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A scene from Kief Davidson's Tribeca world documentary competition doc, "Kassim The Dream." Image courtesy of the filmmaker.

TRIBECA '08 INTERVIEW | "Kassim The Dream" Director Kief Davidson

Tribeca Film Festival

by indieWIRE (April 23, 2008)

EDITORS NOTE: This is part of a series of interviews, conducted via email, profiling directors who have films screening at the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival.

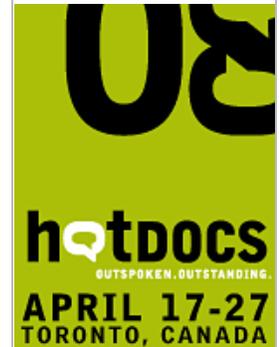
American director **Kief Davidson's Tribeca Film Festival** world documentary competition film "**Kassim the Dream**" is the story of world champion boxer Kassim "The Dream" Ouma. Born in Uganda and kidnapped at the age of six to be a child story, Kassim was forced to commit horrific atrocities. He also discovered the army's boxing team and realized it could be his way to freedom. After living with 12 years of war, he defected to the United States and quickly rose through the boxing ranks and became junior middleweight champion of the world...

In the Tribeca catalog, TFF programmer **David Kwok** writes, "[Davidson] paints a vivid and candid portrait of survival, balancing the story of Kassim's life inside the ring and out. Kassim's rise in the boxing world is extraordinary on its own, but it is the man in the gloves that gives the film its heart."

What initially attracted you to filmmaking?

I really had no clue what I wanted to do until my third year of college. I initially

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pursued cinematography and somehow talked my way into a 2nd assistant camera gig on a **Bad Brains** music video. It was a disaster. I couldn't figure out how to close a c-stand, and halfway into the shoot I lost the smart slate and was publicly fired by the DP.

I decided to give editing a try instead. Eager and willing to work for free, I landed an edit gig on a short doc about **Sally Mann**, the controversial photographer. This was my first real foray into the biz, and soon discovered that the work would be perfect training for filmmaking. Fortunately, I didn't mess the job up, and the film received an Oscar nomination. My editing career took off immediately. Working with many directors, and learning from their successes and mistakes ultimately gave me the confidence and desire to start making my own films.

What was the inspiration for Kassim the Dream?"

During the premiere of my film, "**The Devil's Miner**" (Tribeca Film Festival '05) the dreaded question kept coming up during the Q&A's -- "So, what's your next project?" I said I had a couple of exciting, top-secret projects in the works, but the truth was, I had no idea, and I was starting to worry. A few weeks later, **Kathleen Davidson**, my co-producer and wife, was doing her nightly remote control shuffle between **HBO** and **E!** when she stumbled upon a short news segment on HBO Real Sports about Kassim. Upon viewing the segment, we were struck by the charm and charisma of this former child soldier-turned-boxing champion of the world. How could a guy who was kidnapped at the age of six and forced to kill walk around with such a smile on his face? There was no doubt that a much bigger story needed to be explored. What is going on in this man's mind? How does he see the world? I instantly wanted to know more.

Please elaborate a bit on your approach to making the film...

I think like an editor, which tends to help me out significantly in the field. A lot of my choices on location are instinctual. I am constantly editing the film in my head, so I save a lot of time by not over shooting scenes which are not necessary.

My approach is to trust my instincts, listen carefully, and be impacted by what happens around me. On the simplest level, my films reflect my concerns or obsessions. What motivates me is the desire to learn more about my characters and the subject matter of the film itself. In the case of Kassim Ouma, he was a victim, kidnapped at the age of six, but he soon became a perpetrator who killed and admittedly enjoyed killing. He is a compelling, complicated character who at times seems to be both haunted and impossibly happy. My instincts were to tread carefully with Kassim. Slowly gain his trust and let him reveal himself on his terms. Kassim is incredibly strong, but just as emotionally fragile.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in developing the project?

I wanted Kassim to tell his own story, but his English was challenging to say the least. He is a fast talker and difficult to understand. It was an ongoing joke that Kassim didn't even understand Kassim. We would play him back his own phone messages and he wouldn't have a clue. A lot of time was spent just getting Kassim to just slow down and take his time.

One of the biggest challenges however was the fact that our story hinged on Kassim returning to Africa to reunite with his family. The Ugandan military publicly said that if Kassim was to return to Uganda, he would be tried for desertion and if found guilty, executed. A lot of political pressure was put on the government for Kassim's return, and the closer we came to achieving entry to Uganda, the more terrified Kassim became of the trip.

I can go describing the challenges, but it would surely turn into a novel.

What are your goals for the Tribeca Film Festival?

Seeing the film on the big screen with family and friends is what I look forward to the most. For me, that is when it finally sinks in that the movie is complete...until of course someone reminds me that releasing a film into the marketplace is half the work.

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