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## A Film Chronicle of Sarajevo, Day by Day

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**P**ARIS — Although television has been a common household appliance for some 40 years, it isn't often used as a unique medium: Most programs are just miniaturized movies, newsreels with a visible, instead of invisible, commentator, or visual radio.

In six years of existence, a French television news and documentary agency called Point du Jour has produced 600 hours of film, some of it bread-and-butter work, some of it remarkable in its approach and unexpected success.

"I think television has to be approached as a player in society and not just a reproduction of reality," says Patrice Barrat, who founded the agency with Jean-

### MARY BLUME

Louis Saporito in 1988. Last year Point du Jour became the first foreign company to win the BAFTA award, the British equivalent of an Emmy, for television originality.

The award was for "Chaque Jour pour Sarajevo" (in English, "A Street Under Siege"), a two-minute film shown nightly last winter on BBC2 and picked up by the French-German station Arte and other channels. In Britain audiences grew from 500,000 to 3.5 million by the time the series ended last March.

The simple idea was to take a street in the old Bascarsija quarter of Sarajevo, to film daily life there mornings and to send out the edited film by satellite by late afternoon. The subtitled conversations between neighbors were chosen with great skill and the characters became so familiar, says Serge Gordey, one of the 10 directors of the series, that viewers asked for news of the doctor or the cheeky 13-year-old Nino or the beautician Jasmina after the series ended.

The vignettes gained, rather than lost, by being shown in between normal programs. "Exactly," Barrat says. "They use television as the specific medium, as the tool. Even in terms of programming they are something different in the flow of TV images — between commercials and the news all of a sudden a viewer has to stop and think twice, what is this?"

There is the fireman with his new chicken whom he has named Hasmeta and whom he thanks for having laid eggs to keep his children from starving, there is Nino who no longer goes to school because a shell hit it and who is building a bunker with his chums. "I wish the war would end so we could stop playing war games," he says.

On the 632d day of the siege (each program was numbered) there are the women trying clumsily to fell a frozen tree for fuel while an old lady cries from a floor above, "Don't touch my birch tree, oh no, not that." And there is a stunning film by Gordey prompted by the natives' expertise in identifying incoming artillery by ear.

The local film crew suggested that Gordey view the subject through two deaf men who cannot hear the



Point du Jour

Nino, a cheeky 13-year-old caught in a war.

shells. They are shown in the marketplace. "When I see the others run, I run. The deaf are not made for war," one of them says. The film ends with the two walking down an empty street and chatting with surreal calm, unaware of shells exploding around them.

When the series ended, the Point du Jour team wanted to do something else that could show daily life under pressure and for England's Channel Four produced a series called "Belfast Lessons."

They chose to center the series on one of Belfast's two integrated (Catholic and Protestant) schools, Hazelwood, and the innovation was that the three-minute programs would be seen every night in Belfast as well as England, with a weekly compilation including reactions from Belfast viewers.

The two-month series began just after the September 1994 cease-fire was announced and, while the Sarajevo films were striking for what the subjects revealed, the Belfast series was equally interesting for the teenagers' view. "Whatever you say, say nothing." They are not interested in politics but, spiritless and suspicious, they are destroyed by them.

Point du Jour works with filmmakers of many nationalities and undertakes half its programs before backing is assured. "We don't want just to do shows," Barrat says. "The things that are happening in the world now are so serious that this is not acceptable. I am not against entertainment programs or documentaries about animals but I feel you can't deal with current problems just by putting on a good show."

One of their most successful series is Vis-à-Vis,

which uses the modern technique of video conferencing to enable people from different parts of the world to talk to each other for several days, conversations which are then edited to one hour. "The innovation is that it's direct communication between two people that becomes a film or a documentary with no mediator," Barrat says.

Subjects have included a Serb and a Croat, an AIDS patient in France and one in Poland whose sufferings are increased by intolerance, an Asian woman in a Brooklyn ghetto and an Algerian woman in a ghetto in France. "We are thinking of doing one between teenagers in Belfast and Sarajevo because in Belfast there is a kind of growing tolerance while in Sarajevo the pressure is such that tolerance becomes harder," Barrat says, "and we are thinking of doing one between black teenagers in South Africa and the U. S. where the issue would be comparing the political violence of South Africa with the social violence of the U. S."

In February they will do a program on Algeria consisting of debates between Algerians living in France and Algerians in Algeria. "It will be shown in France and in Algeria and, believe me, everyone will turn their satellite dishes to see this program in Algeria," Barrat says. The point will be to show that Algerians can still think about the future and debate freely. "At least on TV," Barrat adds.

They are also planning a series, commissioned by Channel Four, on fascism. "It is not historical, the idea is to look at dangerous phenomena right now which claim not to be fascist," says Gordey, who will produce.

A second Sarajevo series began on Arte this month, aimed less at showing scraps of life than at letting the locals state their views directly to the camera. It poses problems for Point du Jour since the cease-fire, however tentative, has created an ostensibly less dramatic atmosphere and the team in any case had no wish to repeat last year's approach. Life there is materially better, Gordey says, in that food is more readily available (the fireman, able to buy eggs, has eaten Hasmeta, his chicken) but the people's mood is worse.

The programs are disconcerting, jagged and sour. Nino, now 14, has bags under his eyes, and on day 1009 Jasmina the beautician tells viewers that she is sick of living in a zoo, of being a creature viewed on safari. Their hopes for peace can only shame us because they sound so hollow.

Foreign television stations have criticized the second series because it is less spectacular. Perhaps Sarajevo, now in its third winter of siege is less telegenic, especially with the unfolding drama of Grozny, but Barrat does not consider this a reason to let it drop. The West, he says, is ready to bury Sarajevo without even a decent obituary.

"It's important for all of us to be able to assess what three years of war have done. We spent five months with these people, some follow-up is compulsory. You have to see what happens to people you spent five months with, you can't just let them go."