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White boy looking for Big Dada

Inspired by the one-man presidential show in Zimbabwe, playwright **Brett Bailey** went in search of Idi Amin, the charismatic Ugandan general who burst on to the African stage with his military regime 30 years ago.

I had been thinking to do a play about Life President Field Marshal Doctor Idi Amin Dada in 1999, having twisted an ear towards countries north for a while: Zimbabwe, Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone.

Then a critic on TV said my work "ran the risk of being fascist, because it suppresses debate" and so on. So, being a flippant arsehole at the best of times, I decided to do an utterly fascist play, to take a pickaxe and excavate the dictator in me.

Idi Amin, who snatched the Ugandan throne in 1971, was quite an obvious despotic choice: the arch-dictator, a stereotype from hell. Less interesting than Mobutu perhaps, less topical than Uncle Bob, less bizarre than the Emperor Bokassa, Idi was a truly great showman; a banana republic tyrant who did genocide with a certain je ne sais quoi, who wrecked a country with theatrical flair.

No chance of meeting the man (yes, he's still alive and well in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - he's granted only one interview in the past 10 years or so, to a Ugandan journalist who was assured that the whereabouts of his family were known to Amin's buddies back home), so I took the next best option and set off intrepidly on the cheapest air ticket to Uganda.

I expected the capital, Kampala, to be bullet-riddled, bedraggled - banana trees pushing up through the pavements, bone-fragments in the corners. It is none of these. The centre is truly Westernised; the surrounding hills are covered with leafy residential sprawl.

Wounds heal quickly in Central Africa. I searched for telltale signs of brutality, I listened for the spectral chorus of 350 000 people murdered in eight years. Nothing. Kwasa-kwasa music. The jungle has grown back. I love this place.

Out strolling late one night I'm drawn under the trees by flames and gurgling Zairean music. David, a warm giant, bitter about the state of the nation, tends the fire.

"At least when Amin was here we had money, people were not struggling, there was plenty and things were done in the open. Now people are taken away in the dark and you don't know why."

Memories are short. Amin destroyed the economy completely, channelling all money to pay the mainly Nubian mercenaries he trucked in to run the country by the bullet and the blade. For several years soap, matches, cooking oil, sugar were but memories. People vanished by the truckload: Kampala's disabled and unemployed were rounded up and dumped alive in the crocodile-infested Nile, a bus of trainee nurses was rerouted to the State Research Bureau headquarters for raping by the soldiers. Memories are short. The jungle grows back.

People generally guffaw when I say I'm writing a play about Big Dada.

"If it wasn't for the killings, he was very good for sports and culture," says Jack, who at seven years old was the youngest performer in the *Heartbeat of Africa* troupe in those heady days.

"Everywhere he went he took a huge group of cultural dancers; nowadays the artists are suffering." Once when Jack was left behind, Amin sent a helicopter across the country to fetch him from school for a gig.

Later Jack had his toenails twisted out and his genitals shocked blue during a three-week jail stint in a case of mistaken identity during the regime that followed Amin's. Yep, we've got to wait a long time for a happy ending to this little drama: Amin was succeeded by three dudes (including former president Milton Obote, whom Amin had ousted), who - though less flamboyant - matched his death toll.

Weapons are a common sight in the city; men with antiquated shotguns and assault rifles abound. Uganda is at war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Security guards in a stunning array of costumes lean in doorways and against poles. The United States embassy is a fortress since its counterparts were blown up in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

In Amin's day tanks growled down the high street, a 40 000-strong army took time out from massacring people in the colourful bars, the big man himself hurtled from residence to residence in his chopper across this sky. From pillar to post, I amble, pillar to post. Things take time in Uganda. To get access to the Radio Uganda archives for recordings of Amin's endless, idiosyncratic speeches and for the numerous groovy crooning pop songs about him, I run from radio commissioner to high commission, office to office, commissioning letters, collecting rubber stamps, all to verify that the material will not be put to any use "that will bring the government of Uganda into disrepute", so help me God.

