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Actress Wanjia Mworia has been in numerous TV programmes, but she says she is yet to realise what she expected when she ventured into the field. Instead of the windfall she hoped for, all she's been saddled with are countless promises and files of worthless paperwork >>

## DIFFERENT CASTS, POOR PAY

Shall we finally say goodbye to the hungry, hustling actor, wonders  
MAUREEN ORWA

**U**p until now, not so many Kenyans can tell who is the best paid actress or actor in the country; and if they can, they are divided as to whom that person is.

In South Africa and most parts of the world, actors, models or musicians pride themselves in their profession and wouldn't hesitate to quote an amount that would be considered outrageous here in Kenya as their pay.

In Nigeria, actors are considered the best paid, followed by preachers, and then politicians. The likes of Genevieve Nnaji, Rita Dominic, and Ramsey Nouah are just some of the tens of professional Nigerian actors who are renowned continentally, and who are living proof that there is money in the arts... lots of it.

But, in Kenya, not many actors would be willing to reveal their pay because the amount is embarrassing. It is so little that they have to get side-jobs to support their acting careers. You may have seen them on TV and billboards and newspaper advertisements, or even heard them on radio, but the fact remains that Kenya's actors and actresses are some of the worst paid on the continent.

"Our management of talent has been largely wanting, with some unscrupulous agents, production houses, advertising agencies and briefcase agents taking advantage of the largely unregulated industry and prying on the ignorance of the majority of the talents," acknowledges Wilson Malaba, the secretary general of the Kenya Casting Agents, Models and Talent Welfare Association (Kecamtwa).

"Few artistes bother to put it down in writing when negotiating contracts and rates of compensation for various campaigns."

Kecamtwa, for instance, says that an actor who has appeared in an advert is supposed to be paid every time the advert is aired. Every single time! How often does that happen in Kenya?

"Most local actors are exploited by unscrupulous casting agencies. They are often given a one-off payment yet the commercial gets to run for a longer period, resulting in the agent and the company getting the most money while the actor receives an amount that is probably a quarter or half of what the company would make," says Malaba.

His association boasts of successful advertising stars such as Wahu (Rexona), Mwala (Kenchie), and David Rudisha (Kiwi) among others.

On the big screen they have success stories, from individuals such as Oliver Litondo in the movie *The First Grader*, actors Raymond Wafula, Ken Ambani, Lenny Juma (who



Lowry Odhiambo

acted in *Tomb Raider*) and Joseph Lolita, cast in the movie *Mississippi Masala*.

The association's responsibilities include scouting for talent, training and holding workshops and seminars where actors, actresses and artists come together to share ideas.

"This is an industry that was largely amorphous and random," says Malaba. "The dominance of mismanaged or briefcase agencies, and clients willing to bend every rule in the book to their favour meant there was total chaos in the industry."

Kenya's acting industry was abuzz in the 1970s to early 1980s, with the likes of Oliver Litondo, Orle Rogo Mandull, Lenny Juma, Konga Mbandu (deceased) proving quite popular — and successful — then.

Agencies like Ideal Casting Agency, ran by Susan Muthoni, Real Concepts by Wilson Malaba, Quest Concepts by Dennis Thumbi, Versatile Models by Oliver Wigina, Artistica Casting Agency by

**THE ACTING INDUSTRY HAS BEEN AMORPHOUS AND RANDOM. IT HAS LARGELY BEEN OVERLOOKED, UNLIKE IN THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE.**

— WILSON MALABA  
KECAMTWA SEC. GEN.

Onesmus Muthuri, Imandy Modeling Agency by Ian Ndirangu, Lowry's Online by Lowry Odhiambo, Sakai House of Talent by Jennifer Kanari, Dynamic Race by James Kihindas, Swan Concepts by Joe Korir and Zera Casting by Judy Maranga are some of the few units that have struggled to bring sanity into the field.

But even then, the industry has been plagued by poor pay owing to the lack of a standardised approach to the compensation of talent, and the divide between well-paying clients and the talent perceived to be on the lower side of the divide is so strikingly varied that it results in an intermittent outeries.

Malaba agrees, saying that "the current rates are appalling and are in fact decreasing as opposed to increasing — and the meagre payments seldom come early or within contractual terms".



Wilson Malaba

According to him, this has caused many potential actors, models and other talented artists to shun the arts, in the process slowing down and countering all efforts being made to transform the industry.

Renowned actor and holder of the 2011 Kalasha Lifetime Achievement Award, Professor David Mulwa, agrees.

"I have been looking forward to witnessing this day for the last 43 years," he says, adding that the industry has finally seen the light of the day. David Mulwa has acted in movies such as *To Walk With Lions*, *The Great Elephant Escape*, and *Eye of a Witness*, among other internationally acclaimed flicks.

**At last some hope for artists**

Another industry player happy with the launch of Kecamtwa is actress Wanjia Mworia, a familiar face on local productions. Wanjia has featured in *Wingu la Moto*, *Makutano Junction*, *Tahidi High*, *Higher Learning* and currently hosts *Know Zone* on Citizen TV.

