

The Terror: Adam Nagaitis' Cornelius Hickey Might Be Our New Favourite TV Character



by **Will Perkins** | March 22, 2018, 8:12 am



The most important thing to know when sitting down to watch AMC's upcoming horror series *The Terror* is that every character on the show is doomed.

That's not a spoiler since the series is based on a fictionalized account of the Franklin Expedition, an infamous 1845 voyage that set out from England to discover the Northwest Passage in the Canadian Arctic and was never heard from again. Two ships and all 129 men. Just gone. The show tells viewers as much in its opening moments, so unlike other prestige television shows where the question is almost always "Who's going to die next?" the recurring question on *The Terror* becomes a far more interesting one: What do men do when they know they're going to die?

It's in this dire, morally challenging predicament that we meet one of Sir John Franklin's crew, Petty Officer Cornelius Hickey (Adam Nagaitis), Caulker's Mate aboard HMS *Terror*. He's the smartest man on this ill-fated expedition – and he knows it. Hickey begins to understand the truth of the situation before almost anyone else, and that fact makes him the most dangerous person north of the Arctic circle.

We recently had a chance to speak with actor Adam Nagaitis, who plays Cornelius Hickey, about AMC's new historical horror series *The Terror*, the fate of the Franklin Expedition, his character's complicated world view, the practicalities of cannibalism, and, of course, what's on his Dork Shelf.

Hi Adam! Congratulations on *The Terror* – it's a fantastic show and a genuinely unsettling reimagining of the fate of the Franklin Expedition.

Adam Nagaitis: Oh great! I'm glad you liked it.

I will also say that your character, Mr. Hickey, is an absolute highlight of the experience.

Adam: That's great to hear.

So I want to talk with you about *The Terror* and your character on the show, but first I'd like to know a bit about your history, if any, with Franklin and the myth of this lost expedition. Were you at all familiar with the story before you became involved with this project?

Adam: No, not really! I think my first encounter with it was actually with the book – *The Terror* – when I heard about the audition. I started reading that, got about half through it, and was told to stop reading it because obviously the character is very different. [laughs] But I got a bit into the history of the expedition. Any kind of expedition or adventure story is always really fascinating to me.

So you started to read the book but were told to stop? It seems like kind of the great conundrum for actors living in this era of book to television adaptations. Do you read the book before starting the project or do you just simply stick to the script and ignore the source material?

Adam: Yeah! I remember the audition process was actually the reason I began to read it – I don't think there was a script for me to actually read the first time around. So I grabbed a book to try to get as much information about the character and the circumstances as I could, but once you start reading that book – and you know that you might be involved in it – it's hard to stop!

But yeah, it is difficult to decide when you're doing so many of these adaptations whether you want to rely on the script or how much you want to rely on the script. I suppose it depends on how close they keep to the original text, but with *The Terror* as soon as I was cast one of the first things I was told in a meeting with David Kajganich, Soo Hugh, and Edward Berger, the director, was to immediately stop reading the book because the character they'd created was very, very, very different. They wanted me to get that out of my head.



Right, and in the book Hickey is more problematic and almost a stereotype. He's Irish, he's a homosexual, and he's very evil. He's far more black and white. On the show, the character has a lot more depth and complexity, which I must give you and the writers full credit for. You root for Hickey at times when you probably shouldn't! What were some of your initial conversations with the showrunners about the character?

Adam: As you said, the character in the book – as brilliant as he is – I found that... It's not whether it's better or worse, it's just a slightly different approach to how you would tell the story. He is a lot more of a straight shooter in the book, it's quite clear what he wants antagonistically. and he's fairly predictable. I found his motivations in the book were hazy – there was quite an aggressive and spiteful motivation to him. That's fine and works for that particular character, but in the discussions I had with Dave and Soo predominantly – which went on for about six months before we began shooting – we were all baffled by what it was this person was going to be, who he was, where he sat, and what his values were. And we discovered in the end is that all we had to do was have the correct start point. This guy is on a journey of discovery – I don't want to give too much away – but he sees every room in life. He looks for the door and looks for the next room. He never stays settled, he never just submits. He's looking for something. He doesn't know what he's looking for, but he knows that he doesn't feel comfortable. There's something somewhere that is calling him. So he just follows it and he follows it where he needs to.

That was the conversation we kept having. We went through all kinds of philosophies, a different philosophy each week! Literally, is he a nihilist? Is he this? Is he that, you know? There were so many iterations, but in the end we realized he had to be greater than all of those. He had to be practical. Rule number one was practicality: he was the most practical human being and that comes from a sort of self-aware honesty of just how irrelevant and molecular you are. Therefore you're free – you're free to act and choose your own ethical and moral code, and anyone can argue that.

As the story progresses, he's very reactive in the very beginning. He's searching, the circumstances around him are changing, and he's adapting to them because that's what he can do. This was sort of based on the history which I came up with myself. It's something that fed me that wasn't sort of the typical ruthless criminal, it was much gentler than

that – and to me much more interesting and believable. But as the circumstances change on board he becomes active. He starts to have a hand in these things and I think that's about as much as I can say about that. I'll get in trouble!
[laugh]



[laughs] Well, I don't think we should say more than that for now. One of the things I really like about Hickey is his pragmatic, realist view of what is this very dire situation. It really seems to elude most everyone else on the expedition except for maybe Crozier and Hickey up to a point...

Adam: Exactly! Yeah.

He's smartest guy in the room and he knows it, which obviously creates some interesting dynamics with the other characters. But you mentioned Hickey's history briefly. What is it in this character's past that's made him like this, do you think?

