

David Baile:

You're listening to Meditations On. I'm David Baile, Chief Executive Officer of the International Society for the Performing Arts. This special episode of Meditations On is the third in the three-part series recorded in front of a live audience at ISPA's 2023 Congress in New York City. We invited Ilter Ibrahimof, Artistic Director of Canada's Fall for Dance North Festival, to speak with three emerging arts leaders who have each in their own way broken with convention and the world to embrace an expanded notion of what is possible in the arts. This episode of Meditations On is sponsored by AMS Planning and Research. AMS helps the arts, culture, and entertainment sectors adapt and change to realize ventures that are effective, resilient, and vital. Meditations On will be featured on AMS's artsintelligence.com alongside important industry data, observations, and best practices. Learn more about AMS at ams-online.com.

Ilter Ibrahimof:

Rita Ezenwa-Okoro is a creative culturist, performance activist, and communications expert who believes in the creative arts as a force for human development. Her visionary leadership shines as the founder of the Street Project Foundation, an organization that implements inclusive and creative leadership programs for at-risk youth in Africa. Rita is also the brand new executive director of Global Play Brigade, a movement that uses play and elements of performance to soften borders and barriers between people across the globe. Rita believes that creating access to play and performance, especially in early childhood, leads to building essential life skills, such as building self-esteem, being present, ability to listen and understand other cultures, asking the right questions, and perhaps most importantly, learning empathy. It's wonderfully exciting that she just published her first book titled *Doing. Being. Becoming* about her performance journey as a grassroots youth organizer in Nigeria. Lucky for us, her talk today will include a reading from the book and will no doubt motivate us to use creative arts to facilitate youth development, cross-cultural dialogue, and a harmonious society. Take it away.

Rita Ezenwa-Okoro:

Thank you so much, Ilter. First of all, I want to say a big thank you to ISPA for the opportunity to share my thoughts on the power of the creative arts for human development and social transformation. I'll be sharing accepts from my book, like Ilter said, titled *Doing. Being. Becoming: For the Love of the Creative Arts*, which was published in September 2022, because I saw a need to make a case for why there should be more investments in performing arts-led youth development programs across the world, and especially in the global south. As a woman who traces her holistic development to early exposure to the arts, I see the need to advance our conversations beyond art for art's sake, beyond performances for ticket sales, to the tremendous potential we have in positioning, play, and performance at the heart of the world's development agenda. What do I mean by this?

The world is in crisis. Today, it's the war in Ukraine, nuclear missiles constantly being tested in North Korea, the unrest between Israel and Palestine, and the fight against Boko Haram in West Africa. In many other crimes, it's poverty, corruption, xenophobia, racism, violence, and inequalities in all their forms. In addition, the constant fear of another pandemic. As I stated in my book, performing arts or performing artists are at the bottom of the pyramid worldwide when ranked for their importance against other career jobs. This was evident during the height of the COVID pandemic and the financial hit on the livelihoods of the performing arts community worldwide. So I wonder, would this have been the case if we had set a radical agenda to position performing arts as an invaluable tool to foster peace, stability, and cultural dialogue and create new approaches to solving the world's numerous problems?

Let's ponder. In Nigeria, I run an initiative called Street Project Foundation. Our mission is to use creative arts to facilitate opportunities for youth leadership development, social mobilization, and cross-cultural

dialogue. In 2021, we were awarded the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, that's UNAOC, and BW Group's Intercultural Innovation Award, now referred to as the Intercultural Innovation Hub. Our award weaning innovation called Reflection Sessions is performatory circle of trust created through play and performance that gives young people the freedom to express themselves without judgment and prejudice. It also gives them the opportunity through improvisation, play, and performance to create new pathways for their lives. This innovation was inspired by social therapeutics, a philosophically-informed, practically-oriented practice of the method, which relates to human beings not as behaving individuals who only adapt to culture, but as culture creators and an ensemble of performers of their lives. It hinges on four constructs: one, humans as social beings; two, humans as performers; three, humans as improvisers; and four, humans as revolutionaries. We apply this innovation in all our youth development programs, programs designed to strengthen the capacity of youth for the future of work, to advocate for social issues plaguing the youth population, and to provide mental health support.

Let me share a story with you. In 2020, a teenager called Debora Johnson gained admission into one of our programs called the Creative Youth Bootcamp, a gifted spoken word artist with the capacity for impersonations in different accents, 13 different accents, very brilliant teenager. However, during our Reflection Sessions, which is very improvisational, performatory, and uses the whole concept of community and group therapy, it was evident that she was suicidal. She shared stories of how she would cut herself. She was going through an internal struggle with depression that wasn't managed with care and compassion at home. It was a battle of discovering herself, but she quickly learned she could not win this battle alone or in isolation.

