

Disability Art Space

MAGAZINE

EDITORIAL

A DAY WITH
NOLLYWOOD

HOW THE DEAF USE
DANCE TO
LEARN AND
COMMUNICATE
FOR INCLUSION

INCLUSION,
DON'T FORGET
ABOUT US
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Opportunities
For Creatives



EDITORIAL

Recently the leaders of the creative industry gathered in Abuja to engage the disability community on inclusion in the creative industry ecosystem. The consultative meeting organized by Potters Gallery Initiative in partnership with UNESCO Abuja Regional Office to look at issues of marginalization and discrimination perceived by persons with disabilities passionate to be part of the success story of the Nollywood. The meeting was an eye opener on how the film can help to change the negative public perception affecting persons with disabilities. The meeting provided a good platform for persons with disabilities to share their ideas freely on how inclusion will enrich Nollywood and bring a rich diversity to their content.

The meeting reminds us all of the urgent need to increase advocacy on disability inclusion, the meeting is timely and strategic. The meeting is coming at a time when there is a national disability act with an implementation commission, and a strong emphasis on compliance with its provisions. Persons with disabilities stand to benefit more from the creative industry value chain. The challenge however remains to identify clear entry strategies, and in doing this requires a multi-stakeholder partnership and implementation framework.

The stakeholders meeting with Nollywood will spark new conversation and inspire new



innovation on disability inclusion in the art of telling our stories to the world, and substantially comply with the United Nations SDG slogan of "Leave No One Behind" and the United Nations Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities.



HOW THE DEAF USE DANCE TO LEARN AND COMMUNICATE FOR INCLUSION

It was a new concept known as Deaf Dance, the goal was to learn and communicate issues affecting deaf persons, it was a week-long activity full of fun and learning. The Deaf Dance Boot Camp, which aired on social media platforms commenced on the 28th of August, 2021 to 4th of September 2021. This innovative idea was birthed by the Executive Director of Seams Consult Mr. Samuel James, whose experience curating deaf dance span more than seven years. He was able to sell the vision of the project to Partners, Sponsors and Judges that embraced it. The project, had The Deaf Allopa Dance Crew from Ghana as major partners. The project was planned and executed in collaboration with the leader of the group Emmanuel Duah (Allopa Junizy). A strong partnership was also established with the Center for Contemporary Arts Lagos. **CCALAGOS** provided their massive space for the final dance video shoot.

Well-structured classes were taken by professional Dance tutors and Dance lecturers through practical and pedagogical approach, to impart and improve Dance knowledge and technique of the artists. Leadership classes were well taught for the artists to take up life challenges as they come. This process was tailored in a fun and exciting manner while teaching/learning takes place.

The Deaf Dance Boot Camp was created to achieve the following objectives; Showcase the creativity and boost the innovation inherent in the Deaf community. Demonstrate a collaboration in the creative process through leadership participation and reflection. Develop a multifaceted physicality through dance. Boost a better social and interpersonal relationship. Aid in developing important emotional skills. Prior to commencement

of the Challenge, fliers were posted on social media platforms for interested persons that are Deaf or Hard of Hearing to show their interest by registering with a commitment-fee of N6000. A total of 22 Dancers from across the country showed up. We had dancers from Rivers, Kwara, Anambra, Oyo State respectively.

Participants were well received on day 1 and were fully ready for the business of the boot camp.



Day 2 activities includes:

Workout, Choreography, Guest Visit and was anchored by Mr Samuel James and Kay Dance. Following this session, we had a choreography class perfectly delivered by Kay Dance. Furthermore, we had a guest visit (Dr Odusanya Tola) a supporter, a well-wisher and a role model in the Deaf community. We also had Ghana Afro class by Duah Emmanuel. We had some breaks and then a heart touching session tagged “meet a dancer”. This session allowed all participants to share their stories individually. This is more like the heart of the camp.



