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Down But Not Out: Tara and George and the Boundaries of Subjectivity.

Hamish Sewell

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Abstract

Set on the streets of London, amidst the snarl of traffic and the clip of passers by, this work is a biographical sound portrait of two homeless people, Tara and George. It is a testament to the parlous state of homelessness in the UK today and is masterful in its execution.

To this work, producer and host Audrey Gillan brings a quality of frank disclosure and decency. Relationships between producers and their subjects are contentious, due to an inherent power differential. Gillan neither portrays Tara and George as archetypes nor as helpless and needy. She knows she is the one working for the BBC, delivering 'their' story to us in its very skin and bones. Over time, Gillan's obvious affection for these two mendicants comes through; as does her desire to resolve an insoluble situation that goes back many years.

One of the principal strengths of the work is its framing of time. Over two years, we travel with Gillan and Tara and George, through freezing winters and searing summers, through illness and loss, disappearances, laughter and moments of great pain. Central to this is the relationship between George and Tara, "a love story—of sorts". And just like many relationships that are further fuelled by substances and grief, the bond between George and Tara is complex and varied.

Keywords

homeless, documentary, podcast, journalism ethics

Down But Not Out: Tara and George and the Boundaries of Subjectivity.

By Hamish Sewell

Program Title: Tara and George

LISTEN: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bfykqm/episodes/downloads>

Presenter: Audrey Gillan

Producers: Alan Hall, Audrey Gillan

Original music: Francis Macdonald

Sound design: Alan Hall

Executive Producer: Eleanor McDowall

A [Falling Tree Production](#) for BBC Radio 4

6 x 28 min episodes, broadcast 14 August-18 September 2018

Post-series episode, 28mins, 11 February 2019.

Winner, Best Radio Programme, Broadcasting Press Guild Awards (2019); Best Radio Podcast (Silver), British Podcast Awards (2019)

Runner-up, Best Storytelling category, BBC Audio & Music Awards 2019

Selected, Prix Europa shortlist, 2019 (outcome as yet unknown)

Set on the streets of London, amidst the snarl of traffic and the clip of passersby, this work is a biographical sound portrait of two homeless people, Tara and George. It is a testament to the parlous state of homelessness in the UK today and is masterful in its execution.

Radio from the streets is a familiar trope; from self-authored works such as StoryCorps founder David Isay's [Ghetto Life](#) or [Teen Diaries](#) by Radio Diaries, to works audibly framed by the producer, such as Kate Walton's

[Trev's World](#) or [Carmel's West End](#) - a work of mine. *Tara and George* is a story framed by BBC journalist Audrey Gillan who, from the looks of her website, has a background in travel writing. Gillan's approach is refreshing and carefully measured. She is not attempting a study of her 'subjects' from any anthropological height. This work comes to us from the streets and it is here that Gillan joins them—in the swill of a large city that affords little space for those on the outside.

As a work of sound art, it is modest and relatively unadorned. While there is some use of soundbeds—sombre and lightly played music that occasionally breaks out into horn—it is used sparingly. It's as if both Gillan and her audio engineer/producer (whom, much to my annoyance, the BBC never mentions – but website credits tell us it is none other than Falling Tree Productions founder Alan Hall) know that in this case, less is more. It is the city here that is omnipresent, as much a character in this story as any person. And from out of this white noise comes the singing, the laughter, the shouting and intimate moments that build a vivid picture of the world of Tara and George.

Here is the teaser in the words of Gillan:

This is a love story—of sorts. One that's hard to pin down. For Tara and George, time can be fragmentary and memories confused. Keeping track of life's events can be as hard as holding on to belongings. If there's anything consistent it's that Tara and George can be mostly found on Fournier Street in Spitalfields. It's one of London's most beautiful streets, lying in the shadow of the city

In the first episode, 'More Issues than Vogue', Gillan introduces us to Tara and George from the doorstep of renowned artists, Gilbert and George. This house and these artists are emblematic of the world of Tara and

• Editor's note: producer and sound designer Alan Hall confirmed this by email, 30 Sept 2019: "Less is more was very much our mantra. Audrey and I trimmed every edit and honed every word together."
Disclosure: Alan Hall is an Associate Editor of *RadioDoc Review* (RDR) and has written for RDR. He did not see this review prior to publication.

George: the gentrification going on around them, and the spirit of concern from onlookers who watch out for them. On the doorstep of Gilbert and George, Tara and George like to sleep and a photo on the BBC website captures this moment: Tara and George on the pavers. George in a pink baseball cap, Tara in a hoodie: the two framed by a wrought iron railing fence and an arched doorway. Standing behind Tara and George and in front of the doorway are Gilbert and George: elderly, suited and tied, one in blue, the other green and both men looking at the camera. A younger, though equally well-dressed businessman, mid-stride with a teal blue suit, briefcase in hand, looks askance as he passes the four of them on the street. There at his feet, oblivious to this man, Tara is looking at us, with a puffy face and a piercing scowl.

