare when you first get a script that you can see so clearly the arc of a character. But it's also very subtle all the way through. He's not a common villain in terms of what you'd expect. For the first couple of episodes you see the darkest side of him. But then you realise what's driving him – and that's the fact that he loathes himself... more than anyone else loathes him. The BBC media centre describes him as loathed. But he hates himself more than anyone. So, what he's really doing is behaviour he's learned. He's opportunistic, he's very spontaneous and impetuous but in a destructive way. But he's just following instincts he's learnt to survive and he goes through a journey [throughout the series] as you start to see what unfolds. He's actually the catalyst for a lot of the events that come to a head by the end of the series.

It's also a Jimmy McGovern script, so there's no question that he's a one dimensional character. But Jimmy's script was not like anything I had ever read



Interview by Rob Carnevale

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before. I remember when first getting the script that I didn't have to sit down and learn it. It was in my head from the moment I read it. It's very potent and truthful while at the same time not really like anything he's done before.

Q. How did you find the emotional journey of playing a character that is so self-loathing? Was he difficult to shake off at the end of every day?

Adam Nagaitis: It depends... in a way, it's difficult to answer that question. I suppose we're all self-loathing in some way... or unhappy with ourselves. So, what's beautiful about that is that we can all relate to that one key element that keeps us human. Nobody is perfect and there are levels on a day-to-day basis as to how low we stoop and how high we sweep. I tend to find it quite easy to defend underdogs, which is how I see Buckley. He's in a lot of pain. But in terms of being able to leave him behind at the end of the day, we were all together a lot during filming and we spent a lot of time with each other. We really were like a big family, and these were the greatest group of people I've ever met. So, it becomes a lot easier to switch off. There is a lot of magic with certain characters [that you play], and they can cling onto you. But I think finding a way of defending whoever you're playing, whoever they are, helps with that process. You have to be able to relate to them as well. So, that can also be hard to shake off sometimes.

Q. How much did you know about the history of this story and *The First Fleet* before filming?

Adam Nagaitis: I didn't know a great deal. I knew the basics. The foundation of it was that convicts were considered a different species at that time. It was believed that being a criminal was genetic, so they cast them away to a different continent. So, I knew that much. And I also knew of the notion that these immigrants were going to come and uproot the indigenous people. But once we started doing it, I read a couple of books – *Fatal Shore* [by Robert Hughes] being the main one. I always try to look at stories like this from the indigenous perspective... so, who got screwed the most, or who got uprooted?

But with this, the reason why it was so interesting to me was because it was the story of the convicts and Jimmy didn't want to just start chucking in token five minute snippets about the indigenous population. You either do it completely or not at all, so he chose to focus on what we can relate to the most, which is the convicts' story. And there are many aspects to that, starting with the fact they survived a nine month journey – not many did – and how Governor [Arthur] Phillip kept so many of them alive and rationed so intelligently. They literally had no idea what was in store for them, or that they'd be turning up to such a hostile environment. It would be like turning up on Mars and expecting it to work in your favour. And it's the injustice of it all because the crimes they committed were so petty. In fact, I wouldn't even call some of them crimes. So, they were people trying to survive an oppressive system, which is very relevant.

Q. How did you cope with Jimmy's insistence that words like don't and isn't not be used in the script?

Adam Nagaitis: [Laughs] I think I was guilty of that more than anyone. I kept getting my wrists slapped for using those words. But what I did find is that there is a formality that he [Jimmy] wanted in the language. There's a reason for that structure. He was really trying to find the way the characters spoke. Jimmy doesn't tend to have unwarranted dialogue. It never goes over the top, so if he says that he wants you to do something, then he has a reason. I couldn't diagnose what it was at first, but as soon as I heard the playback I realised that it fit better and was more resonant. And by the end of the shoot – there were four months of shooting in total – I had got the hang of it.

*Q. Reflecting on your career to date, you've become attached to some great projects already – one being last year's highly acclaimed thriller '71. How was that for you?

Adam Nagaitis: [71](#) was great. It was my first film out of drama school and I remember being incredibly excited by the idea of working with Yann [Demange, writer-director]. Those kinds of films are the things I live for... stories with underdogs. And this was about a group of young boys who were sent to this hostile environment in Belfast. So, it was a great experience for me, being chucked straight onto a film set. There was lots of training involved. But I had such a long road leading up to my first job, one that had spanned almost a decade, that I was ready to get started. And then the jobs started rolling in. And everything has sort of come to a head with *Banished*. It's my first real dream role. And it's something I could really get my teeth into. It's a real journey and it allowed me to really develop something.

**Q. So, what first gave you that acting bug? When did you realise you wanted to become an actor?**

Adam Nagaitis: I read a biography when I was about 16. Movies were basically my life as a kid. I loved watching the movies from the '70s and was obsessed by that era, which is – in my opinion – the greatest era. So, I started reading biographies about Brando and De Niro and the people I admired. And there was something about their lives and their attitude towards art that inspired me. I didn't know it was inside of me to begin with but when I did it was begging to come out. And one of the drama school names that kept coming up was in New York, the Stella Adler Studio of Acting. Stella was a famous teacher and she was the person who brought Stanislavski's ideas and theories on acting to the US. Everyone was very excited by her stuff. So, my dream became to go there and one day I just decided to pack up and go.

