

Kassim the Dream



(Documentary) A Believe Media/Urban Landscapes production in association with Monaco Film Hamburg/Arte/ZDF Enterprises. Produced by Kief Davidson, Liz Silver. Executive producers, Luke Thornton, Forest Whitaker, Keisha Whitaker, Joshua Green. Co-producers, Kathleen Davidson, Tom Moran. Directed by Kief Davidson. With: Kassim Ouma, Tom Moran, Russell Peltz, Jermain Taylor. (English, Swahili, Acholi dialogue)

By Ronnie Scheib
April 25, 2008

The story of Kassim "the Dream" Ouma and his rise from Ugandan child soldier to world champion boxer combines serious human rights issues with incredible triumph-over-adversity sports lore. Docu arrives with ready-made dynamic ingredients but, in helmer Kief Davidson's hands, "Kassim the Dream" offers far more than a one-way trip to fame and fortune. As in his "Devil's Miner," Davidson illuminates how indomitable people in impossible situations negotiate with their demons. Haunting docu, with a complex, immensely likeable figure at its center, seems a formidable contender for arthouse release.

Initially, helmer Davidson's recreations of the experiences of a child soldier as recounted by Kassim are kept deliberately simple -- soldiers move through the bush in a pervasive atmosphere of dread.

Kassim was kidnapped at the age of 6, when his boarding school was attacked and everyone was either carried away or slaughtered by then-rebel forces under Yaweri Museveni. While still hardly more than a tot, Kassim tortured and killed people, ordered to do so under the threat of death.

After Museveni came to power, Kassim, in addition to his duties on the killing fields, began to box for the military team. When the team traveled to America for a match, 18-year-old Kassim -- who had no money or contacts and didn't speak English -- dared to defect.

At this point, the docu moves into sports mode, as Kassim's entourage of fellow Africans, fellow boxers and handlers -- chief among them manager Tom Moran whose extended Irish family Kassim has adopted ("I'm black Irish!") -- chime in to flesh out the backstory. Davidson follows the highs and lows of Kassim's career as a professional pugilist, with extensive footage of his fights as he wins the light middleweight championship only to lose it the next year, then moves up in weight class to valiantly, if unsuccessfully, challenge middleweight champ Jermain Taylor.

But alongside the bouts' usual backstage preps and postmortems, Davidson never loses sight of Kassim's inner child soldier. "Boxing is my therapy," Kassim declares. As Kassim shadowboxes his way through fields, gyms, airports and hotel rooms, Davidson frames a man jabbing at traumas that never go away.

Film's highly emotional finale takes place in Uganda, where Kassim finally is permitted to end his 10-year exile. Despite his stolen childhood and a father murdered by government troops in retaliation for Kassim's defection, home cannot easily be discarded. Indeed, the beauty and integrity of war-scarred northern Uganda can be perceived even in the round thatched architecture of a camp for displaced persons where Kassim gives boxing tips to locals.

New rebel forces have been unleashed on the land and child soldiers on both sides lay waste to the countryside. In docu's most amazing scene, a shaken Kassim attends a dramatic, supposedly therapeutic reenactment of a murderous attack on a village. Lenser Tony Molina Jr.'s camera moves through ersatz carnage, while child soldiers toting handmade, all-too-realistic fake guns stalk the periphery. Tech credits are ace.

Camera (color, HD), Tony Molina Jr.; editors, Tony Breuer, Davidson; music, Leo Heiblum, Jacobo Liberman, Andres Solis; music supervisors, Nnamdi Mowerta, Robert Singerman; sound, Mike Norman; supervising sound editor/sound design, Chris M. Jacobson. Reviewed at Tribeca Cinemas, New York, April 8, 2008. (In Tribeca Film Festival -- competing.) Running time: 87 MIN.

NEW YORK MOVIES

NINE TO WATCH

Simplifying Tribeca.
APRIL 23 THROUGH MAY 4

THE TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL IS BACK—and slowly learning from its many mistakes. After raising ticket prices to \$18 last year, the fest will settle for a slightly better \$15 (and less). After spreading itself too thin, it will cluster most of its screenings in Tribeca and around Union Square. Most important, the bloated festival has once again trimmed its often-spotty lineup, from its peak of almost 200 features to a mere 120. But are they any good? Well, we've seen more than half of the festival's films and found at least nine sure bets. Tickets go on sale April 19. **By Sara Cardace, Bilge Ebiri & Logan Hill, Apr 21, 2008**

GUNNIN' FOR THAT #1 SPOT

Filmmaker Adam Yauch's first non-Beastie Boys project is a funked-up, fast-paced doc that uses 2006's "Elite 24" all-star game at Harlem's Rucker Park to highlight eight high-school superstars (likely lottery picks Michael Beasley and Kevin Love, and top Brooklyn



prospect Lance Stephenson, among them). It's as much a snapshot of the contemporary basketball scene as it is a love letter to the famed uptown court. The soundtrack is, predictably, killer. —S.C.

KASSIM THE DREAM

Kief Davidson's gorgeously shot documentary gives us horror mixed with hope: Ugandan boxer Kassim Ouma was kidnapped and forced into guerrilla warfare as a child, deserted the Ugandan Army as a young man, and then came to America, where he battled his way toward becoming a boxing champion. Kassim is both relentlessly upbeat and totally unable to shake his murderous past.



The film provides no easy judgments—just the conflicted, charismatic figure at its center. —B.E.

THE WACKNESS

Hometown director Jonathan Levine's debut (a Sundance Audience Award winner) is an inebriated, thumping paean to being a white hip-hop head on the Upper East Side in the summer of 1994. Child star Josh Peck breaks out of kiddie TV to play a deadbeat teen who courts Olivia Thirlby and trades pot for therapy—when he isn't selling it



out of an Italian-ice cart. Thankfully, the buzzed-about make-out session between Mary Kate Olsen and Ben Kingsley is, like most of the film, more sweetly goofy than crude. —L.H.

ELITE SQUAD

The big winner at Berlin this year, José Padilha's social drama-cum-action epic is equal parts *City of God* and *Delta Force*—with all the breathtaking contradictions and possibilities that implies.



Following two security-squad buddies, this account of a ruthless war against drug lords in Rio's slums is very violent and not at all politically correct. Padilha's film has already sparked controversy in its homeland and at other fests; now it's New York's turn. —B.E.

FIRE UNDER THE SNOW

Makoto Sasa's timely documentary traces the Chinese occupation of Tibet as seen



through the eyes of Buddhist monk Palden Gyatso, who was imprisoned for 30 years and brutally tortured. Gyatso's unwavering faith in the face of horrific circumstances would make for essential viewing in itself, but it couldn't be more relevant now: News coverage that takes you right up through the current global strife over the 2008 Olympics in Beijing bookends his story perfectly. —S.C.

THE SECRET OF THE GRAIN

Abdellatif Kechiche's deserving César Best Picture winner is a family epic in miniature. An aging French-Arab dockworker is laid off, then attempts, with the help of his large and



contentious family, to open a couscous restaurant inside an old boat. What begins as a shapeless, immersive look at immigrant life in France gradually becomes a surprisingly deft piece of neorealist suspense, building up to the restaurant's heartbreaking opening night. —B.E.

PROFIT MOTIVE AND THE WHISPERING WIND

Inspired by lefty Howard Zinn, John Gianvito's haunting experimental documentary



takes us on a silent, meditative journey through the forgotten gravestones, memorial plaques, and other landmarks of America's underground history. We're not talking the Jefferson Memorial here. Gianvito foregrounds abolitionists, organizers, poets, and victims—from Sojourner Truth to Sacco and Vanzetti to Cesar Chavez. —B.E.

MY WINNIPEG

Canadian auteur Guy Maddin's fevered "docufantasia" recasts his hometown's history through the lens of his own family's story and his sordid imagination. The film takes the maverick filmmaker's patented blend of silent-movie aesthetics and dreamy, wink-wink



narratives and gives it all an intensely personal spin. With detours into scandalous melodrama as well as digressions on Canadian hockey, the result is Maddin's funniest and most touching film to date. —B.E.

BOY A

Theater vet John Crowley's Irish drama is a fresh, gritty cover of an old familiar standard: Con becomes ex-con, adjusts to life on the



outside. The script by the woefully underrated Mark O'Rowe (*Intermission*) is a tight leash linked by sharp surprises—and rising actor Andrew Garfield (wasted in *Lions for Lambs*) is held taut by the tough Brit character actor Peter Mullan, as his hard-ass caseworker. —L.H.



Boxer and Former Child Soldier Kassim Ouma on His Tribeca Documentary

by Bilge Ebiri
April 30, 2008

One of the most shattering documentaries at this year's Tribeca Film Festival, *Kassim the Dream* brings viewers into the world of Ugandan-born boxer Kassim Ouma, the 29-year-old former International Boxing Federation light-middleweight champion, and his struggle with his deadly past. Abducted from school at the age of 6 and forced to become a child soldier, Ouma fought in the National Resistance Army during Uganda's harrowing "bush war" in the eighties, engaging in brutal acts that still haunt him to this day. Later, he discovered boxing and fled for the U.S. to try his hand at going pro. Since then, under the tutelage of his manager Tom Moran (whom he affectionately calls "Uncle Tom"), Ouma has become not only a renowned athlete but also an outspoken advocate for African issues. We spoke to him during a visit to New York for the Tribeca premiere of *Kassim the Dream*.

You say at the end of the film that you're still trying to become the normal boy you once were. Do you think you'll ever get there?

I'm still looking. I will always be looking. Put yourself in my shoes. You're a child and you've been abducted. You don't know nobody — don't know who loves you and who doesn't. They tell you to do horrible things, and you have to do them. They order you to kill your best friend — and if you don't do it, they'll kill you. What would you do? You kill him, to survive. So, I can never forget it. Every day, I think about it. I'm trying, but I don't know if I'll ever overcome it.

The film has a very harrowing sequence depicting you in a losing fight. Is it tough watching yourself get beaten on film?

It's tough, of course. I really don't like to lose. But now I say that I'm retired. Not retired forever — just for a few months, to get myself ready. This was the first half of my career. Now I want to start the second half of my career and come back stronger.

One of the most moving scenes in the film comes when you revisit Uganda for the first time since fleeing the army there. Were you scared to go back?

