

television & radio

Simon's choice — but was it

Andrew Billen

TV review



How to Die: Simon's Choice

BBC Two
★★★★☆

Violent Child, Desperate Parents

Channel 5
★★★★☆

I have written before about the orthodoxy growing within the BBC about assisted suicide: in both documentaries and drama, the case against is never as well presented as the case for — and I speak as someone who is in principle in favour of elective euthanasia. So what did I think of the documentary **How to Die: Simon's Choice**?

The 90-minute film followed the last months of the attractive, articulate,

amusing businessman Simon Binner who, having been diagnosed with motor neurone disease a year ago, had decided by the summer he would check into a Swiss suicide clinic on his birthday in November — a decision he barely wavered from except to bring the date forward a few weeks when his condition deteriorated. His death was considered, peaceful and, indubitably, exactly what he wanted.

The film barely needed to emphasise the tragedy for Simon of losing his life at 57. It did emphasise that his determination to choose the method and time of his death was an aspect of his self-image as an alpha male. "I am," he said, "an independent sort of man and the endgame of my disease is not to my taste."

The reason I most admired Rowan Deacon's film, however, was that it empowered those who lovingly disagreed with Simon's choice and asked us to consider if it was his alone to make. His wife, Debbie, put up a strong case that life supplied enough good moments to make it worth living up to the end. She spoke from knowledge, having watched her teenage daughter die naturally of cancer.

It took a suicide attempt by Simon to persuade her to join him at the clinic. Two weeks later, she described the trauma it caused her and the guilt it induced: could she have



Simon Binner, who chose to end his life in a Swiss suicide clinic

done more to make his remaining months palatable?

As so often with documentaries that get very close to their subjects there were omissions. Some were well-judged, such as showing Simon's last breath. Some were irritating: it was not enough to say that Simon's daughter Zoe lived in Germany: we needed to know her thoughts (or at least why she was not supplying them). As a tender diary of death and as an intelligent, passionate debate, however, the film was first class.