

The Telegraph

Enslaved with Samuel L Jackson, review: anger and sorrow in this clear-eyed history of the slave trade

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It might be fronted by a Hollywood star, but this excellent series on the slave trade is no vanity project

By [Anita Singh](#), ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR. 11 October 2020 • 10:00pm



Writer Afua Hirsch was among those joining Samuel L Jackson to explore the legacy of transatlantic slavery CREDIT: BBC

The legacy of the transatlantic slave trade has occupied the news for months, from the toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol to the National Trust's decision to detail the links between slavery and many of its properties. We can debate the rights and wrongs of these approaches; but the heightened tensions around the subject have somehow obscured, rather than highlighted, the history of slavery.

Enslaved (BBC Two) is a sobering US documentary series which sets out, in a clear and incontrovertible manner, the horrors of the slave trade. It is presented by Hollywood actor Samuel L Jackson, but is far from being a shallow celebrity vehicle. His personal investment in the story was set out at the beginning, as he walked along a beach in Africa: "My ancestors came from here. They were taken from

Africa in chains, to power the greatest wealth-generating machine the world has ever known.”

More than 12 million Africans were trafficked across the Atlantic. Around two million of them died en route, and part of the series traced some of their stories via Diving With a Purpose, a group of underwater archaeologists who dive the wreckages of slave ships that became mass underwater graves.

Britain’s role at the centre of the slave trade was explored, although not in great depth - this is not a British-made series, and there are too many stories to be told. The cruelty and inhumanity were illustrated both through tangible objects - the shackles used to prevent slaves from fleeing - and episodes from history, such as the Dutch captain who, when his ship ran aground off the coast of Suriname, ordered his crew to nail down the hatches and leave 664 men, women and children to drown.

Such details proved upsetting for the divers, who showed the utmost reverence for the graves. Jackson was fuelled by another emotion. “Some people say, ‘Don’t you feel sorrow when you see these things?’ But there is a feeling of anger for me,” he said. At a lagoon in Gabon, where his family originated, he was shown huge banks of discarded oyster shells - the last meal on home soil of those waiting there in chains to be shipped to the Americas.

One of the most moving moments occurred at the end of the second episode, with a visit to a village in Suriname. The villagers were descendants of a group of Ghanaian slaves who had fought back against the plantation owners and escaped into the woods to a life of freedom. An uplifting story in an otherwise bleak history.