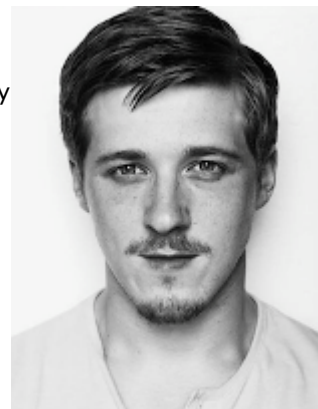
So, I called them, made an appointment, jumped on a plane and auditioned for them. I think I was the first British person to go to Stella Adler. And they were a bit surprised that this young man from Chorley in Lancashire had turned up before them [laughs]. But I had learnt a Hamlet speech on the plane and made up my contemporary speech because I didn't know anything about plays. I was a movie guy, so I had to improvise a bit. But they were the most inspiring people I've met, these two interviewers. And I was stood with the Empire State building behind me out of the window, doing these speeches in front of these two people who were genuinely encouraging. I then got back on a plane, went home and then received an email the next day inviting me to take up a place on the course. So, I went and lived in New York.

Q. And did it live up to expectations?

Adam Nagaitis: It surpassed them... it was just the most wonderful environment to be in at that age. I don't know where I would have ended up without that place. And it's not so much about acting... Stella Adler has the motto that growth as an actor and as a human being are synonymous, and I think that idea motivated everyone, every day. I was still not absolutely sure that I wanted to act but I was looking for the opportunity to do something with my life. This was my first training experience and it was incredible. And then I came home and went to RADA, which was totally different.

Q. How was RADA?

Adam Nagaitis: The polar opposite. Stella Adler was a place that dealt with how to find things... it was really about finding each other and growing and becoming a better person. I think it was also the right time in my life to have that experience. But RADA was incredible too... again, wonderful teachers. But it was very disciplined – physically and vocally, and it was a different environment; not better or worse, just different. But I got to work with some great actors again. You can't go wrong in that kind of environment. And you do end up improving. RADA has such a fantastic history of people who have been there, and you really do know how lucky you are to be there. And you learn so much all of the time. But you also continue to learn with everything that you do.



Q. So, what did you learn from the experience of *Banished* about yourself and as an actor?

Adam Nagaitis: I changed as a person, which is something that I hope to continue doing with everything that I get to do that's meaty enough. The original director and DoP [director of photography], Dan Percival and Steve Laws, were great. They directed the first three episodes and Dan really took me under his

wing. He was the perfect director really. We had a shared language. And the cast couldn't have been more wonderful. So, all the time I was there I could learn from watching how people interacted with each other. And I learned to relax more and be myself and to take time. I also learned how to be around a professional group of people for that length of time.

Jimmy McGovern's stuff has this feeling about it... if he had been in Russia in the 1940s, I think he would have been a dissident writer and banned or imprisoned. But I don't see his stuff as being overly political, just human and complicated and not black and white. So, maybe it's that aura... maybe it travels with his writing and that's why everyone was so lovely. But we all knew we were doing a story that was important. And we were in this beautiful place in Sydney, surrounded by these beautiful landscapes. The whole thing was inspiring. I think I spent every day on set because Buckley is involved with more scenes than anyone else. Buckley is like an owl, he's everywhere. But that meant I got to watch everyone work. And Dan invited me to come and learn about the editing process afterwards, so I learned about that as well as the directing side of things.

Q. Is that something you might like to do further down the line?

Adam Nagaitis: Yeah, it's something that I've always been interested in. I directed theatre in New York for a while. But I'm more focused on acting at the moment. At the same time, there's a part of me that is certainly storing up ideas that I can hopefully implement somewhere down the line. I'm interested in making things that are important, so I would like to keep learning and investigating – although I suspect that directing is many years away...

Q. You also have another interesting project on the way – *Suffragette*. How big a role is that for you and did you share any scenes with Carey Mulligan or Meryl Streep?

Adam Nagaitis: I got to see a lot of the action. My role isn't enormous at all but he's sort of the apprentice in the laundry where Carey Mulligan's character works. So, I basically observe a lot of what goes on and am trying to be the boss and to emulate him – even though he's this awful character who has spent his whole life oppressing these women. But I got to watch Carey and I remember one scene, where she finally gets her own back... it's a very emotional moment and very difficult but she was capable during every single take. And she was flawless. She's magic to watch. I also got to watch some of Brendan Gleeson's stuff and that was the same. But I could hang around and watch people work and I used every opportunity. I got to see Ben Whishaw work as well, And Sarah Gavron, the director, was really inspiring. I admired how much she believed in the story.

Q. And is *Victor Frankenstein* coming?

Adam Nagaitis: It is. It was actually another of the first things I did after RADA. It's just that it's been in the process for such a long time... But when I first came out of RADA, and after I did '71, I did a series of film roles with small parts that

were important to me, and *Frankenstein* was another of those. I did one scene with Daniel Radcliffe, who is such a lovely man. Again, it was a set full of fantastic people.

Q. Going back to your love of films. Which are your favourites from the '70s?

Adam Nagaitis: [Laughs] That's a hard question! I think [Apocalypse Now](#) jumps out... and *Taxi Driver* and *The Deer Hunter*. You can see a pattern here, right? It's that era when they were asking these important questions and not allowing any sort of rules to



dictate them. And I could be wrong in assuming this, but they weren't motivated by money. Film was considered to be a fantastic art form that they were discovering as they went along. And I look forward to the renaissance of that.

I recently watched *Heart of Darkness*, the documentary that Francis Ford Coppola's wife made about the making of *Apocalypse Now*, and it seemed to me that the chaos on-set was representational of the chaos that occurs on-screen. It's that idea that nothing that happens is bad... and that we can work with everything. Deny nothing and see what we discover about these characters... And that's so rare nowadays. But that's why Dan Percival was so fantastic for me. He believes in that – and every actor on *Banished* was totally open to that idea too. So many actors I meet are hungry for that.

***Banished* airs on BBC2 at 9pm from Thursday, March 5, 2015. *Suffragette* is released in UK cinemas later this year. *Victor Frankenstein* is released on October 2, 2015. And '71 is available on Blu-ray and DVD from March 9, 2015.**

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