

Children of Sodom and Gomorrah

Producer: Jens Jarisch (ARD Germany 2009, ABC Australia 2011). English language production for *360 Documentaries* by ABC Radio National, Sydney, Australia, 2011: Sharon Davis, with sound production by Russell Stapleton. Original script, direction and interviews in Africa and Europe: Jens Jarisch. Australian narrator: Rebecca Massey. Duration: 53'38".



Photo: ABC RN 360 Documentaries

Reviewer: Alan Hall

There is a deservedly celebrated moment in Jens Jarisch's production *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah*, re-versioned for an English-speaking listenership by Sharon Davis for ABC Radio National (Australia). It occurs at the 43-minute mark¹ as the program is propelled over a tense apex towards its conclusion. Jarisch, who plays the character, it might be said, of the 'reporter', is about to be detained for trespassing on the notorious waste site in Accra, Ghana from which children scavenge a living by 'harvesting'

¹ Timings from <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/360/children-of-sodom-and-gomorrah/2956122>

computers and electrical goods. Jarisch's anxiety is evident as he's confronted by three security personnel, one heavier – or at least 'shoutier' – than the others. He's escorted away from 'harm'. *You are courting danger*, a voice echoes. His pleas that he's simply a DJ recording sounds fail to convince and his recorder is turned off. He's led to an office for further questioning. This is urgent, dynamic documentary making. We listeners share the reporter's sense of alarm. None of us knows what will happen. Events are being reported in the moment, in the present tense.

Once inside an office 'that looks like offices all over the world', the atmosphere gradually eases. We witness the reporter's discomfort, as the rules of the site are spelt out and the intruder is given a patronising dressing-down. Then, in the cool manner we've come to expect of the voice-over, the narrator explains that the reporter 'starts to feel a little safer again, and unnoticeably switches the recorder back on'. As the site manager seeks to have the terms of his business understood, the scales indiscernibly tilt in favour of the reporter and he lands at his moment of revelation: 'somebody here is trying to cover a cynical business with a legal façade', states the voice-over, and, what's more, 'children had been factored in as units of labour'. Then further, the shipping files on the shelves of the office betray a common source: Hamburg. All the pieces fall into place – the 'hellish' conditions in which children are forced to work on the rubbish dump known as Sodom and Gomorrah; the abusive attitudes of the authorities, including government agencies and police; and the illegal relationship of north European shipping concerns with African waste management. It's brilliant: a bravura demonstration of investigative journalism.

[AUDIO CLIP \(1\): Office](#)

Nothing in *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah* happens by accident. It is an exquisite – if, from the opening montage, uncomfortable – sound experience. The production – both Jarisch's own origination in German and Sharon Davis' re-versioning – is impeccable. It is thoroughly wrought. An artefact to admire. The famous scene in the manager's office unveils a damning denouement with the flourish of a radio master: surreptitious recording, an artful 'echo' voice that draws attention to key statements and carefully scripted narration mesh tellingly to deliver the reporter's verdict. The same care in production is evident throughout the program: beautiful sound recordings, even of the most barbarous scenes, an elegant choreography in the compilation of actuality and a narrative architecture that carries the listener through nearly an hour of complex, layered radio in one cinematographic sweep. And the program deals with one of the pressing issues of our times – the perilous flight of refugees from the continent of Africa to imagined new lives in Europe. It is no wonder *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah* received not just a coveted Prix Italia but, in this English language version, the Directors' Choice Award at the Third Coast International Audio Festival.

I first heard the documentary nearly four years ago and I'd revisited it again in the intervening period for teaching purposes and out of a nagging professional curiosity before being asked to review it for *Radiodoc Review*. The reason for this continuing fascination is, simply put, that the program disturbs me. There's something I can't quite shake off. It's brilliant and horrific. The effect is unsettling to the point that I'm not sure that I understand the information it's trying to convey or that I trust my feelings about it. The office scene is magnificent. All the elements work together to profound effect. But if I rewind to the top, I can clearly recall – and this hasn't left me on repeated listening – a tangible horror when I first heard the opening sequence in which is embedded the sounds of a woman screaming. It's a complicated reaction. This sound is intended to unsettle – who wouldn't find it uncomfortable! And it's unexplained. The effect was, and still is, to put this listener on edge, on guard; it signals foreboding of worse to come.

