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The Hospital Always Wins: Review 1

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Abstract

This documentary gives a graphic and challenging insight into the thinking of a schizophrenic mind. But whose story is it, producer Laura Starecheski's or mental inpatient Issa Ibrahim's? The process of recording a documentary over such a long period of time (ten years) is tough and always difficult to negotiate. What starts out as a journalistic exercise becomes something very different as your relationship develops over time with the people you are recording. Here, it's the narrator who drives the story on, weaving in and out of the interviews and actuality, and it's the strength of the writing that compels the listener to stay with the program or tune out, working in much the same way as a good print feature article. Although the storytelling is strong, there were times when I thought the program could have adopted a less conventional approach to the journalism and the telling of the story. We hear very little interaction between Issa and the journalist, or the journalist and the other interviewees. A stronger aural depiction of the hospital could have added to the listener's understanding of the space itself and Issa's feelings of confinement and isolation, as well as his interactions with hospital staff. The fast-paced intercutting between narration and interview, the 'call/response' crafting technique, while extremely skillful in this work, creates a rhythm that gives less space for the listener's reflections on what they're hearing. That said, atmospheric music is used extensively in the program and is sensitive and well crafted – adding to both texture and emotional feel. At its heart this is not only a documentary about Issa, his mental illness and his struggle to be released from Creedmoor: its broader story is about the madness of the mental health system, and how it responds to non-compliance.

The Hospital Always Wins (53'05") was made for the US public radio show 'State of the Re:Union' (2013). Listed by Harvard University's Nieman's Storyboard as one of the best audio narratives of 2013 in the United States, it is a testament to allowing a story to develop over time, and to the endurance and commitment of producer Laura Starecheski.

Reviewer Sharon Davis is an award-winning Australian radio documentary producer and journalist whose body of work spans more than 30 years. She is well-known for her ability to combine the rigour of investigative journalism with the eloquence of fine radio feature making, including observational storytelling. Her features have been broadcast around the world.

Keywords

radio documentary, Issa Ibrahim, schizophrenia, Creedmoor, Living Museum. Starecheski

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The Hospital Always Wins

Produced, written and narrated by Laura Starecheski, for *State of the Re:Union* (US, 2013). Edited by Deborah George and Taki Telonidis. Sound Design by Brendan Baker. 53.05 mins.

Reviewer: Sharon Davis



Creedmoor Psychiatric Center, New York

What compels a freelance radio producer to keep returning to their subject year after year for more than 10 years without knowing where the recordings are taking them and what they'll eventually do with the material? What sort of relationship develops over all that time, and how does that influence the direction of the project? These were my immediate questions when I began to listen to Laura Starescheski's *The Hospital Always Wins*.

This documentary had its beginnings in 2004 when freelance producer Laura Starecheski had an idea for an arts program. She'd heard about a studio, the Living Museum, based in Creedmoor Psychiatric Center, a state mental institution in Queens, New York, dedicated to presenting the art produced by inpatients. Creedmoor was founded in 1912 and at its peak housed some 7,000 patients. By 2004 de-institutionalisation policies had reduced its population to a couple of hundred people, giving the impression of 'a ghost town'.

Laura visited the Living Museum and began recording anyone who would talk to her, but found it hard to connect with most of the patients she interviewed.

Then she met artist and inpatient Issa Ibrahim. His paintings were striking, and he was easy to talk to, 'he acted and dressed more like a downtown artist'. He had been in Creedmoor for more than ten years. The next time she returned Laura sought him out. As she says in her narration '... The more we talked the more sane he seemed... I couldn't make sense of the situation. Issa didn't seem sick to me, and if he wasn't sick why was he still at Creedmoor?'

She returned again and again over the next nine years:

I just found his situation so confusing, and surprising and mysterious that I just kind of got hooked and I kept going back and talking to him and ...that kind of hook stayed in me all these years. (Starecheski 2014)

For a number of years Issa would not tell Laura on tape why he had been hospitalised. What he did tell her was that he had no idea if he would ever get out.

Our early conversations were just like, not surface level but there was a big elephant in the room, that we weren't going to go on tape with yet... I had this feeling very early on that there was something big in his story, that there were questions that I wanted to grapple with, that I feel are so important to think about even though I didn't know the particulars. Have you ever felt that way that you just know there's something there and you have to keep going? (Starecheski 2014)

Eventually Laura stopped going back – but she never lost interest in Issa's story, in fact quite the opposite. She studied for a master's degree on the history of schizophrenia in the U.S. so that she could understand the illness and Issa's story better. Six years after she first met him, after Issa's release to a halfway house, he agreed to another interview. He now felt safe, that he could trust her enough to tell her why he'd been committed.

