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Horror show

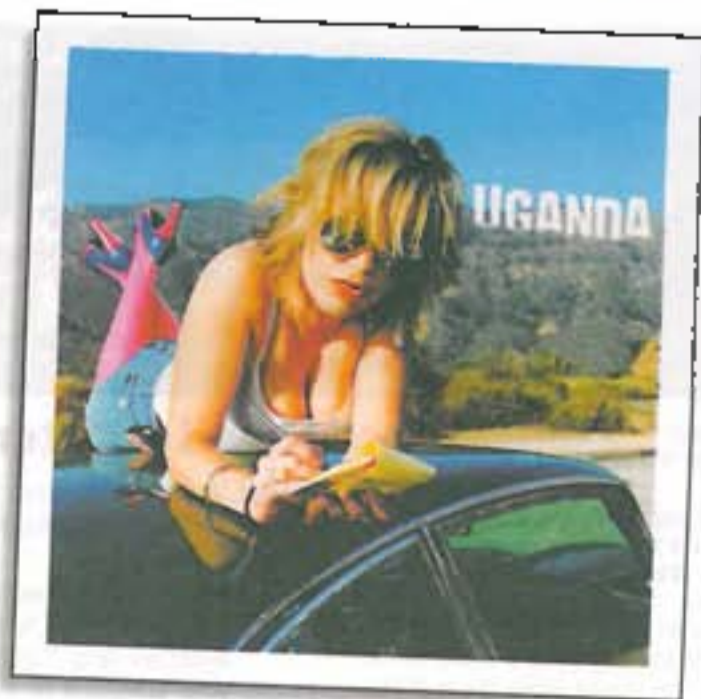
Jane Bussmann thought stick-thin celebs unable to string a sentence together were ghastly enough. Then she went to Uganda

BY CLAIRE BLACK, PORTRAIT BY M SMITH

HAVE YOU HEARD THE ONE ABOUT the celebrity interviewer's encounters with child soldiers? Or the one about the Hollywood journalist investigating a warlord who cuts off the lips of people he thinks have badmouthed him? Actually, they're not jokes. They're true.

Jane Bussmann was making her living writing celebrity interviews in Los Angeles (Nicole Richie, Mischa Barton, Britney Spears, sort of) when, jaded by the denials of eating disorders and unrelenting sycophancy, she saw a photograph of a devilishly handsome and renowned conflict resolution expert and activist called John Prendergast and decided to change everything. Not quite sure how to apply her journalistic skills to conflict resolution, she decided to get a date with the former White House adviser – and the only way to do that was to transform herself into a foreign correspondent. So that's what she did.

Bussmann followed Prendergast to Uganda. It just so happened that when she got there he was in L.A. (to discuss a movie, ironically) but as she waited in Kampala, working out her next move, she uncovered horrifying exploitation, political corruption and the surprising fact that everyone, even a belligerent and dangerous Ugandan colonel, is susceptible to flattery.



Bussmann, left, sends up her Hollywood career, above

If you're reeling from all that, thinking that you've just read the synopsis of a far-fetched Fringe show, all I can say is welcome to the world of Jane Bussmann. In her book, *The Worst Date*, which is also a stage show and on its way to being a film, Bussmann makes the truth sound stranger than fiction. Using satire and an unflinching eye for the absurd, she picks out parallels between the body-obsessed vacuity of Hollywood and the brutal realities of life in Uganda. And while she's at it she gives contemporary journalism a good rabbit punch to the kidneys.

The funny thing is, and by funny I mean Bussmann's brand of laugh-until-you-try humour, that whether it's about the dangers of our celebrity obsession or genocide in Africa, no-one wanted to hear what Bussmann had to say until she put the jokes in. We might find the gags a little close to the bone, but even that's more bearable than the unadulterated truth, it seems.

It all started when, with writing credits on everything from *Brave Eye* to *The Fast Show*, Bussmann went to Los Angeles, where she still lives, to write her masterpiece: a sitcom, or maybe a science fiction extravaganza. But despite LA being the place where she writes most ("You're living in a place so awful that you should stay in and write.") her creative epiphany never came.

it, she was told: "Africa Week was in May". You can see why she had to laugh.

