

Play of the Year: Go Behind the Scenes of ‘A Man Like You’

26 Feb 2016 | By [Tim Mworira](#) | [@Timworia](#)



Michael Olwenya and Tom Walsh in rehearsals for A Man Like You (Photo: Fransoir Images)

There is no other experience quite like watching an actor cry on cue right in front of you. Your heart starts racing, your throat closes up, all the while your mind wonders, how do they do it? I was seated beneath the cooling shade of a climbing plant, under a sweltering hot noon sun, watching the rehearsals for an upcoming theatre play– A Man Like You – when I saw it firsthand. Davina Leonard who portrays Elizabeth North, the disconsolate wife of a diplomat kidnapped in Somalia, is seated in her Muthaiga living room, alone and on the verge of breaking after weeks of hope start devolving into despair. Then it began, in the middle of her expository soliloquy. Her eyes swell up and the bags under them get puffy. Then a tear forms on the inner corner of her right eye, and when she mentions her husband’s name, “Patrick”, the teardrop relents and trickles down her reddened face. I was transported. I forgot to breathe. It was brilliant. Even playwright and director Silvia Cassini, who must have sat through half a dozen rehearsals by this time, was left choked up. “Lights out!”, she calls out coming round after a few sedated moments.



Davina Leonard in rehearsals for A Man Like You (Photo: Fransoir Images)



Silvia Cassini in rehearsals for A Man Like You (Photo: Fransoir Images)

A Man Like You is a gripping drama about two men who are worlds apart in thought and ideology, a Somali terrorist Abdi (played by Nairobi Half Life's [Maina Olwenya](#)) and his British captive (Tom Walsh). Its scenes alternate between a crummy, windowless little room in the middle of war-torn Somalia and a suburban Muthaiga home in Nairobi. Inspired by the horrible events of the Westgate terror attacks, Kenyan-born Silvia has written a powerful exploration of clashing cultures and world views. She cleverly delves into the plight of the terror victim as well as the mind and motives of the terrorist. Somewhere along the incredibly tense plot, the arcs of the two characters meet at an intersection, revealing flaws in one another and establishing both parties as antagonists in the complex web of deceit, exploitation and intolerance of modern terrorism. It's less than a week until the play opens for its first show. And this being one of the few remaining run-throughs, the actors and crew are aware of the stakes. The director begins the session with a simple rallying call, "Today, just do your best". In rehearsals, everyone's locked in. One of the best things about a behind-the-scenes access is getting to see and study each actor's process. Something you do not often experience. I mostly was fascinated and once in a while found myself watching the actors' off-stage demeanor. Davina seems to keep in character, sitting still and maintaining her character's solemn look. Contrastingly, Maina, who practices method acting, shuffles up and down, sipping on coffee and water. Tom Walsh probably has the toughest time of all, his is not a question of choice but what is demanded with many of his off-stage time spent in makeup and wardrobe change.



This is a micro-production (if not smaller) run on a shoestring budget. Rehearsal space is provided by Silvia's folks at their home garden, where some of the props like flowers are collected. The wardrobe assistant doubles as the props designer, piecing and Sellotaping together makeshift prosthetic blood valves. Whilst the sound engineer helps out with procurement.



In rehearsals for A Man Like You (Photos: Fransoir Images)

Everything is run on sheer passion and genuine camaraderie between everyone involved. Minutes before rehearsals begin, everyone is busy doing their bit to make the preparations as perfect as possible. Out of nowhere, the makeup artist offers to pick up a bunch of flowers for the actual shows. "That would be great," says Silvia, still buried in her script. "Can you get roses?" "Got it," comes the response.