To this work, Gillan brings a quality of frank disclosure and decency. In her own nuggety way, she neither judges Tara and George nor brooks any crap. Gillan has clearly learned to handle herself somewhere and she's no pushover. One of the principal strengths of her work is its framing of time. Over two years, we travel with Gillan and Tara and George, through freezing winters and searing summers, through illness and loss, disappearances, laughter and moments of great pain. Gillan has done the footwork here. This is a story built on the passing of time and a solid relationship.

Central to this is the relationship between George and Tara, “a love story—of sorts”. And just like many relationships that are further fuelled by substances and grief, the bond between George and Tara is complex and varied. One day they are looking out for each other, demonstrating great acts of tenderness, loyalty and kindness. The next day they are feuding and quick to flare into cruelty and anger. George is 47, has been a runaway child and a glue sniffer. Today he is an alcoholic who sports broken ribs and lives with a diagnosis of cancer. Tara is 48 and less easy to read than George. She hates her mother, and like George, has been in and out of institutional care and has three children out there—somewhere.

As the series progresses, Gillan searches out their pasts and their families via social media or personal connections. She spends much time relaying messages to and from their families: whether sharing photos, playing back audio recordings or passing on information. Some family members are genuinely concerned when they hear of the plight of Tara and George: others seem unsurprised; a few couldn't care less. Underlying all their lives is a pervading sense of the intergenerational grief and trauma that permeates the lives of the English working class who teeter on the edge of functionality. Gillan meets George's family, his Aunty in her penguin pyjamas, his brother Robert with whom George fought with when he was a boy. Tara was closer to her father than her mother. Though he was a heavy drinker, she fondly refers to him as "booted and suited". Tara's mother says Tara was a troubled young girl who brought suffering upon herself. When Gillan shows Tara a photo of her daughter— a girl put up for adoption— Tara gives a rare smile, then leans forward and kisses the photo. "It's the spitting image of me," she says.

Gillan brings great skills and attention to her role here. But what she intends to do as both a producer of this work and a constant friend to Tara and George, is sometimes moot. On Gillan's personal website, which showcases her Tara and George radio works, it reads (in third person): *Audrey tries to fix a timeline for each of them – a sequence of events that leads from George's childhood in County Durham and Tara's in east London to this moment now - in an effort to discover the key turning points that resulted in them being numbered among the many thousands of rough sleepers living in London today.*

Here to my mind, at the outer limits of journalism, is where this work is both most fraught and most powerful. While I understand Gillan wants to connect Tara and George and to their former lives and families, and in doing so afford us a personal picture of an often impersonal situation: sometimes it feels as if at any moment a family member might step forward to attempt to try and take Tara and George off the streets. It's as if Gillan seeks a resolution in bridging the gaping maw of longing and disconnection that separates both Tara and George from their families and the love that

we all deserve. This wouldn't be necessarily a bad thing, but it is charting territory beyond journalism and would irrevocably change the lives of Tara and George in the making a story.

Relationships between producers and their subjects —whether the homeless, Aboriginal, criminals or family and friends— are contentious: whether it's Brian Reed and John B. McLemore in [S-Town](#), or Martin Thomas's relationship with New York homeless in *Home Front Manhattan*.[•] the relationship between the reporter and the subject invariably reflects an inherent power differential. If this is tricky ground, it also affords listeners a way into the many different worlds of people around us. Gillan neither portrays Tara and George as archetypes nor as helpless and needy. She knows she is the one working for the BBC, delivering 'their' story to us in its very skin and bones. She knows she holds the cards here.

AG: "You know all the time I've been interviewing you."

Tara: "With my consent."

AG: "With your consent. Now Tara, you're not drunk and you're happy to participate in this radio program right?"

T: "Yuh."

AG: "And we're slightly interfering."

T: "I wouldn't say so."

AG: "We are slightly interfering in your life. Are you happy with that?"

T: "I don't mind that."

AG: "You know we went and tried to find George's family right?"

T: "Yeah."

AG: "So you know we're trying to do the same thing with you?"

T: "Yeah, like a reunion."

AG: "Sweetheart, I'm not sure it's going to be a reunion."

T: "Not for me it won't."

