

FILM REVIEW: THE LAST KING OF SCOTLAND

Heather Franzese*

Release: 2006

English Language

“We are real. Africa is real,” Idi Amin threatens his young, Scottish doctor. “We are not a game.” Nicholas Garrigan finishes medical school and flies to Uganda, the spot on the globe where his finger lands when he closes his eyes and spins it. He has nothing in his suitcase but desire – to make a difference, to escape his father, to live an adventure. For a time, it is indeed a glamorous game for both men.

A magnet of repressed insecurity attracts the protagonists. Beaten as a child, Idi Amin (Forest Whitaker) issues promises of new schools and prosperity for the Ugandan people as currency to pay for his political power. Nicholas Garrigan (James McAvoy), once scarcely noticed by his prodigious father back home, now smiles and waves from the President’s Mercedes, attends his pool parties, and feverishly flirts with the Ugandan women – all in exchange for his services as the President’s doctor. In Scotland, Garrigan imagines dumbly, luxuries are perks of the job. But in Amin’s Uganda, they are payment for eternal loyalty and, as Garrigan soon learns, betrayal comes at a price.



In this screen adaptation of Giles Foden’s novel about 1970s Ugandan dictator Idi Amin, Director Kevin MacDonal offers one more iteration of African stock characters –

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the naïve expatriate humanitarian worker, the power-thirsty strongman, oppressed wives, and cynical diplomats. Predictably, the dance among these characters is volatile. Amin runs hot and cold, one minute lauding Garrigan as his “closest advisor,” the next minute berating him as a “nobody.” Less predictably, MacDonald transfers the distress lived by the characters to viewers through graphic images of physical torture. Whitaker’s expert acting compounds the queasy feeling and makes for an incredibly compelling story. The viewer must choose which Africa is more real, the colorful countryside that Garrigan first stepped into, or the hell he comes to inhabit.

More than a compelling story, the film is a cautionary tale. After witnessing Amin’s ruthlessness, viewers easily criticize Garrigan’s folly. Had he listened, he would have anticipated Amin’s abuses. It is not certain whether he processed the nuanced implications of his decision until it was too late. *The Last King of Scotland* urges its audience – especially diplomats, aid workers, and others working in African countries with a history or threat of genocide – to be more mindful: What are the implications of your engagements with these governments?

The movie is also a call to action. In the 1970s, Amin was responsible for 300,000 Ugandan lives. Today, the LRA has taken thousands more in the conflict in Northern Uganda. World Vision staged this contemporary face of Uganda in New York City’s Grand Central Station this summer. The installment, modeled after an African hut, took visitors through an audio journey in the life of a 13-year-old Ugandan child soldier named Stephen. The boy was kidnapped from his family by the LRA and trained to kill with an AK-47. The film of Stephen’s life will not be coming soon to the Cineplex. *The Last King of Scotland* must serve as our wake-up call not to wait thirty years to pay attention.