Tom Walsh and Maina Olwenya are the poster boys of this tight-knit group. Once the gates open for the audiences, they will be tasked with aggregating all the hard work that has gone on behind the scenes and prove all the effort to be worthwhile through their performances. This pressure will extend to the play's other two actors too, Davina Leonard and Amwoma Mboga who plays Hassan. His role as the second terrorist has limited dialogue, but this is not to say he has it easy. All his lines are in Somali. I would imagine it's not an easy thing for a performer to carry on their shoulders most of the weight of the project, but these four are seasoned professionals. Maina's repertoire which includes a role in Hollywood film *The Fifth Estate*—featuring Oscar nominees Benedict Cumberbatch and Alicia Vikander— and countless stage work is unmatched by any Kenyan actor of his generation. And his range is amazing as well, recently appearing in a staging of a comedic play titled *Conmen*. However it is his role as Oti in [Nairobi Half Life](#) that underlines his prowess. That breakout performance put his name in lights and announced him to the world. No mean feat, but still Silvia jokingly states, “he’ll be more famous after this play”. She might not be far from the truth going by the exceptional emotionally-driven performance I saw him give in the rehearsal. Later, when the day's session has ended, I try to draw comparisons between Abdi and Oti but Maina tells me that the only similarities he sees in the two are struggle and the basic instinct of survival.





In rehearsals for A Man Like You (Photos: Fransoir Images)

Tom on the other hand is a lifelong lover of the stage and brings some of the best training from his time at the Vancouver Academy of Dramatic Arts. He has worked as a journalist for CNN and Al Jazeera which has allowed him to cover East Africa. This experiential knowledge of Somalia from his travels there gives an edge and gravitas to his performance that any other person would struggle to deliver. Tom knows that such parallels between his character and his real life, even the little ones like being from the British countryside, help him understand his character Patrick and that of his captor Abdi, much better. Davina's stage experience has hit new heights recently thanks to Making It!, her touring solo comedy show that has gone from strength to strength since she debuted at the 2014 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Davina is absolutely unbelievable in a dramatic role for a person who cut her teeth in comedy and been doing lighter roles for most of the past two years. She made me forget to breath, for Chrissake!



In rehearsals for A Man Like You (Photos: Fransoir Images)

Rounding off the cast is Amwoma. A student of the fine arts and homegrown talent, he has taken on some of theatre's biggest names, both old and contemporary. From Shakespeare to John-Sibi Okumu. But his biggest test yet lied ahead with this play; a non-Somali who has to deliver, compellingly at that, in the Somali language. Alas, he does! I found it amazing how naturally

Amwoma performs his lines— obviously the payoff for his extra efforts. For authenticity purposes, he employed the help of a speech coach and keeps practicing every day by speaking the language with his Somali friends. You can't get any more committed to a role than that. I don't know what the Kenyan equivalent of the Tony Awards is, I'm not sure there even is one. Still I'm convinced that this cast would sweep them. A lot of credit has to go to Silvia for the brilliant material she gives her actors to work with. The writing is incredible and some of it is inspired stuff. I can confidently say that I have never, in the admittedly few occasions I have gone to see a theatre play, come out with quotables: "Amazon is quite unreliable around here", "You are not honest enough to call yourself a terrorist", "We may not agree, but this time is not wasted". Brilliant, just brilliant. Rehearsals are where new ideas come in, others thrown out and many improved. It is fun being in the center of it and glorious to soak in. However, as exciting as that sounds, I find myself imagining more about the final, fully polished package. By the time the curtain opens on March 1st, Silvia and her crew will have done four more rehearsals since I was with them. A lot more will sure have been added, thrown out or improved. I hope to see you at the show.

A MAN LIKE YOU

Tuesday 1st/ Wednesday 2nd March

Braeburn Austin Theatre, at 7.30 pm

**Tickets: Adults Kshs. 2,000/- Students 16-18 years: Kshs. 1,000/-
from Sam: 0723 353645**

Friday 4th/ Saturday 5th March

Muthaiga Country Club at 7.30pm

**Tickets: Members: Kshs. 3,500/- Guests: 3,800/- with Canapes
and Welcome Drink from Jo: 0723 433747**

Tuesday 8th/ Wednesday 9th March

Purdy Arms, Karen at 7.30 pm

**Tickets: Kshs. 3,500/- with Canapes and Welcome Drink
from Celeste: 0792 745927**

Friday 11th/ Saturday 12th March

Braeburn Theatre at 7.30 pm

**Tickets: Adults Kshs. 2,000/- Students 16-18 years: Kshs. 1,000/-
from Sam: 0723 353645**





In rehearsals for A Man Like You (Photos: Fransoir Images)