

artsfirst night

Darkness in Africa's heart

A dense jungle setting houses a powerful polemic dense with ideas, says Sam Marlowe

Theatre

Shiverman

Theatre 503, SW11

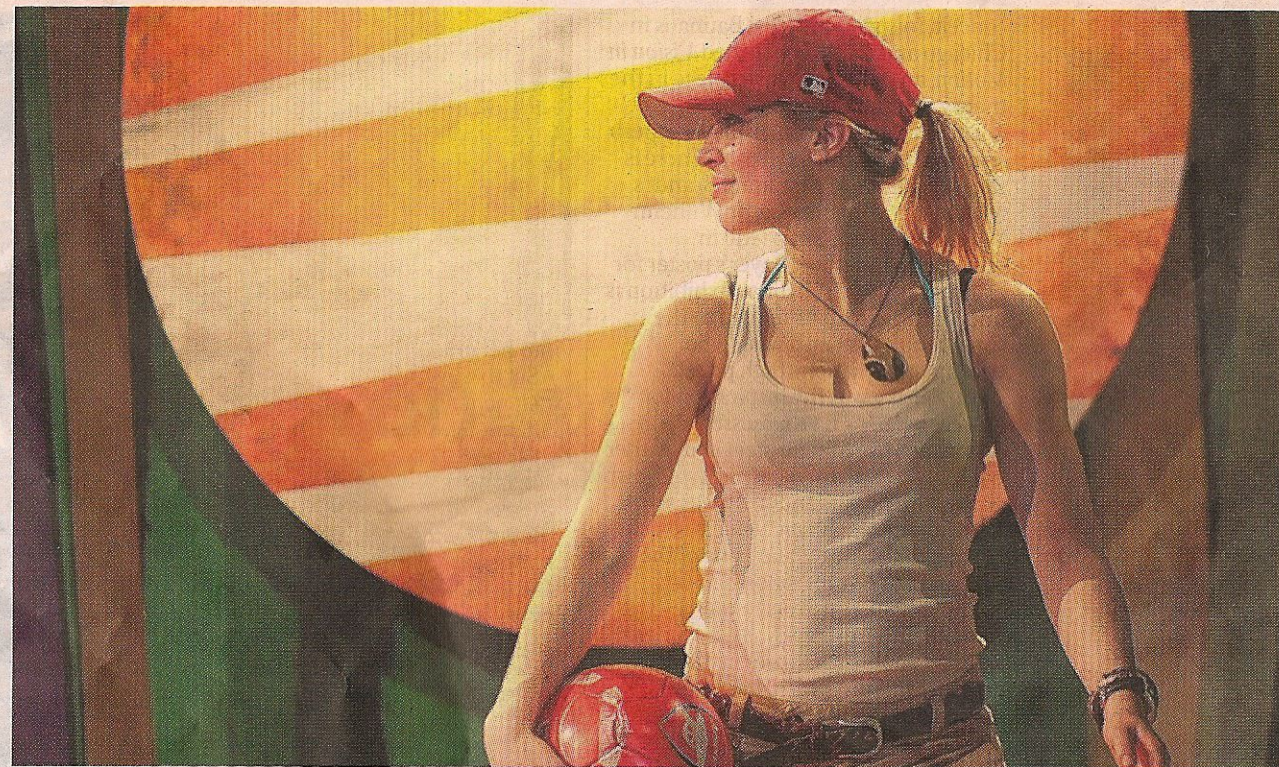
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Who should have been fired in last night's *Apprentice*?
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It's a little like the Garden of Eden; the vegetation is lush, a giant orange sun beams down, and at least one serpent slithers through the undergrowth. The demi-paradise of this Pacific island valley is, in fact, bristling with weapons — hunting spears, machetes, guns — and at times James Sheldon's new play seems something of a blunt instrument. His polemic can be clunky, and not all his characters have enough flesh on their bones. Yet thematically, the piece is absorbingly dense and fecund. And Tom Littler's production grips ferociously, pulsing with ideas and excitement as the tension tightens like a tourniquet, until blood rushes in to flood the fissures between ancient and modern, mythology and religion, the West and the developing world, exploiter and exploited.

Roy Turner, a US anthropologist (Paul Mooney), believes that among the Okoku tribe he may have discovered the oldest surviving music: a sacred sect, the Breathers, coax eerie tunes from clay flutes to appease a vengeful deity known as the Shiverman. Roy hopes to win protected



Eleanor Wyld plays a grad student who strikes up a dangerously double-edged friendship with a local boy in *Shiverman*

heritage status from Unesco for the valley, saving it from Chinese plans to mine there. He needs the recommendation of Dominique (Lisa Kay), an NGO executive director who also happens to be an ex-lover.

But they clash when she uncovers horrific abuse of women and girls, sanctified by tradition. Is she a cultural imperialist with an axe to grind? Is Roy a careerist, or guilty of romanticising the Okoku? Meanwhile, Terri (Eleanor

Wyld), a sensual Australian grad student sent with Dominique to verify Roy's archaeological finds, strikes up a dangerously double-edged friendship with his assistant Tatalau'e (Benjamin Cawley), a local boy obsessed with football and seduced by films about Rambo, Dirty Harry and Mad Max that he has seen at the mission school.

Sheldon is a former anthropologist, and the play buzzes with erudition. And as well as evoking global issues, it

suggests others closer to home, such as the kind of cultural sensitivities that fail to prevent forced marriages and honour killings in modern Britain. It's pugnacious, provocative writing, and if it's occasionally over-deliberate, Littler's cast keep the temperature at a steamy tropical high. It has its rough patches, but this is an enthralling journey into a complex, deeply equivocal heart of darkness.

Box office: 020-7978 7040, to May 26