



Dr Lookman Sanusi Oral History Transcript for IROKO 'Home from Home' project 2022 - 2024



Tholani Alli

Thank you for joining us Dr Sanusi, and thank you for participating in this interview, in partnership with Iroko and the Home from Home project. Dr Sanusi, please in a few words, tell us about yourself.

Dr Sanusi

Yes, I'm going to give you the short version. I am an artist of 40 years standing, which I have used to advance, the arts and my life. First and foremost, as a creative person, I started as early as, the 70s, right from my primary school days. But as a professional artiste, I started in 1984 with a theatre company called Anansi Playhouse, back in Nigeria. And with that, I also transitioned into television. I worked with the Nigerian Television Authority, NTA, as far back as 1984, as a contract staff, as a production assistant, as a writer, actor, and eventually as an independent producer. I left NTA in 1993 to become an independent producer. Again, way back in 1989, I started a theatre for young people, Bubble Theatre, 35 years this year. So, I'm a total artiste and I live my life as an artiste.

Tholani Alli

Right, okay. And if I may ask, when did you arrive in the UK?

Dr Sanusi

Very early 2000.

Tholani Alli

2000, okay. Brilliant. Was there any sort of cultural differences that you noticed straight away then that you had to adjust to, or did you take everything in your stride?

Dr Sanusi

Of course, the UK has a system which is quite different from Nigeria in terms of culture. Things are done systematically here. The people you meet, at your place of work or anywhere you go, are like programmed, like robots. they follow a policy which they adhere to as opposed to Nigeria where, you know, we can 'bend' stuff, you need to know somebody to help you, you know, get across to what you want to do and all of that. So, yeah, I noticed that, and it wasn't as if it's a cultural shock. It's something that we have read about, seen and all of that. So, I didn't find it very difficult to adjust because like I said, as a writer, as an actor, we're used to that. But it's the practicality of it...

Tholani Alli

So, would you, so how, in terms of when you arrived here at the UK, what was the first real, what would you say was the first door or like sort of foot through the door in the area of you being able to re-establish yourself as a creative professional? Were there any opportunities that were presented to you or was it when you first arrived you were relatively sort of well-known and well connected in your in your field?

Dr Sanusi

No, I wouldn't say that. I came on the invitation of the British Council Lagos. I used to be a consultant to the British Council Lagos, so they sent me here on a programme, which was easy. I was able to, you know, mingle and stuff. And then I came back after that to do workshops in schools with a man called Rufus Orisayomi, we called him Papiru; he was well established here. I was involved in a workshop in school, primary school and stuff. but when I came fully to start living in England, I came in through the programme called the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP). It was in 2003, the HSMP started in 2003. There wasn't much opportunity as such. I've been an actor, I went back and forth between Nigeria and here, but then I got an opportunity to work with the Unicorn Theatre, which was a children's theatre here in the UK. So yeah, it wasn't as if there were opportunities unless you create opportunities for yourself.

Tholani Alli

For yourself, yeah, okay. And, well, you've kind of highlighted it, but just to explain a bit further, so, your passion has always, in terms of portraying the African culture, what has your passions been in this direction? Are you driven by a desire for your

audiences to know what's more Nigerian culture or African culture in the wider context?

Dr Sanusi

Well, an incident happened in 2011. I went to see a show. I think around mid-June or so in the UK. And this was meant to be a Nigerian play. Well, it's supposed to be a Nigerian play, but the actors that were there were mainly from Sierra Leone, Ghana, and the rest of them. Right. I didn't find any Nigerians there, so I asked the writer, I said, look, what happened to Nigerian actors living in this country? And she said, oh, there are no Nigerian actors here. So, I felt challenged. Plus, you know, this was also the pantomime season that was approaching, which was, around November, or December. OK, why can't we have, Africans participate in this (pantomime season) and have an African play, during the pantomime session? I then reached out to most of the actors that I knew while living here, Nigerian actors that I'd worked with way back in Nigeria. And I said, listen, I've got this idea of a play. Would you like to be part of it? And they were more than willing to be part of it. I Produced a play, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* by Ola Rotimi with the likes of Moji Bamtefa, Golda John, Segun Ogunfidodo, Femi Ogunjobi, Tomi Ogunjobi, you know, and a whole lot of people. And I can tell you it was a success. We sold out and we went on for more than six months touring. And then I discovered that there was a dearth of Nigerian materials on London stages, and people wanted to see it. So, the demand was there. So, this is like bringing our African culture to London. I also realize that given the population of Nigerians in London alone (about 200,000?), it is enough to sustain a theatre, you know, a live theatre. So, I capitalise on that, although we had our challenges along the way.

