



4/12/2023

Professor Saheed Aderinto
President, Lagos Studies Association

Nomination of Mr. Femi Odugbemi as LSA Distinguished Personality

Dear Professor, Aderinto:

It is with great pleasure and enthusiasm that I write to nominate Mr. Femi Odugbemi as the LSA Distinguished Personality Award recipient for 2023. Mr. Odugbemi is an internationally renowned Nollywood auteur-director, television producer, African arts curator, cultural critic, film jurist, and teacher. His impressive auteur credentials as a film director and television producer of international repute not only show strong evidence of his prolific creativity and avid cultural activism within the African audio-visual entertainment industry, but also buttress his elevated worldwide status as a legendary Nollywood icon with remarkable artistic vision, and notable cinematic and managerial skills. He thoroughly deserves this honorary award!

Born in Fadeyi, Lagos, Nigeria on 24th May 1963, Odugbemi grew up in a young postcolonial nation marked by excitement about independence and the high optimism about its future. It was that boisterous post-independence environment full of enthusiasm and hope that informed his career choice as a filmmaker. Upon graduating from Government Demonstration School in Surulere, he proceeded to Montana State University in Bozeman to Study Film and Television Production in the late 1970s. While at MSU, Odugbemi worked as an intern at KUSM CH9 TV station, a private TV station owned by the department of Mass Communication, earning \$3.99 per hour. It was with the modest earnings from working at the Tv station, and his part-time work at Black Angus restaurant in Bozeman, that he sponsored himself through college in the US. After his studies at Montana State University, Odugbemi returned to Nigeria in June 1985 and worked in broadcast journalism and advertising for a decade and half before establishing his own media production company, DVWORX STUDIOS, reincorporated in 2013 as ZURI24 MEDIA, “a content creation and Film/TV production company with award-winning titles in television drama, feature films, corporate videos and feature documentaries.” He currently serves as the Executive Producer & CEO of Zuri24 Media and directly oversees a vibrant crew of media content producer.

In a three-year period (b/w 2017 & 2020—38 months), Zuri24 media produced three major TV shows; 20,100 minutes content with 320 crew members; 71 major actors; and 1,010-day players/extras. Zuri24 has also made TV adverts and other media promos for big multinationals corporations such as Guinness, Nestle Foods, Coca-Cola, Shell, MTN, ETISALAT, and other transnational corporations operating in Nigeria and the West African sub-region. It is the profits from his advertising business TV productions that he plows back into his creative work, including both documentary and feature films, photography and painting. It is this creative autonomy Odugbemi enjoys that is responsible for his impressive list of films that include eighteen documentaries, eight feature films and three shorts. Some of the most popular films he has directed or co/produced include *Unmasked* (2021), *The Eve and 4th Estate* (2017); *Olotu* (2018); *Bar Beach Blues* (2004), *Maroko* (2006), *Qui Voodoo* (2007), *Bariga Boys* (2010), *Oriki* (2014), *And the Chain Was Not* (2011), *Ibadan: Cradle of Literati* (2011), *Femi Kuti @50: Ararara* (2012), *Rolling Dollar* (2012), *Makoko: Futures Afloat* (2016), and *Gidi Blues* (2016). Amid this astonishing productivity, Odugbemi has also produced five award-winning TV serials—*Tinsel*, *Battleground*, *Battleground: Final Showdown*, and *Brethren*—which have all aired on Africa Magic Showcase, a popular channel of Mnet, a satellite TV station owned and sponsored by MultiChoice, the South African television production giant. Femi Odugbemi is also the Co-founder and Executive director of the IREPRESENT International Film Festival in Lagos, one of the only two documentary film festivals in the West African sub-region which has been running since 2011 and holds every year in March at the Freedom Park Square in Ikoyi, Lagos, Nigeria.

Beyond his spectacular creative output on film, television, and advertising as a director, producer, and scriptwriter, he is also an influential actor in both the African film industry and the global scene of cinematic arts in general. He is the founding Director of the Multichoice Talent Factory (West Africa), a regional film and television training institute funded by the South African media conglomerate—Multichoice—and primarily dedicated to the training of young and talented media content producers and entrepreneurs in film and television in Africa; he is the Provost of the Orange Academy, a Lagos-based academy that provides media training workshops for local mass media practitioners in Nigeria; a 2-term President of the Independent Television Producers Association of Nigeria (2002-2006); a 5-time head of jury of the highly popular Africa Magic Viewer's Choice Awards (AMVCA); a 3-time head of jury of the Uganda Film Festival; a juror of the Johannesburg Film Festival; and most recently, a 2-time juror of the Emmys, the most coveted award for television arts and programming in the world. The climax of his global prominence in world cinema was signaled by his appointment into Hollywood's most prestigious film association, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) in October 2018. In a letter welcoming him to the respected cinema organization and signed by its president, John Bailey, he stated the following:

You are becoming a member of one of the world's leading cultural institutions. The academy doesn't just reflect the art and science of motion pictures. It leads the art of motion pictures. The academy sets international standards by recruiting world-class filmmakers and artists like you, not just to reward their talent, but to discover the talented; not just to celebrate human imagination, but to define it for the next generation; not just to honor the cultural power of film, but to take it to new heights of creativity and imagination. Your work as new members will ensure that motion pictures are as much a part of our world in the future as they have been in the past.

