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AUSTRALIA


November 2014

# The Left-To-Die Boat: Review 1

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## Recommended Citation

Elmes, Simon, The Left-To-Die Boat: Review 1, *RadioDoc Review*, 1(2), 2014. doi:10.14453/rdr.v1i2.6

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# The Left-To-Die Boat: Review 1

## **Abstract**

The tale of the African asylum-seekers who in 2011 set sail in a fragile inflatable from revolution-torn Libya in the hope of reaching the Italian island of Lampedusa and safety, is a phenomenal one. Seventy-two men and women set sail; just eleven survived the two-week-long ordeal, which only ended when the boat was washed back on the Libyan shore. How on earth to tell a story that was *all* in the past, recollected in tranquillity, and still keep it sharp, painful, dramatic and *present*?

The trouble with big, long programs is that, to stay sharp, they constantly have to find clever, new ways of doing things. Somehow, I felt the [almost] 60-minute distance was a tough one to fill with this story. However, the importance of the story, the horrifying lack of humanity on the part of officialdom and of the Libyan military who finally threw the asylum-seekers in jail despite their desperate condition: all make this a feature that *had* to be told, and told well. It goes without saying that Sharon Davis did all of this and we owe her a great debt of gratitude.

The Left-To-Die Boat won a United Nations Association of Australia Media Peace Prize and was shortlisted for a Sony Academy award (UK), the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and the Australian Human Rights Awards.

## **Keywords**

asylum seekers, NATO, refugees, documentary

# The Left-to-Die Boat

Producers: Sharon Davis & Geoff Parish, ABC RN 360 Documentaries (Australia 2012), technical production Steven Tilley. 52mins

Reviewer: Simon Elmes

Sitting on the top deck of a bus headed out of Sydney towards a beckoning warm beach, I'm engaged in conversation by an elderly lady who is keen to talk about the problems the country is facing. These are not the crises caused by migrants shipping out across the Pacific in frail vessels to target Australian territory and hopeful refuge from Indonesia: those are issues of today's Australia, leading Pacific-rim nation. No, this lady's concerns are the more familiar, old-fashioned ones of the faraway 'home' turf of Europe – so far away, she opines: 'ach! The tyranny of distance.'

So it's something of a surprise for a British listener to hear an Australian documentary that looks to Europe for a tragic story of migration rather than to the similarly graphic tales of asylum-seeking closer to home. But a powerful story is a powerful story, wherever it comes from, and the tale of the African asylum-seekers who in 2011 set sail in a fragile inflatable from revolution-torn Libya in the hope of reaching the Italian island of Lampedusa and safety, is a phenomenal one. It's also a terrible story of governmental inaction, as many NATO craft and helicopters were in the vicinity as the battle for the nation raged, and did nothing. Seventy-two men and women set sail; just eleven survived the two-week-long ordeal, which only ended when the boat was washed back on the Libyan shore.

Sharon Davis's<sup>1</sup> powerful piece for ABC Radio National, *The Left-to-Die Boat*, also heard on the BBC World Service, tells the story of those fifteen days of desperation and death as water and food ran out, through the direct testimony of a handful of the survivors – three settled in Australia, one in the Netherlands, three are still awaiting their fate in Italy. Their unutterably moving testimony fills Davis's program with their agony and disbelief as first helicopters with 'ARMY' written along the side and then big lit-up boats slipped close by without paying the slightest notice, despite repeated appeals from coastguard radio.

With a story such as this one, and direct witness from the survivors, Davis could hardly fail. No listener can be unmoved by their words, from the beautifully eloquent broken English of one of the men ('I tell you my story what happens') who opens the program, to the tragedy of the survivors' landfall back in Libya, when they are summarily thrown in jail rather than afforded humanitarian food and aid. It's just too ghastly to imagine. How can anyone really go wrong with the direct witness of these men who are speaking first hand, at length and

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<sup>1</sup> Though the documentary was researched by Davis and Parish, the production aesthetic is by Davis (Ed).

very cogently, about one of the terrible humanitarian ordeals of the past decade? It seems churlish, from one standpoint, even to offer a critique of such a document.

Yet, as I listened to the plight of these desperate people, that terrible cliché about the ‘tyranny of distance’ came floating back, unsummoned – not just the tyranny of their Mediterranean ordeal but – tritely – also the tyranny of the distance a producer has to travel to fill nearly an hour of airtime.

It’s a long haul, as anyone who has had to fill a 60-minute slot knows.

These men’s stories were clearly so graphic, so well-told, they would surely fill plenty of the time-slot. Likewise the sharp-elbowed questioning of those who appeared to choose to ignore the boat would happily occupy another good chunk of airtime. Yet, somehow, I felt the 60-minute distance was a tough one to fill with this story. Was it because Davis decided to tell the unwilling seafarers’ story strictly chronologically? Was it because the investigative narrative really only got its claws out towards the end? I’m not sure.