The description in the documentary of the murder of his mother during a psychotic episode – the event that led to Issa's confinement

– is graphic and challenging and gives a strong insight into the thinking of a schizophrenic mind.

For the next three years, with his permission, Laura investigated Issa's story – combing through his medical records, interviewing psychiatrists and members of his family.

The psychiatrists who had worked with him consented right away and it took a long time to get the others to talk to me... about his case, which is pretty unorthodox I think, and a strong ethical boundary for psychiatrists, so sometimes they would want to speak with Issa on the phone and just check in with him, make sure he was really ok with me digging into his past and his records in the way that I was. So that took a long time. And because I didn't have a deadline it could take a long time. (Starecheski 2014)

At its heart this is not only a documentary about Issa, his mental illness and his struggle to be released from Creedmoor: its broader story is about the madness of the mental health system and how it responds to non-compliance. Violence, privileges, confiscation of paintings and behavioural grading into locked wards 'where they sent people to die... where they sent people who were drug cases, who were unrepentant. And it was like going to hell' were all used to force patients to comply with what the system defined as 'normal'.

Issa bucked the system. Once he recorded a CD in his room about the hospital director, Charlotte, called 'Hot for Charlotte', and posted it to her in the internal mail. He was punished for an affair with a counsellor and became psychotic again. He was put back on medication and became compliant. But still he had no sense of whether he would ever be released. Then a new forensic psychiatrist wrote a damning evaluation of his character, describing him as 'predatory' and 'dangerous'.

Issa was devastated. 'It's true – the hospital always wins. The judge will always defer to the doctors and the hospital... when they're saying "don't let this guy out", the judge is going to say ok.' But Issa had a card up his sleeve. Using money gathered from the sale of his art on the 'outside', he hired his own psychiatrist and lawyer to challenge the verdict that he should never be released. When it finally came to court, the judge was scathing. He described the Creedmoor psychiatrist's conclusions as 'wholly speculative' and said it would be

‘unconscionable’ for the hospital to keep him there. Issa was granted conditional release. Symbolically, Laura was the one who drove him to freedom.

It may be that the nature of the way the material was collected, over such a long period of time without knowing what the end goal or story might be, has dictated the documentary’s sound and form. The storytelling is driven by Laura’s narration. In a style similar to that used by Ira Glass on *This American Life*, it’s a strong linear narrative driven by good, clear, descriptive text with short bursts from interviewees. Friends, girlfriends, family and psychiatrists have been interviewed and we hear from all of them, although most of these original recordings are woven quietly under the script so that we only hear occasional audio snatches in the clear. It’s the narrator who drives the story on, weaving in and out of the interviews and actuality, and it’s the strength of the writing that compels the listener to stay with the program or tune out, working in much the same way as a good print feature article.

Although the storytelling is strong, there were times when I thought the program could have adopted a less conventional approach to the journalism and the telling of the story. We hear very little interaction between Issa and the journalist, or the journalist and the other interviewees. Although the documentary was recorded over 10 years, there is little sense of the development of these relationships, particularly Issa’s relationship with Laura. Less intervention by the narrator might have allowed for a stronger sense of Issa’s character to develop, for deeper resonances and layers of understanding to emerge for the listener. These script interventions mean that instead of the program being Issa’s story, the documentary is Laura’s story about Issa.

The sounds of Creedmoor are largely absent. There is little use of atmospheric recordings or sound effect, only a small illustrative motif – a big door closing at the beginning of the program, another door opening near the end. A stronger aural depiction of the hospital, using the microphone in the way that Australian producer Tony Barrell once described as using ‘a camera with added ears’ (Aroney & Barrell 2009) could have added to the listener’s understanding of the space itself and Issa’s feelings of confinement and isolation, as well as his interactions with hospital staff. As British feature maker Alan Hall has noted, ‘sound has the capacity to take the listener out of the

everyday by making images dance across the imagination. Sound offers a kind of portal through which deeper, often inarticulate, consciousness can be glimpsed.' (Hall in Biewen & Dilworth 2010, p.99)

The fast-paced intercutting between narration and interview, the 'call/response' crafting technique, while extremely skillful in this work, creates a rhythm that gives less space for the listener's reflections on what they're hearing. That said, atmospheric music is used extensively in the program and is sensitive and well crafted – adding to both texture and emotional feel. There is also some humour when we hear the recording 'Hot for Charlotte' and Issa and a friend reflect on the lyrics of the song and its impact.

