

Leah McLaren

When Bridget Jones went to war

Out of Africa, with dark humour and righteous anger

Column

Comments (15)



Leah McLaren

Last updated on Sunday, Jul. 12, 2009 03:36PM EDT

Jane Bussmann is on a personal mission impossible: to make civil war in Africa a sexy, entertaining Hollywood romp.

And how does she intend to accomplish this feat? In the same way she has done everything else in her stellar yet seemingly random career – with manic energy, demented brilliance and a total disregard for her own health, safety and sanity.

The London-born, Los Angeles-based writer/comedian meets me for an afternoon drink in a Soho pub near the Groucho Club, where she is rehearsing a performance of her critically acclaimed one-woman stage show, *Bussmann's Holiday*, which debuted at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2006 and had subsequent runs at the Soho Theatre in London and off Broadway. A staunch singleton who coyly puts her age "somewhere above Angelina and below Jen," she is looking foxy in a black turtleneck and fedora; she pulls behind her a rolling suitcase full of props for the show – the comedian's proverbial bag of tricks.

The performance is to promote her new book, *The Worst Date Ever*, a comic memoir of the time she spent as an out-of-work-TV-writer-turned-miserable-celebrity-profiler in L.A., which she subsequently fled for war-torn Africa in an attempt to seek meaningful employment and the affections of a man who she didn't, in her words, "have chance of copping off with."

Sick of contributing to Hollywood's "Golden Age of Stupid" (2003 to 2006, the Paris v. Nicole years) and of being surrounded by "fameosexual It Kids" whose only purpose in life was to "snort, screw and buy another Chihuahua," Bussmann impulsively decided to quit Hollywood to follow John Prendergast, a respected Washington peace negotiator, to Uganda and document his efforts to help to bring peace to the strife-ridden nation.

Why the sudden career change? Well, she was single. And Prendergast was hot. Think Josh Hartnett with a social conscience and White House connections. Their introduction came about in the regular Hollywood way: She read a profile about him in *Vanity Fair*.

In the book, Bussmann details how she manages to blag assignments from both the right-wing British tabloid *The Mail on Sunday* and *The Times of London*, then flits off to Entebbe with little more than a laptop and a tube of lip-plumping gloss to her name.

Sadly, she drops to the plumper down the airplane toilet and, when she reaches her destination, Prendergast has already defected for Washington, off to negotiate more peace.

Valiantly, she decides to brave the threat of sun damage and lack of Diet Coke – her journalistic high point to that date had consisted of finagling copy to make it seem like she had had face time with Britney when she hadn't – to stay on to report on the intricacies of the civil war that has plagued Uganda for years. She interviews corrupt army officials and violent rebels, uncovers mass child kidnappings and systematic rape, teaches AIDS orphans how to work a digital camera and finds out the hard way that cleaning a canker sore with a dirty safety pin the night before a date in Africa is a super-bad idea.

While her African pratfalls are self-deprecatingly hilarious – think Bridget Jones covering a war – they also have a subversive point. By reflecting on her own trivial, Western obsessions in the middle of an impoverished, violent landscape, Bussmann is not making fun of civil war in Africa, but the self-absorbed developed world that turns a blind eye to it. As with Sacha Baron Cohen's Bruno, who observes that "Clooney has Darfur – now I need Darfive," the joke is not on Africa, but those who use its problems to their own self-serving ends.

Like the stage show before it, the book relentlessly, and to great comic effect, plays on the tension between the inanely superficial and the deeply serious. It's all part of her one-woman effort to resuscitate Africa's public image.

"I think we've jumped from the days when Africa was an exotic place where lady explorers would go and have big adventures and see lions to it being this place of terrible pity and suffering and awfulness that makes one miserable just to think about," she says.

Her expression narrows and I see something else in her face that is apparent in the book: anger. Witty as she may be, the author is also extremely pissed off by what she has seen in Uganda. And she intends to do something about it.

"I get very angry with things like Live Aid because, whatever good they may have done, they've undeniably turned Africa into a pity party when it's actually the most exciting place in the world," she says. "[They have] perpetuated the whole idea that there's nothing you can do The idea that Africa is too complex to understand is an excuse that's been used to stop the West from doing anything that might be expensive or difficult."

While her experiences in Uganda were dark and occasionally grisly, they have nothing on the terrifying nihilism that fuels Bussmann's vision of Los Angeles, a city she still lives in, she claims, because it makes her miserable and lonely enough to write.

And although her days of celebrity profiling are over for now – with two sitcoms in development and a studio option on the book, she is back to

"I get very angry with things like Live Aid because, whatever good they may have done, they've undeniably turned Africa into a pity party when it's actually the most exciting place in the world," she says. "[They have] perpetuated the whole idea that there's nothing you can do The idea that Africa is too complex to understand is an excuse that's been used to stop the West from doing anything that might be expensive or difficult."

While her experiences in Uganda were dark and occasionally grisly, they have nothing on the terrifying nihilism that fuels Bussmann's vision of Los Angeles, a city she still lives in, she claims, because it makes her miserable and lonely enough to write.

And although her days of celebrity profiling are over for now – with two sitcoms in development and a studio option on the book, she is back to being a screenwriter – the harrowing memories are still fresh.

As for her mission to draw attention to Africa, there is nothing ineffectual about her efforts.

When I ask her how she copes with the enormity of her subject, she shrugs, unflappable. "You just write the most effective joke that's ever been written and you hope that people flinch."