Day 3 came with lovely sessions again loaded with African Contemporary, lectures, Games and Choreography Class. The African contemporary was well delivered by Mr Joshua Olagunju. He opened up the mysteries around the African dance and gave relevant ideas to becoming a better African contemporary dancer. It was more of theory and practical session. We had a fantastic lecture afterwards, lectures on Introduction to element of Dance and The Business of Dance which was facilitated by Mr Adewale Ademuyiwa. He emphasized on the impact of the bootcamp and the need to take the lessons home, to the grassroots to help develop other deaf kids who loves to 'dance to the beat of their dreams too'

Mr Adewale also emphasized on the need to take advantage of the training as a strong platform for dance career and self-development. We concluded with an interesting game anchored by Mr Samuel James and the officials - the tasking game promoted social interactions amongst the participants and prepared them for the choreography class conducted by Kay Dance.



Day 4 started with a session on traditional dances which was facilitated by the great Damilare Agboola. He is a pro dancer with many accolades under his sleeve. The session which was observed twice with a recess in between was co-facilitated by Mr Joshua Olagunju an expert dancer. Mr Damilare who is a dancer analyzed the dance, organized the dancers and introduced the beats. Away from the traditional dances, we had the choreography sessions facilitated by Kay Dance. The interesting session ended in a dance battle which was fun. We draw the curtain with moments of humor, and talent display.



Day 5 opened with a light interactive session with Mr Clement Ojo, one of our sponsors and well-wisher. He spoke at length on Hard-work and focus. This is through a virtual session with the participants. The session which lasted for about an hour entertained questions from our great dancers. Away from the first session, we had our breakfast prepared by our Camp chef- Miss Ayokunnu. The second session started immediately we refreshed our system with the nourishing meal. As part of the Day 4 assignment, the dancers, divided into groups were asked to come up with presentation following a heavy rehearsal as choreographed by our standing Dance Instructor, Kay Dance, and other facilitators- displaying creativity and putting into

practice what has been learnt. The presentation was awesome as the 2 groups performed wonderfully well. The session was well commended by the judges and constructive criticism were raised to give them a better view and understanding of what their expectations and goals should be as dancers.

Following the group presentations, we had a recess, a short one. Soon after, the existing groups had another round of rehearsals, a different assignment to correct their flaws from day 1 till date. The session was well supervised by Mr Samuel James and watching it was so riveting. The performances would be fire ? as always. This session ended with another break in between. Then the proposed camp project, a video to be shot after the camp had its rehearsals up since the day 2 of this event. The shoot which promises to feature all the dancers on this camp had a continued rehearsal today as coordinated by our lead choreographer, Kay Dance. It should be noted also that we are so blessed as Day 5 ended with Guest visit. We had lot of dignitaries coming to see the great wonders happening in the camp. We are so encouraged by this act.

Day 6 came with moments of fierceness, tenacity and focus as we proceeded in our sessions of exercise, rehearsals, grooming and drilling. Today, day 5 started with an opening prayer as led by Kay Dance followed by exercise which was coordinated by Mr. Samuel James and the lead facilitator, Kay Dance. Following the morning drilling, we had rehearsals back-to-back in preparation towards the camp project and a way to solidify methods that were taught. The rehearsals were necessary for the

camp project and also for a shot as captured by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) BBC Yoruba came to capture the choreography as expected while they also interviewed the Organizer of the event, Mr. Samuel James, his beloved wife, Mrs. Betty James, and the Lead Facilitator, Kay Dance. The session lasted for hours but finally ended in success. In between, we had 2 guest visitors- Engr. Adewope and Mr Ayorinde. The day ended with much confidence, optimism and excitement as it ended with photography sessions and suya night/ camp fire.