Odugbemi's appointment into AMPAS, one of the world's most esteemed cinema organizations, was not only a public testament to his iconic status as a first-rate artist in the global stage of filmmaking, but it was also an explicit acknowledgement, however belated, of the phenomenal contributions of Nollywood to world cinema culture, and to global arts and culture in general. His nomination into AMPAS was significant in many ways because it was a public consecration of Odugbemi as one of the well-regarded pantheons of African cinema and perhaps the boldest and clearest symbolic gesture of Hollywood's acknowledgement of Nollywood as an important and influential global cinematic movement

The point I've been trying to make is that Femi Odugbemi deserves an award by the LSA not only for the extensive list of feature and documentary films he has directed and co/produced, the TV soaps he has co/produced, and the film festival he cofounded and continues to curate, and those he adjudicates across the continent and beyond, but also for his relentless commitment to training a younger generation of talented and well-equipped African cultural producers and entrepreneurs in film and television production. In more ways than one, his remarkable screen media productivity and commitment to training a younger cohort of African filmmakers and TV producers for the past twenty years mirrors the extraordinary accomplishments of legendary African filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembene, Med Hondo, Haile Gerima, and Djibril Diop Mambety, whom, Manthia Diawara argues, have earned their revered place as some of the "leading figures in African and African diasporic cinema, both in terms of the number and quality of films produced, and in terms of [their] influence on the younger generation of filmmakers." It no wonder then that in November 2021, Odugbemi was appointed as one of the judges for the joint Netflix-UNESCO "African Folktales, Reimagined" competition, a media production project designed to provide annual production grants of \$75000 USD and an award of \$25000 USD to six young and talented African filmmakers to make their own films, under the guidance of a mentor chosen by the granting agency, which premiered on Netflix in 2022.

I strongly believe Femi Odugbemi certainly deserves the LSA Distinguished Personality Award because he reminiscent of what Valerie K. Orlando calls an Afropolitan filmmaker, a term she uses in referring to a generation of contemporary African and African diasporic filmmakers who not only lead transnational lives themselves, but who also maximize to full capacity the new digital technologies associated with postmodern media production in commenting on specific issues related to Africa and the African diaspora, especially as part of the global human condition. In my research work on his cinematic corpus, I have proffered the concept of Afropolitan humanism, a term I now use not only to capture Femi Odugbemi's transnational stature as a Nollywood director-auteur, but also to designate his avid ethical commitment in using screen media to create a vibrant public consciousness in the context of a new democratic culture in Nigeria, and his passionate and relentless socially-conscious artistic efforts to challenge a failed postcolonial system indifferent to human suffering and other forms of social anguish. His body of work is representative of the humanitarian uses to which an artist can put his/her screen media work as a socially-committed filmmaker. In Odugbemi's case, it is the unique ways in which he deploys screen media to interrogate and challenge a decadent postcolonial political-economic and socio-cultural order that is marked by cruelty, contemptuous of human life and the other precious resources needed to sustain it. Part of the wider argument I make for why he deserves this award is about the ways in which his cinematic oeuvre as a director-auteur as a whole is

indicative of a well-established tradition of what Hans Richter has referred to elsewhere as a “socially responsible cinema,” which has rarely been acknowledged by African film scholars and other commentators on Nollywood. Odugbemi’s creativity is powered by a humanist vision that informs and shapes both the visual aesthetics and thematic concerns of his screen media work. It is an artistic philosophy and aspiration driven by the quest to remake a world pervaded and smothered by a culture of cruelty and indifference to human suffering, to an ethical postcolonial social order characterized by compassion and the ethics of care in public and private endeavors.

It is based on the above reasons that I strongly recommend Mr. Femi Odugbemi as the LSA Distinguished Personality for 2023. As it turns out, May this year will be his 60th birthday. The LSA award will certainly be a well-deserved honor to an artist who has dedicated his entire life to telling African stories and promoting and curating African cultures and the arts in general!!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Paul Ushang Ugor". The signature is stylized and written over a light blue rectangular background.

Paul Ushang Ugor, PhD
Professor, African and Postcolonial World Literatures
Department of English Language and Literature