Meet comedian who has made mark by avoiding crude jokes

Comedian Emmanuel Ekeesit has described him as someone who "should be on the Mount Rushmore of Ugandan Comedy," highlighting the lasting impact of his mentorship and influence on the country's comedy scene.

BY PHILIP MATOGO

Mr Timothy Nyanzi is arguably the most influential comedian in Uganda today. Not because he is the best performer, but because he is without a doubt the most consistent curator of comedy events and shows in Uganda. Ask any comedian about him and you will get glowing praise in return. He is something of a fringe player who's at the centre of things, however. It's a paradoxical existence.

One far removed from any semblance to the early years of comedians like David Letterman. Who, before his TV fame, worked at a grocery store where he once stacked cans all the way to the ceiling. He arranged them so that if a customer pulled a single can, the entire display would collapse. On another occasion, he used the intercom to announce a fake fire drill, leading to a store-wide evacuation.

Today, Letterman's former TV show The Late Show boasts a total of 16 Emmy Awards and 112 nominations over 33 years. He has received the Kennedy Center Honors (2012), the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor (2017), and two Peabody Awards (1991 and 2015). And, if that was not enough, the prestigious magazine TV Guide ranked The Late Show as the 7th greatest TV show of all time in 2002. As of 2025, Letterman's estimated net worth is approximately $400 million.

The "come up"

Before comedy, David Letterman seemed unsuited to success. It is different for Mr Timothy Nyanzi. He is single-minded in his focus on becoming comedy's go-to guy. Mr Nyanzi is a workaholic and a visionary who has elevated the quality of stand-up and stand-up comedians in Uganda.

To several Ugandans, Mr Nyanzi is the quick-witted stand-up comedian whose one-liners hit audiences long after he has left the stage. But he is also the founder of Uganda's first official comedy club, Laughing Marabou Stork, and a mentor to many comedians. But away from the spotlight, there is a lot about Nyanzi that many people do not know.

Mr Nyanzi was born at Mulago Hospital on May 26, 1990 to parents Joshua and Winfred Ssentamu. The third of four children, he was raised in the lakeside suburb of Ggaba. His father is a land surveyor, while his mother operates a hardware business.

He grew up in an Anglican household and went on to attend Namilyango College, where he completed his S6 in 2008. He joined Makerere University in 2009 and graduated with a bachelor's degree in Procurement and Supply Chain Management.

Clearly, on paper, it seemed that Mr Nyanzi was headed for a quiet life. One removed away from the ups and downs of comedic shenanigans. To be sure, a quiet life is ideal for comedians. It comes with the territory.

Several comedians are introverts because their personality traits, such as strong observational skills, a preference for working alone, and empathy, lend themselves well to the creative process of developing unique and relatable material.

Although this is not always the case, some comedians love to fish in troubled waters too. One day, for instance, American stand-up comedian Don Rickles (the Merchant of Venom) was seated at a casino restaurant in Las Vegas.

Rickles, who was dining with a date he wanted to impress, spotted musician Frank Sinatra at another table. He approached Sinatra and pleaded, "Frank, do me a favour. Just walk by my table and say, 'Hello, Don,' so this girl thinks I'm important".

Sinatra, being a good sport, agreed. A few minutes later, he strolled over to Rickles' table and said, "Don, how are you? Nice to see you". Without looking up, Rickles waved him away and snapped, "Frank, not now! Can't you see I'm eating? Get lost!"

Sinatra reportedly stood there with his mouth open in shock before breaking into a fit of laughter, cementing Rickles' status as one of the few people who could safely "insult" him. Sinatra had strong connections to the American mafia, so insulting him was a health risk.

Depth charge

Long before audiences came to recognise him on stage, Mr Nyanzi was already shaping his craft. His first major television appearance came in 2014 on Comedy Club Live Kampala on Africa Magic.

Just two years later, he was representing Uganda on regional stages, performing at the Goliath Comedy Club in Johannesburg and later at the Kigali International Comedy Festival in Rwanda 2016. He went on to appear at the Juba International Comedy Festival, South Sudan in 2022 and toured Kenya with his show Around The Border, performing at several venues in both Mombasa and Nairobi the following year.

