

Edinburgh festival

How Nicole Richie drove me to a war zone

Jane Bussmann explains why she went from Hollywood hack to foreign correspondent - and ended up a comedian

Jane Bussmann
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Article history



Absurd one-liners ... Bussmann on stage in Edinburgh. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod

I have written for a lot of out-there comedies - South Park, Brass Eye, The Junkies, etc. But I never expected to write, let alone perform, a comedy about a useless celebrity journalist trying to be a war correspondent in Uganda. Especially when that journalist is me.

I wouldn't have got into this mess if it hadn't been for celebrities. I finally cracked in Beverly Hills, during a Nicole Richie interview. I'd already seen this sane, witty woman get turned into a boil-in-the-bag-slapper by LA's "stylist to the stars", Rachel Zoe. Then Richie started flicking through a book on Taliban fighters. "Put it down, Nicole! It's political!" snapped a minder, warning me in no uncertain terms not to mention the book in my article. I tried to think of a way of killing myself that wouldn't upset my mother, failed, and went job-hunting instead.

Médecins Sans Frontières were not at the time recruiting celebrity journalists. I was whimpering into my frappuccino when I spotted a bloke in a magazine - John Prendergast, an American peacemaker barred from his former workplace, the White House, for radical talk about the west's role in foreign conflict. Guns in his forehead in Rwanda, rescued by US marines in Sudan; I felt we had lots in common. (I should mention here that Prendergast was also the hottest man I'd ever seen.) But while Prendergast ended wars, he hadn't impregnated Britney Spears, so no women's magazine would want to profile him. How could I meet him?

In January 2005, I got my excuse: the Independent called. At last! I was a serious journalist! The editor said: "We think you'd be perfect to write a story about dating out of your league." I asked if I could interview Prendergast instead.

A month later, we met. Prendergast was personable, even intimate, when talking about his life in the war zone. But when I asked him to recall the atrocities he'd seen, his eyes glazed over and he slapped the desk, saying: "It's best that I don't." It dawned on me that this angry man would make gripping TV. Commissioning editors wanted test footage, but warned me not to spend any money. I spent £30,000. The editors didn't like my documentary. Shit.

In June, failing, I chose a new angle. Prendergast was flying to Uganda to snare Joseph Kony, the world's most prolific child kidnapper. 30,000 kids have been abducted into his Lord's Resistance Army. For the purposes of television, Kony is so evil he even looks hard in wellington boots, and the child sex-slave soldiers are cute as hell. It was Love Island meets Oliver! The commissioning editors told me: "Sorry, Africa week was in May." That's a quote.

It was another month before I got an email from the Sunday Times foreign pages. They wanted Prendergast. Goodbye, shallow fashion culture: I was a foreign correspondent. I didn't waste a second. I went straight to Harrods and bought sunglasses.

In August I arrived in Uganda. Small problem: Prendergast had gone back to Washington. I was alone in a war-torn African country. Balls. I asked a local journalist if I was safe. "When I wrote about Kony, the government threw me in jail, stole my computers and shut down our newspaper for a week," he shrugged. Sure enough, I was followed; somehow, Ugandan intelligence wasn't aware that the most serious thing I'd ever written was a piece about a reality show called Paedophile Island for Brass Eye. Panicking, I backed up my hard drive on to a CD and labelled it "Coldplay" so that no one would want it.

Over the following weeks, I blundered into a real story. I met children who, kidnapped and tortured by Kony, were then shot at by Uganda's UK-funded government. Kony himself offered me an exclusive in return for supplies - specifically new socks and gumboots; a war criminal's life was clearly hampered by athlete's foot. The colonel fighting Kony relaxed enough to tell me that he bought his underpants from Marks & Spencer, adding, bitterly, "but they always try to make me get a store card". By then I was virtually Kate Adie. Then I accidentally emailed the bullet points for my article, not to Sean Ryan, foreign editor of the Sunday Times, but to Sean Hayes, flamboyant supporting star of TV's Will & Grace. My piece was killed.

I sloped back to LA, and the job of asking Whitney Houston whether or not she was trying for a baby. My documentary was shortlisted for the Sundance film festival - but no channel wanted to screen it. Suicidal, I re-edited the footage into a stand-up show; same material, but telling the story from the (horrifically) funny side, with the joke on me. It debuted in a friend's shed. Reaching the photo of the mother with her face sliced off by a 12-year-old, I was struggling for a punchline when Robbie Williams arrived. I took this as an omen, albeit an unclear one, and paid a urine-scented Hollywood theatre \$50 a night to put on "Jane's Africa Thing". Audience: two.

But then a heavyweight agent saw it. The next thing I knew, I was in an off-Broadway theatre, blinking into spotlights, telling New Yorkers jokes about gang rape. Damn you, Aids orphans, this is your doing. Then one night, just before curtain up, Prendergast called. He was on his way to see the show between meetings with Hillary Clinton and a Sudanese vice-president.

I fell to pieces; I had told him he was in the show, but not in what way. I had to perform 60 minutes of tongue-in-cheek crush to the man himself. This was the longest and most agonising date I'd ever been on. Prendergast liked the show. I felt like Lord Lucan in a Cape Town jacuzzi, circa 1985.

Now it's August, and I'm in Edinburgh. Under the castle, transvestite nuns and a singing mental nurse revue jostle for space as I drive a bus for the sake of publicity pictures. (Bussmann. It's a pun.) Later, it's Neil and Christine Hamilton's chat show. "Then we were accused of rape!" Christine chirps, as her husband dances a reel.

Bussmann's Holiday, a child soldier comedy, sells out on its first weekend. Laugh? When a renegade barred from the White House is doing more than my own foreign secretary to deal with the situation in Uganda, nothing is beyond a joke.

Bussmann's Holiday is at Assembly @ St George's West, Edinburgh, until August 27. Box office: 0131-226 2428.

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