During the pandemic, we continued engagement online, ensuring she was co-creating video content with her peers. She also got the opportunity along with her peers to participate in the Brave New Voices poetry slam organized by Youth Speaks in San Francisco, USA for two years in a row. This exposure to other poets across the world further gave her a sense of purpose and confidence to pursue her passions. Two years later, Debora Johnson wins two grand slams in Lagos, Nigeria and Abuja, Nigeria and now is constantly being engaged to perform before leaders in government and for development programs across the country. And as such, the thought of suicide is gone. Transformational stories of this nature are instrumental in positioning the performing arts as a force for social change.

I'd like to round out by reading a short excerpt from my book, *Doing. Being. Becoming: For the Love of the Creative Arts*. "Colin 'Alt Aesthetics' Kersley, an illustrator from the United Kingdom, states, 'There has been an entrenched stigma associated with creativity in the UK for so long that it isn't considered a real career.' Funding and educational cuts always hit the creative sector, which means that it heavily relies on individuals turning their passions into businesses with very little support. Despite all that, the creative industries contribute more to the economy than the oil, gas, automotive, sciences, and aerospace industries combined, which is pretty incredible. The underfunding of the arts is one of the reasons I wrote this book. Stakeholders in Development sectors worldwide need to understand why creative arts are crucial to young people's development and why there should be more investments in the arts.

"Besides, the several months of the COVID-19 lockdown inspired many people to become content creators. Wouldn't you agree? They use their platforms as a valuable resource for education, income, and mental health wellness. I am compelled to write this book because my formative years in Nigeria showcase how the creative arts contributed to my development and why I have built a career in youth development. I have been a part of the creative arts industry since I was eight years old as a child model in a television commercial for Raid. The television commercial was produced by Media International, a top media company in Nigeria. Years after, I studied creative arts, graduating top of my class and

participating in high-profile stage performances for international audiences. I also featured on television programs and did a lot of singing in church for community development and as a recording artist as well.

"I pursued a master's degree in media and communications following my years as a copywriter and creative strategist across advertising agencies in Nigeria and West Africa. I founded Street Project Foundation in January 2008, a not-for-profit organization designed to use creative arts as a tool to facilitate opportunities for youth leadership development, social mobilization, and cross-cultural dialogue. In my early 20s, I started the youth movement, impacting the lives of thousands of Nigerian youth directly through numerous projects like the Creative Youth Boot Camp, Digital Amazons, Street University, Arts of OKC, Talent Hub, Project ROAR, Project Uplift, Haven Project, and A Smile for December. Programming at Street Project Foundation continues until this day, intending to replicate our youth engagement models across the continent of Africa. Writing about the ideology and inspiration behind our work is the first step toward convincing sector leaders worldwide to invest more in the improvisational, experimental, experiential, performatory, playful, philosophical, and probing spectrum of creative arts for human development.

"Doing. Being. Becoming is an improvisational theater of the unknowable. It is a continuous process that makes one comfortable with the fact that what we are today isn't necessarily what we will be tomorrow. What is important is our ability to create with what life throws at us. Creative arts equips human beings with curiosity, exposure, depth of thought, critical thinking, adaptability, activism, organizing, stick-to-it ability, and human relations needed to build careers and strengthen communities. Putting creative arts at the center of development activities is a radical step toward changing the approach to pursuing the implementation of sustainable development goals. When creative arts are at the heart of a nation's agenda for development, room is being made for young people to thrive." This is where I end the reading of my book, and I hope you read the rest by getting a copy on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Kobo books or ordering a stack of them via IngramSpark.

In conclusion, I'd like to make a charge to those of you listening live or to you listening to this podcast. The theme of this year's ISPA Congress is the urgency of now. This work of play and performance for social transformation is urgent. We do not want any more wars, authoritarian governments, terrorism, racism, religious intolerance, and ethnic rivalries. We want peace, and we need to do something now. You have the tools. As leaders in the performing arts world, you've got networks. You've got partners and funds to invest in this kind of work. I encourage you to create programs for human development, social cohesion, and transformation. Most recently, I was appointed the first Executive Director of the Global Play Brigade, an international movement of improvisers, educators, musicians, clowns, therapists, and coaches from across the world who use play across borders to build community and connections for social change. To push this agenda further, I am on a mission to establish global centers for artistic activism and intercultural dialogue that will serve as a hub for peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding globally. I'm excited to welcome you all, as many of you who would love to join this movement that bursts open the hydra-headed possibilities of play and performance for human development and social change. Thank you.

David Baile:

Meditations On is presented by ISPA. This live episode was recorded at ISPA's 2023 Congress in New York City. It was produced by Johnnie Spence with live audio engineering by Rich Johnson. Our theme music is by Johnnie Spence. Special thanks to Rita Ezenwa-Okoro and Ilter Ibrahimof and to the America Society for hosting the recording session. You can listen to this episode as well as other ISPA media content on ISPA Streams. To learn more about ISPA, please visit our website, www.ispa.org, and follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

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