When I first arrived in Uganda, I was very scared. I didn't know what would happen to me. When I returned to the army base that I left, I didn't know what they would do to me. I have to give big ups to President [Yoweri] Museveni, who pardoned me. Then Uncle Tom told me I'd have to go to the north [where a conflict still rages between rebels and government forces]. I tried to resist, but when I went, I saw all these people who really needed help. It was very hard for me. I opened up a clinic there, but they still need more help. The most important issue is clean water — not just in Uganda, but in all of Africa.

Do you think politicians in Washington genuinely want to help Africa?

Uncle Tom and I go over there twice a year to talk about these issues. I think politicians in Washington want to help, just like everybody else. There are a lot of groups out there really helping — like the ONE Campaign. Celebrities like Oprah and Madonna have gotten involved in African problems. It's all part of the same issue, the same fight. The problem is that even when food aid comes, the food doesn't reach the people who need it.

Tom Moran says that you're a political person, regardless of whether you want to be. Do you agree?

I don't like to go against the government or anything like that. But if it's political to help people, then I'm political.



Tribeca Scours the Earth for Human Drama

Movies Review of: Head Wind, and Kassim the Dream, and Milosevic on Trial

By S. JAMES SNYDER
May 2, 2008

Most of the buzz surrounding this year's Tribeca Film Festival, which comes to a close Sunday evening, has zeroed in on its red-carpet premieres. But only slightly less appreciated are the festival's powerful and probing foreign entries, several of which offer an unprecedented view of events that altered the course of the future.



Nicolas Johnson Former Ugandan child soldier and boxing champion Kassim Ouma is the subject of Kief Davidson's 'Kassim the Dream.'

Atop the roster is Mohammad Rasoulof's "Head Wind" (showing Fri., Sat., Sun.), a documentary doubling as a case study of how democracy is taking root in the Middle East through the adoption of technology, as the younger generation works its way around the oppressive propaganda of tyrannical governments.

A case in point concerns the cheap, flimsy satellite dishes that pop up throughout Mr. Rasoulof's film and are bought and sold illegally all across Iran. As he travels to remote villages, major cities, even to individuals living in tents in the desert, Mr. Rasoulof shows how one satellite and a pinch of electricity can bridge the modern and the fundamentalist. With the flip of a switch, people who have been denied access to the world at large are suddenly overwhelmed by music, news, and opinions spanning the globe.

Of course, there is dissent among the Iranian population, most of which knows nothing more than its government's crippling isolationist policy. In one village Mr. Rasoulof visits, the men are allowed to watch television, but the women are not. In a dramatic touch evoking his fellow documentarian Errol Morris, the director goes so far as to re-create raids in which government agents storm apartment complexes and stomp the satellite dishes.

Many Iranians, however, are not deterred. Out in the desert, Mr. Rasoulof allows us to marvel

at the ingenuity of the man who powers his cell phone with his car battery, his television and satellite dish with a portable generator; he is as connected to the outside world as just about any New Yorker. Later, in an urban area, Mr. Rasoulof listens as a young girl describes how adults love the entertainment made possible by satellites but remain unaware of their own ability to generate electronic communication. As she navigates the Internet, smiling in the glow of her computer monitor, we watch as technology empowers a generation to break free of ignorance one mouse click at a time.

If "Head Wind" is about a society gradually moving forward, then Kief Davidson's "Kassim the Dream" (showing Sat.) is about a former child soldier of Uganda working backward as he tries to reconcile the horrors of his past.

Mr. Davidson spent two years getting to know Kassim "The Dream" Ouma, whom some will recognize as the former world junior-middleweight boxing champion.

"It took two years to really get to know him," Mr. Davidson said. "But the closer I got, the more I saw the conflict in him. It would have been so easy to make a fluff piece about this great boxer who returns home to cope with his inner demons. But while I believe Kassim has a huge heart and is trying to do great things for Uganda, there are limitations for him — a dark side from his past you don't see right away."

Starting in the boxing ring before shedding light on the killing fields in Kassim's past, Mr. Davidson gingerly reconstructs the dark years of his subject's life. He was abducted at age 6 by the rebel army of Yoweri Museveni and forced for 12 years to slaughter men and women across Uganda in a civil war that has claimed tens of thousands of Ugandan lives. His saving grace was to be discovered on the army's boxing team — a hobby that Kassim refers to as his "therapy." He fled to America in 1998.

The stakes are raised when Kassim decides to return home to see his family — a visit that will only be possible if the Ugandan government pardons him for his past crimes. Traveling with Kassim on his harrowing six-day trip, Mr. Davidson cuts through the third-person testimonials, archival footage, and objectivity that one might expect to buffer a film of this nature.

"It was a roller coaster, those six days, and at that point in Africa he definitely forgot that the cameras were there," Mr. Davidson said. "And we reached a point where we had to get involved. We desperately wanted him to be pardoned; we talked to the ambassador. It wasn't just a film anymore, but a mission."

Michael Christoffersen's commitment to his subject can be measured not in years but in hours — 2,000 of them.

That's how much footage the director of "Milosevic on Trial" (showing Fri. and Sat.) had to wade through to fully understand the story of Slobodan Milosevic's trial before the Hague Tribunal for crimes against humanity. Poring over some 120,000 minutes of footage — that's 83 full days of video — Mr. Christoffersen immersed himself in this unprecedented trial of the former Serbian president, following the first case of its kind as it spanned various judges and lawyers and continued through numerous dramas involving witnesses recanting their statements and Milosevic's own efforts to obstruct the process at every step.

Beyond the genuine melodrama of the courtroom, Mr. Christoffersen was there to interview the trial's lawyers and observers as the three-ring circus unfolded.

"It brought it to life in a whole new way, to be there all the time," Mr. Christoffersen said. "It helped, since we weren't re-creating the moment, or asking people to re-enact the moment. We were there, in the hallways, close to the key players. You start to get a sense of how massive and frustrating this whole thing was."

More than a surreal courtroom drama, "Milosevic on Trial" offers a vivid survey of the atrocities perpetrated by Milosevic's Serbian government, but its true purpose is to provide a glimpse of the inner workings of the international court and a cumbersome legal process that is far larger than any one man.

"We wanted to show the breadth and the scope of this," Mr. Christoffersen said. "This is the first time we're getting a good look backstage. It's part of globalization, this way of dealing with conflicts and criminals, and it's very debatable about whether that's good or bad, but we simply wanted to get a good look at what exactly is going on here."

Boxing is therapy for former child soldier Kassim

Apr 30, 2008

By Kristina Cooke

NEW YORK, April 30 (Reuters) - What struck U.S. filmmaker Kief Davidson about Ugandan child soldier turned world champion boxer Kassim "The Dream" Ouma was that he was always smiling.

Davidson became fascinated by how Ouma, kidnapped from school at age 6 by the rebel army of Yoweri Museveni -- who is now Uganda's president -- dealt with his nightmare past.

More than two years after first seeing Ouma on a TV news segment, Davidson's beautifully shot documentary, "Kassim The Dream," debuted on Friday at New York's Tribeca Film Festival. In the film, Davidson tells the story of Ouma's first journey back to Uganda since he fled to the United States in 1998.



The filming took place last year during a cease-fire between Museveni's government and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army.

But one of Africa's longest wars rages on, after nearly two years of negotiations collapsed in early April. The 22-year civil war has killed tens of thousands of people and uprooted 2 million more in northern Uganda alone.

Ouma, who learned to box in the army, fled to the United States when he was 19 using a visa given to him for a military boxing championship. He arrived homeless and unable to speak English, at one point handing out pizza fliers before finding a boxing gym, where his talent became apparent.

"Boxing was my way out and it's my therapy," said Ouma, 29.

And it was his boxing fame, in particular his high-profile match against reigning middleweight champion Jermain Taylor that helped him obtain a pardon from Ugandan President Museveni and visit his homeland.

"For me, the story was Kassim getting back to Africa," Davidson said in an interview. "He was wanted for desertion, but because of his status there was the potential of a pardon. The fight with Jermain Taylor, which he lost, was the fight that opened up the doors to him going back.

"Kassim was afraid that it was a trick. The military had said before if he ever set foot in Uganda he would be tried for desertion and the punishment for desertion is death."

BUILT-IN PROTECTION

But, Davidson said, Ouma saw the cameras as his built-in protection, as the crew had the support of U.S. senators and nonprofit groups who helped Ouma get the pardon.

"We made it very clear that if we go and something happens it won't go silent," said Davidson, who won more than a dozen awards for his 2005 film "The Devil's Miner."

Davidson was also concerned some people might have a vendetta against Ouma. "Who knows who he has killed in the past? He was a victim and a perpetrator," Davidson said.

Ouma hopes the film will raise awareness about the plight of child soldiers and the people living in displacement camps, afraid to return to their villages.

"It's hard to talk about my childhood. But my heart is still with my people in Africa, and I have to spread the word," he said. "The most important thing is to never give up hope. They stole my childhood, but I never gave up hope."

Ouma won the International Boxing Federation's world junior light middleweight title in 2004 and holds records for the most punches thrown in a fight. He is raring to get back in the ring for what he calls the second round of his career.

After boxing, Ouma said, with his trademark broad smile, he would like to star in some martial arts movies.

"I'm going to be the African Jet Li," he said. "Watch out." (Editing by Michelle Nichols and Philip Barbara)

TRIBECA '08 INTERVIEW

"Kassim The Dream"

Director **Kief Davidson**

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 soldier, 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 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.

Hartford Courant.

Tribeca Film Festival: Stories Of Stolen Youth

By SUSAN DUNNE |
April 23, 2008

Ishmael Beah's best-selling memoir from last year, "A Long Way Gone," got the world talking about the use of child soldiers in Africa.

Among the 122 feature films showing at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York this week and next are two documentaries that will fascinate those who want a closer examination of the horrifying situation.

They focus on men who are trying to escape the horrors of their past and make their lives meaningful.

'War Child'

Emmanuel Jal doesn't know how old he is. His guess is 25 to 27. So he isn't sure how old he was when he was recruited by the Sudanese People's Liberation Army. But in his rap lyrics, he figures he was 8.

"I left home at age of 7. ... One year later, I had an AK-47."

In Karim Chrobog's documentary "War Child," we get to know Jal. We also get a terrific primer on the incendiary political situation in Sudan, then and now, and what led 10,000 children, over 20 years, to fight alongside adults to assert the rights of the southern part of the country.

Unlike Beah, Jal joined the military willingly. He wanted revenge for what happened to his village. The residents were massacred and their homes set aflame, leaving the survivors to wander until they found someplace to live.