Today was a dream come true and a very special day to Seams Consults and all participants of this bootcamp. Today featured a very big dance project which had been in the pipeline. It was rehearsed all along in each day after some other theory and practical sessions. This project which is a beautiful artistic work laced with different stories was designed to push out the deaf dancers in Nigeria while also assessing their area of strengths. The heavy rain wouldn't stop us. We had our bus out in the rain, it floated on water, dancing to the beat of the flood. We arrived our venue, had rehearsals, a perfect video shot which lasted for many hours, we had great fun and behind the scenes and it was a success! We are really glad to have had this program, recording much successes. We thank God for wisdom and we appreciate everyone who made it a success.



Samuel James is a Script Writer, Sign Language Interpreter, and Curator of Deaf Dance.

A DAY WITH NOLLYWOOD

Imagine having the confidence to walk up and start a conversation with any Nollywood celebrity that catches your eye. Any celebrity



Especially that type that you fantasize about day and night. Especially at night, watching movies like **lion heart** by **Genevieve Nnaji** on **Netflix**. At night, when you are alone scrolling through Instagram, you see them. Those images sometimes look unreal.

They looked like a work of art. So clean, so hot, so out of your reach. But what if?

What if you could get them to talk to you?

No matter the place, malls, markets, churches etc. Anywhere you find them, as you speak, they dissolve into heart-melting smiles. What if this is your reality right now? That was the scenario for many persons with disabilities who desire truly to connect and be part of the success story of the creative industry in Nigeria. I was nervous almost all the time, looking forward to this meeting, because it meant so much to me and my career as a writer and curator. I couldn't but imagine that this is becoming real in Abuja. A lot of persons with disabilities are this way, this is because of the benefits that will come out of the meeting.



This is why this meeting was everything most of us wanted to see happen. The consultative meeting with leaders of the creative industry is one of the best things that happened to the community of persons with disabilities in Nigeria. Many thanks to the support and partnership of **UNESCO Abuja Regional Office**. It was a gathering of the **PRESIDENTS**.

This includes: the president of Actors Guild of Nigeria, Directors Guild of Nigeria, Secretary of Association of Movie Producers, and Financial Secretary of Script Writers Association of Nigeria.

I won't lie, to gather this caliber of men in Abuja under one roof, in spite of their busy schedules and celebrity status, it takes the kind of commitment and passion **UNESCO** has for persons with disabilities to make it happen. Coming into the meeting with high hopes, you will understand it is one of the best things to happen to over 30 million persons with disabilities in Nigeria.

According to recent statistics, the creative industry in Nigeria last year contributed almost 1.8 billion dollars to Nigeria's GDP, it is the second largest in the world after the Hollywood.

It wasn't difficult for the stakeholders present at the meeting to agree in unison that "the film is a strong tool and medium in changing public perception suffered by persons with disabilities" The film has contributed immensely in exporting Nigeria's culture to Africa and the world, especially the culture of the people of south eastern Nigeria.



Using the film to do the same thing will have a multiplier effect in the lives of persons with disabilities in Nigeria. Stakeholders agreed in the meeting that there is urgent need for capacity build on the basic issues and concept of disability. This will be a significant step to creating awareness and domestication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of persons with disabilities, and other relevant international instruments.

The meeting came as a great relief to **Aver Akhigir**, an amputee, who is passionate to appear on screen, and has attended countless audition without success. Aver shared her story full of emotion, how movie directors prefer in most cases to fake disability than to give her a chance. The pain in her story made this meeting at this time more compelling.

According to the National Secretary of Association of movie producers **Baba Agba** said and I quote "The inclusion of stories of persons with disabilities in the movie industry will bring about a rich diversity in the film industry, but we need to explore and identify entry points". Aside the marginalization that persons with disabilities suffer in the creative industry, it is also important to stress the need to adopt creative and innovative strategies that will make our entry into the industry more viable. This is because the creative industry is a business of creativity, and what matters at the end of the day is the balance sheet.

At the end of the consultative meeting, participants agreed on the need for partnership involving government, persons with disabilities, and development partners like **UNESCO** to ensure that practical steps are taken to address the marginalization and discrimination, design framework of participation and inclusion into the second largest industry in the world. Stakeholders are advised to look at the entire value chain of the creative industry. This way, there will surely be something for every person with disability passionate about the creative industry ecosystem.