Tholani Alli

Dr Sanusi, sorry to cut you, but would you say that your audiences are very diverse? Or did you have a particular demographic that was more than the other? Or was it very diverse, people from all over came? Or was it very Nigerian in terms of the audiences you were reaching out to?

Dr Sanusi

It's diverse in a sense. Don't forget that we also have intermarriages among the Africans living here in London, to be specific. You know, Nigerians are married to Ghanaians, to Sierra Leone and whatnot, and even to other white nationalities. So, most of them came out to watch our show. We have Caribbeans reacting to the materials. We have Ghanaians, especially Sierra Leonians, and all that, they reacted, they came out. So anytime we have a play, an African play, especially a Nigerian play, you see all of these other African nationalities coming out to support, and their support has been very overwhelming.

Tholani Alli

Very brilliant. And what would you say has been your, like, sort of personal achievement, like most notable achievement here in the UK in terms of this acting stage that you've been on? What are some of the highlights of your journey so far?

Dr Sanusi

Well, you know, I started a company, my own company after working with Unicorn Theatre for a while. I left Unicorn Theatre in 2010. I started Heavy Wind Media. It's a media as well as a theatre company. And with that, as I told you, we performed, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, and I've also produced for other people. For instance, we produced *The Gods Are Not to Blame* for the Thespian family from Nigeria. They said, oh, please, can you produce for us? And then we also produced for Bolanle Austen-Peters, *Saro, the musical*, and *Wakaa, the musical*, both in 2016 and 2017 respectively. We've also consulted for other theatre companies here. We just recently, produced 'Awo, The Musical' on the 18th of May, and we sold out. Every time we've had to put an African material on the London stage, we have always sold out, because there is a need for people to connect, you know, they want to connect with home, they want to connect with the culture.

And what I find very fascinating is that when people come to see our show, they're all dressed up in their African attire. Right. So, it's almost like it's even more than the show itself, it's an occasion for people to dress up for, and look forward to. Yeah. But what fascinates me about our show is that we're always sold out. I think that's a remarkable achievement.

Tholani Alli

Absolutely. Yeah, that's a testimony to the work you do. And, if I may quickly ask for the layman, for the outsiders, those that are not familiar with the theatre world, just give us a rundown as to some of the logistics that are involved, planning, money, how you manage that? Because there will be some people that might just look at it as, oh, it's just a case of gathering a few friends around to, you know, to sort of get a bandwagon going. But just give us a little bit of an insight as to some of the things that are involved in getting to an end production.

Dr Sanusi

First, it's very challenging to put up any play in London because you need a lot of funding. And I must tell you that it's very challenging to get funding. I (with most of my productions), didn't have to wait for the Arts Council and whatnot to fund us. We had to, like our first production, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, in 2011 was funded by me. It cost me a lot of money, and I was able to get the support of the actors in the sense that they wanted to be on stage too, so I got a lot of support from them. But in most cases, funding is necessary to secure a theatre space to start with. There's also the publicity aspect of it. And the most challenging is getting the actors themselves because most of these actors are working in other sectors. After all, they've got to pay their bills.

Tholani Alli

Absolutely, yeah.

Dr Sanusi

So, we have had to work around their (actors') schedule, you know, to ensure that they still go to work, and then in their own, you know, I would not say spare time, but,

they also have to find space from work to be part of our rehearsals. So, you'll find that our rehearsals are a bit tedious. We've had to rehearse in silos, just to make sure that maybe a week or two weeks before production, we put everybody (actors) together and make sure that the play is ready. These are the most challenging aspects apart from getting the funds.

Tholani Alli

Yeah, that's a very good point that you've raised because there are, it's sort of the double-edged sword with a lot of creatives, especially in the London scene. Some creatives have given up on the idea that you can be a creative full time, you know, as you've correctly mentioned, and a testament to the work that you do, for you to have got this going, you are working around the second jobs, maybe third job schedules of a lot of our people. What advice would you give to some of the young people who are keen on acting but maybe they just feel that the acting world, the creative world is just completely dead at the moment? What would be some advice you would give to encourage them to fulfil their dreams?

