

# Cleopatra

Tonny Kimani, a close friend of mine, asked me to take a walk with him down the main street of Nairobi, Kenyatta Avenue. He actually challenge me. "Peta, let me show you something that will surprise you. Yes, you, Peter Daino, the Catholic Brother who has ministered to "women of the night." How little you know about your brothers, "men of the night." And so, we walked down Kenyatta Avenue from 9 p.m. to 10 p.m. on a fair night in late January 1996. There on every street corner I saw young men in tight jeans who looked nervous and afraid. When they recognized Tonny their expression would change. They would smile, run toward him, stop, take his hand, and with sparkling eyes say, "Cleopatra, Karibu! Queen of Nairobi, Karibu!"

History of ISHTAR  
at  
its BIRTH: Cleopatra

by Peter Daino  
CO-AUTHOR of Cleopatra  
PRODUCER of Cleopatra

Tonny would accept the homage with a regal nod of the head, and then introduce me. I chatted for a few minutes with each of Cleopatra's subjects usually asking them where they were from and what brought them to Nairobi. This is how I got to know that poor young men in Nairobi were as desperate as the poor young women.

A few weeks passed before Tonny raised a question about those men in the night we had encountered on Kenyatta Avenue. "Peta, what can be done for these beautiful desperatos? Look, your church is helping their sisters at Maria House, so why can't you open a school for our young men to give them new skills and a new life?" I told Tonny that I had had many meetings with the women before a decision was reached how best to assist them. I explained to Tonny that we had to find a way to sit with the desperatos, so we could listen carefully to their problems and to any solutions they might suggest that would make their lives better.

"Okay, Peta," Tonny replied, "you want to get these guys together for several meetings so you can discuss life with them. I know exactly what to do. The best way to gather these gay young men is to invite them to rehearse for a musical.

And the musical I propose is Cleopatra in which Tonny Kimani would play Daughter of Ra, Queen of the Nile.

That is how the idea for "Cleopatra the Musical" was conceived. I wrote the plot and Tonny put together the music and dancing. We got funding from the Dutch Catholic Church. We booked the Kenya National Theatre for two consecutive weekends in late May 1997.

There were many challenges we faced. First, Tonny was not the easiest person to work with. Tonny had fought against immense prejudice in his short life (he claimed to be 22 but he was probably older). He had developed a fighting spirit and could be aggressive when crossed. All of this I learned later. My first impression of Tonny, who I met in the Post Office, was "Wow, what a sweet guy." In fact, Tonny was a Bitch! This trait was good when we were fighting for our right to stage the production but was bad when the desperatos did not show proper reverence because Tonny would kick them off the show.

Tonny was 3/4 Kikuyu and 1/4 Italian. He was raised by a single mother in Kiambu, a town near Nairobi, well known for the Mau Mau and for fighting colonial rule. Tonny was a firebrand. He always defended his honour, never let anything get by him. Tonny was the kind of person who could be walking down a street and upon hearing any mockery would turn around and march back to whoever had insulted him and give them a dressing down.

Second, there was the challenge of sabotage. During rehearsals

homophobic thugs let the air out of the tyres of the play director's car. Maximillia tried to ignore this almost nightly attack but one night they left a threatening note on her windshield. She became so frightened that she quit the show. She handed the directorship to Tonny who then became play director and lead actor/ress.

After rehearsals homophobic thugs would corner the gay dancers and hit them in the stomach and in the face. These thugs even tried to corner Tonny one night but he shrieked "Bloody Murder" and yelled at them hysterically. The thugs quickly released Tonny fearing the wrath they saw in his furious face and the high heel shoes he was brandishing.

A week before opening night anonymous callers began to phone the office of the theatre manager saying that if she allowed the musical to be performed they would burn down the theatre. After many such phone calls the manager pleaded with us to cancel the show but we refused. Tonny was able to reassure her that her building was safe. He pointed out that the police station was right down the street and the fire department was around the corner.

