

Lunch with the DM

'I got \$1,000 after pumping \$15,000 into my first movie'

Jerry Sesanga, the main man at Njovu Studios Africa, tells Trevor Lutalo why Uganda needs to build its film industry first and be patient about making returns.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

At the entrance of Njovu Studios Africa in Kyanja, Kampala, fiction greets you before reality does. The reception area is dressed as Nile Sugar, a fictional company from the television series *Loving Beyond*, which has slowly but firmly captured Kampala's attention. It feels less like walking into an office and more like stepping onto a set mid-scene, where stories are not just told, but lived.

Jerry Sesanga himself meets me at the door. We had tried to align schedules before, unsuccessfully, each attempt swallowed by the unpredictable rhythms of a creative industry that rarely pauses.

He seems in motion even as he stands still, making calls, greeting team members, issuing quick instructions. The energy is unmistakable. Around him, a young team moves with a certain looseness, professional but unburdened by corporate stiffness.

Lunch is ordered almost immediately. We settle into an office washed in Kampala sunlight, large windows letting in both warmth and a strange calm. It is quiet, almost too quiet perhaps, the quiet that invites confession.

When the food arrives, it is deeply local: peanut paste, traditional staples, his without meat, mine with beef. And then, as if cued, the story begins.

"I was born by a lady called Terry Namubiru, my mother, and a man called Rogers Sesanga," he says, settling into his chair. "I didn't see my father because he died when I was nine months old."

Stories shaped by absence

It is a matter-of-fact statement, but its weight lingers. Raised by a nursery school teacher who would go on to become the longest-serving employee at Kampala International School, Sesanga's childhood was shaped less by absence and more by presence, the presence of stories.

"She would bring back books," he recalls. "I remember *The Jungle Book* so much because she would read it to me. Then she brings a collection of *Cinderella*, *Rapunzel*, and *Snow White*. So I grew up with stories, and I think it impacted me."

By Primary Seven, he had already attempted his first book. It was never formally published, but his mother printed it into a pamphlet, a gesture that, in hindsight, feels prophetic.

"I was happy I had my first book," he says with a small smile.

From there, the path seemed inevitable. In Senior Three, he began chasing publication, facing rejection after rejection at *The East African* before finally finding a break at *Sunrise* at the National Theatre. Persistence paid off. By the time he finished Senior Six, he had published in almost all local dailies, including *Daily Monitor*, a feat many seasoned journalists would envy.

Then came the break-

through. "In my first year at Makerere University, I published my first novel with Longhorn Publishers," he says. "It elevated me a lot."

And yet, even then, something felt incomplete. "The books, I felt a few people have access to them," he says, leaning forward. "Very many people don't read. Even people who want to support you can buy that book, and they put it on their shelf."

From pages to screen

Film, he realised, was different. "But when people watch a trailer, they're going to be so interested."

It was not just a creative shift; it was a strategic one. Still, strategy does not guarantee success.

For nearly four years, Sesanga searched for Shs5 million to shoot his first film. He had the script. He had the vision. What he did not have was the money.

"I was very broke," he says plainly. "But

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Hopeful.
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- Jerry Sesanga of Njovu Studios Africa

I looked very successful on social media."

The contrast is almost cinematic in itself: international speaking engagements in Oslo, Minneapolis, Hollywood, and Guatemala, yet returning home with just \$100 (Shs368,000) or less in pocket money.

"During that period, I was looking for just Shs5 million to shoot a movie. I couldn't find that money."

When it finally came in 2019, it came not as a breakthrough, but as a lesson. He secured a \$12,000 grant and set out to produce his maiden mo-

tion picture, *The Run*. What followed was a crash course in the realities of filmmaking in Uganda.

"You tell this one, I'm giving you this much money, shoot all the footage, edit it and give me a ready movie." This guy just shoots, and for a month, he keeps quiet. He had done nothing," he says.

Post-production dragged on for nearly a year. "A movie that is edited in two weeks, the first cut took me about 10 months," he says.

Then came the final blow. "I sold the first movie to DStv for just \$1,000 (Shs3.6m) after investing over \$15,000 (about Shs55m)."

This makes my heart jump, and I ask him why.

"Because I wanted my people to see my work. It wasn't about the money," he says.

Risky bet

That decision to prioritise visibility over profit sits at the mettle of Sesanga's philosophy, and perhaps, his gamble. It is a gamble not just on himself, but on an industry he describes with-out hesitation.

"The film industry is one of those raw areas we could invest in as a country and get a lot," he says. "The landscape is still virgin."

Virgin and full of potential, but largely untapped. For Sesanga, the problem is not talent. It is structures.

"We have players such as MultiChoice and StarTimes, but only five production houses might have running projects. There is still time for content both on daytime and nighttime television."

Distribution remains limited. Opportunities are uneven. Even success does not guarantee continuity.

"If there is an actress who has been on a show, it might be a long time until they find their next gig."

And then there is the cost of production. "The production of *Queen of Katwe* we had to do some shots in Singapore because it was more expensive in Uganda in terms of taxes. There has to be a deliberate shift."

His argument is not just creative, it is equally economic. "Film can employ many people, from actors, crew, property owners, logistics and catering."

It is an entire ecosystem waiting to be activated.

Building Njovu

Yet even within these constraints, Sesanga has chosen to stay and invest.

"When I got some money, my mother told me to build rentals," he says. "But I had a dream."

That dream is slowly taking shape in Kyanja. Njovu Studios Afri-

ca is a production house and has been an attempt at building infrastructure, where little exists. A system where once dominated.

"I didn't want a company that is me," he explains. "Tomorrow you can take over."

