



I HAD A FARM IN AFRICA: *Scott (left) and Desmond Dube, who plays her neighbor, B.K.*

Put On a Happy Face

In 'Detective Agency,' Africa never looked so good.

By JOSHUA ALSTON

THE AFRICA IN THE NEW TELEVISION series "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" isn't the one we're accustomed to seeing. There are no wailing babies with swollen bellies, no violent political uprisings and nary a hemorrhagic fever to be found. Based on the popular series of novels by Alexander McCall Smith, the show follows Precious Ramotswe (Jill Scott), a woman living in Botswana who uses her intuition to solve mysteries. In this Africa, the closest thing to a humanitarian crisis involves a woman named Happy Bapetsi and a man who may or may not be her father—or, as the situation is known within the agency, "The Case of the Dubious Daddy."

"Agency," which debuts this month on HBO, is a feel-good series set in a place we're used to feeling bad about. Granted, Botswana has a lot going for it, compared with many developing countries. The country's government is democratic and stable, and its gross domestic product is among the world's fastest-growing, thanks to its diamond wealth. However, about 25 percent of adults in Botswana are infected with HIV—the second-highest infection rate in the world. In McCall Smith's first novel in the series, from which the show's pilot is culled, there's almost no mention of the HIV epidemic, save for one coy statement from an ancillary character: "I

have a sister who is sick with a disease that is killing everybody these days. You know what I am talking about." Even that line is nowhere to be found in the pilot. McCall Smith has long had to defend his novels on these grounds, but the television adaptation of them, along with the debate surrounding this year's best picture, "Slumdog Millionaire," reintroduces the question. Is it appropriate for an escapist fantasy to be set in a culture where so many people are suffering?

With "Slumdog," much of the conversation hinged on the fact that both screenwriter Simon Beaufoy and director Danny Boyle are British—outsiders. McCall Smith is British too, as was the late Anthony Minghella, who helped bring "Agency" to the screen and directed the pilot. But whereas "Slumdog" was accused of offering a fairy-tale solution to Indian poverty, "Agency" will almost certainly be accused of ignoring Botswana's problems altogether. Both are willful misrepresentations of the respective countries and cultures they are portraying. In fact, the absence of the typical dark-continent viewpoint was what attracted Minghella.

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to the project. "It was a privilege to be working on a film which celebrates what we can learn from Africa, and not what we think we can teach it," Minghella said.

The lesson we can learn from Precious Ramotswe is much like the one we learned from Poppy Cross (Sally Hawkins) in Mike Leigh's "Happy-Go-Lucky"; in the war that is life, there's no better weapon than an unwavering sense of optimism. Precious has plenty of reasons to brood. Her father just passed away, and she's reeling from the dissolution of an abusive relationship, but she's irrepressibly sunny. She takes the cattle bequeathed to her and sells them off, then uses the money to start her detective agency. Business is slow at first, as the idea of a female detective is met with skepticism, but she wills it into a viable enterprise. The plotting is simplistic, the performances are over the top, but "Agency" works in spite of it all. The show puts you into an adorable, heartwarming sleeper hold. It's less painful if you don't fight it.

With its industrious, joyful people and scenic backdrops, "Agency" is as much a tourism advertisement for Botswana as it is a TV show. But it's the right of the show's creators to project that vision of Botswana if they choose to. There are plenty of romantic fantasies set in America or England, and while they don't fully capture the countries in which they're set, that shouldn't be the goal of a fictional story. Telling the story—the story of Precious, not the story of Botswana—in the most compelling way is the filmmakers' responsibility.

That's not to say that McCall Smith and Minghella's rose-colored view of Botswana doesn't occasionally strain credibility. One of Precious's clients, Alice Busing (Nikki Amuka-Bird), suspects her husband, Kremlin (a hilarious, hammy David Oyelowo), of infidelity. There's not even a passing mention that in a country where a quarter of adults have HIV, infidelity carries greater potential consequences than a broken heart. Still, that's only a narrative misstep, not a moral failing. "Agency," like any other fictional story, should be judged on how skillfully it renders its world, not on the degree to which its world reflects reality. After all, the movies and television shows that have depicted Africa as a slide show of human suffering haven't shown the entire picture either. And if there are going to be escapist fantasies, there's no better place to set them than in countries where the people could use a little respite. ■