



The art. How the night of exclusive tasting of Diageo's 2025 special releases in Mutungo went down. **P.30**



Tayo Shonubi wrote her way to the stage spotlight

Shy child becomes award-winning performer. Tayo Shonubi on building a career across film, theatre, and storytelling on her own terms.

BY ISAAC SSEJOMBWE

Tayo Shonubi does not fit neatly into one box. And she is not trying to. She is an actor, writer, director, producer, photographer, and teacher. On paper, it sounds like too much, but in reality, it is a life that has found rhythm in creative chaos.

On some days, her life feels like too many things happening at once, but she always finds time.

"The time is always

there," she says simply. "Sometimes one area is quiet, so you become busier in another."

That quiet confidence runs through her journey, that stretches from childhood musicals to international film festivals, from rejection in Los Angeles to recognition

on Ugandan stages. Long before film festivals and awards, Tayo was a shy child

Tayo shows off her Best Actress award.



who found comfort in musicals. She remembers watching *The Sound of Music* and *My Fair Lady* over and over again, not just for entertainment, but something deeper she could not explain at the time. Those films made her feel safe.

By the age of 11, she had joined Kampala Amateur Dramatic Society (KADS), stepping into a world that felt terrifying and right. She did not just act; she learnt lighting, stage management, and everything she could. It was never only about being in the spotlight but understanding the whole story.

Seeking more knowledge

Years later, that passion took her to New York and then Los Angeles, where she studied musical theatre and tried to build a life as an actress. But, the reality she encountered was far from what she had imagined.

"I wasn't booking anything," she says. No roles. No callbacks. Just silence.

Instead of waiting for the industry to choose her, Tayo "....decided to write something I would want to be in. And something I would want to watch."

She did not have formal training in film. No roadmap. Just instinct, curiosity, and a need to create.

Returning home

When she returned to Uganda in 2022 after her visa expired, life calling her back home, she was not returning as a finished product. She was still figuring things out.

"I didn't have experience as a writer. I was just writing in my room."

Then came an opportunity: a call for writers for *Beloved*, a TV show. She applied anyway, and got it. That moment mattered. Not because it solved everything, but because someone else saw something in her before she fully saw it herself.

Her films followed, small, personal, and quietly bold.

Positive, her first short film, tells the story of a man grappling with his HIV status. No dialogue. Just emotion. "I didn't know what I was doing," she says honestly. But it made it to a film festival.

Then came *Can You Text?*, a thriller built on a simple but terrifying idea: every time a girl answers her phone, someone dies. And then *The Blanket*, her most personal work yet, exploring generational trauma passed from grandmother to mother to daughter, wrapped in the symbolism of something as ordinary as a blanket.

With each film, she grew, not just in skill, but in confidence.

"I was probably the least experienced person on set," she says. "But that was the best thing. I learnt from everyone."

Challenge of funding

Still, the reality behind the work is harder than it looks. Her first film was supported by family. The rest, she financed herself.

"And I can't keep doing that," she says, almost laughing, but not really.

There is a pattern she recognises in herself: getting money, then pouring it straight into another project. "It's passion, yes. But it's also sacrifice."

Now, she is trying to do things differently, applying for grants, building relationships, and learning to trust that others might believe in her stories enough to support them.

There are moments when everything feels right: when her family watches a show she wrote, when she performs in musicals she once memorised as a child, and when she teaches young actors who remind her of herself. In those moments, Uganda feels exactly where she is meant to be.

"I feel useful," she says. "I feel like I am growing."

But there are quieter, more restless moments too, when some dreams feel far away. Like Broadway.

"It's something I can't achieve from Uganda," she says, matter of factly.

That tension between staying and leaving, between building here and reaching out there, is something she carries with her.

The breakthrough moment

Tayo has now won her first major award, taking home Best Actress at the inaugural Uganda Theatre Excellence Awards in March 2026.

She earned the accolade for her role as Amalia in *She Loves Me*. The award, based on public votes, marked her first professional recognition, offering validation, credibility, and renewed confidence in her craft.

The role pushed her to her limits, vocally, physically, and emotionally.

"It's one thing to do it once," she says. "It's another to do it over and over again and still be okay."

She had done the work. And this time, it was seen.

For all the uncertainty, one thing has never changed: why she does this.

"It's not for the money," she says. It is for the feeling she had as a child, sitting in front of a screen, watching a musical and feeling something shift inside her.

It is for the version of herself who found joy in performance when she was too shy to express it any other way.

It is for the stories she hasn't seen yet, but knows should exist.

Still in the kitchen

These days, she is still writing. Still teaching. Still planning.

Following her first win, Shonubi hosted a "Triple Threat Performance Workshop" at Alliance Française Kampala this month (April). Meanwhile, her first feature film, nearly two years in the making, is nearing release, something she is still excited about, which she takes as a good sign.

She talks about going back to school, studying the voice more deeply, and helping others, singers, actors, and even stroke patients, find their voices again.



Future
Tayo Shonubi knows what she hopes for is to create more, to grow, and to stay inspired.

Because if there is one thing Tayo has learnt is: sometimes the path does not open all at once. Sometimes, you just keep going, writing, performing, teaching, and learning until one day, you realise you have built something real out of uncertainty.