I clasp my thighs around the butt of my motorbike taxi driver and cross the city again. I maintain a sweaty composure. The day of my departure I manage to get tinny dubbings of four songs and two speeches.

Jack chaperones me to a contact, Robert Ondoga. As a young man in 1978, he met Amin at a function he had organised at the president's favourite club. There he is waiting in a queue for the loo and suddenly darkness falls. He turns and Amin is standing behind him, his huge bulk blocking the light.

"Did you allow him to go before you?" I ask.

"Of course. We said: 'Please, come sir.' But he said: 'No. Please. You were here first.' Then he asked us where we came from, whether we thought the service at the club was good. Very affable, very friendly. I was mesmerised for those minutes, mesmerised. And his huge hand - he shakes your hand, but your hand simply vanishes into his."

"I bet you couldn't pee."

"No, of course not, no matter how long you stand there. How can anyone pee with Idi Amin standing behind you?"

How indeed? Heavyweight boxing champion of Uganda throughout the 1950s, Amin hailed from the marginalised Kakwa people, whose blood rites fostered his taste for human organs. Inferiority complex, syphilis, hypomania, brute stupidity. Various theories are offered to account for his behaviour.

"He had the most powerful presence of evil," shudders Dennis Kylie, British correspondent for *The Guardian* in the Seventies, over a whiskey. "A scoutmaster promoted to ultimate power - terrifying."

MP Henry Kyemba has me to tea in the bright white restaurant of the Houses of Parliament. Amin's sophisticated righthand man for several years, he fled in 1977 as his peers were being scythed down all around him. His book *State of Blood* is one of the most intimate accounts of "the terror".

"Amin was a very pleasant person, one of the most pleasant people I've met, when he was not in his rage - he had the rage of a wounded buffalo."

"What drove him to such extremes?"

"Survival ... survival."

The Israeli "Zionists" and 50 000 Asians were chased out within two years of Amin's ascension. Most whites followed them. Africa for Africans.

Outside, hosts of hideous carrion-eating marabou storks gather on the parapets of the parliament building, swing slow circles through the sky. They were not native to Kampala until the great flesh banquets of the Seventies - so many men, so little time. The environmental impact of humanity.

I spend hours and hours in the bleak beige library of Makerere University, with bound volumes of the Voice of Uganda and my Dictaphone, filling cassettes with the sagas of Amin's regime: boasts, accusations, fabrications, relentless columns of his excellency's words.

Over a few years, as journalists were exiled or murdered, the paper regresses from a vibrant 12-page people's rag to a dull four-page military government gazette spangled with photographs of stylish Amin in Stetson and cravat, Amin in Saudi robes, in Saville Row suits, military fatigues; Amin the doctor of political science in academic plush, Amin the field marshal in Christmas medal décor, Amin in a swimsuit.

Amin taking 1 000 salutes, laying the foundation stones of 1 000 never-to-be-built institutions, shaking the hands of hundreds of visiting diplomats, dignitaries and pragmatic businessmen from around the world.

Amin having a chat with Anglican Archbishop Janan Luwum and his wife at State ouse on February 15 1977. The following day Amin is embracing the archbishop in a garden - what pals these leaders of state and church are! Next day the archbishop is tragically mashed in a car crash following charges of arms hoarding - photos of the mangled cars.

Voila! The stage management of Idi Amin in the Theatre of Dada!

In reality the archbishop has been shot to pieces for being too popular, along with a couple of inconvenient MPs, at the headquarters of Amin's infamous State Research Bureau. The Chief Justice, to name but one, had gone the same way five years before. The world shouts and screams, the United Nations Commission for Human Rights looks the other way.

We have slogged across Kampala, Jack and I, and up to the summit of Nakasero Hill to the Ugandan TV (UTV) buildings - these used to be a hospital long ago, in colonial days: small dark rooms with high ceilings, long corridors.

Across the fence is State Research headquarters - responsible for most of the interrogations and torturing back then - beyond that stands the residence of the president.

