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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](#)

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 unloosed 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.

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