

film review

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Doctor of the Man

By [Josef Woodwrd](#), October 17, 2006

***The Last King of Scotland.* Forest Whitaker, James McAvoy, Kerry Washington, and Gillian Anderson star in a film written by Jeremy Brock, Peter Morgan, and Joe Penhall, based on the novel by Giles Foden, and directed by Kevin Macdonald.**

Reviewed by *Josef Woodard*

How best to tell the story of a known tyrant? In the German film *The Downfall*, the bunker-eye view of Hitler's final days comes replete with both mania and touches of tenderness. In the narrative approach adopted by *The Last King of Scotland*, we are cleverly led into the twisted mind of Ugandan despot Idi Amin through a side door. What we now know about Amin's dark, mass murderous legacy — leaving more than 300,000 Ugandans dead during his '70s reign of terror — is only slowly revealed, through the perspective of a Scottish doctor. In both films, the humanity, and even vulnerability, of these demons are explored, the better to damn their actions in power.

Our hapless protagonist is a young, idealistic doctor, Nicholas Garrigan (James McAvoy), who chafes at the prospect of a quiet life and heads to Uganda. Plans to be of use on the ground at a clinic are interrupted by an invitation to be the personal doctor of the volatile Amin (Forest Whitaker, in possibly his finest role), as he's rising to power.

Even young Nicholas validates the "firm hand" philosophy of rule in Africa, at one point countering a detractor by saying, "In Africa, fighting violence with violence is the only thing that works." Of course, he has no idea of the magnitude of violence and evil his boss is capable of, or how intimately he will be implicated in Amin's machinery of brutality. For sensual relief, Nicholas is drawn into liaisons and would-be liaisons with Gillian Anderson and Kerry Washington, and slides into the spirit of hedonistic excess surrounding the "last king of Scotland" (as Amin calls himself, aligning with an anti-British sentiment).

Sparing doses of ultra-violence are necessary in telling the Amin story, but the most riveting aspects of the film are more psychological, revolving around the charismatic madman Amin, who has squelched his own humanity and humble villager beginnings in pursuit of a bullying, fear-fueled reign. This film fails to reach the heights of empathy and cinematic power of *Hotel Rwanda* or *Black Hawk Down*, but it does direct our attentions to the historical and ongoing plight of African politics.

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