

Whitaker lifts 'The Last King of Scotland'

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

Was Uganda's Idi Amin (1924-2003) merely a monomaniacal misanthrope as suggested by the generally accepted myth, or was he a diabolical despot with more of a method to his madness? The conventional caricature created over the course of his eight-year reign of terror dismissed the sadistic strongman as a laughing-stock among world leaders.

This was based on an array of increasingly bizarre, mostly unsubstantiated rumors circulated in the Western press depicting him as a depraved character indulging in erratic behavior ranging from a childlike narcissism to outright cannibalism.

Conveniently overlooked, in the rush to dismiss Amin simply as a paranoid lunatic who had senselessly slaughtered 300,000 of his own people without rhyme or reason, was the fact that he was a Muslim and that much of the sectarian violence, which erupted in the wake of his 1971 coup, had been along religious rather than tribal lines.

For example, soon after assuming power, not only did he create death squads comprised primarily of trusted Nubian and Sudanese from the Islam-dominated north, but he also broke off diplomatic relations with Israel,



"The Last King of Scotland" portrays the life and times of Uganda leader Idi Amin.

while cultivating closer ties with Arab countries.

This explains why, in 1976, after a airliner hijacking by the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the pro-PLO Amin allowed Palestinian terrorists to land at Uganda's International Airport at Entebbe; and why, when he was ultimately exiled in 1979, he was granted asylum by Saudi Arabia.

So given the recent rise of radical Islam, one might expect a new biopic revisiting the life of the despicable dictator to take a fresh look at his motivations as possibly one of the early proponents of an emerging ideology.

Unfortunately, "The Last King of Scotland" presents

Amin as, essentially, that creepy, cartoonish, persona we're already familiar with rather than from a more complicated perspective.

The problem undoubtedly emanates from the source material, since the picture is based on the historical novel of the same name written by Giles Foden, a Scotsman who was a child at the time that his subject was in power.

The book explores similar themes as Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," sharing that literary classic's inclination to paint Africa as a frightening, godforsaken land of unimaginable bloodlust. The novel is narrated by a fictitious character purely a creation of

Foden's imagination, a naive Scottish doctor with an uncanny, Forrest Gump-like knack for appearing at memorable moments in Ugandan history.

This fairly faithful adaptation of the best seller was directed by another Scotsman, Kevin MacDonal, who coaxes an Oscar-quality performance out of Forest Whitaker, though sadly in service of a mediocre melodrama. While Whitaker's in-

terpretation of Amin is admittedly mesmerizing, what's nevertheless disappointing is the script's reluctance to humanize its antagonist, settling instead to portray him as that stereotypical mental patient (a la Hannibal Lector) who alternates unpredictably between the polar opposites of a refined charm and sheer brutality.

The picture co-stars James McAvoy as Dr. Nicholas Garrigan, a recent medical school grad who arrives in the country planning to practice among the poor. However, after being recruited as the head-of-state personal physician, he soon finds himself at the beck-and-call of Amin, serving also as a confidante, sidekick and stand-in at the presidential palace.

Enjoying the Mercedes convertible and other considerable perks of his plumb position, Garrigan initially has no problem with his job. But as evidence of the wholesale ethnic cleansing unfolding across the countryside is gradually revealed, he becomes acutely aware of his boss' penchant for cruelty and of his own implied com-

licity as a medical mercenary.

Then, when members of the cabinet start disappearing, too, the doctor suddenly has a reason to fear for his own safety, since he's become infatuated with one of Amin's neglected wives (Kerry Washington).

Though no longer able to feign ignorance, he inexplicably chooses to remain in Uganda, with dire consequences.

The "Last King of Scotland" is likely to be worthwhile if approached not as an historical epic but as an unlikely buddy-flick about a carefree adventurer completely compromised and corrupted by the embodiment of evil. Recommended for the work of Forest Whitaker alone, even if the gifted actor was restricted by a screenplay which squandered a golden opportunity to imbue his character with a complex range of motivations and emotions.

Good (2 stars). Rated R for sex, expletives, male and female frontal nudity, graphic violence and gruesome images.

Oprah: Lawyers zealous

NEW YORK (AP) - Oprah Winfrey says her lawyers shouldn't have gone after the man who is trying to promote her as a candidate for president. Not because she's running, mind you.

"I feel flattered by it," the 52-year-old talk-show host told The Associated Press on Monday. "My lawyers overreacted, I think, by sending him a cease-and-desist order because it really is a flattering thing."

It should have been handled in a phone call, said Winfrey, who said she's thinking of calling Patrick Crowe of Kansas City, Mo., herself.

Crowe has been campaigning to urge Winfrey to run for president for years, set-

ting up a website that has its own campaign song. A month ago, Winfrey's lawyers sent Crowe a letter demanding that he remove her picture from his website.

Winfrey's smiling face remained on www.oprah08.net Monday.

Winfrey was in New York to promote "Oprah and Friends," which launched Monday on XM Satellite Radio.

In February, Winfrey signed a three-year, \$55 million deal with XM Satellite Radio Holdings Inc. to launch her new radio channel, which joins her nationally syndicated television show and her *O, The Oprah Magazine*. XM Satellite Radio boasts more than 7 million subscribers.

Run's child dies at birth

RIDGEWOOD, N.J. (AP) - A daughter born to rap pioneer Joseph "Rev. Run" Simmons and his wife, Justine, died shortly after delivery last week, an MTV spokesman said last week.

Simmons issued a statement through the network, which airs his reality show, "Run's House," saying his wife "is doing fine." He thanked his supporters for their prayers and condolences.

"On Sept. 26, 2006, Victoria Anne Simmons for some unknown reason chose to come early and unfortunately did not sur-

vive," his statement said. "We must accept whatever is there and once you accept unconditionally, then everything is beautiful. Every pain has a purifying effect. So, whatever comes your way, just be thankful. We see life in death and believe in the celebration of life in death."

The baby was delivered at Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, according to MTV spokesman Graham James. Simmons, brother of hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, has five children. He was a founding member of pioneering rap group Run-DMC.