Donald Unanka

INCLUSION, DON'T FORGET ABOUT US:

Disabilities in Performing Arts



Imagine sitting in an audience in a theatre, waiting for a musical to start. The lights go up and a cheerful song starts playing. Actors cluster onto the stage, and you notice something rather unusual. Some of the performers are in wheelchairs, some are using other aids, and some are only using sign language. You look around at the audience and notice them beaming, wiping tears of happiness and trying to copy the signs of the song lyrics. This unique form of theatre has not stolen any of the magic of live performance, and I am happy to tell you this picture exists outside your imagination. I am one of the actors that has seen it firsthand.

The moment I described was created by [ShedHelsinki](#), an inclusive theatre organization in Finland inspired by [Chickenshed](#) from London, England. During my years with ShedHelsinki, I vividly remember hearing the phrase “this is not disability theatre.” This was the first time for many of my peers to be included and treated as equals both on stage and in rehearsals. What ultimately breaks my heart is knowing that for many of these individuals, it will be one of the very few — if not the only time — they experience that, despite their passion for theatre. They will face substantially more obstacles than their able-bodied peers in creating a career in performing arts due to a lack of inclusivity and accessibility. Disabled people deserve better.

DISABLED ACTORS EXIST, STOP IGNORING THEM

Currently, disability representation in performing arts is minimal. One in four American adults has a disability of some kind, making them the largest minority in the country, yet they are also the least represented in the performing arts field:

Ninety-five percent of disabled characters are played by able-bodied actors. A vast number of actors and actresses have won an Oscar for portraying a character with a disability, but only two actors with the same disabilities as their characters have been awarded.

Broadway's recent productions of “The Cripple of Inishmaan,” “Richard III,” “The Miracle Worker,” and “The Elephant Man” all casted able-bodied actors to play the main character who has a physical disability. Further, many of these actors are celebrities. “Wicked,” during its 15-year run, has not cast an actress with physical disabilities to play Nessarose, who uses a wheelchair to get around. Similarly, “Newsies” character Crutchie, who uses a crutch for his limping, has never been played by an actor with the same condition. Paying more attention to casting a disabled actor for these roles whenever possible would not only level the playing field for the currently overlooked group, but also make the character portrayal in those works more credible.

At the very least, disabled actors should be offered the opportunity to play characters with the same condition. However, we shouldn't reduce their options to just these roles. Teal Sherer, an actress and wheelchair user, discussed in an interview with the HPR how disabled people should be considered for roles other than those that are disability-specific: “Why can't I play the mother, the lawyer or the teacher, because those are all things that I could be in real life? We're often not seen for those roles because they feel like we're gonna play a character to that character, and how that character has to revolve around their disability or has to be explained.” It is important that disabled actors are not overlooked in the casting process of disabled characters, and that disabled actors have the opportunity to explore various roles based on criteria other than solely whether the character was written with a disability in mind.

Disability should be considered an important perspective in the artwork, but also recognize that the disabled individuals have more to give than their disability. Filmmaker, theatremaker and disability arts advocate Emily Dash shared in an interview with the HPR that although her disability will always impact her work, there needs to be more opportunities for disabled artists to experience and produce art from a wider perspective. In addition, she recognizes the importance of intersectional identities: “[Experiences of] queer disabled people, black disabled people, trans disabled people and others deserve to be authentically represented in the performing arts.” Dash noted that, despite being the most underrepresented group in performing arts, disabled people are statistically more likely to engage in the field. Thus, ableism in the arts field cuts off a range of individuals keen on engaging with it. There is a lot of talent offered by disabled artists, which audiences will never be able to see as long as disabled people are deprived of their opportunities to present their work. The prevalence of ableist ideology is especially problematic in theater. Disabled characters are too often portrayed in the narrative of villainy, where disabilities are depicted as something that needs to be cured in order to give a story a happy ending. Disability is seen from a negative perspective and many stories of disabled people are told by those around them and focus on the “burden” the disabled person gives them. Another typical way to use disabled characters in works of art is for inspiration porn, where disabled people are not seen as equal, but serve solely as inspiration and

a reminder for the able-bodied to be grateful for their abilities. Disabled people are pitied and treated as “heroes” for merely completing everyday life tasks on their own. This current prevalent ideology disallows disabled people to be viewed as equally competent artists as their able-bodied colleagues. We need to not only have disabled artists on stage, but also include them equally.

