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The participants during rehearsal. Photo: Aderemi Adegbite

## Art in praise of slums

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"I no be born troway o, no matter wetin dem say, I no be born troway," sang the 25 participants of the BornTroWay project on Friday, May 20 at the Bola Ige Millennium Senior Secondary School, Ajegunle, Lagos.

Coined from the idiom, the BornTroWay project is a creative arts training initiative to promote individual self-expression, artistic skills, team work and integration among the so-called dregs of society. It is a voluntary project undertaken by artists that believe in using the arts as a tool for positive social change and who advocate a re-think in public attitude towards the poor.

The May 20 event was the climax of a five-day intensive dance, music and drama workshop for the male and female participants. Musician Ade Bantu, dancer Segun Adefila, actor Ropo Ewenla and writer Dagga Tolar facilitated.

### Self belief is vital

The producer, Ilaria Chessa, disclosed the idea behind the project at the event. She said, "It is using human and physical waste to tell the kids that though no one believes in them, they can start believing in themselves by honing their skills. This workshop is original, right from the songs to poetry to drama. They were created by these kids."

She added that the maiden edition is a pilot for others that will soon take place across the country. "This is to instill hope in the kids from the slums that it is not over for them; that their background doesn't define who they are or will be."

The initiator, Bantu, disclosed that the major objective of the workshop is for the slum kids to stand up and say, "I refuse to be a castaway." He added, "This creative arts project is about giving a voice to the outcasts in the society. With the workshop, we have been able to ignite something positive in them and leave them with opportunities to get to wherever they want to get to."

Ending the training was a mini show which began with speeches by coordinators of the training sessions. They thanked the community leaders in Ajegunle for their support and co-operation in ensuring the successful completion of the training.

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"I thank the people of Ajegunle for accommodating us. The fire for this project was ignited last year when I came to do some projects," said Bantu. The Nigerian-German artist added, "For a long time Ajegunle has been stereotyped and its inhabitants relegated to nothing. That is what we are changing with the project."

**Caring for the environment**

Attired in dirty and rumpled dresses, participants filed on to the stage looking for litter to pick. As they began to pick dirt off the sandy stage, they immediately burst into the theme song, accompanying it with acrobatic displays. They stopped at a point to discard the refuse in a corner while a number of them came out to perform poems.

The highpoint of the programme was a drama presentation on climate change and the challenges it poses to human beings. The play opened with a fisherman, Baba Kewe, who had a fruitless day at sea. He trekked home dejectedly hoping to find succor from his wife but she castigated him for not returning with food. She also demanded for what they will eat but Kewe, who had been eavesdropping, came out to proffer a solution. She informed her parents that the river goddess was angry about the dirt in the river and refused to release food to the people. Her mother ordered her to shut her mouth because she couldn't understand the relationship between hunger and the dirt in the river. Kewe however urged her mother to listen to the sounds of the river calling unto her. She did and went into a trance where she saw the goddess, who revealed the adversity of the people. The drama highlighted pollutants people introduce into the environment and how to control them.

**Positive testimonies**

Certificates were presented to the participants after the play. Tolar, the poetry coordinator, said, "What we saw here today is just a little of how far the children can go if they are given the needed support." The chair, ANA Lagos, also decried how much greater society has neglected the existing potential within the slums. "With appropriate exposure, these talents will shine. It is time for arts to take the center stage; arts centres including Ayota Arts Center in Ajegunle should be revived. This will help youth to be busy instead of being miscreants," he added.

Chessa said, "I am very humbled by this. [It is] not I don't believe what these kids are doing but how good it will be if we only pay attention to youth in the slums as they can be successful just like any other privileged person."

Drama coordinator Ewenla could not hide his joy. "This was an opportunity to plant a seed and we did, not only in the participants but in the community of Ajegunle. It is left for us and the society to cultivate these seeds and keep the fire burning."

"It was wonderful working with the participants for the past five days. I hope to do it again and again. It is beautiful, exciting and revealing."

Asked if he would consider coming back to mentor the slum kids, he said, " I don't know what I will be doing if I am not involved in projects like this. This is what I am born to do."

The instructors were not the only ones with happy tales; the participants also had positive testimonies. Obuhoro Williams, a secondary school student revealed, "I thank God. This training is so good. I appreciate the teachers who taught us, God bless them."

2Tek Odey, a Lagos State University undergraduate said, "I have learnt many things. I have learnt how to combine dance, music and drama. Through this training, I have discovered that talent is not enough; one must be disciplined and humble. What we normally see as waste in the society is not waste because they can always be recycled."

Grace Edojah, a female participant and an artist revealed, "It was stressful but it was exciting, interesting and educative." The participants also had a free styling session after they received the certificates.

Though the maiden edition is over, BornTroWay is still on. It is collaborating with the Ghetto Red Hot film project, which will give Ajegunle youths the opportunity to feature in a music feature film.

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