After an almost unbelievable series of hardships — a boat sinking, a crocodile attack he fended off with a hand grenade, and later surviving by eating the vultures that were feasting on nearby corpses — Jal was rescued from his nightmarish life.

"I believe I survived for a reason, to tell my story, to touch lives," he raps on stage in one of his concerts.

Jal now lives in London, and travels all over the world to tell his story, in rap. He has fans who like his music because, as one says, it is rap with "no bitches, no billing, no hos."

An eloquent and gentle man, it's difficult to imagine Jal killing anyone. The memories of the person he used to be — "my dreams are like torments," he says — have made him, at times, suicidal. But he continues to rap, and work for better things for his homeland.

He hopes someday the Sudan will enjoy an American-style freedom of expression.

"I like the way Americans make fun of their president, and their president doesn't mind," he says. "You do that in Africa, you're asking to die."



'Kassim The Dream'

Kassim Ouma endured much the same trauma as Emmanuel Jal, but his salvation lies in another arena: a sports arena.

Ouma, a native of Magamaga, Uganda, was kidnapped at age 6 and forced to join the rebel forces. At 8, he began killing. Then he began torturing, and as he says, "it was fun because I was young."

In the 20-year conflict, 30,000 Ugandan children were used as soldiers. Resisters were killed, putting the ones who obeyed in the unusual position of both victim and villain.

After many years, Ouma vowed to escape. He got trained as a boxer; that became his ticket out. He fled to the United States.

Ouma says that in retaliation for his escape, his father was killed. In America, Ouma rose to the junior middleweight world championship.

"Kassim the Dream," Kief Davidson's documentary about Ouma, shows a man glowing with joy toward anyone who is kind to him, and living like a rap star. His joie de vivre and embrace of the American Dream is almost boyish.

But he is haunted by memories of Uganda. In the film's last segment, he goes back, with permission from Ugandan leader Yoweri Museveni, but his emotions overwhelm him. He no longer is fluent in Acholi, and he is asked to watch a dramatization of the horrors he and his comrades-in-arms inflicted. He falls apart at his father's grave.

Kassim's dream is the same dream of immigrants from eras past: to give his children a better life than he had. His story is horrifying, and at the same time gentle, and also sad, especially when one knows what has happened since the film wrapped. Ouma's career has taken a downturn.

Tribeca Film Festival

The 7th annual Tribeca Film Festival begins today and runs through May 4. The fest was founded by actor Robert De Niro and associates Jane Rosenthal and Craig Hatkoff after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, in an attempt to revitalize the economy and culture of Lower Manhattan.

Unlike many festivals, which take years to catch on, Tribeca was popular immediately, and has grown every year. It almost became too popular; last year's festival was a dizzying glut of movies — 160 features — which were spread out over the city, seemingly negating the lower-Manhattan emphasis. This year's lineup has been scaled back considerably and the venues are more geographically concentrated. Also, the ticket prices have been reduced.

Among the other films at the festival are some that shine a light on Lyme disease, the Middle East, steroid usage, the Homeless World Cup, Slobodan Milosevic, Bobby Valentine, Celia Cruz, Keith Haring and that crazy Frenchman who strung a high wire between the Twin Towers in 1974 and walked across.



Tribeca target titles

10 films generating interest among execs

By SHARON SWART, ANTHONY KAUFMAN

April 21, 2008

A mildly acquisitive Sundance coupled with economic woes and a tough theatrical marketplace have buyers casting a particularly cautious eye on this year's Tribeca lineup. Still, a few titles are piquing interest among execs. Here are 10:

Ball Don't Lie

Urban coming-of-ager about a streetballer (real-life basketball star Grayson Boucher) who overcomes his troubled past. Pic is feature debut of Brin Hill (short "Morning Breath") and based on Matt de la Pena's popular novel. Co-stars Ludacris, Nick Cannon and Rosanna Arquette. (Sales: Film Sales Co.)

Bart Got a Room

Quirky teen comedy that follows a young man's quest to find a prom date, as the marriage of his parents (William H. Macy and Cheryl Hines) falls apart. Written and directed by first-time feature helmer Brian Hecker. (Sales: Cinetic)

From Within

D.p. Phedon Papamichael ("Walk the Line") takes the helm with this psychological thriller about a string of apparent suicides in a small town; scripted by Brad Keene, with a young cast including Thomas Dekker, Elizabeth Rice, Rumer Willis. (Sales: Cinetic)

Gotta Dance

Helmed by Dori Berinstein ("ShowBusiness: The Road to Broadway"), docu chronicles the first senior citizen hip-hop dance team, the New Jersey NETSationals. (Sales: WMI)

Kassim the Dream

Docu follows the journey of Kassim "The Dream" Ouma, who went from being a child soldier in Uganda to a world champion boxer. Directed by Kief Davidson ("The Devil's Miner"). (Sales: attorney Andrew Hurwitz)

Lake City

Southern drama toplining Sissy Spacek and Troy Garity as a mother and son who try to reconcile their past; helmed by first-timers Hunter Hill and Perry Moore. Cast includes Dave Matthews, Drea de Matteo and Rebecca Romijn. (Sales: Film Sales Co.)

Tennessee

Road movie, helmed by Aaron Woodley ("Rhinceros Eyes"), about two brothers who travel back to their hometown and encounter a spirited woman (Mariah Carey) along the way. Produced by Lee Daniels ("Monster's Ball"). (Sales: CAA/Submarine)

Theater of War

Docu maverick John Walter ("How to Draw a Bunny") dissects German playwright Bertolt Brecht, weaving in behind-the-scenes footage of the Public Theater's recent staging of his antiwar play "Mother Courage" and the creative process of stars including Meryl Streep. (Sales: Required Viewing)

This Is Not a Robbery

Docu portrait of J.L. Hunter "Red" Rountree, who became one of the country's most notorious and senior serial bank robbers at 86 years of age. (Sales: Cinetic)

Trucker

Michelle Monaghan ("Gone Baby Gone") stars in James Mottem's debut, a drama about a female truck driver who must take over the care of her estranged 11-year-old son. Plum Pictures produced; cast also includes Benjamin Bratt and Joey Lauren Adams. (Sales: Cinetic)



N.Y. rolls out red carpet for Tribeca

Festival kicks off Wednesday night with 'Mama'

By WINTER MILLER

Apr. 22, 2008

The seventh annual Tribeca Film Fest opens on a light note Wednesday night with the world preem of Universal's Tina Fey-Amy Poehler laffer "Baby Mama" at midtown's Ziegfeld, with an after-party at the Museum of Modern Art.

In keeping with Tribeca's eclectic tradition, however, films set to unspool will include a significant number of international pics, political documentaries and fare from tyro filmmakers.

Selections for this year's fest, which runs through May 4, were trimmed by 25% from last year. Gripes about sprawling venues and high ticket fees have been addressed with two centralized hubs and lower prices.

"We want to keep a pulse on what's happening in the rest of the world," said Tribeca artistic director Peter Scarlet of the fest's picks. "You can get a better sense of how people live in other parts of the world through films, more than reading the newspaper. You feel people's souls."

Mainstream centerpieces are David Mamet's samurai warrior "Redbelt" and family-style actioner "Speed Racer." Additional outreach efforts to target the indie uninitiated are the outdoor screenings (the making of Michael Jackson's "Thriller," plus the video), an ESPN mini-fest of competish films and a traditionally well-attended downtown street fair that has brought several hundred thousand people to the Tribeca hood.

Fest is known for harvesting a reputable crop of docs. Buzzed-about screenings include Errol Morris' "Standard Operating Procedure," Madonna-produced Malawi AIDS orphans doc "I Am Because We Are," Gini Reticker's inspirational Liberian civil war doc "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," Kief Davidson's Ugandan-child-soldier-to-world-champion-boxer tale "Kassim the Dream" and Beastie Boy Adam Yauch's streetball doc "Gunnin' for That #1 Spot."

One sales agent echoed an oft-expressed sentiment that while Tribeca is not much of a market, "It's a great barometer of popular taste; it tells you what films people like."

Fest co-exec director Paola Freccero emphasized the underlying mission at this point of bringing like artists together to network.

"I hope our film festival is not only measured by how many films sell but (by) the connections made," said Freccero. To that end, the fest partners with its nonprofit arm, the Tribeca Film Institute, to sponsor the Tribeca All Access program.

In its fifth year, TAA has selected 37 filmmakers from traditionally marginalized communities to participate in mentoring, networking and pitch meetings with creative execs from shingles ranging from Zeitgeist to Miramax. Three films in this year's fest are from prior TAA alums. One success story is a 2005 alum: Helmer Benson Lee's breakdancing doc "Planet B-Boy" opened in Gotham in March with the highest per-screen average for an indie film nationwide in its first sesh.



Documentaries stir up heat at Tribeca Film Festival

By Jeremy Kay
New York
27 Apr 2008

In its short history the Tribeca Film Festival has been slow to trigger buying sprees and sure enough as the event reached the first weekend's halfway mark no major deals had closed.

However by Saturday interest had coalesced around Keif Davidson's World Documentary Competition entry *Kassim The Dream*, which recounts the remarkable story of Kassim Ouma, the former Ugandan child soldier who went on to become world junior middleweight boxing champion.

Another popular piece of non-fiction has been *This Is Not A Robbery*, Lucas Jansen and Adam Kurland's tale of JL Rountree, who was believed to be the world's oldest active bank robber.

Plum Pictures' drama *Trucker* has generated buzz as well as universal admiration for Michelle Monaghan's turn as an emotionally remote long-haul truck driver struggling to reconnect with her estranged son. New York-based Plum, which is also represented at Tribeca by *Bart Got A Room* and *Life In Flight*, expects a deal to close shortly on its Sundance entry *Birds In America* by Craig Lucas.

Channel 4/More 4 acquired UK television rights to Julie Checkoway's documentary *Waiting For Hockney*, which received its world premiere at Tribeca last Thursday.

Neal Checkoway and GERALYN WHITE DREYFOUS of *Littlest Birds* and JANA EDELBAUM and RACHEL COHEN of *iDeal Partners* produced and Michael Lesser served as executive producer.

Waiting For Hockney follows an eccentric 38-year-old art school graduate who tries to reinvent realism and believes the key to his success hinges on showing his work to his idol Hockney.

"We are thrilled that Channel 4 has embraced this wonderful documentary," Edelbaum said. "The struggle to create art and to seek validation for that work is a universal story."