Laura Starecheski's journalism throughout the program is strong. As well as combing through Issa's hospital files, she approaches family, friends and psychiatrists who have had a connection with him, not all of them favourable, to talk about his case. As a journalist she is clear about why she trusted Issa's story. Asked in an interview whether someone who had been hospitalised for a long time with schizophrenia was an 'unreliable' narrator, she responded:

That is the kind of idea that I have encountered a lot over time and in fact even when I would pitch stories that were centered around someone's personal experience of some kind of struggle with mental health... I would hear from editors... "we can't make this person's voice the centre of the piece because ... they're an unreliable narrator" ... I really prickle at that response to it because that's not what I've gotten out of the many stories that I've done about people's experiences with mental health issues. I think there's a difference between Issa being in a state of psychosis and being totally disconnected from reality when he has gotten very sick. I never saw him like that because he hasn't had any episodes like that since 1998. I think it's important to make a distinction between that state of someone when they're very sick and the state of someone who's had an experience like that but isn't experiencing symptoms, isn't hearing voices, isn't having delusions and is stable. I think the bigger point is that whether I am interviewing someone who has a diagnosis of schizophrenia or whether I'm interviewing someone who has no mental diagnosis, you fact-check, and you double and triple fact-check

everything and that way you don't have to worry about having an unreliable narrator because you've done the leg work. (Starechevski 2014)

The process of recording a documentary over such a long period of time is tough and always difficult to negotiate. What starts out as a journalistic exercise becomes something very different as your relationship develops over time with the people you are recording. Instead of being a journalist, you might become a friend, sometimes even a trusted confidante, particularly when the person you are recording is vulnerable and isolated. It's a complicated situation, requiring skillful negotiation and renegotiation. Then, at some point, you have to decide to pull back and become a producer again, making decisions that are dictated by strength of story, restrictions of edit time and the multitude of recordings that you have in front of you, rather than the relationship. But could this program have been made without such a long lead time, without the opportunity for Issa and the people around him, including psychiatrists, to get to know Laura and be prepared to talk to her on tape? Probably not. It's fortuitous that Laura was a freelancer.

In this age of the rationalisation of resources, increasing use of live talk radio, the cutting back of broadcast outlets for long-form radio documentary and shorter and shorter deadlines, it's unlikely a broadcaster would have allowed a staff producer the time for such trust to develop. *The Hospital Always Wins*, listed by Harvard University Nieman's Storyboard as one of the best of 2013 in the United States, is a testament to allowing a story to develop over time, and to the endurance and commitment of the producer Laura Starecheski.

As a final note, I was interested in Issa Ibrahim's reflection on the relationship he developed with Laura, and his thoughts on the final program. He emailed:

When I first met Laura in 2004 she was basically a freelance journalist coming to do a story on the Living Museum, my rehab program and art studio. I had plenty of experience with journalists in the past so I figured it was just another Living Museum profile. Over time I grew to trust her and we developed a friendship. This trust (led) me to be more forthcoming and vulnerable in our interviews.

I came to understand the limitations of condensing someone's life into 50 minutes. I also came to understand that it is more her story about me, her experience of my experience, so there is a bit of a distance. Though I am featured it is almost in a cursory way. Perhaps she thought this was best to allow the listener a sense of easy empathy, from a distance, especially since the subject matter is at times challenging. I suppose that is the NPR format and I believe she stuck with that. That said I believe it was very well done.

I haven't really noticed any change or significant impact on my life, besides the occasional kind word of encouragement and interest coming from distant places...like Australia ;-)

(Ibrahim 2014)

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[Podcast available here on State of the Re: Union website](#)

SHARON DAVIS is an award-winning radio documentary producer and journalist whose body of work spans more than 30 years. She is well-known for her ability to combine the rigour of investigative journalism with the eloquence of fine radio feature making, including observational storytelling. Her features have been broadcast around the world. Sharon has taught radio production, audio storytelling and journalism at various universities, as well as being involved in media development and training in southern Africa and the Pacific. She has also worked as a freelance print journalist in both Australia and overseas.