Dr Sanusi

If you don't do it, it won't be done. If you've got a passion for it, which is the most important thing, you have to have the passion, but at the same time, don't be blinded by the passion. You make sure that you have something that can sustain you. I mean, it's always a tradition here for actors, whether you are African or not, to always have a second job or have something that brings in the income, you know, because here the bills don't stop. They'll keep coming. I have said that. If you pursue your passion, and your talent, and then you put your talents to work, you might be extremely lucky and you hit maybe one big job which is enough to last you for years. That's another thing with the art, you can be engaged for like a year or two on production. We do have productions that run forever. An actor might be lucky and get such a contract and then that will fulfil your passion as well as give you income but if you don't do, if you don't step out to do anything and then you are dissuaded by the fact that oh, it's not possible, it can't be done, then you won't be able to do anything. So, just go out there and do it and manifest it. If you are arrested by the mews, you must go out there and make sure that you display your talent. Don't be discouraged. But you must have a safety net, something that gives you income. Otherwise...

Tholani Alli

Of course, yeah, that's, it's funny you say that because I have to remind myself that my sister, my younger sister, she was very keen on theatre and acting. She still is, but what happened was that when she went to Uni, the parents were telling her exactly the same thing, that you know what, do your degree, don't, because she wanted to leave her studies to venture into it full time, find her own path. But my parents, probably myself as well, we sort of advised her, you know what, you're already halfway through your studies, just finish it. Get it done. Always have a plan B. But then, a couple of years later, she was saying that there are some, and you might be able to give light to this as well, that there are some, a lot of people involved in the theatre scene, especially in this country, sometimes the plan B, if you don't encourage them to know that actually, look, there's life outside your plan B. Don't

make your plan B your everything, to the point where now your passions, you're now neglecting them. And you obviously spoke about that a few minutes ago when you said that some of the challenges were, especially for the Nigerians or some of the actors in London, you had to encourage them, even though they had second jobs, third jobs, because if you were very strict and you said, no, no, no, you have to drop everything, you must come to this theatre production, then maybe, or I'm assuming, it would have been very difficult for you to find actors and actresses.

Dr Sanusi

Yeah, it's very difficult to find actors and actresses.

Tholani Alli

If you're not flexible.

Dr Sanusi

If you're not flexible. But some actors are just professional actors, and they belong to Equity. So, the Equity gets them jobs, but the Equity cannot get them jobs every time, because it's not all the jobs that are out there that fit everybody. Some are very lucky that they get jobs that can run on, whether on TV or stage.

Tholani Alli

When you say, sorry, go on. When you say Equity, just for those that don't understand, can you just explain what that means? Are you talking like an agency or like a pool, a talent pool?

Dr Sanusi

Yes. Well, agency, as you have to belong to an Equity, you know, for you to begin to practice here as an actor. If you belong to a credible agency, you might be lucky to have an agency that gets jobs regularly, which might be able to sustain you. And like I said, for instance, I have a friend who went on to do Lion King. She was signed on for like a year doing Lion King. And then you get your money, your salary. The more you get on stage, the more you are in front of the camera, for instance, the more people see you. And then they say, you know what? I need that man to play this or so-and-so character. You might even be lucky to get jobs that take you to America, to Africa, wherever, for you to constantly be in action.

Tholani Alli

Yeah, in action, okay, okay.

Dr Sanusi

For you to be noticed.

Tholani Alli

Brilliant, brilliant. All right, well, thank you so much, Dr. Sanusi. Final question, if I may ask, so what do you, what do you aim for your legacy to be? What do you want

to be remembered as, you know, in the future? I'm sure you've got a few things to say.

Dr Sanusi

Well, I want to be remembered as a creative individual who tried his best to ensure that humanity is far better than it is now and explore that through the arts, because art is life, and art is believing. The fact that we're all living on this mother earth means that we are a creative work of art, we are God's creative work of art, and therefore, we need to improve it. So I want to be remembered as somebody who used art as an instrument to better humanity and facilitate a good relationship amongst all races.

Tholani Alli

Thank you so much. All right, brilliant. Well, thank you once again, Dr Sanusi, for joining us and remember this interview is in partnership with IROKO Theatre. Thank you.

Dr Sanusi

Thank you so much for having me. Thank you. Brilliant. Cheers.

End.

All errors and omissions excepted.