The third challenge was the political scene in Kenya in May 1997. The pro-democracy movement organized a march for 25 May, a saturday. That weekend would have been the show's final weekend.

President Daniel Arap Moi warned the demonstrators that if they crossed Uhuru Highway and entered Uhuru Park he would have the police arrest them. Well, that's exactly what happened. The demonstrators crossed Uhuru Highway and entered Uhuru Park. By the way Uhuru means freedom. In the park the demonstrators were met by hundreds of policemen who shot teargas at the them. In the panic that ensued people were running away in every direction and a few were smashing shop windows. The police shot more tear gas and closed the roads around the National Theatre which was located near Uhuru Park. The melee forced us to cancel all weekend performances.

I believe that we were lucky all this happened. Nobody came that saturday to the theatre except the cast. Try to picture it:

There was no audience in the spacious National Theatre. The actors, actresses and dancers were sitting forlorn on the stage waiting for the teargas outside to dissipate. Then Tonny said to me, "Peta, this is a great opportunity to ask them your question." I had already had a meeting with the cast at the Benedictine monastery in East Nairobi but few desperatos attended. Now I had a captive audience, or actually a captive cast. And so i asked them, "How can the Church respond to the pastoral needs of the gay community in Nairobi?"

Let me set the stage We were sitting on little stools in a circle on the wooden stage. The curtains were open and the stage

lights were beaming down on us. The harsh lights made me think of heaven's door and final judgment. At last the reckoning. Now was the time to speak the truth.

The most effeminate of the dancers who always wore a lavender jumpsuit and had been beaten twice by the homophobic thugs, stood up and said, "I want to be loved by my family. I want to stop hiding. I want to feel safe." Then I said, "Isn't this the meaning of salvation? Isn't this what Jesus preached: 'Don't be afraid.' Jesus came to bring us safety. Indeed, instead of asking 'are you saved?' might it not be more Christlike to ask, 'do you feel safe?' Jesus came that we might feel safe. (Ugh! I am embarrassed as I write this. That young man did not need a sermon.. but it gets worse).

Others spoke up after the soft spoken dancer in the lavender jumpsuit. Most said the same thing: "We need job training, we need a school where we could learn skills that would give us an income without losing our dignity. Still others talked about the need to change society's attitude toward gay people. The need most often repeated was for a school. The desperatos wanted an education which would help them to become self-reliant. I noted all that was said for the report I was going to submit to the Archbishop.

I spoke after everyone had finished. I thanked the cast for staying for the unplanned meeting we had just had. I thanked the Catholic Church for funding our musical. Then I said, "Remember you are all God's children and deserve love and respect. You have a special contribution to make to society. Of course homosexuals are called to a life of celibacy in order that they can channel their sexual energy into generative activities: social service projects, artistic endeavors, liturgy."

Now in 2012, when I look back at what I did in 1997 I am both proud and ashamed. I am proud we had the guts to go through with staging the First Gay Play in Kenya. Despite the violence used against us, despite the threats to our property and lives The Show Went On!

I am ashamed at the advice I gave at our final meeting. I am ashamed I told the dancers to channel their love energy to whatever good they could conceive except, EXCEPT!, toward the object of their love, that is, never channel the love to the one who inspires it.

I am proud and ashamed of what I did in 1997. Over all I think I failed my gay brothers. What I said to them demeaned their emotions, and yet I was talking about Heshima!

What if any of the dancers actually tried to follow what I said was Church teaching. They would be on the road to a double life, feeling one thing, professing another. By hating their feelings they would have definitely been on the wrong road, for the only road to the heart of God is feeling the feelings deepest in our hearts.

Oh: can God forgive me for saying such stupid, stupid things? I am in an Anglican Monastery as I write this report to you. I am begging Jesus to have mercy on me; and, yes, to direct his gay love to this sinful gay soul of mine, trusting its the true object of his love energy.

Peter Daine  
WRITTEN  
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New York  
USA

5