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BROOKLYN UP CLOSE

## Love Triangles, Evil Twins: The International Language

By **ANDREW RICE**

**D**rama is built on character, but a soap opera is rooted in place. A character on "Days of Our Lives" or "General Hospital" may marry, divorce, be buried alive or lost at sea, but Salem and Port Charles, their famous locales, remain unchanging and eternal.

And so not surprisingly, the real stars of "BrooKenya!," a soap opera for which production is wrapping up on two continents, are the borough of Brooklyn, and Kisumu, a sleepy town on the shore of Lake Victoria. Shot on digital camera, with mostly amateur actors, the show demonstrates how two peoples, separated by divergent cultures and roughly 7,000 miles, are united by their proclivity for scheming, their propensity for tantrums and their desire for sex.

The creators of "BrooKenya!" are Kitche Magak, a Kenyan teacher, and Kate Gardner, artistic director of the Community Theater Internationale, a Dumbo group. The two met three years ago at a performing arts conference, and were intrigued by the phenomenal popularity of soap operas in Kenya.

So Ms. Gardner and Mr. Magak soon began collaborating on a soap of their own, trading footage over the Internet. Soon, Ms. Gardner said, what began as a "grassroots international relations project" evolved into an epic, with proliferating subplots and a cast of 37. She is now editing footage into the first of 13 episodes, to be shown this year on Brooklyn Community Access Television and Kenyan national television.

Vastly simplified, the plot of "BrooKenya!" centers on two female characters: Miderma Lela, the beefy wife of a wealthy Kenyan businessman, and Jacqueline (Jaxx) Aaron, a lesbian Brooklyn restaurateur. Years earlier, Jaxx had had an affair with Miderma's husband, who was studying in America. They conceived a son, who was put up for adoption. Early in "BrooKenya!," Miderma learns of the relationship. She confronts her husband, bellowing, "You left me here as your fiancée to go to New York and breed like a rat!"

Miderma decides to turn the crisis to her advantage. During her marriage she has had three daughters, but not a son, a situation that has her husband contemplating a second, polygamous marriage. To provide an heir, Miderma flies to New York.

All this unfolded onscreen one recent Saturday, when Ms. Gardner and Mr. Magak staged simultaneous premieres of a rough cut of "BrooKenya!" In Kisumu, where it was raining, the crowd overflowed from beneath a tent. Meanwhile, in a converted warehouse beneath the Manhattan Bridge, a test audience of 100 New Yorkers drank Tusker beer and mingled with members of the cast, a group that included Marlon Hunter, a young actor whose credits include parts on "All My Children" and "Sex and the City."

"BrooKenya!" ends with a pair of cliffhangers. In Brooklyn, Miderma confronts Jaxx at her restaurant, where it is revealed that the heir to the Lela fortune is -surprise!- Pete, the handsome busboy, played by Mr. Hunter. In Kenya, a young woman catches her boyfriend cheating. "You'll pay for this, you fool!" she shouts. Then she dissolves into tears, as a Celine Dion ballad swells.