

[Home](#) | [Arts](#) | [Life \(Midweek Magazine\)](#) | **Ajegunle youths seek stardom on stage**

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Usoroh Alexander (18) would love to be a celebrity someday. It was this dream that drew him to the audition of *BornTroway* at the Ayoka Art Centre, Ajegunle Lagos.

"I have always dreamed of becoming a celebrity. And when I saw the poster near my house, I saw it as an opportunity and took it, hoping my dream of being a celebrity would be achieved," he said.

He hoped to excel in the dance category because as he puts it, "Dancing is my strong talent." And indeed, Alexander showed the stuff he is made of when he hit the dance floor that Saturday afternoon. He danced his way into the judges' heart. But he would only know whether he made the list for the *BornTroway* project, a few days to the talent workshop billed for next month, the judges said.

In anticipation, he said: "I am looking forward to being picked and I hope to gain a lot that would help me achieve my dream."

Like Alexander, over 100 youths seeking stardom gathered under the scorching sun at the centre to be auditioned for the creative art initiative tagged: *BornTroWay*. According to the organisers, the project expresses the belief that art can integrate, reposition and expand the innate and, often, hidden talents of Nigerian youths. Hence, it seeks to impart underprivileged youths in rundown areas with artistic knowledge for better self-expression by honing their skills in a training workshop. The workshop would feature classes for free in dance, music, spoken word, and drama that would hold in AJ.

Ade Bantu, a co-organiser with Music Matters, said: "The term *BornTroWay*, i.e. born throw away, as a theme for the workshop, is metaphoric of the way we view the downtrodden in our society. People look down on others living in the slums with disdain without doing anything to impact on them positively. The project aims at inspiring a rethink in public attitude towards the less privileged. It invites everyone to re-experience everyday life with open mind and senses, and be inclined to connecting with what is happening around us, especially with people in those areas; and be less indifferent.

"And what better way to start than discovering talents among the future of this nation in Ajegunle, a home of talents. In most cases, their fathers and grandfathers were born here, but if we can help them discover their potentials, then, they may grow up to be their family's saving grace, and the society's."

Although the gathering was meant to select 28 talented youths out of the 130 that registered, the auditioning lacked the trappings of the popular talent hunt shows. There were no spotlights, charms, class or glamour. And the ambience associated with the popular talent hunt projects was missing. There were also no stage constructions or decorations to reflect the calibre of the event. The hall was the once popular, but, abandoned art centre owned by the late Segun Taiwo. On the side of the building were cloth lines with all kinds of underwear and clothing hanging on: most of which were old. Some of the youths waited under it to shield themselves from the sun.

But it did not dampen the spirits of the 'Jungle City' youths. It, in fact, amplified their hopes. The charms and

glamour, they said, would have intimidated them since they were used to hard life and struggles. They said they viewed the audition as a battle ground to the road of stardom. And so they slogged it out in front of the judges who drilled them with eagle's eyes in music, dance, spoken word and acting categories. The audition began at about 11am and lasted till 7pm. On its jury were Bantu, Dagga Tolar, Ropo Ewenla and Segun Adefila, who are also the workshop instructors.

The youths (between the ages of 14 and 19) came with their jagged-looking clothing. One could see there was no extra effort to look dashing. Most of them had only rubber slippers on; without makeup, and their hair, especially the girls, were undone. But, that did not bother the jury. In fact, according to Bantu, the project was meant for such.

Thus, the youths were given the opportunity to showcase their creativity. And they proved that AJ is still sprawling with talents. Indeed, the judges were impressed by the number of talents; however, they observed that, the environment and present living conditions have greatly affected their minds. While youths on other talent hunt shows, who are presumably from more privileged homes, would have sung on love, heartbreak or motivational themes, it was not so with the AJ youths. Their presentations reflected borrowing, suffering, fortune (good or bad), witchcraft attack, calamity, death, poverty and more. They would murmur and complain to a fictitious parent about their frustration, situation; demanding their birthright or questioning why they were brought into the world to suffer. It got to a point that the judges were forced to react. "We saw great talents in all of you. But, listen, life is not all about suffering and tragedy," Adefila said.

Seventeen-year-old, Remi Adekoya's performance, however, was one of the outstanding ones. She literally dazzled the judges with her effortless miming of Riana's *Take a bow*. "I dream of becoming an international singer." If picked, it would be a big step to to my dream," she said.

Judith Nwanbia was another talent to watch. Aside reading Lenrie Peters's poem *The Fence* offhand to the reporter, she has good dramatic skills. Like many who came, Judith (15) arrived at the centre by 10am and waited for the nine hours the exercise took. When asked why she waited, she said: "It is worth it," adding: "I know I have what it takes. And since it is good to be optimistic, so I believe I would be selected."

In addition to talents, they were also able to express themselves flawlessly, in most cases. Victoria Williams said she was not happy with getting to wait all day before she was auditioned, but added, that, she had no choice. "I feel bad because I am hungry but I need the break. And that is why I have decided to wait. Acting is my greatest talent. And I hope they pick me," she said. She was pleased when some refreshments were handed to her after she auditioned.

Still on the project, the Creative Producer, Ilaria Chessa, said the *BornTroWay* Project is a nationwide dream, adding that AJ's edition is the pilot phase. She said: "The *BornTroWay* holding in Ajegunle is a pilot in the vision. Subsequently, it will travel across Nigeria, touching cities such as Port Harcourt, Jos, Kaduna, Kano and Maiduguri. The workshop would reflect on waste, abandoned spaces and places. The idea is raising a team of artists from each state; and the top seven-team member from each city would be selected to become part of a national musical show production that would tour the country and bring the fresh and combined perspectives of young artists from different geographical, ethnic and religious denominations, showcasing talent and promoting peace and unity. Future training modules may include fine arts, visual beautification of public spaces, photography, script writing, and filmmaking."

The workshop, initially billed for April 4 to 8, Ilaria said, is now postponed due to schools' examinations and the election processes.

Other members of the *BornTroWay* team include the International Instructor and Co-ordinator, Petra Kron; the Project Manager Paul Agbahor; Ntare Mwine (film). The award-winning AJ poet, Nkem Iroha also supported the group with photography, among others.

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