

Theatre Renaissance Starts With You!

Theatre and Performing Arts Festival 2025



The Theatre and Performing Arts Festival held its fourth edition on 21st October 2025 at the renowned Bat Valley Theatre. The MC, Haddy, was in high spirits, warmly welcoming all thespians in attendance. As each guest introduced themselves, the recognition for the theatre stars in the room was met with high-pitched ululations and loud applause.

Festival Director, the regal Mariam Ndagire, in her opening remarks, reminded everyone of this year's theme: "The Theatre Renaissance Starts With You." She traced the roots of Ugandan theatre back to our ancestors gathered by the fireside, and later to personalities like Kiyingi, who advocated for the professionalism of theatre, and Byron Kawadwa, who was tragically kidnapped because of his work in theatre.



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She recalled how, in the 1990s and early 2000s, a group went to university to study Music, Dance and Drama (MDD), where the renowned Philip Luswata still lectures. They went on to form Afri-Talent, staging performances at Bat Valley Theatre with actors such as Ashraf Semwogerere, the late Kato Lubwama, and Mariam Ndagire herself. Theatre grew to great heights in that period and turned many of these personalities into household names.

With the advent of FM radios, many actors transitioned into radio presenting. Around the same time, Bakayimbira Dramactors was formed in 1982 by Andrew Benon Kibuuka, Aloysius Matovu Joy, and Charles Ssenkubuge, also staging their plays at the famous Bat Valley Theatre. Over time, improvisation became more common in productions, which, while creative, has in some ways contributed to a nose-dive in the quality and consistency of theatre.

Mariam's call to action was clear: it is time to revive theatre in its uniqueness. Even with advances in technology, theatre must not be replaced. During this year's festival, she noted, they would be discussing the state of theatre

today in order to develop solutions that reflect contemporary society and promote learning, entertainment, and development. The festival ran for a full week and was filled with funfair, daily performances, and prizes that included cash, laptops, and trips.

The National Culture Forum (NCF), represented by Charles Batambuze, was in full attendance. The NCF is a private sector-led body that brings artists together to engage government. In his jovial address, Batambuze highlighted that the Culture and Creative Industries (CCIs) are now well planned for in the National Development Plan 4 (NDP4).

He explained that the creative sector first appeared in a national plan in 2014, but only in relation to archiving traditional music, and at the time, only **0.003%** of the national budget was allocated to it. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, creatives and artists who relied solely on gigs were devastated by the two-year shutdown of public performances. Many were left hungry and desperate, and they rose up to advocate for better planning.



Now, in **2024**, NDP4 dedicates a full page to CCIs. This will address access to capital as well as capacity and infrastructure development for the sector. Batambuze noted that artists have long struggled to access bank loans due to a lack of collateral and high interest rates. In response, government has set aside UGX 28 billion specifically for CCIs, to be split as follows:

- **UGX 5 billion** for musicians
- **UGX 5 billion** for copyright
- **UGX 18 billion** for SACCOs in the performing arts, books, film and other major arts domains beyond music.

This announcement was received with thunderous applause.

Batambuze explained that if a SACCO is performing well, it will be vetted and capital injected into it as a revolving fund under the newly created Creative Uganda Revolving Fund, enabling artists and creatives to access financing. In areas where there is no SACCO, government will identify existing SACCOs through which artists can access this money. There will be one SACCO per region in Uganda.

Creatives and artists will be able to borrow as:

- Individuals: **UGX 500,000 – 10 million**
- Companies: **UGX 500,000 – 30 million**
- For companies seeking up to **UGX 100 million**, they must demonstrate high-impact job creation. The interest rate will be **5%**.

He encouraged all artists to borrow from this fund and to be diligent in repayment at the **5%** interest rate. Collateral, he noted, can include property such as houses, artworks, copyright, royalties, brand ambassador agreements, and LPOs. In this way, government has tried to be flexible and accommodative so that as many creatives as possible can access the funds. There will also be financial literacy trainings to support compliance. Batambuze closed by noting that more information will be shared soon and thanked the President for hearing the pleas of creatives, adding that when artists are given money, “they will do miracles.”

