

THE SUNDAY TIMES

ED OSSE



Bussmann's holiday

Famine, war, pestilence and comedy page 3

FESTIVAL SPECIAL

Badge of honour

Gregory Burke on the unique spirit of the Black Watch page 5



THE SUNDAY TIMES

www.timesonline.co.uk/scotland

AUGUST 6, 2006

SCARFE — A FINE LINE IN SHOCK



The big picture: Scarfe did not pull his punches as Hattersley, below, found out for himself

How genocide turned up as fringe comedy

Take a gossip columnist who has grown tired of empty-headed celebrity tittle-tattle and years for adventure. Throw in a handsome and idealistic political campaigner who wants to right dreadful wrongs in a faraway land. Then add a dash of unrequited love and a soupçon of adventure in a mysterious African country. And there you have all the ingredients you need for a Hollywood blockbuster.

In fact that is (more or less) the true story of Jane Bussmann, whose one-woman fringe show *Bussmann's Holiday* ranks as the most unlikely comedy tale in Edinburgh.

As a feature writer for *Glamour* and *Esquire*, Bussmann was adept, she says, at "getting bulimia quotes out of Nicole Richie". But while that can be a profitable skill in certain quarters, it is not necessarily the talent you need if you follow a story into a war zone. Which is why the 37-year-old writer found herself out of her depth when she decided to make a documentary about President Clinton's former director of African affairs.

He was John Prendergast, a handsome, floppy-haired senior adviser at the International Crisis Group who was once mistaken for U2's Bono by President Bush.

Smitten by his good looks, Bussmann — who is a Londoner but based in Los Angeles — persuaded him she was a serious journalist and began putting together a documentary, *Prendergast's Race*, about his attempts to end the genocide in southern Sudan, in which 400,000 people had been killed.

Bussmann did a good enough job to get her Michael Moore-style documentary shortlisted for the Sundance film festival. The problem was that nobody wanted to screen it.

Feeling guilty at letting down the victims of genocide, she followed Prendergast to Uganda in 2005 in the hope of getting more footage.

"One of the reasons Channel 4 didn't want the documentary is they said it just looked like I really fancied him," laughs Bussmann at the memory. "I thought, okay, this is clearly a better story than 2m people dying in Darfur. Why don't I do a show about someone incredibly ill-equipped to fancy someone incredibly cool?"

Once you see the documentary footage in the light of her crush, says Sally Phillips, who is directing the fringe show that builds a commentary around what was meant to be serious documentary footage, you see how unintentionally hilarious it is.

For example, as a gossip columnist Bussmann had traded on a number of stock questions to get celebrities to open up. One was: "You're in amazing shape — what's your secret?" On film she asks the earnest Prendergast the same thing.

"Because she hasn't filmed it for a comedy purpose, her being in awe of him is incredibly funny," says Phillips, 36, who appeared in the television comedies *Green Wing* and *Smack the Pony*, but is

Jane Bussmann is no stranger to controversy, but her attempt to capture the troubles in Sudan and Uganda on film is proof of the law of unintended consequences, writes **Mark Fisher**

best known for her portrayal of the hard-drinking, foul-mouthed Shazzer in the *Bridget Jones* films. Coincidentally, Bussmann was the character's inspiration.

Bussmann and Phillips are sitting together in the Frontline Club in Paddington, a watering hole and restaurant for foreign correspondents where Bussmann is trying to become a member. "It's my number one pathetic career fantasy," she says.

Yet she already has a formidable track record, writing for the quality press, magazines such as *GQ* and

Red and working as a comedy voice on Radio 4's *Loose Ends*. She has also written gags for *South Park*, *Friday Night Armistice* and *So Graham Norton*. "I decided early on that a personal life would be a waste of space," she says. "I absolutely love working. You have to have a happy, fulfilling personal life or write a lot. I write a lot."

Of course, some might take a dim view of a comedy show set in war-ravaged Uganda, but the joke, Bussmann insists, is on her.

"It's totally sincere," she says. "In the middle of it all is me just

desperately trying to make this documentary and everything's going wrong. Prendergast isn't even there. I'm sick. I try to get treated in a hospital and the doctors have died of ebola." Nobody is poking fun at the Ugandans, she insists. "It's more about laughing at me trying to cope."

Not that Bussmann is above cracking off-colour jokes. She lives for the punchline and the more extreme the better. Her conversation is so littered with gags it's hard to know when to take her seriously. "Jane is a sick and wrong person," says Phillips in her deadpan, butter-wouldn't-melt kind of way. "She's the queen of ineffectual nastiness. She will say the most offensive and appalling thing about someone and it makes you realise she really likes them."

Bussmann chips in: "There's one point in the show when I've got such bad diarrhoea and I'm scared I'm about to be kidnapped, but I can't concentrate on the fear because I need to go to the loo."

Not everyone finds her funny. She attained notoriety as a controversial scriptwriter, the woman named and shamed by the press for co-writing with Chris Morris the notorious paedophile episode of *Brass Eye*, the most complained about show in British television history. And, having written *The Junkies*, the world's first internet sitcom in which Phillips starred as Sal ("the first girl from her school to spend all her trust fund on heroin"), Bussmann is now harbouring plans to write a sitcom set in the Third World. If there's a subject that is off limits for comedy, she doesn't know what it is. "I'm trying to find it," she says, "so I can make a joke about it."

It is through comedy that Bussmann and Phillips came to be friends, working initially together on an Armando Iannucci election show 10 years ago. Later, Bussmann was a script editor on *Smack the Pony*.

"There were no girls who wanted to write comedy," says Phillips. "There was Mel and Sue and us. The climate was very different and the boys had a consensus that women weren't funny. In retrospect, *Smack the Pony* was groundbreaking because it was a character comedy that wasn't somebody just saying the words 'granary bap' lots of times in a funny accent. It was normal-looking women being idiots. Previously, you had to pretend to be a man."

With Bussmann's *Holiday* their roles are reversed with the writer in the limelight and Phillips helping knock the show into shape.

"When I was script-editing her, I would try to make her do more horrible things," says Bussmann. "Now she's directing me she's trying to make me look like a better person, while I keep trying to put horrible jokes in."

Jane Bussmann — *Bussmann's Holiday*, Assembly@St George's West, August 4-27 (not 14 and 21)



History: Bussmann co-wrote *Brass Eye's* paedophile episode



Direct: Phillips, left, is best known as Shazzer in *Bridget Jones*



Katie Lee