But why stick with comedy for something so deadly serious?

"My total lack of qualifications," she quips, before pausing. "And also it's just inappropriate and I just really like being inappropriate at all times." Another pause, like a stand-up sassing out the audience. And then we finally get to it. "Aw! also I tried doing it the serious way and no-one gave a crap."

"I'm going to do jokes about it until people realise these aren't *Have I Got News For You* word-play jokes, they are, hopefully, gut-wrenching, look-at-that jokes, if there is such a thing. God, that sounded pretentious."

It's not easy to be funny about torture or rape. It's uncomfortable, absurd, grotesque even. But then again so are the statistics from Rwanda, the Congo, Zimbabwe, countries where millions have been slaughtered or displaced by long-running conflicts, where poverty, illness and sexual violence is endemic and politicians including our own International Aid Secretary, Douglas Alexander, who finds himself in Bussmann's sights, and Hillary Clinton say things like "There are no easy answers."

"When I listened to John Prendergast's speeches his description of the prime excuses for doing nothing were what struck me. One of them is: 'It's a really complex situation'. That is the oldest trick in the book for not doing anything. The other one is 'There are no good guys or bad guys'. Well, why don't we all just give up now? The whole point of life is to be good, not bad. If there's no such thing then let's just climb back underneath a stone, back into the primordial ooze."

"It's so f***ing obvious. How can there be anything complicated about a guy who's taking kids [Kony]. 'Oh, it's a complex tribal war'. No it isn't. He rapes kids. What's he doing this for? He's doing it to have it off with 70 girls."

Bussmann's like a ball of energy. She's pissed off. And she's got a tendency to do it now, think about it later. In Uganda her laptop and her camera were stolen

Bussmann, right, began investigating Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony, below right, after becoming interested in activist John Prendergast, pictured below centre being arrested outside the Sudanese Embassy in Washington, for demonstrating against the genocide in Darfur in April



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from her locked hotel room. She received threatening phone calls and on more than one occasion found herself alone with someone who she knew was capable of murder. So is she brave?

"I'm a terrible coward. You've no idea what I coward I am."

I tell her I don't believe her.

"No, I am. I just tend to put myself in situations where I can't back out. It really helps to paint yourself into a corner."

And that's something she is good at. By the time she arrives in Edinburgh Bussmann will have been back to Uganda and she'll have spent time in the Congo.

"I know I have to go to the Congo and it's really stupid. But I'll probably go sooner rather than later without having made the appropriate living arrangements just so I have to do a bit of scabbling."

"It was the same with the stage show. I just didn't think about it. I'd written it and then I knew that the only way I'd do it was to book a theatre and go. The act of cowardice was getting drunk first."

Sitting in a swanky London hotel eating rare roast beef sandwiches, Bussmann can downplay it all she wants, but the fact is she is brave. And she is doing something because she promised the children she met when she was in Uganda that she would. And if you wait for long enough, when the comedy schtick is resting, there are moments when she'll admit that action is what interests her. She's full of admiration for a recent march on Washington DC to support the "Invisible



Children" of Uganda. Organised by young people, it reminded her of what she loves about America.

"If you really try and plan and do it, you can succeed. That's probably why I'm still in L.A. Those kids who were marching gave the politicians exactly what they needed - they showed them what to do. They sat down, planned it and did it. It's not very British, because we just want to get pissed in the evenings."

That's how it works, the bubble of hope and then the pinprick of reality. But Bussmann has been changed by her experiences in Uganda, by meeting former child soldiers too traumatised to speak, mothers whose daughters have been kidnapped, the women disfigured by Joseph Kony's men.

Her triumph is that she tells it like it is and leaves it

to us to work out that the most shocking thing of all is that it's Jane Bussmann - a woman who went to Uganda to get a dare - who is the one who is listening, helping, doing something.