What I do know is that the producer had a formidable stack of challenges to face down in the making of the feature. Firstly, there was the eye-witness testimony: of these men, only one appears to speak English, though as I’ve said, his words had a beautiful limpidity and simplicity that was deeply moving. Thus all the other boat-people had to be heard in translation.

Davis’s translated voices were good, and subtly differentiated. And the performances – so often, in programs like these, rushed and mechanical on the one hand or over-emphatic and actorly on the other – were gentle and softly-spoken, like their originals. This was really well handled, and many BBC current-affairs documentarists could learn a lot from the way Davis directed her cast of performers.

Yet, that said, there was just a helluva lot of voiceover which, with the burble of the original voices running unquenched beneath, did become somewhat trying over the course of a full hour’s listening. Had Davis maybe deployed the stereo soundstage to space the voices across the beautifully constructed widescreen mix of ocean waves, passing helicopters and the like, it would have just made for a more interesting, and clearer, listen.

The other translation challenge that the producer had to resolve was that the people she spoke to in Italy also had little English. We had some half-sentences in not-bad English before the voiceover started again; though, thank goodness, Lorenzo Pizzani, Davis’s expert from Goldsmiths, University of London, had great English; so too did Tineke Strik, her interviewee from the Council of Europe. So, given the real production horrors that this percentage of non-English speakers presented, Davis did her very best.

However, the effect of so much overdubbing, albeit beautifully realised by the audio supervisor Steven Tilley, was to *veil* the story, distancing it from us, softening the harshness. When the voyagers start to die, we’re hearing a soft Anglo voice, half-cleansed of its original anguish by the translation, rather than the howl of pain and despair that was undoubtedly in the Eritrean speaker’s heart.

Likewise, the wash of waves – an almost unceasing presence through the feature – began as a brilliant nagging reminder of these people’s situation, yet in the long run became rather repetitive. It’s another production headache: once you decide to have an effect running under a particular sequence, the rationale is to keep it there throughout, which means 60 minutes can become a very long voyage.

It’s perhaps worth pointing out that lengthy documentaries are more common outside the UK than they are at the BBC, where we have a 30-minute standard (though we do, in fact, regularly broadcast some 40 and 60-minute features). France regularly broadcasts features of 60 minutes and longer, and the German standard is often 50 minutes. Arte Radio’s *Qui a Connu Lolita?* by Mehdi Ahoudig that won the Prix Europa four years ago was 51 minutes long and NRK (Norway)’s documentaries regularly run 40 minutes or more.

Whatever the national convention, how one constructs a story to fill a big chunk of airtime is an issue that every long-form documentarist has to face.

In the end, it comes down to questions of storytelling and dramatic structure (or ‘dramaturgy’ as the international community usually refers to it). *Lolita*, for example, despite (or perhaps because of) its brilliant, careful pacing was utterly riveting and compelling, with no slackening of tension across its considerable length. I recall playing it back to a roomful of colleagues who were desperate for their lunch, and the silence after it ended resembled that before the applause at the end of a concert – thick, emotion-filled... until a colleague (mindful of the strictures the BBC’s schedule and commissioning processes impose) said regretfully, ‘but could we ever broadcast such a piece here?’

Likewise Franziska Dorau’s *Life’s Holiday* (Prix Europa 2012) for Austrian national broadcaster ORF was in essence a brilliant current-affairs documentary about an Alzheimer’s clinic in Thailand, but which was made with the methods of a classic feature. Not for a second did the story flag across its 53-minute length and, in spite of the subject’s heterogeneous mixture of ‘head’ and ‘heart’ structure, scripting and actuality were stylistically and tonally at one: sublimely subtle and carefully graded throughout the program. This was utterly exceptional, controlled and hugely sophisticated program making.

Coming right up to date, Hugo Lavett’s murder mystery documentary for Swedish radio (*Woman Found Dead by Lake Shore*), which was heard internationally this year, runs a full 52 minutes. Yet, thanks to its careful and studied dramaturgy, which made the most of the narrative’s irresistible tug, this debut feature was utterly compelling.

Thus the other big challenge for Sharon Davis in *The Left-to-Die Boat* was structural. How on earth to tell a story that was *all* in the past, recollected in tranquillity, and still keep it sharp, painful, dramatic and *present*. Certainly, the current affairs component – the inquisition of those who left the refugees to die while ships and aircraft passed close by – offered a present tense narrative. But tonally, its necessarily journalistic, inquisitorial tone was completely at odds with the human drama recounted by the refugees.

There was some serious holding-to-account to be done here, which demanded some brisk no-nonsense narration and tough, no-holds-barred questioning. Davis put the case to both

her interviewee at the Council of Europe and, crucially, to a representative of NATO. It takes a very skilled interviewer to pull off these investigative interrogations with energy, and here – despite some articulate questioning – I was left frustrated by the bland answers and angrily demanding more blood on the carpet. Governments needed to be pursued, bureaucrats and military functionaries grilled to a cinder if possible (or at least be heard in the attempt). Thus the investigative component of *The Left-to-Die Boat* again felt rather sotto-voce and underpowered.