But, despite all that glamour, she is yet to find the success that many expect to come with the fame.

"When I joined this industry, I thought that, five years down the road, I would be an accomplished actress living large. But, in retrospect, I now realise that I was hoping for the impossible," she says.

Wanjia discloses that when she decided to join the industry, she didn't know anyone. She had no uncles, aunts, or even the so-called god-fathers in the business. She auditioned for every show but no special exemption was accorded her.

She believes that actors

should be the highest paid people in the industry, and admits that there are producers who fleece artistes by paying them 'peanuts' at the end of every season.

It is tough to be an independent actress without an agent, she admits, but at the same time she is happy she doesn't have one.

"Musicians have managers who book gigs for them for a cut. As for me and other actors, we look for these shows ourselves. We audition and if we do well, we are hired. The amount I receive is enough to support myself and wouldn't be able to sustain a manager or an agent," she says.

The least amount she has ever been paid for an episode, she says, is Sh5,000 while the most is Sh20,000 per episode. Now that she is a member of Kecamtwa she hopes the association will change the way the system has been operating.

As she waits for that to happen, she has a side-job that helps pay the bills. But she is among the lucky who are actually getting paid. There are those who have to wait for two or three months to be paid, and often they get as little as Sh1,000.

However, Kecamtwa decrees that they have not reached the exclusivity stage that allows them to solely represent an individual. The association's assistant chairman Lowry Odhiambo says that having exclusive rights to an artist is tasking because they have to maintain the contractual agreements entered into at the beginning, which some of the time do not always work to the advantage of the casting agency.

He says Kecamtwa's role is to provide proper channels that these individuals must follow to avoid being duped into dubious contracts. Malaba says the future is bright for the ordinary Kenyan actor, voice-over artist, model and actress.

"The association will complement the government's effort to regulate broadcast content in the industry," he says.

"We will be in a position to assist in improving the quality of local TV, radio and film production as regards acting talent."

"Another untapped area we are targeting is the promotion and export of local talent abroad through film tourism," he says.

As they wait for that to happen, Wanjia and her peers will keep their fingers crossed, hoping against hope that finally sense is coming to the industry.



FAR FROM POPULAR BELIEF, ACTRESSES ARE NOT ALL LOOKS AND NO BRAIN. WANJIA MWORIA SAYS SHE HAS TO MEMORISE LINES AND STUDY SUBJECTS THAT SHE IS EXPECTED TO PLAY. IT'S NO EASY FEAT.

## TAKE TEN

BY GEORGE MADIANG'I



with DJ PETER ADAMZ

### 1. Who or what are your biggest influences?

I listen to a lot of different types of music. You know, soul, local East African music, rock, jazz and hip hop, which I connect the most with. Primarily, I'm mainly influenced by what people now call the old style or old school which consists of artistes like Kurtis Blow. Those were my first influences.

In terms of DJs, there's Grandmaster Flash, and DST. I think those were my first impressions of hip hop, and therefore my first influences.

Also, my father listened to a great deal of James Brown and Miles Davis, so I was exposed to them from a very early age. So those two also had an influence on me.

### 2. What was the first hip hop record that you ever bought and when did you start scratching and mixing on the turntables?

Sugarhill Gang's *Rapper's Delight* was the first hip hop record that I ever bought.

After I saw the Wildstyle performance event, the next day I went to an instrument shop to purchase a turntable, a mixer and a sampler and started scratching and mixing on my own; that was about 10 years ago.

### 3. How would you describe your sound?

I have listened to a lot of music over the years and I was raised in Nairobi and so a combination of all these is expressed in my sound. It's that simple. What is expressed in my music is a result of those various influences. And hopefully my personality is infused in it. You know, the whole thing is just a combination of a lot of different elements that are me.

### 4. How would you describe your ideal gig?

One with a good sound and lighting system, an MC who hypes the crowd well and doesn't talk too much, a DJ who plays good music and lastly, the people who come to party.

### 5. What images and emotions do you want your music to evoke in the listener?

Are you asking what I'd like the person to think as they listen to my music? Well I think some people might listen to it, like hear my music and think "Wow, it's really weird." But some place in between, in some aspect or another, I hope that people appreciate it and like it.

### 6. What do you look for in a beat? What's important is not just the individual beat itself but the total groove. That's very very important.

### 7. What do you think the future holds for DJ when it comes to visuals? Any insight you would like to share?

There's a good future in video mixing; it is the in thing at the moment. Unless, of course, technology changes and we have computers programmed to play without the presence of a VJ, which I hope will not happen any time soon. Talk about robots!

### 8. What's your take on gospel musicians performing in clubs?

This is a high level of wickedness. It is far away from ministry, and God wouldn't buy that. Clubs are a platform of darkness and not of light and the two don't mix. They better stop it and preach the word in the right places.

### 9. What does the future hold for DJs in this industry?

The future is very bright as the demand for DJs is growing. The income has also increased so there are increased possibilities of making good money. There's hope.

### 10. Is there need for local artistes to hire tour DJs?

Of course, there's a high need; they make the show. That's the trend with international artistes and so local artistes who are eyeing the international stage should engage local DJs.