Maybe that's the greatest indictment of the £740 million that Britain has given to Uganda's president, Yoweri Museveni, in the last 20-odd years. And if that sounds like a back-handed compliment, I don't care because I know Jane Bussmann will get it. ■

■ *Bussmann's Holiday, The Worst Date Ever*, 4:50pm August 24-30, Assembly Rooms, George Street, Edinburgh. Tickets, £9.50-£13, tel: 0131-623 3030. *The Worst Date Ever: War Crimes, Hollywood Hearts-Throbs and Other Abominations* is published by Macmillan, priced £11.99.



Hence the interviews with Hollywood's finest. "If you ever wonder why interviews are drivel these days, it's because many of them didn't take place," she explains. And the ones which do happen aren't exactly edifying. The interview Bussmann did with the now deceased Anna Nicole Smith, who could speak "two words in four hours", yielded a 14-page feature in a glossy magazine. Then there was Britney Spears who, to be fair, Bussmann did see – through a doorway from a fair distance – but never met, although she did still manage to write interviews for a national newspaper and a magazine.

"The strangest thing is that when I wrote about that

Bussmann, left, with Mischa Barton in 2006



Beneath the bad-taste gags and frippery there is moral outrage. She really is angry

[making up interviews] I couldn't believe I was the first person who said this is what happens in real life. You are told what to write and you don't meet them. You just ask them what they're wearing."

Years of fabricating anodyne niceties about ungrateful celebrities took their toll. The pretend politeness and pandering to over-indulged, underweight starlets, not to mention being threatened with legal action when an editor added in a "quote" to an Ashton Kutcher interview to which he objected, finally tipped her over the edge and so Africa called, giving Bussmann the chance to let rip on the horrors she found there and in a bizarre parallel, those she'd found in Hollywood.

On LA she is as brutal as rhinoplasty without an anaesthetic. Rachel Zoe, the celebrity stylist, is a "boil in the bag Brigitte Bardot". There are tales of "lipo

leakage" – when the puncture wounds used to remove excess fat ooze – and kidney failure as a result of eating too much protein.

"Even the English friends that I have there who are proper grown-ups, we greet each other by saying 'oh my god, you're so thin'. When I was in Uganda I met these nuns. They looked at me and were like 'are you all right? Did you have breakfast?' I said 'I had a banana' and they just couldn't understand it. Why would anyone damage their brain by not eating enough food? It doesn't make any sense."

In the flesh Bussmann is just as rapid-fire as her prose. And as contradictory. She's funny but deadly serious, self-deprecating and necessarily self-promoting, dismissive of LA's obsession with bodies and beauty yet as thin as a rake with an afternoon appointment for a pedicure. Beneath the bad-taste gags and frippery there is a genuine moral outrage. She really is angry about decades of systematic violence and abuse being rewarded with multi-million pound aid packages and personal tragedies written off as collateral damage. It's just that she expresses it through stories about lip plumpers and exploding bowels. It's as hilarious as it is horrifying.

"You can't say it's too depressing to find funny," she says. "In that case every soldier in the trenches wouldn't have been allowed to make a joke. Perhaps we'll go back and find that Hitler didn't really have one ball. We're British, it's all we've got. We've got nothing left apart from golden syrup and jokes."

When Bussmann arrived in Uganda she discovered that despite having been sought by Uganda's army since the mid-1980s, the warlord Joseph Kony, a man believed to have kidnapped between 20,000 and 30,000 children who were then forced into sex slavery or fighting in his militia, was still at large. With time on her hands, she did some investigating. What she found was government collusion and corruption and utterly ineffectual international aid and charity programmes. She tried to sell the story to newspapers that she thought would jump at the chance to publicise the plight of thousands of Ugandan children.

The reaction was as depressing as it was predictable. They all said no. "The question is: what is its real value? We've got ourselves tied to all these checklists – does it tick the box as a story? I was being told if the kids were released then we'd have a story, while they're still being tortured, where was the story? Woah! Is this really what we've done to ourselves?"

When Bussmann asked one editor why he'd rejected

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