I find Gillan's relationship with the two praiseworthy. If there is a temptation to prioritise story over and above the lives of the people represented—for

• Made in 1991 and broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and American public radio.

me this is a powerful driving force behind so many true crime podcasts today—at no point does Gillan step over this line. Over time, Gillan’s obvious affection for these two mendicants comes through; as does her desire to resolve an insoluble situation that goes back many years. Having made it through the entire series and the difficult lives, their illnesses and eruptions, I was almost relieved when in episode 5, *The Long Hot Summer*, amidst extreme weather warnings, with Tara covered in flies, Gillan gives a little ground:

My role as documentary maker was starting to bleed. It was becoming distressing. I just wanted to take her home and give her a bath. But that was a line I couldn’t cross. I washed her sleeping bag instead and the smell of it remained with me for days.

Underpinning all the relationships that this work is built upon—whether it be between George and Tara, Tara, George and Gillan, or with the broader Spitalfields community—it is perhaps our own collective relationship with the likes of Tara and George that is the most perplexing. Tara and George are real. They have back stories, families, loves, heartaches and relationships like the rest of us. This could be us sleeping on the streets and brawling at night: two people in 5000 people who sleep on the UK streets each year: unique in our own right, but a drop in the ocean. And hanging here in this story, like the proverbial UK fog, is the dilemma of what to do with these people and this situation. Run for the hills or try to fix them? And is the answer to these many problems going to come from Tara and George themselves, or from us, or from government and local councils?

The ongoing conundrum over what to do here is the marrow of this experience: it’s messy, difficult to get at, but good for us—so we are told. The enormity of the problem, and its intractability, is brought home time and time again by Gillan. But when it’s expressed through the eyes of a benevolent stranger, we are able to step back and see it more clearly. On the steps of (what I’m assuming is) Gilbert and George’s place, Gillan strikes up a conversation with a passerby:

Passerby to Tara: "Hello dear. How are you?"

Tara: "Hello."

AG: "Are you her friend?"

Passerby: "No I see her. She says hello to me. I say hello to her. You can say hello to anybody if they say hello to you. It's nice to, you know... [to Tara] Are you ok?" Pause. "The thing is the guys [presumably Gilbert and George] are really really nice to her, let her sleep here. And then she sits there. And sometimes I get so, umm, frustrated, looking at her. Is there any home for her? Is anybody there? Is her family there? Because always I've seen her live in that same place. Here and there.

AG: For how long?

Passerby: "Oh my God. I'm talking ten years."

A post-series episode, *Beyond Tara and George*, takes a different tack and focuses more on homelessness as a broader issue. I'd be curious to know what underpinned this decision to go down this road, and am reminded of those parting words on public radio or television when in the course of a discussion or program, they've gone to some difficult places: 'If this work brought up strong emotions for you, please call Lifeline on...' In moving away from Tara and George, Gillan's work slips into a more worn groove of reportage and journalism. It is more predictable than our journey with Tara and George, and more a world of selfless volunteers, social services and shocking statistics around the plight of homelessness, their growing numbers and poorly managed policies. While I missed Tara and George, this final episode does, however, serve to contextualise the situation.

Gillan goes to an annual memorial service, at St Martins in the Fields, for the many homeless who have died over the last year. Along with everyone else there, she is given a card to remember one of the many who has died. Therein, Gillan takes up the search for her person: one Fiona McCarthy, a Scottish-born woman who was a serious drug user and died aged 36. While McCarthy's story could be an entirely new series, and this line of story doesn't ultimately go anywhere, it does serve to remind us, yet

again, that McCarthy, along with Tara and George, are people who are falling through the cracks—and fast.

With little by way of comforting closure, Gillan finishes up the series upon hearing from McCarthy's mother who informs Gillan that her daughter lived a harrowing life on the streets, but she didn't die alone. It is this small moment of solace and the idea of dying alone, that leads us back to the freezing streets of Spitalfields and Tara. With George in residential care and in bad health, Tara prefers to be on the streets than taking up offers of help and a bed in residential care.

AG [narrating with music from the memorial service as a backdrop]: I'm glad to know that Fiona, the girl who I was asked to remember, was not alone at the end.

Music continues.

AG: So why are you back in Fournier Street tonight?

Tara: Cos I just come and stretch, come and stretch my legs.

AG: So you won't go in. You've got your bed for the night, but you won't go in.

Tara: Yeah, I'm not taking it just for tonight. No.

AG: But you know you're freezing to death.

Tara: I won't. I'm used to the cold. I'm used to the cold.



HAMISH SEWELL has a background in oral history and feature length radio. His radio documentary, *Battle Flagging Father*, won a Third Coast International Audio Festival prize and more recently he has produced two podcast series: *Crucial Conversations* and the *Nambour Variety Show*. For the last five years Hamish has been both a founder and primary producer with *Soundtrails*: a leading Australia-based geo-locative audio app. *Soundtrails* is pitched at cultural tourists, and works voices, stories and sounds into rich and intimate place-based experiences. Hamish has recently returned from a study trip of geo-locative media in the UK and today he lives on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. To learn more about the work of Hamish Sewell, visit <https://storiedland.com>