Today, he oversees a structured operation, writers' rooms, directors, editors and visual effects teams, all working in sync.

"With *Loving Beyond*, I am not a director, I'm not a writer," he says. "It is a team."

It is a deliberate shift from individual brilliance to collective execution. The question lingers: why continue investing in an industry that has yet to pay?

"The first thing anyone has to understand is that I got here because of passion," he says.

But passion alone is not enough. He knows that. "In the long run, it will pay," he adds. "Dynamics are changing every single day."

He points to Uganda's population, young, growing, and increasingly connected. "The biggest market we have for content is not abroad, it is our own people."

If each of those people contributes even a small amount, the math begins to math.

"If you give me Shs1,000 and eight million Ugandans give me that, I'm going to be making money."

It is a simple equation, but one built on a complex foundation: access, infrastructure, policy, and trust. For now, global platforms remain out of reach.

"YouTube will not pay you as well as somebody abroad," he says. "TikTok will not pay you as well. [The] government needs to bring these people on board and negotiate the terms, ask the question 'how do our content creators benefit?'"

Small wins, big impact

Despite the challenges, some moments affirm his belief. He speaks of a young man who started as a cook at the studio.

"Today, he's one of the best visual effects artists in the country," he says. "He's now a DOP too."

Another, who had only studied up to Senior Four, is now writing scripts and preparing to return to school. "So someone who was just cooking is earning a good salary," he says. "I'm proud of that story."

These are victories that are seldom celebrated, the kind that do not make headlines, but signal something deeper.

Time is pacing as we are lost in conversation, and Sesanga returns to where it all began: stories. His creative process, he says, is inspired by music, by nature, by everyday life.

"The characters are day-to-day people who we stay with," he explains.

A maid who misunderstands city life. Girls navigating different realities in a bar. Workers in sugar plantations. These are not abstract ideas. They are lived experiences, and through them, he is trying to do something bigger.

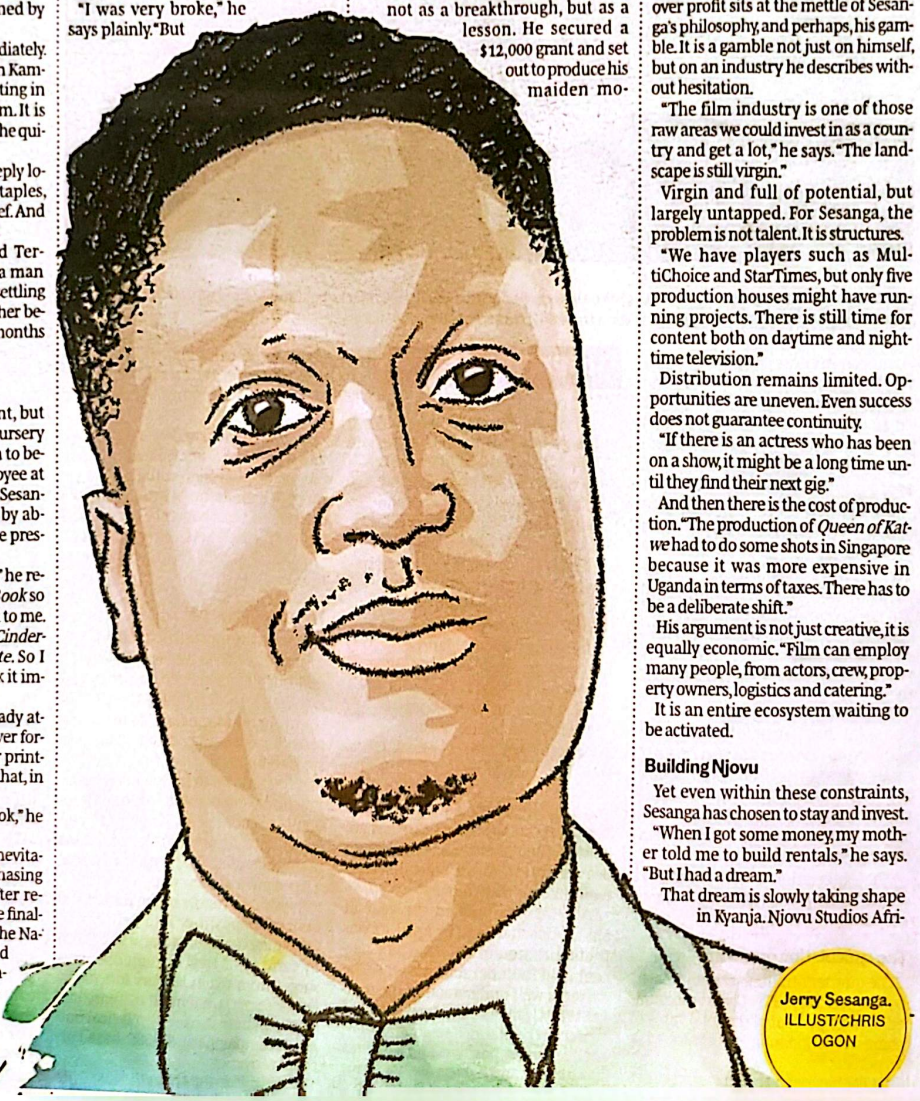
"I wanted so much to tell our own authentic stories," he says.

Stories of a Uganda that existed long before colonial narratives and one that continues to evolve beyond them.

If he were to meet a younger version of himself, Sesanga would have clear advice earned from the school of life.

"I would tell that version of me that they can be better than me," he says. "But they just need to start."

And then, almost as an afterthought,



Jerry Sesanga.
ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS OGON