Cactus Three partner Julie Goldman brokered the deal on behalf of *iDeal Partners* with Sandra Whipham for Channel 4/More 4.

Tribeca slims down for 7th edition

By Gregg Goldstein and Steven Zeitchik
March 12, 2008

NEW YORK -- The 2008 Tribeca Film Festival has followed through on its promise to trim its slate, announcing Tuesday a features lineup that's nearly 25% smaller than last year's.

The six-year-old fest responded to criticism that it has grown too unwieldy. "There's been elephantitis at film festivals worldwide," artistic director Peter Scarlet said, noting the reduction of features from 159 last year to 122 this year, culled from 2,329 submissions.

"Festivals are getting bigger and bigger, and with the digital revolution more films are getting made," Scarlet added. "There's a limit as to how much new information people can process."

This year, the fest will give a higher profile to those movies that will be screened. Indeed, the competition and Encounters sections announced Tuesday contain some star power, with docs that feature such celebs as Madonna, Richard Gere and Meryl Streep and assorted fictional features starring Sissy Spacek, Dave Matthews and Michelle Monaghan.

Twelve narrative and 12 docu competition features competing for \$100,000 in cash prizes were announced Tuesday, along with 21 Encounters features. Thirty-one countries are represented, including 55 world premieres. More lineup announcements are forthcoming.

New works from notable filmmakers include Shane Meadows' teen friendship comedy "Somers Town," Rosa von Praunheim's

autobiographical adoption docu "Two Mothers" (Meine Mutter), animator Bill Plympton's dark comedy "Idiots and Angels" and Melvin Van Peebles' character study "ConfessionsofaEx-Doofus-ItchyFooted Mutha."

Late last year, the fest hired Miramax vet Genna Terranova, who has helped acquire movies like the Felicity Huffman-starrer "Transamerica" and the Samantha Morton drama "Morvern Callar," to up the scripted quotient.

In addition to the trimmed slate, Scarlet noted a number of themes this year. "Almost without exception, these films focus on families or the dissolution and absence of families," he said.

Another trend: first-timers. There are 66 feature debuting efforts represented among the 145 directors in the fest.

Comedies were a large part of this year's Sundance film fest, but they will be less of a factor here. "There were more comedy submissions, but they either weren't very funny or didn't translate from other cultures," Scarlet said.

The previously announced opening-night film is Michael McCullers' surrogate mother comedy "Baby Mama." The New York-shot Universal Pictures film starring Tina Fey and Amy Poehler will be shown April 23. The fest runs through May 4 in various venues, and as with the number of features, it has scaled back its previously added uptown theaters to Lower Manhattan.

World Narrative Feature Competition:

"57,000 Kilometers Between Us" (57000 km entre nous), directed by Delphine Kreuter, (France) -- North American premiere
"The Aquarium" (Genenet al Asmak), directed by Yousry Nasrallah, (Egypt, France, Germany) -- North American premiere
"Eden," directed by Declan Recks, (Ireland) -- International premiere
"Let The Right One In" (Lat den ratte komma in), directed by Tomas Alfredson, (Sweden) -- North American premiere
"Lost Indulgence," directed and written by Zhang Yibai (China) -- International premiere
"Love, Pain and Vice Versa" (Amor, dolor y viceversa), directed by Alfonso Pineda-Ulloa, (Mexico) -- world premiere
"My Marlon and Brando" (Gitmek), directed and written by Huseyin Karabey (Turkey) -- North American premiere
"Newcastle," directed and written by Dan Castle (Australia) -- world premiere
"Quiet Chaos" (Caos calmo), directed by Antonello Grimaldi, (Italy) -- North American premiere
"Ramchand Pakistani," directed by Mehreen Jabbar, (Pakistan) -- world premiere
"Somers Town," directed by Shane Meadows, (U.K.) -- North American premiere
"Trucker," directed and written by James Mottem (U.S.) -- world premiere

World Documentary Feature Competition:

"Baghdad High," directed by Ivan O'Mahoney and Laura Winter (U.K.) -- international premiere
"Donkey in Lahore," directed by Faramarz K-Rahber (Australia) -- North American premiere
"Guest of Cindy Sherman," directed by Paul H-O and Tom Donahue (U.S.) -- world premiere
"Kassim the Dream," directed by Kief Davidson (U.S.) -- world premiere
"Milosevic on Trial" (Slobodan Milosevic -- Praesident under anklage), directed by Michael Christoffersen. (Denmark) -- North American Premiere.
"My Life Inside" (Mi vida dentro), directed by Lucia Gaja (Mexico) -- international premiere
"Old Man Bebo," directed by Carlos Carcas (Spain) -- North American premiere
"An Omar Broadway Film," directed by Omar Broadway and Douglas Tirola (U.S.) -- World Premiere.
"Pray the Devil Back to Hell," directed by Gini Reticker (U.S.) -- world premiere
"Theater of War," directed by John Walter (U.S.) -- world premiere
"Two Mothers" (Meine Mutter), directed by Rosa von Praunheim (Germany) -- North American premiere
"War, Love, God & Madness," directed by Mohamed Al-Darajji (U.K., Iraq, Netherlands, Palestine, Sweden) -- international premiere



TRIBECA '08 | Competition Slates Set for 7th Tribeca Fest

by Eugene Hernandez

March 11, 2008

Set for April 23 - May 4, 2008, the Tribeca Film Festival has unveiled the competition and Encounters slates for the upcoming Manhattan event. Touting a "streamlined selection" of 122 feature films, festival organizers are boasting 55 world premieres, 10 international premieres, 26 North American premieres, and 8 U.S. premieres this year. A dozen narrative and documentary titles are set for the two international competition sections, while twenty-one titles will screen in the festival's Encounters section. Among other stats, the festival noted that 66 filmmakers are making their feature directorial debuts, adding that the roster for the event was culled from 2,329 submissions.

"Each year the festival's programming team sets out to bring together a community of filmmakers from around the world and around the corner to share their artistic visions and stories with our international audiences and industry," said co-founder Jane Rosenthal. "This year's festival is a quintessential reflection of our world."

This year's Tribeca Film Festival is made up of ten sections: World Narrative Competition, World Documentary Competition, Encounters, Discovery, Midnight, Spotlight, Showcase, Restored/Rediscovered, Galas and Special Events. Additional lineups for the event will be announced later this week and early next week.

As previously announced, Michael McCullers's "Baby Mama" (from Universal Pictures) will open the 7th Tribeca fest on April 23rd. A New York production from Lorne Michaels and John Goldwyn, the film stars Tina Fey and Amy Poehler and is the directorial debut of Saturday Night Live writer McCullers. Rounding out the cast are Greg Kinnear, Dax Shepard, Romany Malco, Maura Tierney, Holland Taylor and Sigourney Weaver.

LINEUPS FOR THE 2008 TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL

World Narrative Feature Competition

57,000 Kilometers Between Us (57000 km entre nous), directed by Delphine Kreuter, written by Mathieu Lis, Emmanuel Finkiel and Kreuter. (France) - North American Premiere. A provocative yet charming take on digital communication, this debut follows a teenager caught between her stepdad (who records and posts the family's supposedly perfect life online), her real father (now a transsexual), and the refuge of her own online life as she searches for meaningful connections with others. French with English subtitles.

The Aquarium (Genenet al Asmak), directed by Yousry Nasrallah, written by Nasser Abdel-Rahman and Nasrallah. (Egypt, France, Germany) - North American Premiere. An anesthetist who listens to his patients mumbling under sedation and a late night talk show host (Hend Sabri) whose callers reveal secrets are the yearning principals of this intriguing new work, an ambitious examination of repression--both sexual and political--in Cairo today. Arabic with English subtitles.

Eden, directed by Declan Recks, written by Eugene O'Brien. (Ireland) - International Premiere.

Taking a frank look at the slow disintegration of a marriage

during the week before a couple's 10th anniversary, Recks catapults an intimate story from O'Brien's award-winning play onto the big screen while only enhancing its emotional impact.

Let The Right One In (Lat den rætte komma in), directed by Tomas Alfredson, written by John Ajvide Lindqvist. (Sweden) - North American Premiere. Based on Lindqvist's best-selling novel, this beautifully touching tale tells of the first romance for bullied 12-year-old Oskar and the girl next door, Eli. . . who also happens to be a vampire. Swedish with English subtitles. A Magnet Release.

Lost - Indulgence, directed and written by Zhang Yibai. (China) - International Premiere.

A visually stunning meditation on loss, Lost.Indulgence centers on the complicated relationships between a teenage son, his mother, and the secretive young woman they take into their home after a tragic accident. Mandarin with English subtitles.

Love, Pain and Vice Versa (Amor, dolor y viceversa), directed by Alfonso Pineda-Ulloa, written by Alex Marino. (Mexico) - World Premiere.

This stirring and moody psychological thriller finds two strangers subconsciously linked when their recurring dreams begin to topple their reality. Featuring strong performances by the sizzling Barbara Mori (La mujer de mi hermano) and Leonardo Sbaraglia (Intacto). Spanish with English subtitles. A Panamax Films Release.

My Marlon and Brando (Gitmek), directed and written by Hueseyin Karabey. (Turkey) - North American Premiere. They fell in love on a film set--but she's a Turk living in Istanbul and he's a Kurd living in Iraq, which US forces have just invaded. The lovers play themselves in this captivating, heartbreaking film, based on their own true story. English, Kurdish, Turkish with English subtitles.

Newcastle, directed and written by Dan Castle. (Australia) - World Premiere.

Revolving around Jesse, a 17-year-old surfer who treads the line between success and self-destruction, Newcastle saturates the senses with magnificent surfing footage and absorbs viewers in the fresh loves and personal tragedies of Jesse and his mates.

Quiet Chaos (Caos calmo), directed by Antonello Grimaldi, written by Nanni Moretti, Laura Paolucci and Francesco Piccolo. (Italy) - North American Premiere.

"How to grieve" is the unexpressed question faced by Pietro, a Rome television executive (Nanni Moretti), after his wife's sudden death. This movingly understated film traces his spiritual rebirth. Italian with English subtitles.

Ramchand Pakistani, directed by Mehreen Jabbar, written by Mohammad Ahmed. (Pakistan) - World Premiere.

Gorgeous colors enhance this tense tale, based on actual events, about a young Pakistani boy who, with his father, inadvertently crosses the border into India. Both wind up in jail for years, while mother (Nandita Das) is left bewildered and alone. Urdu with English subtitles.



