

...A space for critical discourse through presenting alternative narratives

By Sandra Mbanefo Obiago



With very meager funding, IREP has continued to create space for critical discourse through presenting alternative narratives which don't necessarily have that box-office draw but are vitally important for our individual and collective well-being and growth.

"Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; truth isn't."

Mark Twain



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WE are intrinsically story tellers. There is nothing like *jisting* between friends. Have you heard? No really? Can this be true? But as the American writer Mark Twain said, truth is indeed stranger than fiction, and always has a much more powerful impact.

Documentary story telling combines the best of many disciplines. Film craft, writing, research, powerful interviews, and the ability to make history or current events come alive.

Documentaries evoke intellectual discourse, as we ponder the impact of happenings and personalities embedded in our ever-changing reality or interpret historical events to give us the necessary tools to better understand our present-day challenges. Documentaries invite us to critical reflection, interpretation, and appreciation of the world around us.

Documentary filmmakers are a different breed of story tellers. Their journalistic commitment and fearless determination to speak out, require a spiritual calling, and often years of research, despite small budgets, to uncover the not-so-obvious which surrounds us in plain view. And that is why these films are so poignant. So vitally important. So necessary for our spiritual cleansing, our inspiration, and our education.

IREP has ensured that for the past 10 years, the documentary genre has survived and been celebrated in Nigeria, alongside the rise and rise of *Nollywood*. Despite the appetite for shorter and shorter clips, we have year after year enjoyed documentaries from across Africa and the Diaspora, which peeled back the intricacies of our culture, our history and the struggles for freedom and democracy, the beauty of our environment, the vision of our luminaries, the inequities of our society, and inspired us by reminding us of past and present freedom fighters. Most of these stories have been told from *our point of view*. With very meager funding, IREP has continued to create space for critical discourse through presenting alternative narratives which don't necessarily have that box-office draw but are vitally important for our individual and collective wellbeing and growth.

IREP created an intellectual oasis at Theo Lawson's Freedom Park, where I was privileged and humbled to present a number of my films, alongside some of the best documentary storytellers. I always enjoyed meeting thought leaders, visionary writers, daring young voices, new talents and old friends like Professors Awam Amkpa, Niyi Coker, Manthia Diawara, and Frankie Edozien, my powerful sister film-makers Jihan El-Tahri and Remi Vaughn-Richards, and international culture activists like Barbel

Mauch and Marc-Andre Schmachtel of the Goethe Institut and many more too numerous to name. The film screenings, training sessions, and the rich conversations under the trees at Freedom Park, kept reminding that truth is indeed more alluring and important than fiction.

My profound thanks and respect go to my brothers, Femi Odugbemi, Jahman Anikulapo, and Makin Soyinka, for all you have done to keep your dream of IREP alive. Your die-hard, committed, visionary, good humour, always hungry for some intellectual sparring, joyful tenacity is most inspiring. Especially at this sobering time of the corona virus, when we begin to question our purpose and what is truly important, you have done exceedingly well.

When you started on this journey over 10 years ago, you aimed to provide a safe place for “Africa to engage in conversation with itself concerning the shape of its future,” while reflecting on its journey, its roots, and its unique character, outlook, vision and identity. You have achieved this and so much more.

My prayer is that God continues to inspire and strengthen you for the decades ahead, while you mentor a new generation of documentary filmmakers and visionaries to eventually take over the reins, and keep the festival running for the enlightenment of generations to come.

Congratulations and celebrations to the entire IREP team for this 10th year milestone and impressive achievement!

- *Mbanefo-Obiago, founder **Communicating for Change**, the media-in-society focused NGO, is also an art curator and culture activist*