As a feature maker myself I feel not just a concern to gauge the potential impact on listeners of specific pieces of actuality recording, or potent juxtapositions of material, but an obligation to be able to justify the intention behind their effect. In relation to Jens Jarisch's documentary, I have felt caught between an awed admiration for the courage with which material has been gathered and then composed virtuosically into a narrative and, on the other hand, a suspicion of that same virtuosity, the storyteller's seductive use of the tools of fiction to represent true stories.

Looking for reasons to explain my conflicted response, I can see that, in part, they are cultural. For a British audience, the terms of the *contract* between documentary producer/reporter and listener are built on expectations rooted in long-established journalistic conventions. That doesn't make them unassailable – I'm not myself a journalist in any formal sense, and often argue that notions of objectivity or 'truth' are notoriously flimsy – but these expectations do frame our engagement with subjects and production styles. This documentary, even in its Australian re-versioning, retains the technique of much German feature making in detaching the narrative voice from the author (the reporter or producer). This is itself simply a convention, but one that inflects the way we receive the program: it is Jarisch's experiences that we're invited to share but not his voice that carries the burden of presentation; it is his words we hear but they are delivered, in the German manner, by an anonymous narrator. Jarisch is nevertheless the *author*. And he also makes appearances within the location material – friendly exchanges with interviewees, appearing alongside them as empathetic advocate rather than facing them confrontationally as perhaps a news journalist might; he's an incidental figure in 'scenes' about other people or events and we observe him reacting, often meekly in his cloaked role as musical DJ, to the trickier people he encounters – those people whose motivations and actions he will expose.

He also makes brief appearances at both ends of the documentary. At the start, he's introduced almost heroically in the words he himself gives the narrator, 'looking out into the night' from the bows of a ferry crossing from Europe to Africa. On his return, at

the end of the program, he's queuing at Passport Control behind a black teenager who is denied entry into Amsterdam. Jarisch's signature is witnessed in the set up and the conclusion. He is both the author of the piece and its lead character – but not in any conventional manner. Despite the coup of his investigative reporting, he is less a journalist, in the broadly understood meaning of the role, than a surrogate who represents us listeners – a surrogate not afraid to engage his feelings, his anger and vulnerability, a man with a conscience and the skills to articulate his responses. He inhabits a sequence of scenes, encounters individuals, gathers his impressions in sound, then returns home to north Europe and assembles them with almost theatrical panache.

But cultural aspects shouldn't be overstated. They are something of which I was conscious when I first encountered *Sodom*. What I hadn't anticipated was the uneasy dance of intimacy and distance in this production style, which also colours my response. We hear authentic, 'hot', present tense conversations, scenes and events. These are filtered through the usual processes of deliberation – selection, editing, compilation – before being framed for broadcast by a cooler, emotionally detached narrator. The language that the narrator uses is a combination of description, poetic reflection and an emotional engagement with the stories it's sharing. The shifting blend of second and third person narration – speaking on behalf of and then directly to the authentic voices we hear – and further sophisticated production devices (the echo voice, dynamic recording perspectives and jump cuts) are intended to enhance the telling of the tale, pulling us into its world. But they just as readily have the effect of distracting us from it, pushing us away. This is an elaborate, multi-layered production, originated for a German audience in that country's rich feature making tradition, before being filtered through an Australian production sensibility. It can't be assumed that the contract with the listener will be universally signed up to – that conventions, whether predictably fulfilled or meaningfully confounded, will be understood, that the grammar of the piece will necessarily be shared by all.

Nothing in *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah* happens by accident. In the centre of this tale stands the most complicated protagonist, a storyteller who resembles yet doesn't quite act like a reporter, an apparently accidental witness who doesn't get too closely drawn into the actuality of any scene or challenge his interviewees in the moment but, rather, modestly observes, reflects and sculpts his recordings after the event into a broadcast form. He, on our behalf, forges fleeting relationships with the key witnesses in the story and moulds the figure of the 'everyman-refugee', a composite of various people we encounter en route. But there's something distancing in this rolling up of real people's stories into a representative figure of the author's invention. Just as there is between producer and listener, there's something unsettling about the contract between program maker and contributor, about the producer's responsibility for weighing the import of his material.

