

Ssetimba's 45-year wait for Uganda's film industry to pay off

In an era when careers are chosen primarily for profitability, Charles Ssetimba Ssempala stands as an outlier. For 45 years, he remained in the film industry, not because it made sense on paper, but because it made sense in his heart.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

Charles Ssetimba Ssempala is an industry pioneer and legend. At 72, he is remembered as the man who has pushed the film industry for the last four decades. Ssetimba stayed through seasons when acting did not pay, when transport to rehearsals was uncertain, when the industry itself was dismissed as unserious. He stayed when there was no money, and now, as Uganda's film industry begins to find its footing, he is still here to see it finally start to pay off.

A life before the stage
Born in 1954 in

Kibiri, Busabala road, Ssetimba attended Kibiri Primary School before moving to Nnabagereka Primary School for his Primary Seven. From there, he joined Old Kampala Secondary School, later enrolling at the Uganda College of Commerce, now Makerere University Business School, where he pursued a diploma in Business Studies, majoring in Accounts. He would go on to begin the rigorous ACCA professional course, but the political and economic instability of Idi Amin's era disrupted that journey. "ACCA is a very demanding course," he recalls. "But at the time, there were no resources. It became difficult to continue."

Still, he pressed on. In 1974, he joined Makerere University under the bursar's department, later working as a senior accounting clerk at the Centre for Continuing Education. His career would expand further when he trained in personnel management and industrial relations at Eastern and Southern African Management Institute (ESAMI) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. By all measures, his path was set, steady, professional, and far removed from the unpredictability of the stage. But something else was calling.

The audition

In the 1970s, Ssetimba approached his cousin, Mr J.W.K. Ssebamiye of The Ebonies, one of Uganda's most

influential theatre groups, and asked for a chance to audition. When the moment came, he did not hesitate.

"I used what God gave me," he says, his face lighting up as he demonstrates the now famous eyebrow movements that would later become part of his signature on stage. The panel was impressed. He landed a role and just like that, a second life began.

He appeared in productions such as *That's Life*, *Mwattu*, and *Bibaawo*, filmed by VCL Studios, which at the time was the only major filming company in Uganda.

"I entered, and I never left," he says.

Two worlds, one man

For years, Ssetimba lived a dual existence. By day, he was an accountant working first at Makerere, then at Uganda Pharmaceuticals, where he spent 16 years. Later, he would move into business, working in printing before joining Property Masters, a pioneering real estate company. There, he rose to a managerial level, overseeing expansion into Kenya and Tanzania, opening offices in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

By night and often on weekends, he was an actor. It was not easy. "There were times I could not even find transport to go for rehearsals or to set," he says. "Financially, it was not stable at all."

Yet he stayed. Not because it made sense on paper, but because it made sense in his heart. "We stayed because of passion," he says. "There was no money. But we loved what we were doing."

When acting did not pay

In those early decades, acting in Uganda was not seen as a viable career. It was often dismissed as a hobby, something people did for amusement rather than livelihood. "There was a time when film and drama were not taken seriously," Ssetimba says. "People did not see it as business."

Even within the industry, resources were limited. Productions were modest, equipment scarce, and opportunities unpredictable. Actors relied heavily on commitment rather than compensation. But the stage offered something else, something less tangible, but equally powerful. Connection.

"If the audience loves you, they will find you," he says. "Even if you are not on social media, even if you are far, they will look for you."

He recounts a moment when a man working on his compound asked how people managed to find him for roles, given how private he is. "I told him, if people want you, they will find you. That is how it has always been."

Craft, discipline, and transformation

What sustained Ssetimba through the years was not just passion, but discipline. He approached acting with the seriousness of a profession, even when the world around him did not.

"My experience has taught me to understand every character fully, the script, the story, the scope," he explains. "I do not just come and act. I become the character before I get on set."

One of his most defining roles came in the stage play *Daisy*, where he was cast as a professor in a medical setting. "I researched deeply," he says. "Even real doctors could not dispute what I was saying."

The performance left a lasting impression. "Up to

today, people still remember that role," he says, a quiet pride in his voice. "On that stage, I had become a doctor."

His ability to switch between characters, sharpened through years with The Ebonies and continuous training, made him versatile, able to meet, and often exceed, the expectations of directors.

A new generation

Despite acknowledging that Uganda still trails behind industry giants like Nigeria, Ssetimba is optimistic. "We are in a race to catch up," he says. "And we are moving."

He speaks highly of the new generation of actors, describing them as talented, driven, and well-positioned to take the industry forward. "The future is in safe hands," he says. "There are many good actors and actresses. The industry is growing."

He also credits investors and producers who are putting money into film without compromise. "They are focused," he says. "And that is what we need."

Faith, family, and grounding

Away from the stage, Ssetimba lives a grounded life. A devout Anglican, he is actively involved in church and the choir, drawing strength from faith and music. He is also a husband and father to six daughters, all of whom he describes as successful.

Gratitude and loyalty

Ssetimba is quick to acknowledge the people who shaped his journey. At the centre of that gratitude is J.W.K. Ssebamiye, the man who gave him his first opportunity.

"He made me who I am," Ssetimba says. "He trained me, supported me, even paid us when we were not working."

During the COVID-19 lockdown, when many industries came to a standstill, Ssebamiye continued to support actors. "Even then, he paid us," Ssetimba says. "That is leadership."

His loyalty to The Ebonies remains unwavering. "Once an Ebony, always an Ebony," he says. "I have never left."

He also acknowledges younger industry players like his current boss, Mr Jerry Sesanga, whom he praises for investing heavily in film and creating opportunities across generations.

The work

Over the years, Ssetimba has built an extensive body of work, appearing in productions such as *Dorah the Queen*, *Daisy*, *Bibaawo*, *Ties That Bind Us*, *City Girl*, *That's Life Mwattu*, *Deception*, *Senkyu Boss*, *Urban Life*, *Loving Beyond*, and *Crossroads*, among others.

Each role, he says, is approached with the same level of commitment. "Whether it is small or big, I give it my best," he says.

For him, acting is not just performance; it is service. "Film and drama educate," he says. "They shape society."

The lesson of staying

Looking back, Ssetimba does not dwell on what could have been. Instead, he reflects on what was and what is. "Getting here required commitment," he says.

"You must love the work, regardless of the challenges."

His message to aspiring actors is simple but firm: "Be patient."

Because in an industry where success can be delayed, sometimes for decades, patience is not just a virtue; it is survival. "There are times you will earn a lot from just a few takes," he says. "More than you would in months at another job."

But to reach that point, you must stay.

THE JOB

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