Adam: Yeah, but I really don't want to ruin that for audiences. I think it's very important that people have their own ability to create these stories for characters on their own. An audience member is as important to imagine how that person got there. But I will say to me a lot of it had to do with the time and the area he would have been raised. What he would have been exposed to in the early 1830s and 40s, politically, in terms of literature what he would have got his hands on, where he would have been. Those are the questions and that's all the fun stuff! I don't want to ruin it by telling you the decisions that I made, but people will make their own decisions about that person got there and that's part of the fun.

That's great! It's interesting that you use the word history because Cornelius Hickey was a real person. Does that change how you approach the character or create any reservations for you as a performer in terms of how you play the role?

Adam: I think normally I would have had the respect for that to have given me some reservations or at least some sort of guideline about the choices I would have made. But for this, Dan Simmons, the writer of the book, had already made that leap that this particular character was going to be something of a plot mover or antagonist. So I was following that architecture as opposed to taking on who the real Cornelius Hickey would have been. It probably would have been incredibly difficult for me to find information on anyways, and also no one could really have said who did what on this expedition because these men vanished. So I didn't let that affect me at all to be honest.

The real-life Hickey is one of the few individuals from the expedition whose belongings were actually found in the Arctic. Did you get an opportunity to see his knife in the Maritime Museum in Greenwich?



A table knife belonging to the real Cornelius Hickey that was recovered in the Arctic

Adam: I have! I have seen it up close. It's interesting the story of the knife – our version of that story is interesting too, which I will not go into but very nearly did. So easy to spoil things! [laughs] But I have seen it. We got to go around the exhibition at the Maritime Museum when it first opened and it's just fantastic the stuff in there. It tells you so much.

I also wanted to ask you about the treatment of Hickey's homosexuality on the show. It's much more nuanced than in the book. As the performer, do you feel that Hickey is genuinely interested in the sexual relationships he's engaged in or do you think he simply views it as another tool to manipulate others?

Adam: That's interesting! It may sound awfully odd, but I'd never really considered the sexuality issue like that. There is great love between him and the character Gibson (Edward Ashley). There's a love story, a love story that's actually happened before we meet them. Then what we actually witness is the end of that relationship, but not the end of that love story. The magic of Hickey is his ability to survive – his armour that he's developed and justified. It almost removes the mourning or grieving that would happen at the end of the relationship because he'll be able to spin it into something else. It's his adaptability and he's practical about it. He may say "Yes, I loved this man and we had this wonderful time together," but as he grows and changes during the show his initial response to being spurned by this person changes. The way Hickey responds to these things is not the way your average person would respond. He has strange pathways in his mind as to how you deal with certain innate human emotions. He deals with them very differently than most people, which is the best way I can explain it, but it doesn't mean he doesn't feel the emotions or they aren't real. They're just dealt with in a different way.

You get to play opposite some real heavy hitters in many scenes – the commanders: Ciaran Hinds, Jared Harris, and Tobias Menzies. Tell me a little bit about performing opposite those actors.

Adam: It's an absolute pleasure, especially because these are people I've watched for a lot of my life. You just admire them and you just hope that one day you get to be around them close enough that you can steal things and learn! But it's always a pleasure when you meet people that are that talented and that successful, and yet they're also just lovely

human beings who are willing to share with you, share their time with you. It's a very easy environment to get better in, you know? When you're surrounded by that they make you concentrate. I hope I get to work with them again in that proximity. Fantastic people.

The whole cast is great...

Adam: They really are, they really are.

But I want to ask you specifically about Paul Ready and the relationship between Hickey and Mr. Goodsir. They're sort of on opposite poles, to use a polar metaphor, in terms of their world views and how they see the situation the expedition is in.

Adam: That was my favourite relationship actually and working with Paul Ready was unbelievable. He's so gifted. I learned so much being around him. I don't even remember where it began, Goodsir and Hickey's relationship on the show, it just developed. There is an interaction early on and you realize "Oh, they see each other." These two people naturally know that this person could do me harm, this person sees me. Others don't notice or are blind to my abilities, but this person sees me. Goodsir represents something to Hickey that Hickey could never admit, even if he felt it. He could never admit that Goodsir's ethos, his belief system, is completely contrary to Hickey's. It's the antithesis. And for him to admit that would destroy him. Hickey represents so much to people that they wish they could be: that anarchic, carefree, fearless person. He just acts immediately and follows his instincts. Don't worry about ethics or good, just think practically.



There's so much humanity in Goodsir. It just oozes out of him. Hickey's used to seeing people like that and he's learning throughout the expedition. He makes plans for Goodsir, it's almost like a human experiment for him. He can really see the purity of man, how real it is, how long lasting it is, and what it will take. It's definitely my favourite relationship on the show – it becomes really interesting.

Now, I don't get to ask this question in many interviews, but given that the real life events and the source material the show is based on involve, well, cannibalism, in a survival situation what do you think you would do? Do you think you would you eat your boots like Franklin so infamously did on a prior expedition or maybe something else...?

Adam: [laughs] That's a good one! I would eat anything before I ate my boots, let's put it that way. I'm still too tainted by the show to really answer it, but let's just say I'd probably end up somewhere in the middle.

The name of our site is DorkShelf.com, so we like to ask the people we interview if they have any interesting keepsakes or collectibles that they cherish or maybe show to people when they visit their home. Perhaps something you display on a shelf! If you have such a shelf with such an object or objects, what's on it?

Adam: I absolutely do have a shelf like that in my house. I played a character called Branwell Bronte in a film last year about the Bronte sisters. They had great artwork on the wall that he would have drawn, self-portraits, and I got to steal a couple of those. So I have those on my wall, they're really beautiful.

I'm tempted to tell you what I took from The Terror, but I'm not sure if that would be a spoiler. I think it's probably safe to say that not all of Hickey's cutlery stayed on the ship... I found certain elements of that and took them away. Let's just leave it at that. I think I've probably got myself in too much trouble already! [laughs]