And that brings me to *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah's* other famous – or, more accurately, notorious – scene. At just about the midway point (29 minutes), in a scene

labelled 'Silver Tears' in the transcript² (though not in the audio), an interviewee describes the fate of some of the young girls who find themselves striving to make a living in Sodom and Gomorrah. Their desperation provides material that is difficult to hear. Pimps 'rent out tiny rooms to girls who sell themselves'. Underscoring this episode, which clearly carries its own intensity, the producer has laid the sounds of a street fight. It's a disturbing conjunction. Then, in a rather matter-of-fact way, the narrator, in the reporter's words, describes how a group of men has turned on a teenage boy, accusing him of stealing. These are the 'shouts and blows' that accompany the narrator's description of child prostitution in Sodom and Gomorrah. The men start beating the boy, 'urged on by the crowd, until he is dead'. This is not a scene that many would be comfortable recording and re-presenting. But, you might argue, there's courage in capturing and sharing it. We shouldn't always turn away from what's uncomfortable.

In an instant, our ear's gaze, if I may put it like that, is deflected from the presumably bloodied corpse of the teenage boy towards our surrogate, the 'reporter' himself. He's struggling with what he's witnessed and sits on the kerb. We are told the reporter's 'look is shattered' and then, in second-person mode, the narrator addresses the representative refugee: 'yours is only sad'. Death is rolled aside and life rolls on. The young refugee, hardened to life's horrors, braces himself and continues with the business of his life: to flee to Europe.

[AUDIO CLIP \(2\): Silver Tears](#)

Nothing in *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah* happens by accident. Nothing is there by chance. Deliberate production decisions have been made at every turn – the retention of the reporter's hesitant manner on the rubbish-strewn streets of Accra, the dynamic – often *subito* – shifts from scene to scene, the holding at arms' length of the European border control officer, the annotations of the 'echo' voice and the conspicuously biblical trajectory of the composite refugee's journey. The production style draws attention to itself. We're invited to experience the tale as much as a piece of theatre as a documentary in any journalistic tradition.

The declared intent of the program is to examine the reasons why young Africans seek to flee to Europe. We are given compelling evidence in one location as to why they might feel that impulse. And we also digress into the business of electrical waste disposal and a moment of investigative revelation. But for this listener, the apparent strengths of the production's journalistic imperative remain entwined with a question as to its real focus, its genuine intent.

² [Transcript here](#)

One very tiny third moment – alongside the office scene and the teenager’s murder – encapsulates this for me. In fact it’s so incidental, it might easily be missed, though I suspect its impact is felt, as it’s intended to be. At about 23 minutes, a scene is finishing in which the reporter has met a couple of children, shyly asking their names then quickly offering, before departing, ‘Nice to meet you, bye!’ The focus moves on and the narrator describes the vehicle access into Sodom and Gomorrah. The sounds of the road itself take over from observations about lorries from Europe coming ‘every day bearing containers and used cars’. This is information that prefaces the revelation in the office later. Just as at the top of the program the sound collage becomes overwhelming, full of foreboding. The scene modulates from fact to feeling, and then, buried within the mix, we hear the voice of the reporter – recorded, presumably, on location: he utters the words ‘Oh, my God!’ This phrase, and its delivery, is full of dread. The ‘scene’ then changes to early evening with birds singing, courtesy of one of Jarisch’s signature production devices – the *subito* cut.

[AUDIO CLIP \(3\): Oh, my God!](#)

I’m reminded of a line from the novel *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson. It’s a line that I share often with program makers to support my instincts about the strength of (subjective) feature making over (objective) news journalism: ‘Fact explains nothing. On the contrary, it is fact that requires explanation.’³ This tiny moment, almost buried in the mix, yet speaking with an alarming clarity, is brimful of deliberate emotion. It serves no journalistic purpose. It speaks not of fact. It appropriates a genuine expression of feeling, which I suspect was possibly recorded at the moment of the street fight and murder, to heighten the documentary’s emotional intensity. Reflecting on this almost casual utterance I can begin to unpick the entanglement of fact and feeling at the heart of my conflicted reception of *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah*. I find myself in the unfamiliar position of wondering whether, in fact, it is the feeling in Jarisch’s production that requires further explanation.

[AUDIO CLIP \(4\): Oh, my God – reprise.](#)

[PODCAST of The Children of Sodom and Gomorrah \(ABC version\) here.](#)

³ Robinson, M 2014, *Housekeeping*, New York, Picador, p.217

ALAN HALL has been a radio producer since 1990 and has built a reputation for long-form documentaries, music features and innovative formats (*Between the Ears*, *Short Cuts* and *The Design Dimension* among them). Before 1998 he worked as a staff producer at the BBC but has since been independent, establishing Falling Tree Productions as one of the world's leading radio production companies. His – and the company's – programs have received numerous awards from the Prix Italia, Prix Europa, Third Coast Festival, Radio Academy and elsewhere. Alan is also in demand as a writer and speaker about storytelling in sound.