The keynote speech was delivered by Abby Mukiibi, a much-loved veteran of theatre, who spoke about the urgency of restoring theatre to its former glory. He reminisced about days when, after every play, **UGX 3 million** was paid to each actor, and when in London, **£1,000** was earned per artist after every show. He posed a painful question: What happened?

Abby argued that the challenge began with the actors themselves. Radio, he said, was meant to publicise theatre, not take over from it. Over time, some actors became complacent—they no longer wanted to rehearse or put in the long hours needed to refine their craft. Plays began starting late. He emphasised that theatres must be treated with respect and given the care they deserve, including treating customers well and publicising productions professionally.

He further observed that there is too much infighting, unhealthy competition, back-biting and

back-stabbing among actors instead of mutual support. For theatre to thrive, discipline is key, and it must start with the artists. Abby urged them to start believing in themselves again.

He shared a sobering story of how Bat Valley Theatre was recently almost evicted over **UGX 46 million** in arrears. When they appealed to the Uganda National Cultural Centre (UNCC) and to Presidential Advisor Eddie Kenzo, no help came through. In the end, Mariam and Abby had to sell their personal pieces of land to save the theatre. They attempted to demonstrate to attract public sympathy, and while the Lord Mayor came to support them, artists themselves were not visibly at the forefront of this struggle. Abby stressed that artists must be present, support one another, and show up for rehearsals where they can critique and teach each other. With the few remaining spaces for live theatre under threat of eviction, public support is urgently and critically needed.



Abby highlighted marketing as one of theatre's biggest challenges today. He urged artists to understand their audience and age demographics so they can plan appropriate strategies to reach them. He called for investment in quality productions and casts, for collaboration and mutual support, and for actors to attend each other's productions.

He urged artists to write better, original scripts that resonate with their audiences, to revise their work, and to seek knowledge on current trends in order to stay relevant. There must be a concerted effort to maintain and grow audiences in every possible way.

Abby emphasised the importance of publishing many success stories to inspire younger generations and of being strict during rehearsals. High egos and indiscipline, he warned, must never be tolerated, as they kill the spirit of unity in productions. He encouraged the audience by affirming that art is beautiful and that one can live well and earn highly as a professional artist.

He gave his own testimony, stating that he has never been interested in politics and is fully content as an artist.

He noted that mentorship and passion are still lacking, with only a few directors like Mariam actively mentoring young talent. He also pointed to the rise of digital media as a direct competitor to live theatre.

An encouraging testimony came from Philip Luswata, who was in the audience. He recalled how, in 2009, his team broke up, leaving him dry, down, and unable to continue performing. Abby, his close friend then and now, called him and said, "The show is still on." To Luswata's surprise, Abby and a group of friends volunteered to act for him until he could regain his footing. Every Thursday, for four months, this ad hoc group performed together until Luswata was able to regroup and form a new cast. The loyalty was deep, the friendship strong, and the competition healthy. Luswata urged the younger generation not to let this spirit die.



Aganza Kisaka, President of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) Uganda chapter, also shared words of encouragement. She expanded on the meaning of "renaissance," explaining that it involves renewed recognition, job creation and productivity—making theatre a driver of the economy. She noted that

audiences have changed; they now have more exposure to different art forms and experiences. Collaboration and recognition, she said, are therefore essential in strengthening theatre.

Aganza explained that ITI is a membership-based organisation, with fees of **UGX 100,000**



for individuals and **UGX 200,000** for institutions. She invited creatives to join ITI to increase their chances of accessing international platforms and diverse audiences. She closed with the encouragement: “Don’t ask for permission, just put your head down, focus and do it.” She also mentioned that The Acting Arena trainings, another of her initiatives, are open and rewarding to emerging talents.

As the opening ceremony of the Theatre and Performing Arts Festival wound down, one

message was unmistakable: there is an urgent need to revive and save live theatre.

Live theatre remains vital because it offers a unique, immersive social experience that no technology can replicate. It fosters human connection by bringing actors and audiences together in shared moments, builds empathy, and sparks social discourse on real-world issues. In an age of screens and speed, theatre still has the power to slow us down, make us feel, and move us to action.

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