As for the mariners' past tense narrative, I felt it could have been given even greater energy to sustain the hour by finding a more elaborate dramaturgy. Some elements might have been temporarily withheld, or the attention focused at various points more closely on particular aspects of the experience, through pure description or the visceral tug of emotions. Even in sequential narratives, timelines can be bent to dramatic purpose. As it was, the narrative flowed on pretty much chronologically and even-paced, rather like the unyielding watery horizon. Even the great wave that finally knocks them back onshore in Libya felt to me acoustically underwhelming: hardly the roaring wall of water that it must have been. All a little too civilised for my taste.

These knotty production decisions are all too familiar – believe me, I've been there and got myself in horrible predicaments in the past – so I sympathise entirely with Sharon Davis's dilemmas.

Like what to do to with music. To music or not to music? It's a familiar, boring, even hoary old debate amongst feature makers. Rigorous masters of the old school demand that any music be required by the context, grow naturally out of the narrative and be used sparingly and appropriately: the argument goes that if you're a painter you don't splash gallons of red paint all over canvases, but use it discreetly and with intent. But then again, why not? Many contemporary artists have done so to great effect. Likewise many award-winning topical documentaries made for younger listeners in the UK are driven hard, MTV-like, by an incessant bed of rhythmic rock.

So I don't take issue with Davis's choice of music in this program. There's something pleasingly cinematic about the way the wide expanses of the ocean are conjured by her long, languorous chords and string motifs. Very striking, too, when married with Steven Tilley's wonderfully stereophonic helicopters that appear truly to overpass us as we listen. Fantastic sound work: the barking dog, the Italian church-bell, the beautifully acoustically-distanced archive that sounds as though we're listening to it somehow at one remove – all realised in a degree of three dimensions that reminded me of long-ago BBC experiments in 'binaural' sound. Really classy stuff, this. Here it placed the production firmly in *Captain Phillips* territory: big cinematic gestures that really gave a sense of scale and set these mariners' plight in the middle of a vast open sea.

But, just like the constant waves, the music becomes, over the 60 minutes' duration, a bit of a millstone. What is the producer to do when the investigative components occupy the stage? Kill the music completely? But that then sounds rather dull. And, obviously, these more 'worthy' elements (as opposed to the emotion-charged narrative of the refugees) are less immediately compelling when placed adjacently. So... cue the music. Both to sex up the

dull bits and to stylistically meld the disparate tones of the programme. Yet, clearly, we're not listening to Tineke Strik in some muzak-filled lift in the Council of Europe, so why on earth is that orchestra still whooshing along behind? Am I just being an old-fashioned purist? Maybe, but for this listener it struck an odd and inappropriate note. Whatever your personal view on this, the central issue holds true: it's that producer's bind yet again - once the ploy is undertaken, you're stuck with it. It blunts the journalistic weapon of the program just when it needs to be at its sharpest.

The trouble with big, long programs is that, to stay sharp, they constantly have to find clever, new ways of doing things. The listener won't stay as agog as they were at the beginning unless the program delivers a narrative of twists and turns, of assumptions challenged and discoveries unveiled: this means carving the story apart, finding big thematic lines and moods, deploying production devices like music and effects in *variable* quantities and thicknesses to assist that constantly shifting story-pattern; let the soundtrack even go silent perhaps just for a moment or two.

It means recognising that some voices in translation will need more space and time than English ones, and that the narrative needs a pace that varies: with intercutting that's sometimes breakneck-fast, sometimes slow and spacious. It means too, that, investigative journalism is dealt with as such: punchily, journalistically and without a low-volume wash from the digital jukebox.

Finally, it means actually going outside, into locations, not just conjuring them up with a resonant Hollywood-style effects track. 'I'm standing on the spot where...' may be a terrible reporter's cliché, but it sure does put the listener in the middle of the action. Again in *The Left-to-Die Boat*, we were never closer than watching the action through a screen.

So I enjoyed – if that's the right word – *The Left-to-Die Boat* for its ambition, its incredible testimony and its technical production, while, I guess, questioning some of the answers the producer found to the many problems it posed her. However, the importance of the story, the horrifying lack of humanity on the part of officialdom and of the Libyan military who finally threw them in jail despite their desperate condition, all make this a feature that *had* to be told, and told well.

It goes without saying that Sharon Davis did all of this and we owe her a great debt of gratitude. In spite, may I say, of the 'tyranny of distance'.

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AUDIO of The Left-To-Die Boat is [HERE](#).

**SIMON ELMES** is Creative Director of BBC Radio's Documentaries Unit. He has made many and award-winning documentaries including Melvyn Bragg's 26-part Radio 4 history of spoken English language *The Routes of English*, and led the network's long-running language magazine 'Word of Mouth' from its inception. He was a founder-member of the BBC's Creative Network and has widely studied creativity processes in the US and UK. Simon works extensively with the international radio documentary community. He has represented the BBC on the steering committee of the International Feature Conference for several years, and for whom he staged the conference in London in 2012.

