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Steenie Njoroge as Kamong'a Solo, a man plagued with a diminished sense of his manhood.

ALL PHOTOS BY MARGARETTA WA GACHERU

Strong cast lifts 'The Urge' despite low attendance

ON STAGE Steenie Njoroge puts up a strong and emotive performance as a man plagued with fears of bedroom failure

BY MARGARETTA WA GACHERU

Steenie Njoroge's performance in *The Urge* made the painfully powerful point that men, while they may look self-confident, cool and collected, sometimes have a really rough time coping with hidden issues not easily disclosed to any but their most intimate associates.

And even then, men typically are not meant to expose their human frailties, especially if related to their "manhood".

That's one reason I feel many male theatre-goers did not rush to see this latest play by the popular Kenyan playwright JPR Ochieng-Odero.

The Urge is about the peculiarly male problem of erectile dysfunction, not exactly the sort of weekend show to take a hot date to, although members of the new Nairobi City Players thought that the public would be curious about the topic.

In spite of the scanty crowds that came to Alliance Francaise last weekend, Steenie, playing Kamong'o Solo, put up a strong emotive performance as a man plagued with a diminished sense of his manhood, making clear how closely some men identify sexual virility with self-worth.

Kamong'a never speaks specifically about his problem but he does have desperate, often

angry conversations with his "Binaisah" (named after the former Ugandan president who is bald-headed), urging "him" to behave and perform. Yet the more desperate he becomes, the less capacity he has to get over the stress associated with his flagging sexuality.

My one problem with the play is that Kamong'a gives us a detailed history of the humiliation he has endured since the problem first arose, but the playwright never interrogates the psychological dimension of sex, only the physicality of it.

For instance, the first time "Binaisah" fails him, all we know is that the woman in question is hot. There's no reflection on Kamong'a's marriage, whether he feels anything for cheating on his wife. What's clear is only that the attraction is purely physical, but many studies have shown that sex is as much a psychological issue as a physical one.

Ultimately, Kamong'a reckons his problem is related to age, the idea that he's getting on in years and ED tends to be an issue affecting older men.

So Mr Solo finally says he's reconciled to his problem, even though it has practically ruined his marriage and made him a laughing stock among his neighbours as his wife has maliciously told them all about his failing.

I don't quite buy the ending, especially as today, the pill Viagra is a popular panacea used by many older men, yet Ochieng-Odero never even mentions it.

Still, I applaud Steenie and director Odingo Hawi for reviving or rather totally revamping the Nairobi City Players, given the group is committed to producing original plays by African writers and more especially by Kenyans.

"That's one reason we chose JPR's play,

but we also want to find more (quality) scripts by Kenyans," Odingo said.

He and Steenie have been together in Kenyan theatre for decades and have worked with some of the finest thespians Kenyans have ever seen, acting in plays by John Ruganda (who often directed them), Athol Fugard and even Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Meanwhile, at Kenya National Theatre, preparations are going on all this weekend for another "world premiere" production which opens November 10.

Puma is by Mkawasi Mcharo-Hall who is also the show's director and ambitious playwright.

Having scripted and directed amazing plays in the 1990s even before she went for further theatre studies in the US, Mkawasi is one of Kenya's most seasoned professional thespians who has directed plays up and down the East Coast of the USA.

Her return to her homeland is in large part due to her desire to get Kenyans' input and feedback for the play which I saw in "read-through" form more than a month ago.

Puma's a fascinating story that touches on many of Kenya's most topical and touchy issues, even as it's enlivened by humour and ironic reflection on our sad state of public affairs today.

For big laughs on stage, there is rarely a better place to go than to a Heartstrings production since director Sammy Mwangi specialises in making fun of the foibles of Kenyan everyday life.

He and his cast get away with either alluding to or explicitly saying things on stage that might get any other cast in trouble for exposing their greed, hypocrisy, corrupt practices of all kinds— that is if they don't do so with the light touch that is Heartstrings' hallmark.

"*It wasn't me*" opens tonight at Alliance Francaise and runs through the weekend.

Finally, the public needs to know that Parking at Kenya National Theatre is back to the normal rates they used to have before someone decided it was cool to raise rates astronomically.

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The cast of 'Puma' rehearses the play, which opens at Kenya National Theatre on November 10.



London photo exhibition features Hitler's bathtub

A young American woman soaks in Adolf Hitler's bathtub, her muddy boots staining his bath mat, and an official portrait of the Fuehrer sits on the tub's edge.

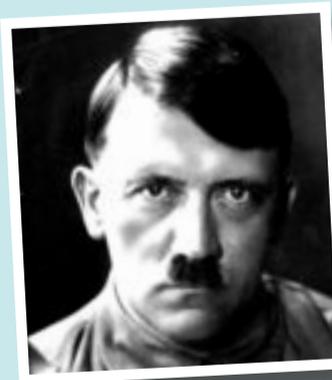
The woman is Lee Miller, the only female combat photographer in Europe during World War Two. She is pictured in Hitler's Munich apartment on April 30, 1945, by fellow war correspondent David Scherman. The image is one of the highlights of a new exhibition at London's Imperial War Museum, "Lee Miller: A Woman's War", ending on April 24, 2016.

"This was actually taken on the day that Hitler committed suicide, although Lee Miller didn't know that

until after the event," said Hilary Roberts, research curator of photography at the museum, who put together the show.

Shortly before, Miller had toured and photographed the Dachau concentration camp. She and Scherman had then made their way to Munich, by this time under US occupation, and headed for Hitler's apartment, where they spent the night with a group of other people, the curator said.

"The key objects in the photograph are Lee Miller's boots on Hitler's bath mat, which when she arrived was pristine white, and when she left was covered with dirt from Dachau," she said.



German dictator Adolf Hitler (1889 - 1945). (PHOTO BY HEINRICH HOFFMANN/GETTY IMAGES)

Miller walked away with more than just a souvenir snapshot of herself in Hitler's tub. She also filched a few of his mistress Eva Braun's personal belongings, which are on view in the exhibition: a smiling portrait of Braun, her powder compact, her large Art Deco-style perfume bottle, and her four-piece rose-patterned desk accessory set.

Before the war, Miller was a model, a Surrealist photographer, and a fashion photographer. Yet her concentration camp pictures are among the ones she is most famous for.

The show displays a few, including one of a group of women at Dachau who were forced into prostitution

inside the camp and now awaited evacuation.

The exhibition's focus is Miller's depictions of women in Britain and elsewhere in Europe during and right after the war.

Her 1943 images of British women - factory and farm workers, uniformed drivers, nurses, and even a parachute packer - are not as bleak as those taken in the defeated Germany. One particularly chilling German image from April 1945 shows the daughter of a Nazi dignitary - Leipzig's city treasurer - lying dead on a sofa after committing suicide with her parents. "On the surface, they may appear to be documentary works, but her background in fashion and in Surrealist art is always there," Roberts said.

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