While he has mentored some of the country's top comedians currently like Dr Hilary Okello, Agnes Akite, Okello Okello, Don Andre and Akau Jambo (South Sudan), Mr Nyanzi has also played a significant role in guiding talents, including Optional Allan and others who left like Maggie D'Bwaiserian, Collins Emeka, Lyshia Juliet, Living Thomas, Richmouth, and Eva Nabadda.

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"I was the one behind comedy nights such as Funny Tuesday (2016), More Coffee More Comedy (2019) and Laffé Little (2023). My support for the comedy ecosystem extends beyond mentorship into collaborative writing. For many years, I have been part of Anne Kansiime's creative team, serving as head writer for her recent Comedy Grill, where I wrote roasts for the panelists, and working on the Pearl Magic Prime reality TV Show *KanSeeMe*, where I also appeared in three episodes," Mr Nyanzi told *Sunday Monitor*.

He added: "Additionally, I continue to play my part in shaping comedy behind the scenes. I have been writer and supervising director on multiple episodes of the sketch production *Don't Mess With Kansiime*, and in 2024, I contributed writing to the Highly Debatable Show at the Nairobi International Comedy Festival."

Comedy's Renaissance Man

Mr Nyanzi is one of those comedians who believes he must learn everything he can about the comedic trade. He soaks in every aspect of comedy. One may liken him to being a latter-day Richard Pryor, a man widely regarded as the greatest stand-up comedian ever.

American comedian Damon Wayans praised Pryor's versatility and genius: "There are my kinds of comedians. The observational humourist, the impressionist, the character creator, the physical comedian, the self-deprecator and the dirty joke teller. What made Richard Pryor (RIP) so brilliant is he was able to incorporate all these styles at once."

This is Mr Nyanzi, without the profanity that Pryor was famed for. Mr Nyanzi keeps his comedy clean. So clean that one wonders why he has not yet teamed up with Kenneth "Pablo" Kimuli, another squeaky-clean comic.

Any comedian will tell you that clean comedy is harder to do than dirty comedy. It has to be more subtle, more nuanced. That's why comedians like Pablo and Nyanzi employ puns, homophones, double-entendres and other witty devices to add layers to what they are saying.

Audience appeal

However, even if they were to do dirty comedy, comedians like the late Richard Pryor would advise that other comedians never use profanity as a punchline. Instead, it should be a weapon in their overall comedic armoury.

By steering clear of controversial topics like politics or religion, as well as profanity or crude jokes, Mr Nyanzi's comedy ensures everyone in the audience feels comfortable and included in the shared experience of laughter.

It's also family-friendly, making Mr Nyanzi's comedy appropriate for diverse settings, including corporate functions, charity fundraisers, church events, and family gatherings, without the risk of causing offence or backlash.

What many comedy fans may not know is that Mr Nyanzi is also an animation writer.

In April last year, he scripted *Cartoons from the Source of the Nile*, a collection of four animated short films: *The Adventures of Pablo, Rushian Macinary: Who Killed Captain Alex? Magujja and Opolot*, and *Queen Kitami*. The collection later earned a nomination in the Gbaka African category at the Festival International Gbaka Animation Awards.

"I also appeared as a panelist on the witty quiz show *Dumb Questions for Cool People*, which I co-created with writer and satirist Ernest Bazanye. From Mulago Hospital to the African animation stage, from small comedy nights to regional tours and writing rooms, my journey shows a career much larger than what audiences see under the stage lights," he told *Sunday Monitor*.

Evidently, behind the laughs is a thinker, a builder of systems, a show producer, and a mentor whose fingerprints can be found across Uganda's comedy landscape. Mr Nyanzi's career is a testament to the versatility of the artist. It is a versatility that many can learn from and apply to everyday life.

ABOUT COMEDIAN NYANZI

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Timothy Nyanzi, a comedian. PHOTO/ COURTESY OF PHILIP MATOGO

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