In an interview with the HPR, Louise Perry, managing director of Chickenshed discussed inclusion practices: “It’s not okay for just someone to be in the room, but they have to have a genuine sense and realization of achievement. Once you have reached those people, what are you going to do to make sure that the processes and the policies and the practice that they’re involved in is as effective of all their abilities as it should be if you’re going to go down the route of diversity to stop it just be a box-ticking exercise?” Including disabled people in plays just as tokens and for inspiration porn happens far too often. This needs to be acknowledged and action must be taken so that managers and directors will learn how to avoid the situation.

OPEN THE SPACES

In addition to lack of representation, physical accessibility poses a problem for disabled actors. As always, it is imperative to remember that disability is not a monolith. Even people within the same disability category may seek different accommodations. For instance, not all deaf individuals want subtitles in theatre shows, and wheelchair users have different levels of motion abilities. Mental disorders like autism are spectrums, meaning that symptoms vary vastly within the individuals and they can even manifest as polar opposites in different individuals on the spectrum. In addition to having an inclusive attitude, the performing arts field should rely on experts in order to best accommodate differing needs and make their spaces welcoming.

At the moment, disabled artists have fewer performance options due to accessibility concerns. Dash commented, "I can make theatre work but my options in which to tour outside of its original creation are more limited than a non-disabled person's simply because a lot of smaller independent venues are not accessible."

Similarly, Sherer shared her experiences of having had to audition in places like alleyways and parkinglots with trucks driving by when the casting offices have not been accessible. Older theater buildings especially have frequent accessibility issues, and spaces like backstage, bathrooms, dressing room and access to enter the stage often present difficulties for disabled performers.

Even audience access is limited in many theaters., the spaces for the audience are often more accessible than for the performers, there are still accessibility issues. Dash noted that "if we can't experience arts as consumers fully then how can we ever hope to properly be represented in it." Many smaller venues still lack adequate seats for wheelchair users, and many performances lack captioning or other required aid for deaf members of the audience. With current technology, solutions can be created, but this issue needs to be acknowledged and prioritized for that to happen.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

While there is still work to be done, there have been many positive changes that can guide future demonstrate what making good and strong choices can do in changing the minds of other young people like them." Giving a platform and showing value for those who may have lacked that in the past is a powerful tool in changemaking: "We are able to demonstrate the causative of 'look what you're missing if you don't allow inclusion to really be embraced by everyone within the community.'"

By following Chickenshed's example of providing more inclusive spaces in performing arts, artists are given room for effective self-advocacy which can create major changes in the field.

As such, there are multiple solutions already invented to make performing arts more accessible and diverse which must be more widely promoted than they are now. We need theatre buildings that are accessible for both audiences and actors, we need disabled characters played by disabled actors and even more importantly, we need disabled actors to be able to expand their horizons and play any other character as well. We need performing arts to be a field where everyone has value, and when we do that, we send a bigger message to society as a whole to alter current injustices. There has been a huge movement towards more diversity, but disability is often too much overlooked. Disability can affect anyone at any point of their lives, so it is beneficial to everyone to have performing arts as a field of inclusion. Art has compelling power and the field offers a major platform for presenting impactful work. When we allow disabled artists to strive for excellence and succeed on the field, they are finally able to tell their own stories with their own voices, thus becoming a natural part of performing arts and discouraging the current view of their inferiority in society.

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By [Rosanna Kataja](#)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CREATIVES

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