Somers Town, directed by Shane Meadows, written by Paul Fraser. (UK) - North American Premiere.

A charming comedy by Shane Meadows (This Is England) built around the unlikely friendship between Tomo, who's turned 16 and fled to London from a difficult life in the Midlands, and Marek, a Polish immigrant who lives with his construction worker dad. English, Polish with English subtitles.

Trucker, directed and written by James Mottern. (USA) - World Premiere.

Michelle Monaghan is riveting as a tough-talking, devil-may-care truck driver who is faced with raising her estranged 11-year-old son after his father (Benjamin Bratt) is hospitalized. This eloquent and uplifting story also features Joey Lauren Adams and Nathan Fillion (Waitress).

World Documentary Feature Competition

Baghdad High, directed by Ivan O'Mahoney and Laura Winter. (UK) - International Premiere.

Four classmates (Kurd, Christian, Shiite, and Sunni/Shiite) in Baghdad are given cameras to document their last year in high school, resulting in a rare firsthand view of what it's like growing up where sectarian violence rages right outside the classroom window. Arabic with English subtitles.

Donkey in Lahore, directed by Faramarz K-Rahber. (Australia) - North American Premiere.

An unusual love story that follows the quixotic courtship of Brian, an ex-goth puppeteer from Australia, and Amber, the traditional Muslim girl he met and fell in love with in Pakistan. Can this unlikely couple survive the challenges they are about to face? English, Urdu, Arabic, Punjabi with English subtitles.

Guest of Cindy Sherman, directed by Paul H-O and Tom Donahue. (USA) - World Premiere.

Analyzing his relationship with reclusive artist Cindy Sherman leads videographer Paul H-O to confront his own ego and identity in this personal and often humorous documentary, which features unprecedented access to Sherman and a unique view of the New York art world.

Kassim the Dream, directed by Kief Davidson. (USA) - World Premiere.

Kassim "The Dream" Ouma went from Ugandan child soldier to world champion boxer. In this gripping tale of survival and determination, Kassim proves that even against all odds, a man can achieve his dreams and turn tragedy into inspiration. Part of the Tribeca/ESPN Sports Film Festival.

Milosevic on Trial (Slobodan Milosevic - Praesident under anklage), directed by Michael Christoffersen. (Denmark) - North American Premiere.

Defending himself against widely credited charges of genocide before an international court in The Hague, Serbia's former president proved frustratingly difficult to convict, as this riveting look at Milosevic and the chief prosecuting attorney attests. English, Albanian, Serbian with English subtitles.

My Life Inside (Mi vida dentro), directed by Lucia Gaja. (Mexico) - International Premiere.

At 17, mild-mannered Rosa Jimenez came to the United States to provide a better life for her family back in Mexico. This riveting, heartbreaking film examines how she came to stand accused of murder in a Texas courtroom. English, Spanish with English subtitles.

Old Man Bebo, directed by Carlos Carcas. (Spain) - North American Premiere.

Nearly 90, Bebo Valdes is one of the greatest living Cuban musicians. This joyful documentary celebrates the man who was a key figure in the development of mambo and whose life reflects the experiences of many Cubans since 1959. Spanish with English subtitles.

An Omar Broadway Film, directed by Omar Broadway and Douglas Tirola. (USA) - World Premiere.

Using a contraband video camera inside the notorious gang unit at Newark's Northern State Prison, incarcerated Bloods member Omar Broadway puts his life on the line to document guards' corruption and excessive force. His groundbreaking footage exposes the violent and unseen world behind bars.

Pray the Devil Back to Hell, directed by Gini Reticker. (USA) - World Premiere.

After more than a decade of civil wars leading to more than 250,000 deaths and one million refugees, a group of courageous women rose up to force peace on their shattered Liberia and propel to victory the first female head of state on the African continent.

Theater of War, directed by John Walter. (USA) - World Premiere.

Art and politics converge in this provocative look at the life and ideas of Bertolt Brecht, interwoven with The Public Theater's staging of his Mother Courage. Meryl Streep, Tony Kushner, Kevin Kline, and George C. Wolfe take audiences on an unprecedented behind-the-scenes look at their creative process.

Two Mothers (Meine Mutter), directed by Rosa von Praunheim. (Germany) - North American Premiere.

At age 58, award-winning filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim found out he was adopted. The search for his biological mother leads him--and the audience--on a dark and engrossing journey into a world of prison hospitals, the SS, and the Nazi occupation of Europe. English, German, Latvian with English subtitles.

War, Love, God & Madness, directed by Mohamed Al-Daradji. (UK, Iraq, Netherlands, Palestine, Sweden) - International Premiere.

It's no surprise that making a feature film in Iraq in 2003 wasn't a picnic. But this extraordinary account of the peril-filled ordeal that the director and crew of Ahlaam went through must be seen to be believed. Arabic with English subtitles.

Encounters

Bart Got a Room, directed by Brian Heckler, written by Ed Hart. (USA) - World Premiere, Narrative.

It's ticktock ticktock for Danny as the prom approaches, and he still doesn't have a date. With the help of his plain-Jane best friend and likable but wacky parents (Cheryl Hines and William H. Macy), his hopes for that "special" night may come true in this colorful and quirky comedy.

The Caller, directed by Richard Ledes, written by Alain Didier-Weill and Ledes. (USA) - World Premiere, Narrative.

Frank Langella gives a tour-de-force performance as an energy executive who tries to expose his corporation's corrupt practices in this quiet yet chilling neo-noir thriller. He hires a private investigator (Elliott Gould) to forward his efforts, but who is investigating whom? English, French with English subtitles.



Notes from the Underground

Brace yourself for a bumper crop of topflight indie films

May 19, 2008

– Adam Duerson and David Epstein



SI'S FAVORITE It would be easy to write off light middleweight Kassim Ouma as just another immature boxer. He has a history of irresponsible behavior in and out of the ring and is prone to odd pronouncements like, “I have six kids left inside of me that I haven’t released yet; they’re like albums.” But director Kief Davidson’s **Kassim the Dream** exposes a tortured soul who acts like a child because he never got to be one. As a six-year-old in Uganda, Ouma was kidnapped by insurgents and forced to torture and kill for his captors; boxing became his ticket to an escape to the U.S. when he was a teen. Davidson catches Ouma at the moment when he returns to Uganda to confront his past. If you don’t like to cry at the movies, be careful. As in boxing, things can get messy when you let your guard down. ★★★★★1/2

Through boxing, Ouma escaped nightmarish childhood

By Joe Tessitore
March 26, 2008

Seemingly every night, ESPN programming is filled with world-class athletes who emerged from challenging backgrounds. Many have similar stories. Socioeconomic hurdles -- including hardships, limits or tragedy -- are the norm.

Now another world-class athlete who is overcoming adversity will have his story told.

This story, however, is far from that norm. This story starts in a living hell and may never escape from it. It's been told before, but now a much brighter spotlight is shining on it in the Tribeca ESPN Sports Film Festival -- and with new revelations.

Of all those athletes on our air this week who carry the tag of finding a better life through sports, only one of them was forced to repeatedly murder as a child. Only one of them escaped that life which resulted in the vengeful, brutal killing of his father. Only one had cameras follow him as he returned to that horrific place and allowed us to see his self-medicating remedy. Only boxing star Kassim Ouma knows the American dream from a perspective few, if any, have ever seen.

Ouma's story has been told numerous times through print and television. Now, it's about to be uncovered with new twists in a long-form film. It makes for interesting crossroads in Ouma's life.

Ouma will be the focus of this week's "Friday Night Fights" main event against Cornelius Bundrage (ESPN2, 9 p.m. ET). Then, on April 25, the documentary "Kassim the Dream" premieres at the Tribeca ESPN Sports Film Festival.

"[Ouma] goes into detail about killing people and how he felt about killing people," said director/producer Kief Davidson. "I spent two years with him and had to gain his trust for him to reveal things slowly."

As a 6-year-old in Uganda, Ouma was abducted from his school and trained to kill by a savage upstart military. He experienced inhumane abuse and crossed lines he can never cross back from. Through boxing, he escaped to America to find freedom, success and attempts at healing. He became a world titlist and fought pay-per-view star Jermain Taylor for the middleweight crown.

Davidson's film delivers much more than just a recap of an African child soldier. He brings this story where no one else was able to go -- back to where it began.

"The idea of him going back to the army base he had come from was daunting. Kassim was visibly scared. He believed they would arrest him and try him for desertion," Davidson said.

With the producer pressuring the national government, Ouma was allowed back into Uganda. Two cameras on him at all times captured his triumphant return. Countrymen crowded the airport and rushed the streets to greet Ouma. Young boys reached high towards the sunroof of his motorcade to touch his world title belt.

The heroic welcome would be replaced by harsh realities. Those same cameras would film him reuniting with his family and visiting his father's grave. The whole time, Ouma was thinking somebody might kill him, perhaps a relative of a life he ended or perhaps a young boy-turned-angry man who remembers how Ouma once ruined lives.

"He needed to deal with some of the demons he was battling for so long," Davidson noted. "It will still be a lifetime of him trying to figure out his past."

Understandably so.

We also get a glimpse of just how Ouma deals with figuring out that past. He smokes -- and not Marlboros. The trailer for the movie will show you enough. His need to heal has been a lifelong battle for Ouma. The drug and alcohol use is just one of the sneak peeks Davidson gives us into his thorny life.



Nothing in the ring can compare to the challenges that Ouma faced as a child in Uganda.

"There's ways he copes with his past," Davidson said. "He has an attitude of, 'This is who I am, make your own judgments.'"

As a fighter, Ouma is skilled. As a human, he is flawed. Flaws brought about from deep fractures in a child's psyche and spirit.

"He appears to have attained the American dream, but the American dream to Kassim can be very destructive," Davidson said.

Ouma has fought on ESPN through much of his career. For fight fans, he is a well-known, volume-punching, elite-level junior middleweight. He has always come across as a likable fellow.

He is always smiling, forever optimistic, yet sad in a way. It's been said all fighters are sad. Ouma's sorrow, portrayed through Davidson's cinematography, somehow seems deeper and penetrates further into our sensitivities than others.

"Kassim is a complex character. There are many sides to him," Davidson thoughtfully explained. "People may not like him because he has killed. The challenge was how he would come across. Kassim has a huge heart -- he can be self-destructive, for sure, but at the end of the day he has a huge heart. He isn't perfect; he's flawed like we all are. I don't think any of us could have walked in his shoes."

