

How “Shanty Town” Bungled the Chance to Be a Spectacular Crime Series

Salawu Olajide
February 3, 2023



On a sunless afternoon in early 2000s suburban Magodo, a routinely squalid existence in one of the city’s slums is interrupted by gunfire and rapid explosions. A woman and her two daughters are almost robbed and violated in the ensuing chaos but for the timely intervention of a neighbour, whose heroics come at the cost of his life. However, fate is determined to deal a hard hand that day, and further gunfire ensures that both sisters are split apart for nearly two decades.

Violence and tragedy set the tone for this gritty, dark-toned crime drama set in Nigeria’s cosmopolis, Lagos. Directed by Dimeji Ajibola (*Hoodrush, Ratnik, Passport*), created by Xavier Ighorodje (*Forbidden, Enakhe, Unbroken*) who co-writes with Donald Tombia (*Strain, Introducing the Kujus*) and produced by Chinenye Chichi Nworah, *Shanty Town* is a six-episode limited series, each episode playing out at an average runtime of 34 minutes. Slotting perfectly into a rapidly expanding sub-genre that already includes *King of Boys: The Return of the King* (2021), *Blood Sisters* (2022) and *Diiche* (2022), the cast of this drama series comprises a nice blend of old and new, with veterans such as Ini Edo, Chidi Mokeme, Nse Ikpe-Etim, Shaffy Bello, Richard Mofe-Damijo, Ali Nuhu, Sola Sobowale and Uche Jombo sharing a story world with current high-flyers Nancy Isime and Zubby Michael, as well as (relative) green horns Mercy Eke and Peter Okoye.

Shanty Town, the titular commune where events mainly take place, is run like a feudal system. Its inhabitants earn their bread from drug dealing and transactional sex, and a huge chunk of financial proceeds go to Scar (Mokeme), the murderous, maniacal kingpin whose word is law. The neighbourhood is his lair, the women are at his mercy, and he will stop at nothing to enforce his authority. He, in turn, reports to Chief Pedro Fernandez (Mofe-Damijo), a seasoned politician with wild sexual kinks who aspires to become the next governor of Lagos state and dethrone Dame Dabota (Bello).

Inem (Edo) returns to Shanty Town after a short stretch in maximum security, and is bullish about her plans to end Scar’s reign of terror, plans which she discloses to Ene (Ikpe-Etim), her closest associate and Scar’s new favourite. Shalewa (Isime) desires to earn her freedom from the commune

just like her colleague Jackie (Eke), but finds out that she would probably need decades of transactional sex to clear out her debts. Scar himself gets into a quandary of his own when Chief Fernandez orders him to shut down the more violent operations in his criminal empire.

Vengeance, ambition, bloodlust and chicanery are the driving forces in this intense crime series that explores the grimy underbelly of the crime syndicates which thrive beneath the glitz and glamour that characterise Lagos. Replete with gore and vulgarity at a volume that the makers of the *Spartacus* franchise would have been proud of, as well as a brilliant set design and laudable visual effects, *Shanty Town* does a decent job of piquing the interest of audiences with fast-paced action...at least for the first four episodes.

As far as performances go, Chidi Mokeme stands head and shoulders above everyone else he shares screen time with, rolling back the years with a virtuoso performance as the menacing but troubled, intimidating but equally charming crime lord. It's difficult not to love him as he swings his way through the commune, oscillating between Yoruba, Igbo and pidgin while reminding younger audiences why he was a fan favourite in the late 1990s and the early 2000s: hopefully, there are clips of Izu Ojukwu's crime flick *Desperadoes* (2001) available on YouTube.

There is also a case to be made for how Mokeme's well-written, rounded character is a culmination of Nollywood's attempts over the past decade to create the perfect super-villain. The industry's leaps in cinematography have not always translated to commensurate levels of character development in storytelling, but progress should (and will) be acknowledged where it is noticed. In *Shanty Town*, Scar is the ruthless enforcer that still manages to show moments of vulnerability (like the opening sequence, for instance), and whom you could even manage to feel for; it's not out of place to spar a thought for him when you realise that he's only a pawn in the chessboard of the city's political overlords. Scar's villainy embodies all at once the boisterousness of Sambasa Nzeribe's "Ghetto" (*A Soldier's Story*), the cockiness of Remilekun Khalid Safaru's "Makanaki" (*King of Boys*), the brutishness of Bucci Franklin's "Government" (*Far From Home*) and the charisma of Bright Okpocha's "Shadow" (*Brotherhood*).

Ini Edo puts in a decent shift as the lead protagonist, even if she struggles to evoke sufficient emotion to have audiences actively rooting for her. Nse Ikpe-Etim gracefully interprets her role as a scheming courtesan who (in her own words) "is a victim too", and Zubby Michael's ad-libs make for great comic relief with a blend of malevolence and humour reminiscent of Jerry Amilo's antics in *Wanted Alive* (2001).

