How voice of a local VJ turns global films into local theatre

VJ Emmy weaves humour with insight, slipping in commentary about greed during crime dramas, about loyalty during family films, and about discipline during martial arts epics.

BY EDGAR R BATTE

By the time dusk settles over the trading centre, the semi-temporary video hall is already breathing. It is a structure of compromise—timber posts, iron sheets, a patched tarpaulin roof that flaps when the wind gathers courage.

Inside, wooden benches are arranged in stubborn rows, their surfaces polished by years of restless viewers. At the front is a projector. The air smells of dust, warm bodies and roasted groundnuts.

At the front, half-lit by the flicker of a white screen that has known better days, stands Musa Ssebanyiga, alias VJ Emmy, microphone in hand, headphones slightly crooked, eyes fixed on the moving images as though he is about to step inside them.

"Mute," he signals softly to the operator. The original soundtrack dips. A silence stretches across the hall. Even the boda bodas roaring outside seem to retreat. And then Emmy begins.

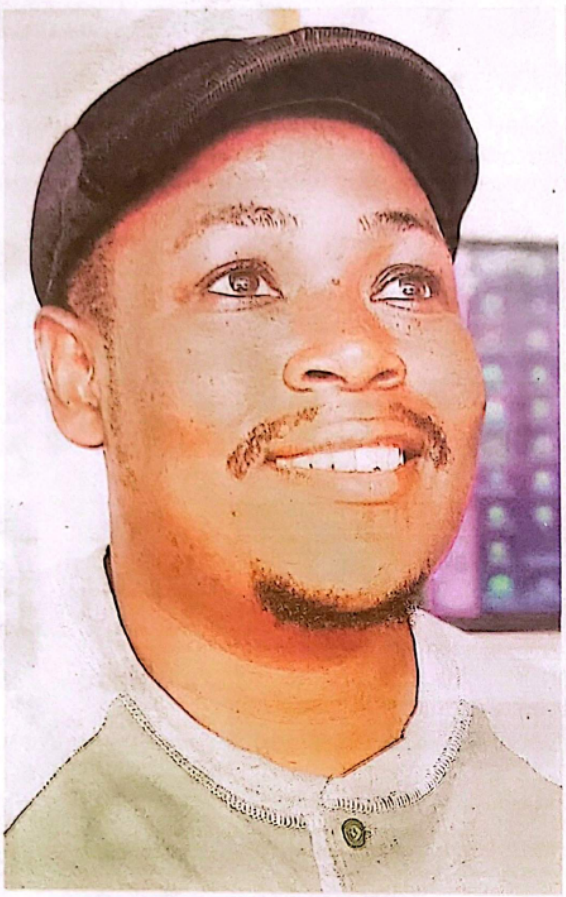
Lessons from entertainment

On a horror night, his voice tightens like a drum skin. A shadow creeps along a corridor on screen, and he lowers his tone to a whisper that slides across the room.

"*Wulira... waliwo ekintu wano.*("Listen... there is something here")" he murmurs. Patrons lean forward.

A teenage boy grips the edge of the bench. A woman who sells tomatoes by day covers her mouth with her kitenge. The door in the film creaks open, and Emmy pauses just long enough for hearts to pound.

When the ghost lunges, he releases a sharp cry that ricochets off the iron sheets, sending three boys jumping in-



VJ Emmy says he dreams of stronger collaboration within Uganda's film industry. PHOTO/COURTESY

to the aisle. Laughter bursts out instantly, breaking the fear.

VJ Emmy rides that wave effortlessly, turning terror into theatre.

"*Abasajja, bwe mukola eby'obutamanya, ebyo bye bibatuusa wano!* (Gentlemen, foolish choices will land you here!)" he adds, drawing a moral from the mayhem.

In that dark hall, horror becomes a lesson, and a lesson becomes entertainment.

On action nights, the mood is entirely different. A Hollywood hero leaps from a speeding truck, and Emmy's voice roars with approval. "*Mulabe omusajja wa maanyi!* (Look at the real man!)" he bellows.

The hall erupts. Someone whistles. Another lets out a high ululation. Fists pump in the air as though the fight is unfolding in the trading centre itself.

Emmy mocks the villain's arrogance, praises the hero's resilience, sprinkles in streetwise humour that makes the audience laugh even before the punchline lands.

A Chinese kung-fu master delivering swift kicks, an Indian superstar breaking into song, an American detective solving a crime—through VJ Emmy's Luganda cadence, they all belong here.

Whether the audience understands English or not becomes irrelevant. He does not merely translate words; he translates worlds.

How he started out

The journey to this microphone began far from these iron sheets. He grew up in his grandfather's village after losing both parents at a young age. In that compound filled with cousins and chores, he first learned to observe people closely.

His grandfather, he says, studied his grandchildren carefully, measuring intelligence and character in quiet ways. He reflects: "Maybe he saw something in me, maybe leadership."

The village cinema, *kibaanda* (local cinema hall), was his first portal into imagination. There, beneath dim bulbs and noisy generators, he watched films with wide eyes.

When travelling VJs came to perform live translations, their rhythm and authority ignited something in him. They were not just narrators; they were performers, comedians, teachers and cultural interpreters rolled into one.

"I was caught with fire," he says of that moment.

After his grandfather's death, he moved to Kampala, carrying grief and ambition in equal measure. Survival came first. He painted cinema boards in Katwe, carefully lettering movie titles and showtimes to earn a little money while staying close to the screens he loved.

He walked long distances, from Lugala to Natete, just to watch established VJs perform. He studied their timing and pauses, and the way they built suspense. Then one evening, opportunity arrived disguised as absence.

A scheduled VJ did not show up. Emmy picked up the microphone. He translated without pay, working for food, learning in real time before a live audience that did not care about his nerves.

More than just comic relief

They cared about delivery. The hall owner noticed the spark. The audience leaned in. And a new VJ was born. Over the years, VJ Emmy's craft has evolved beyond comic relief.

He weaves humour with insight, slipping in commentary about greed during crime dramas, about loyalty during family films, and about discipline during martial arts epics.

"It is not just watching," he insists. "There are messages behind those emotional pictures."

In psychological thrillers, he points out the dangers of pride. In romances, he reminds lovers that affection carries responsibility.

The audience laughs, yes, but they also nod. In that half-dark hall, education arrives disguised as entertainment. He is aware of the comparisons that ripple through Uganda's VJ community, the debates over voice and style.

Some confuse him with others; loyal fans insist they can tell the difference immediately. Emmy avoids rivalry talk. What matters to him is growth.

He studies global filmmaking trends, talks passionately about workshops and festivals like the International Film Festival Rotterdam which he recently attended, and dreams of stronger collaboration within Uganda's film industry.

Yet no matter how far his vision stretches, he returns nightly to spaces like this- semi-temporary halls where global cinema meets local tongue.

As the film's credits roll and the projector light fades, patrons stretch and step out into the Kampala night, still chuckling over a joke or replaying a frightening moment.

Some linger to greet him. He smiles, wipes sweat from his brow, sets down the microphone. Tomorrow, another film will flicker on that screen. Another hero will need praise, another villain ridicule, and another ghost a voice sharp enough to chill the spine.

And once again, in a hall held together by nails and hope or a bar, VJ Emmy will stand between worlds, translating not just language but emotion, culture and consequence- reminding everyone that sometimes the most powerful cinema is in the voice that carries it home.

ABOUT VJS

VJs, short for Video Jockey, are professional performers that translate and narrate over foreign films in makeshift shacks all over the country.
Source: UNICEF website

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