Those shoes have walked through hell. No one should ever have to face what he faced, especially not as a 6-year-old child. Now, thanks to Davidson's recent years of hard work and Ouma's cooperation, we will soon be able to experience his story in a new way.

The trailer for the movie can be found at www.kassimthedream.com.

ESPN broadcaster Joe Tessitore is on the advisory committee for the Tribeca ESPN Sports Film Festival.



In winning a world title and competing with the very boxing fighters of his weight class, Ouma has lived the American dream.

Tribeca Film Festival Mini-Review No. 8

May 1, 2008

By Neil Best

Kassim the Dream, 86 minutes.

This is the remarkable story of Kassim (The Dream) Ouma, who overcame a shattering childhood as a Ugandan soldier - first killing a person at age 8 - to become a successful boxer in the United States.

Strange as it sounds, the early telling of the story is not the most compelling part of the film. That comes later, when the cameras follow Ouma as he returns to his native country by special permission of the president and visits his beloved grandmother and his father's grave.

One great scene: Kassim walks past a flag-waving Don King en route to a bout. "Only in America," Ouma says.

Responds King: "Don't you forget it it - greatest country in the world."

Another: Ouma explains the importance of abstaining from sex before a bout, saying sperm "is the motor oil of the body."



Another: Ouma, steeped in American culture after a decade living here, blurts this out in the presence of the Ugandan president: "I love you, nigga!"



TriBeCa Film festival's delicate balancing act

BY JOHN ANDERSON | Special to Newsday
April 21, 2008

The most poignant movie experience of the TriBeCa Film Festival, which opens Wednesday, may turn out to be an 89-minute documentary about a trapeze artist, made up largely of black-and-white still photographs, and set in - and above - a Manhattan of 34 years ago.

If this sounds at all peculiar, consider the title character of "Man on Wire": French aerialist Philippe Petit, who electrified New York in August 1974, by wire-walking between the towers of the World Trade Center.

TriBeCa, the festival, now 7 years old, was created and/or presented as an effort to revitalize the very target of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the area that lay in the shadow of those now-vanished buildings. So there are apt to be a few moist eyes in the house when Petit's story rolls across the screen. After all, the man did for the Trade Center what King Kong did for the Empire State Building.

'Man on Wire' and balance

But "Man on Wire's" presence in TriBeCa has a certain metaphorical content, too. When Petit ambled out illegally 110 stories above the street, he did what he did against all odds, in defiance of good sense, and maybe just because he could. A lot of TriBeCa's filmmakers, though closer to the ground, will feel a certain kinship with the movie's subject.

And then there's the fact that TriBeCa itself has always been part film festival, part balancing act. Never more than now.

"The mission of the festival is to bring the widest group of films and filmmakers in front of the biggest audience," said Jane Rosenthal, the movie producer who, with her longtime colleague Robert De Niro, founded the festival in 2002. She was asked about this year's changes, which involve situating the festival almost entirely in the Union Square area, rather than its namesake neighborhood.

"Let's face it," she said, "there are no venues downtown. There's no place for us to screen pictures that isn't in front of a bunch of steel going up. So we had to create a hub, somewhere we could find a new home."

"It's still New York," De Niro said during an interview at the TriBeCa Film Center. "TriBeCa is TriBeCa, and the center of gravity is still here. To me, it's a logical evolution of the festival. It doesn't mean anything else."

Both Nancy Schafer and Paola Freccero, the co-executive directors of the festival, stressed that TriBeCa's purpose was

to be something for everyone, "a populist festival," in Freccero's words. There seems to be room for that. The film events that dot the yearly cinema calendar in the New York metro area - from Lincoln's Center's New York Film Festival to its cousin at Stony Brook University - might be considered elitist, given that their purpose is to find the best films for their audience, as deemed such by the rarefied taste of their programmers. TriBeCa wants to do something else.

"We are a film festival for movie lovers," said Freccero. "If there can be such a thing as a world-class film festival for the broadest possible audience, we are it. And we're a reflection of the city we are in." Until TriBeCa came along, she added, "there really wasn't a festival as broad and diverse and as wide-reaching as New York is."

A broad range

That wide-reaching, diverse broadness is evident in this year's range of films: The opening film, "Baby Mama," the Tina Fey-Amy Poehler surrogate-mother comedy, screens Wednesday; "Trucker" is about a different kind of mother, a long-haul trucker (Michelle Monaghan), suddenly coming to terms with her estranged son. "Speed Racer," which closes the festival, brings the Japanese TV hero into the new millennium; "Kassim the Dream" is about a different kind of heroism, that of a Ugandan child soldier-cum-champion boxer. "War, Inc." is a comedy about corporate war; "Standard Operating Procedure" is Errol Morris' haunted, haunting look at the photographs that define, rightly or wrongly, Abu Ghraib. And while animator deluxe Bill Plympton gets wacky with "Idiots and Angels," cinematographer-turned-director Santosh Sivan closes out the Raj era with the lush "Before the Rains."

There are fewer films in the festival this year, but more screenings of individual films. And while De Niro resisted any comparison to the Sundance empire ("Sundance is Sundance and it's great, but this is another thing") TriBeCa does have an institute and educational programs and the All-Access program, "designed to help foster relationships between film industry executives and filmmakers from traditionally underrepresented communities," according to the literature. It's a given that what separates the AAA film festivals from their lessers is how much business gets done, how many deals are cut. TriBeCa is clearly concerned with this, but Rosenthal indicated there are other priorities.

"We're as much about courting the audience," she said, "as we are about the courting the industry."



THE FILM FESTIVAL - INSIDE AND OUT

TRIBECA DRIVE-IN. Three nights of free outdoors screenings, at the World Financial Center Plaza, West Street between Vesey and Liberty streets.

Thursday, 7:30 p.m. - "Thriller" Night: The 25th anniversary of the Michael Jackson video is celebrated with a screening of "The Making of Thriller" hosted by director Jon Landis, plus more Jacksonian activities.

Friday, 7:30 p.m. - "Meerkat Manor: The Story Begins": The long-form version of the Animal Planet series.

Saturday, 7:30 p.m. - "Fans' Favorite Football Flick": Vote at tribecaespn.com and then come see which movie scored.

TRIBECA FAMILY FESTIVAL STREET FAIR. Daylong event featuring performances, activities, local merchants and more. May 3 from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. along Greenwich Street (between Hubert and Duane streets).

BREAKING THE BAND. Sponsored by Target. Live music event featuring the Hold Steady, the Virgins, the Republic Tigers and Bad Veins, May 2, 6 p.m., Webster Hall, 125 E. 11th St., near Fourth Avenue, Manhattan. Tickets available through the TriBeCa Film Festival box office at tribecafilmfestival.org.

TRIBECA/ESPN SPORTS FILM FESTIVAL AND SPORTS DAY. Interactive games, events and family activities, co-sponsored by the cable sports network, and tied in to more than a dozen sports-related movies playing the film festival. May 3, all day, North Moore Street, between Greenwich-West streets.

WHAT'S PLAYING: HOT TICKETS

BABY MAMA - TriBeCa's opening night comedy, starring Tina Fey and Amy Poehler. (Wednesday, 7:30 p.m., Ziegfeld Theater)

SPEED RACER - The Wachowski siblings ("The Matrix") bring the old Japanese anime to high-tech life, on the festival's closing night (May 3, 6:30 p.m. Borough of Manhattan Community College, 8:30 p.m., Pace University).

REDBELT - David Mamet's latest, starring the phenomenal Chiwetel Ejiofor as a famed jiu-jitsu teacher forced into the ring. (Friday 6:30 p.m., BMCC; Sunday, 6:30 p.m., Village VII).

TENNESSEE - Mariah Carey returns to the big screen in a tale of two brothers on the road to discovery. (Saturday, 6 p.m., BMCC; Sunday 6:15 p.m., Village East; more.)

WE'VE SEEN 'EM - OR WE REALLY WANT TO

BOY A - Newcomer Andrew Garfield and veteran Peter Mullan ("The Magdalene Sisters") in a drama that will leave audiences stunned.

CHEVOLUTION - How that iconic picture of Bolivian revolutionary Che Guevara became a capitalist tool.

KASSIM THE DREAM - Kassim Ouma's story, from Ugandan child soldier to champion boxer.

MY WINNIPEG - Eccentric Canadian genius Guy Maddin, in an ode to his home province.

SAVAGE GRACE - Unbearably beautiful film about one rather sordid real-life family. Julianne Moore stars.

SECRECY - The U.S. government's cult of classified information, and how/why we don't know anything.

STRANGERS - Poetic, romantic drama about an Israeli man and a Palestinian woman who collide on neutral territory - Paris.

WAITING FOR HOCKNEY - Artist Billy Pappas spent nearly a decade working on one picture. What then?

WORLDS APART - Danish thriller maestro Niels Arden Oplev directs a drama about romance and belief.

Tribeca Slims Down for 7th Edition

March 11, 2008

By Gregg Goldstein

NEW YORK -- The 2008 Tribeca Film Festival is cutting its competition features lineup by nearly 25%, responding to criticism that the six-year-old event grew too large and unwieldy from its initial slate.

"There's been elephantitis at film festivals worldwide," artistic director Peter Scarlet said, explaining the reduction from 159 features last year to 122 this year, culled from 2,329 submissions. "They're getting bigger and bigger, and with the digital revolution more films are getting made. There's a limit as to how much new information people can process, so this number is more easily handled. The festival began as a response to Sept. 11, so we're paying attention to what people are saying."

Twelve narrative and 12 docu competition features competing for \$100,000 in cash prizes were announced Tuesday, along with 21 Encounters features. More hefty lineup announcements are forthcoming. The 122-feature slate has a bit of star power, with films ranging from docs featuring Madonna, Richard Gere and Meryl Streep to fictional features with Sissy Spacek, Dave Matthews and Michelle Monaghan in competition and Spotlight sections.

"Almost without exception, these films focus on families or the dissolution and absence of families," Scarlet said. Thirty-one countries are represented in the slate, including 55 world premieres, 10 international premieres, 26 North American premieres, eight U.S. premieres and 18 New York premieres.

New works from notable filmmakers include Shane Meadows' teen friendship comedy "Somers Town," Rosa von Praunheim's autobiographical adoption docu "Two Mothers" (Meine Mutter), animator Bill Plympton's dark comedy "Idiots and Angels" and Melvin Van Peebles' character study "Confessionsofa Ex-Doofus-ItchyFooted Mutha."