I am after archival TV material. Along with the newspaper, the regime took control of the broadcaster in 1972; by all accounts every public footstep taken by Amin was beamed to the nation. There must be kilometres and kilometres of footage.

"Oh, that was all shot on 16mm," says the man in charge of such things, the engineer.

"Yes, is it possible to access it?"

"No it does not exist - we do not have it."

"It does not exist?" I am alarmed "What has happened to all those reels?"

"They were destroyed."

"You know, after [former president Milton] Obote was chased out," adds Jack, "if anyone was found with his picture, or any film or anything, they would be beaten or even killed. So when Amin fell people were afraid."

The engineer agrees: "Everything was burned." But he looks shifty.

"All that history. Your history!" Me, being melodramatic. I see flames devouring streamers of whirling film; words and faces burning red.

And what does it matter, really?

On our way out Jack says "They sold it, most of it. I didn't want to say anything there. The big networks, international universities - people pay a lot of dollars for it."

"Ja," I say.

"There was a big pile of it there," he points to a piece of open ground, "It lay there in the rain for years, but the State Research Bureau is just here. Nobody would touch it."

The State Research Bureau. I wonder to what lengths the UTV sound engineers had to go to keep the screams of captive men from their viewers: beaten men, ripped men, men with gouged-out eyes and splintered teeth, men flung into cellars clutching the stump of a hacked off limb, men forced to beat the brains out of the man in front with a hammer and then pass the hammer to the one behind you and take your turn. Thwock thwock!

When Kampala was liberated they found the cells packed with the dead and dying, people who'd been stowed with corpses for weeks.

Men in overalls are cutting down a big tree on a plot near my lodgings. They work all day with machetes and axes. Shining men, stripped to their waists; they throng on the branches, sinking the iron teeth of their weapons into the wood. I watch a while in the morning as I leave for the library.

The tree lies right across the road when I return; great amputated limbs straddled by the hacking men, pieces all strewn in the dust. Cars stop, hoot, reverse.

"What you kill this tree for?" I call. The men laugh. The core of every branch is red, stained dark by red-earth water coursing through plant veins, out into the sky.

Everything broken, everything in pieces.

Later, in the mystery of dusk, I stand dazed by the carnage.

"African renaissance". So I'll pick up a lot of flak for this show. I'll be called a racist, an exploiter, a neo-colonialist - all the old -isms Big Daddy hurled at his detractors. It's all just the repartee of life in post-colonial Africa.

I'll paint glitter red lipstick on my Amin's mouth, strike up the band and shrug.

It's been raining hard, an afternoon downpour and the ground is steaming. I'm walking on Nakasero Hill, a shortcut track from Makerere University to town through a red-earth wasteland of puddles and weeds. Here and there, in the mud, snaking out of the pools, grey gleaming ribbons of discarded videotape, strands of twisted brittle film, the dried viscera of long dead animals, more and more the further I walk.

I pick up a dirt-encrusted strip, hold it up to the sky: scratched images of tiny marching men, fancy uniforms, tassels and plumes, jolly brass military music. Another shows five men in white suits smiling into the camera, a packed grandstand in the background with huge red letters: "PY" - what "PY"? "HAPPY"? - 10 frames. A display of massed police formations, three frames; cut to close-up of a smiling woman in the crowd, five frames.

Then a 12-frame strip: a man in a cream suit and another in army garb, below them the black, yellow, red of the Ugandan flag; a low-angle shot, a white railing crosses out their faces. The cream-suited dude looks at his companion and as I watch through cracks and scratches the army guy turns to the camera - could it be?

I scan the sequence again, rinse the strip in a warm red pool, hold it up to the clouds: Life President Idi Amin Dada gazes back at me, here, where I stand in the national film archives of his second Republic of Uganda.

The jungle has grown back.

[Big Dada premieres in Amsterdam on June 20 at the Roots Festival at the Tropentheater. From July 5 to 7 it shows at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown and then opens at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town on August 1.](#)