Nancy Isime shines as a distressed damsel who needs saving but who is by no means naïve, and Richard Mofe-Damijo does just enough to cut it as an imposing, sexually deviant bigwig. Sola Sobowale's role as a diviner of sorts is a little understated, but she portrays the internal conflict nicely without having to do any yelling. Shaffy Bello's performance bears the look of a poor man's Eniola Salami (re *King of Boys*); the idea is to conjure the image of a psychopathic go-getter, but the ultimate result is giggles rather than shivers.

There's much to be enjoyed across the six episodes of this series, but as with most things Nollywood, the transition from good to excellent is derailed by a number of (avoidable) hiccups.

Shanty Town has a "nudity" problem, but it's not the kind that prudish viewers have been pontificating about, and definitely not the kind that would warrant a member of the cast to announce to the world - barely 24 hours after the series debuted on Netflix - that a nude scene was performed by a body double: imagine Sharon Stone doing such a disservice to *Basic Instinct* (1992). or Angelina Jolie doing that with *Original Sin* (2001). The series' flaw with navigating the nuances of nudity is more about the lack of equity in the panning shots: in her essay "The Spectacle and Politics of

Nudity in *Blood Sisters*”, Nigerian lawyer and novelist Olaoluwa Oni argues that Nollywood filmmakers consistently exploit the naked female form while protecting male nakedness from public leering. If the jacuzzi scene with Mokeme and the body search scene with Isime are anything to go by, that lack of balance rears its head, yet again. How relevant is the display of those areolas, real or body double, to the overall plot?

Female audiences would also have a thing or two to say about certain sequences that seem to glamorise violence against women. It could be argued that the graphic nature of the sexual assault scene involving Mofe-Damijo and Edo had no actual bearing on the unfolding of the story, or that the scene where Mokeme’s character decapitates a woman with an axe is shot with too much casualness. But then, if art is an imitation of life, shouldn’t these things be portrayed on screen as far as age restrictions allow? In any case, the latter is vaguely reminiscent of a scene in Zeb Ejiro’s *Domitilla* (1996) where Kate Henshaw’s character is bludgeoned to death, and maybe it illustrates that in modern times, just like in the mid-1990s, violence against women continues unabated.

The cinematic crimes of *Shanty Town*, however, lie in the finer details, which any competent script editor would (and should) have weeded out.

The dialogue in this series would have been more fluid if the use of pidgin was better deployed; slum dwellers have no business conversing like middle-class city inhabitants. The Ibibio exchanges between Edo and Ikpe-Etim are pleasing to the ears, but as for the pidgin, Nollywood clearly struggles with crafting colloquial dialogue that is accurate to the demographic being portrayed. The visual editors could also use a few words; even if the chopped head depicted as lying on the road was actually a doll, it didn’t have to be so obvious.

Good casting elevates a film, just as poor casting ruins whatever good intentions the storytellers have. Why would the son of a Yoruba politician, with no backstory as to growing up in an Eastern town, have the thickest Igbo accent since Kenneth Okonkwo in *Taboo*? There’s certainly no glossing over that, it’s like palm oil stains on a white shirt in boarding school.

A good story would be forgiven for its plot inconsistencies, but there are certain holes that are too gaping. How does a woman, with no experience of the commercial sex trade, slot in so seamlessly into a world of that nature, her police expertise notwithstanding? In Scorsese’s *The Departed*, Leonardo DiCaprio’s character had to go undercover to infiltrate a crime ring, and the mental gymnastics involved sent him to a therapist’s armchair. In contrast, there’s nothing here to suggest that we should be emotionally invested in this character...and how does a woman, whose phone was clearly put away before she was hacked to death, manage to send a crucial voice note that changes the direction of the story? Suspended belief is allowed in the action genre, but toying with the intelligence of audiences is not permissible.

The less said about the fight choreography in the final episode, the better.

Shanty Town gets off to a promising start, but ultimately loses direction and wobbles across the finish line to a conclusion that is as anticlimactic as it is underwhelming. An excellent body of work takes care of the little things, and much unlike *Love*, good acting cannot cover a multitude of cinematic sins. Is there any need, then, for this watchable but not-so-memorable limited series, to have a sequel, as the epilogue hints at?

Jerry Chiemeka is a writer, music journalist, film critic and lawyer. His works have appeared in *The Africa Report*, *Berlinale*, *The Republic*, *Africine*, *Netng* and *The Lagos Review*, among others. He

lives in London, from where he writes on Nollywood, African literature, and Nigerian music.



OLONGO AFRICA