"This year there's far more work by new filmmakers, all either beginning or unknown," Scarlet said of the 66 feature directorial debuts among the 145 directors in the fest. Twenty-four competition films come from 18 countries, and more than half are by first-timers.

World Narrative Feature Competition

"57,000 Kilometers Between Us" (57000 km entre nous), directed by Delphine Kreuter, (France) -- North American premiere

"The Aquarium" (Genenet al Asmak), directed by Yousry Nasrallah, (Egypt, France, Germany) -- North American premiere

"Eden," directed by Declan Recks, (Ireland) -- International premiere

"Let The Right One In" (Lat den ratte komma in), directed by Tomas Alfredson, (Sweden) -- North American premiere

"Lost Indulgence," directed and written by Zhang Yibai. (China) -- International premiere

"Love, Pain and Vice Versa" (Amor, dolor y viceversa), directed by Alfonso Pineda-Ulloa, (Mexico) -- world premiere

"My Marlon and Brando" (Gitmek), directed and written by Huseyin Karabey. (Turkey) -- North American premiere

Comedies were a large part of this year's Sundance fest, but less so at Tribeca. "There were more comedy submissions, but they either weren't very funny or didn't translate from other cultures," Scarlet said.

Up-and-coming producers Plum Pictures scored three fest entries: James Mottern's dramatic competition entry "Trucker" starring Monaghan, Benjamin Bratt and Joey Lauren Adams and two spotlight entries: Brian Heckler's comedy "Bart Got a Room" starring Cheryl Hines and William H. Macy and Tracey Hecht's drama "Life in Flight" starring Patrick Wilson and Amy Smart.

The awards will be for best narrative feature, best new narrative filmmaker (for first- or second-time feature directors), best actress and actor in a narrative film, best documentary feature and best new documentary filmmaker (for first- or second-time feature directors).

New York-based productions will vie for the NY Loves Film -- Documentary award and the Made in New York -- Narrative. The Cadillac audience award for best feature film, best narrative short, best documentary short and the Student Visionary Award will also be presented.

The 10 categories this year are: World Narrative Competition, World Documentary Competition, Encounters, Discovery, Midnight, Spotlight, Showcase, Restored/Rediscovered, Galas and Special Events.

The Discovery and Midnight sections will be announced Thursday, followed by the Spotlight, Showcase, Restored/Rediscovered and special events announcement Monday.

The previously announced opening-night film is Michael McCullers's surrogate mother comedy "Baby Mama." The New York-shot Universal Pictures film starring Tina Fey and Amy Poehler will be shown April 23. The fest runs through May 4 in venues, and as with the number of features, it has scaled back its previously added uptown theaters to lower Manhattan.

The following is a complete list of entries in the narrative and docu competitions and the Encounters section:

"Newcastle," directed and written by Dan Castle. (Australia) -- world premiere

"Quiet Chaos" (Caos calmo), directed by Antonello Grimaldi, (Italy) -- North American premiere

"Ramchand Pakistani," directed by Mehreen Jabbar, (Pakistan) -- world premiere

"Somers Town," directed by Shane Meadows, (U.K.) -- North American premiere

"Trucker," directed and written by James Mottern (U.S.) -- world premiere

World Documentary Feature Competition:

"Baghdad High," directed by Ivan O'Mahoney and Laura Winter (U.K.) -- international premiere

"Donkey in Lahore," directed by Faramarz K--Rahber (Australia) -- North American premiere

"Guest of Cindy Sherman," directed by Paul H--O and Tom Donahue (U.S.) -- world premiere

"Kassim the Dream," directed by Kief Davidson (U.S.) -- world premiere

"Milosevic on Trial" (Slobodan Milosevic -- Praesident under anklage), directed by Michael Christoffersen. (Denmark) -- North American Premiere.

"My Life Inside" (Mi vida dentro), directed by Lucia Gaja (Mexico) -- international premiere

"Old Man Bebo," directed by Carlos Carcas (Spain) -- North American premiere

"An Omar Broadway Film," directed by Omar Broadway and Douglas Tirola (U.S.) -- World Premiere.

"Pray the Devil Back to Hell," directed by Gini Reticker (U.S.) -- world premiere

"Theater of War," directed by John Walter (U.S.) -- world premiere

"Two Mothers" (Meine Mutter), directed by Rosa von Praunheim (Germany) -- North American premiere

"War, Love, God & Madness," directed by Mohamed Al--Daradji (U.K., Iraq, Netherlands, Palestine, Sweden) -- international premiere

Encounters

"Bart Got a Room," directed by Brian Heckler (U.S.) -- world premiere, narrative

"The Caller," directed by Richard Ledes (U.S.) -- world premiere, narrative

"Celia the Queen," directed by Joe Cardona and Mario De Varona (U.S.) -- world premiere, documentary

"Chevolution," directed by Trisha Ziff and Luis Lopez. (U.S.) -- world premiere, documentary

"The Chicken, The Fish and The King Crab" (El pollo, el pez y el cangrejo real), directed by Jose Luis Lopez--Linares (Spain) -- North American premiere, documentary

"Confessionsofa Ex-Doofus-ItchyFooted Mutha." directed and written by Melvin Van Peebles (U.S.) -- world premiere, narrative

"The Dalai Lama: Peace and Prosperity," directed by Mark Bauman (U.S.) -- world premiere, documentary

"Days in Sintra" (Diario de Sintra), directed and written by Paula Gaitan (Brazil) -- North American premiere, documentary

"Everywhere at Once," directed by Peter Lindbergh and Holly Fisher (France) -- world premiere, narrative

"Hotel Gramercy Park," directed by Douglas Keeve (U.S.) -- world premiere, documentary

"I Am Because We Are," directed by Nathan Rissman (U.K.) -- world premiere, documentary

"Idiots and Angels," directed and written by Bill Plympton (U.S.) -- world premiere, narrative

"Lake City," directed and written by Perry Moore and Hunter Hill (U.S.) -- world premiere, narrative

"Life in Flight," directed and written by Tracey Hecht (U.S.) -- world premiere, narrative

"The Objective," directed by Daniel Myrick (U.S.) -- world premiere, narrative

"A Portrait of Diego: The Revolutionary Gaze" (Un retrato de Diego: La revolucion de la mirada), directed by Gabriel Figueroa Flores and Diego Lopez (Mexico) -- international premiere, documentary

"A President to Remember," directed and written by Robert Drew (U.S.) -- world premiere, documentary

"Terra," directed by Aristomenis Tsirbas (U.S.) -- U.S. premiere, narrative

"Three Kingdoms: Resurrection of the Dragon," directed by Daniel Lee (China, South Korea) -- North American premiere, narrative

"Whatever Lola Wants," directed by Nabil Ayouch (France, Morocco) -- North American premiere, narrative

"The Zen of Bobby V," directed by Jonah Quickmire Pettigrew and Andrew Jenks (U.S.) -- world premiere, documentary



Kassim Ouma Hits The Big Screen

The heart wrenching story of former world champion Kassim Ouma hits the big screen this weekend with the world premiere of "Kassim the Dream" at the prestigious Tribeca Film Festival co-founded by Robert De Niro in Lower Manhattan. In this inspiring tale of survival and determination, we see Kassim "The Dream" Ouma transformed from a Ugandan child soldier to a world champion boxer..

Ouma was born in Uganda, kidnapped by the rebel army and trained to be a child soldier at the age of 6. When the rebels took over the government, Kassim became an army soldier who was forced to commit many horrific atrocities, making him both a victim and perpetrator. He soon discovered the army's [boxing](#) team and realized the sport was his ticket to freedom. After 12 years of warfare, Kassim defected from Africa and arrived in the United States. Homeless and culture shocked, he quickly rose through the boxing ranks and became Junior Middleweight Champion of the World.

Kassim, now age 29, seems to have obtained the American Dream with his jovial nature, fame and hip hop lifestyle. In the film, as Kassim trains for his next world title fight against Jermain Taylor in Little Rock Arkansas, keeping his demons out of the ring becomes increasingly difficult. His desires to reunite with family in Uganda intensify when Kassim's only hope for a safe return is a military pardon from the president and government responsible for his abduction.

Award winning producer/director Kief Davidson shot over 200 hours of footage over the last 3-years for the documentary feature film. Actor Forest Whitaker, who won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin, is the Executive Producer of the Ouma film. The film will compete against 11 other films for the Best Documentary in the festival, a prize that went last year to "Taxi to the Dark Side," which later went on to win the Academy Award.

More information and a movie trailer are available at the [Kassim the Dream.com](#) website or the Tribeca Film Festival website.

quicksilber

Sunday, April 27, 2008

by Kenneth Silber

Go see Kassim

We just saw an excellent film at the Tribeca Film Festival: *Kassim the Dream*. It's a documentary about Kassim Ouma, a Ugandan boxer and former soldier. He was kidnapped at age 6 by a rebel army, which later became the government army. He came to the U.S. to participate in an international military boxing competition--and he stayed, becoming a deserter to the Ugandan army that had forced him to join, and opening the way for a new, soaring career. He's a remarkable person--witty, vivacious, decent and incredibly resilient. He's not presented as a pure victim or saint. As a child, he was forced to kill and torture--and he found some of that to be "fun"; his conscience developed later. The film shows an uneasy interplay between Kassim and the Ugandan authorities, as he seeks a pardon for desertion and permission to visit Uganda. Kassim was present at the showing to answer questions, with filmmaker Kief Davidson. The audience was very impressed by the film and its subject. Davidson seems a thoughtful and very honest type, and Kassim was shy but engaging (though there was one lame question from the audience when a woman probed Kassim as to why he was seen on film wearing colors of Jamaica, not his native Uganda--as if he needed to prove his ethnic or national bona fides to her). An interesting question is how the Ugandan government will react to this film, which notes that the present government emerged from the same force that kidnapped Kassim and committed numerous atrocities. One hopes the authorities in Kampala will take the diplomatic approach that this film is part of their troubled country's needed reconciliation.

Friday, April 25, 2008

Kassim The Dream

Documentary film to screen at the
Tribeca Film Festival



Written by Laura Adibe *Photography by* Tribeca Film
Festival website



Kief Davidson directs the story of Kassim “The Dream” Ouma, a former junior middleweight boxing world champ. Kassim, born in Uganda, had been trained as a child soldier at six years old and forced to commit unspeakable atrocities until he was eighteen. Eventually, Kassim comes to the United States and tries to start a new life for himself, although the memories of his past continue to haunt him.

Kassim decides to go back to Uganda and reconnect with his family back home, but the journey home has its own obstacles. This is the story of a man who must confront his past so that he can continue on the path towards his future.

The 86-minute film, which is executive produced by Forest Whitaker and his wife, Keisha Whitaker, will screen at the Tribeca Film Festival and is entered in the World Documentary Film Competition. Tribeca is an annual celebration of film, music and culture which takes place in Manhattan, New York, bringing together people from all walks of life.

You can watch the trailer for this film on Tribeca’s website and learn more about other films that will be screened.

CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of boxer Jermain Taylor.

The Fight Of His Life

Buffeted by War, Kassim Ouma Began Punching Back

By David Segal
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, June 16, 2008; C01

NEW YORK

Kassim Ouma landed at [Dulles International Airport](#) in February 1998 with one of the lamest plans in the history of travel.

A 19-year-old deserter from the Ugandan army, he arrived vastly underdressed for winter, a season he'd never seen, then started hitchhiking. When a cabdriver pulled over and asked where he was going, Ouma said "Richmond," because he had heard that Ugandans live there. The driver assumed he meant Richmond Highway, a misimpression that Ouma was in no position to correct because he didn't speak English and knew nothing about U.S. geography. He was dropped off at a rather dingy Alexandria motel, where he lived until his money ran out.

That took two weeks. When Ouma was homeless, he moved in and out of shelters, and on and off the streets, and found work delivering fliers for a pizza joint. Instead of simply dropping the circulars at the front door, as instructed, he would knock and ask everyone who answered the same question, using two words he had picked up: "Boxing gym?" he'd say, usually to blank stares. "Boxing gym?"

Yes, this was the sum total of his plan: (1) fly to the United States, and (2) box. A month after he'd arrived in the country, Phase 2 began when Ouma spotted the Alexandria Boxing Club and waited there until the club's manager, Dennis Trotter, showed up to unlock the door.

"There's this guy waiting outside the gym," Trotter recalls one recent afternoon. "Didn't understand a word he said. And he didn't understand a word we were saying. We just knew that he wanted to box."

Ouma's highly improvised arrival in the country is part of "Kassim the Dream," a documentary showing Friday and Sunday at the Silverdocs festival at the [AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center](#) in Silver Spring. The film, which charts Ouma's path to the junior middleweight title, initially looks like an anything-is-possible American success story with a "Heart of Darkness" twist.

Ouma, we learn, had been abducted from his boarding school at age 6 by the National Resistance Army, a rebel force that would eventually topple the government. He grew up torturing whomever he was told to torture and killing whomever he was told to kill. And up to the moment he decided to fly to the United States, he assumed he had no choice but to live the rest of his life as a soldier.

The bleakness of his upbringing, and Ouma's eventual triumph, could have led "Dream" into "Rocky" territory. But Kief Davidson, the director and producer, doesn't pitch his protagonist as a hero. Ouma, he knows, is too complicated for that. The lad has serious discipline issues, including a propensity for drinking and smoking pot when he's training for big fights.

He also has some growing up to do. After he was allowed back into Uganda in 2006, following a lengthy negotiation to ensure that the army wouldn't execute him for desertion, he held a news conference in the Entebbe airport where he offered this shout-out to President [Yoweri Museveni](#): "I love you, my [N word]."

You watch "Kassim the Dream" unsure whether you want to adopt Kassim or smack him upside the head. You're wowed by his achievements but worried about his future. Which is how Davidson felt as he shot the movie.

"I pretty much wanted to show Kassim the way I perceive him," Davidson says. "I think he has a huge heart, and at his core he's a good person. But he's incredibly frustrating, and he's got a dark side that you don't want to get near. It saddens me quite a bit. And his story isn't done. He's 29 years old."

* * *

Ouma, who was granted political asylum in 2000, now lives in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., with his three children and his mother, whom he brought here from Africa a few years ago. He traveled to New York in April for the Tribeca Film Festival, where "Kassim the Dream" debuted. The day of the premiere, the producers brought a small group of kids from disadvantaged New York City neighborhoods to a gym in Chelsea, where Ouma gave them a pep talk and boxing lesson, with a few members of the media watching. ("Don't give up your hope" was his refrain.) Ouma was introduced by his manager, Tom Moran, a teddy-bearish guy who has become a surrogate dad.

"This guy threw 1,331 punches in 10 rounds," says Moran, beaming at Ouma and referring to a 2004 bout against Verno Phillips. "Nobody has ever done that."

Ouma starts shadow boxing and smiling. "This feels good!" he shouts to no one in particular. "I haven't done this in a while."

It's been a few months, in fact. Ouma last fought in March, losing his third straight bout, this time to a guy he was heavily favored to whup. To

know Kassim these days is to have a theory about why he lost his title and can't seem to get it back. He parties too much, some say. He hangs out with the wrong people. He's stressed by his past. He's lost his passion for the sport.

"I agree with that," Ouma says. "That's why I'm going to train and come back as a different guy."

It's the day after the premiere and Ouma is sitting for an interview over lunch. He's somber and, given the circumstance, not very chatty. The smile, which ignites everyone in its path, is absent. He studies the menu and asks the waiter a couple questions he's probably never fielded. Like, "What is asparagus?" and "Can you bring me some boiled milk and sugar?"

Talk turns to the movie. There's been one review so far, from *Variety*, which said that "Kassim" "illuminates how indomitable people in impossible situations negotiate with their demons." Davidson says "Kassim" will be released in a handful of cities by the end of the year.

Ouma likes the film, mostly. He wishes that Davidson had left out scenes like the one of him furtively puffing on a blunt on his way into a sparring session. Ouma likes to think of himself as a role model and a humanitarian dedicated to bettering the Ugandan people. The party-guy image isn't helping.

"When you're a kid and a soldier, you smoke," Ouma says with a shrug.

It was the only way to cope with life in what became known as Uganda's war in the bush, he says, and it wasn't his only behavioral issue. When Museveni took control of the government, in 1986, Ouma was unable to sit still in classes at the military school where he was sent. Instead, he gravitated to sports -- first taekwondo, then boxing, which seemed more appealing once he learned that members of the Uganda military team were occasionally given visas to travel overseas.

Ouma was supposed to fly to Texas with the team, using the visa he was given by the government in 1998. When that trip was canceled for unknown reasons, Ouma fled to Kenya, where family friends gave him \$800 and a ticket to Washington. The Ugandan military, which executes deserters, was furious, and according to Ouma's mother, it exacted a terrible revenge. A year after her son left, she says in the movie, soldiers came to her village and beat her husband to death.

A spokesman for the Ugandan Embassy, George Ndyamuba, said the government did not kill Ouma's father and had nothing to do with his murder.

The loss was devastating to Ouma, who figured that his flight from Uganda had sealed his father's fate. "Dream" has an avert-your-gaze sequence in which Ouma returns to his village and wails and weeps at his father's grave, asking for forgiveness. Moments like that led director Davidson to conclude that Ouma agreed to make this documentary, in part, because he thought it would be therapeutic for him.

"I don't think it's a replacement for therapy, by any means," Davidson says. "But the film is one of the very few ways that Kassim has looked at his past. There is this happy-go-lucky guy who comes across in much of the movie and that's very genuine, which is amazing given what he's been through. But when he crashes, he crashes hard, and if he goes back emotionally to his youth, it's hard for him to pull himself out of it."

* * *

During his months in Alexandria, Ouma was just a kid with a huge smile and a relentless jab. He showed up every day at the boxing club, which is geared to at-risk kids. He clowning around constantly and didn't want to leave when it was time to close up. Early on, because of the language barrier, nobody knew who he was or how he'd gotten there. They didn't even realize he was homeless -- not until boxer Kaye Karoma called his mother, who speaks a number of African languages, and put her on the phone with Kassim.

"She was like, 'He's homeless, he's got no papers,'" says Karoma, sitting in the Alexandria Boxing Club. " 'You've got to help that boy out.' It wasn't until later that we found out what had happened to him as a child, and that he was running from the army. You'd think he didn't have a problem in the world."

Ouma started living with regulars at the club. On a few occasions, he hid in the gym and slept under the ring. Trotter knew he had talent, but he didn't know exactly how much until he snuck Ouma into a Virginia Golden Gloves tournament. (Snuck, because you need papers to fight amateur tournaments. They need to know who you are, to make sure you're not a pro.)

"We went down to Norfolk," Trotter recalls. "And Kassim was fighting the Number 1 dude from Navy. The crowd was booing him. 'Africans can't fight.' Stuff like that. And he beat the brakes off that guy."

A boxing camp in Florida got in touch and Kassim was flown south to work as a sparring partner. He soon signed with Moran and promptly won nine consecutive professional fights. By his 14th, he'd become a favorite of [ESPN's](#) "Friday Night Fights," which televised one bout of his after another. The improbable upbringing, the superhuman punching capacity -- it was irresistible television.

As Ouma's boxing career took off, he negotiated a return visit to Uganda, where he was officially pardoned, having become a national hero. But the triumphant homecoming narrative was monkey-wrenched by a loss, just before his trip in 2006, to middleweight champion Jermaine Taylor.

"That was the first time that Kassim didn't fight with his head," Moran says. "And he hasn't fought with his head since then. I know Kassim has awesome physical talent, but he's lost mental focus and that's even more important. Boxing is an unforgiving sport. You can't lose mental focus and expect to win."

Ouma knows that today his naysayers outnumber his believers. He's earned a "couple million dollars" over the course of his career, and he's held on

to enough of it, he says, to be comfortable. For the time being. He lives in a small four-bedroom home in a suburb, but his daughter sleeps in the same bedroom as her grandmother, so he'd like a bigger place.

"I need another fight," he says. There is none planned, though, which suggests that Ouma is starting from the bottom.

Asked if he plans to stay in the United States, he says, "Of course," then ticks off what he loves about his adoptive country: the food, the Target down the street, the freedom to fly wherever you want to fly, whenever you want to fly there.

"I'm ready for the second half of my career," he says, as optimistically as possible.

Moran isn't quite despairing, but he appreciates the obstacles -- all of them in Ouma's psyche -- that he'll have to overcome.

"Kassim basically was told to be an adult when he was a child," he says. "When he grew up, he kind of became a kid."

If there's a "second half" to this improbable career, Ouma will need to grow up again.

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company