

# Artist Profile: actor Gbenga Akinnagbe helps bring KNUCKLEHEAD to life

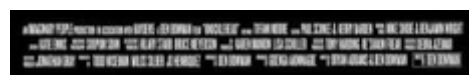
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Actor Gbenga Akinnagbe has had the opportunity to explore different worlds, not only through his acting, but through his ethnic heritage, and his burgeoning platform as a social activist.



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Ben Bowman/Imaginary Film (used with permission)



*Gbenga Akinnagbe (used with permission)*

Gbenga was born here in the United States to Nigerian parents, but only got to visit his homeland when he became an adult. “Going back was never an option, going there period—we were poor,” he said. “But once I was an adult, I made it a point to go. I went like five years ago for the first time, and I’ve been back every year since.

“I’ve been very fortunate. Nigeria to me is just another neighborhood. It’s not some big mental distance anymore that, there’s always emotional garbage that keeps you away—partly familial, partly the stereotypes that we get taught here in the United States about the continent of Africa, all those emotional things. But now that I’ve been there, and have relationships there, and now look to do business there as well, now it’s like going to Manhattan, or going to L.A. It’s just another cool place.”

Acting has taken Gbenga to many cool places as well, and for an accidental career (he was originally pursuing a career in government), it has afforded him some unique and varied opportunities.

Gbenga’s latest opportunity is producing and promoting his new film, **KNUCKLEHEAD**. Written and directed by Ben Bowman (with a co-writing credit by Bryan Abrams), KNUCKLEHEAD is a raw, urban drama based in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant. Gbenga stars in the film as well, portraying “Langston Bellows”, a developmentally disabled man, who despite his considerable limitations, has a dream of how his world should be and desires to pursue it. Langston lives with an abusive mother (“Sheila”) played with frightening precision by veteran actor Alfre Woodard, and longs to get his own apartment so that he can be independent from Sheila, his neighborhood, and his own fractured mind.

When his protector-brother is shot, Langston takes his future into his own hands, searching for a pill marketed by a Manhattan charlatan who writes endorsements, along with questionable prescription drug cocktails, in celebrity magazines. We follow Langston's journey of seeking, loss, and unfortunate revelations. The film follows Langston's stumbling footsteps, reflecting the world that he lives in, and subsequently discovers, through the lens of his often jumbled mind.

Gbenga auditioned for the role early on, when the film dropped off the radar. “By the time we made the movie it had been years living with the character,” he said. “Ben had been trying to make the movie for six years before I came on. Then the movie had lost its funding again, and then I found him and I said, listen, I don't know if you ever plan on casting me in this, but I want to make this movie, I want to come on as a producer, and I will help make this movie; because I love this script, and I love this character.”

Not only did Gbenga convince Ben Bowman to continue with the film, but he brought on Alfre Woodard, fresh off the Academy-Award winning *12 YEARS A SLAVE*, to produce and star in the film too! The collaboration and partnership with Woodard was a satisfying experience.

“Man, I want to work with Alfre for the rest of my life! Aside from her immense talent, she's just an amazing human being, just to be around her.”

Ten years in the making, *KNUCKLEHEAD* finally premiered on March 26 at BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) to sold-out audiences. The film is screening in the month of June at the Dances with Films Festival in Los Angeles, and at the San Francisco Black Film Festival.

Both Gbenga and Woodard were passionate about the script and the project. In questioning a white writer and director taking on such a starkly urban story and characters, Gbenga pointed out, “People can obviously tell stories from different cultures and so on. There are bridges to be crossed in order to do that, but they can.

“I'm going to defend this film, and it's white director! Because it ain't about him, it's about Langston and the story being told—this story has to be told. We never question that when Johnny Depp is playing these roles, or Leonardo DiCaprio is playing these roles. We need to be able to tell these stories as well. They are valuable, they are in our neighborhoods. Hollywood won't let us, so we have to! We can't back bite when it's being done.”

As a story about a mentally disabled man, *KNUCKLEHEAD* is ripe to be used as a point of advocacy for the mentally disabled in the Black community. “I think it's very empowering,” Gbenga said. “To me, this is 'The Odyssey'. Langston, he has a dream, he has his limitations, and those limitations are not enough to stop him from getting his dream. When it doesn't work this way, he goes another way. It's like he goes up against the Sirens, against temptations; I think it's inspiring for anyone who is looking for a home, whether it's physical or metaphorical. It's inspiring to anyone struggling with mental disability. It's inspiring to me. I think it can and should be used in advocacy.”

As part of preparation for the role, Gbenga pulled from his experience with people like Langston who he had encountered throughout his life. “We purposely didn't define what he had because so often in these communities people go undiagnosed or undefined. If I was to choose something, probably along the autism spectrum, yes. Aside from growing up with people like that in my neighborhood, I've been in and out of different institutions, and I went to school with people that exhibited that spectrum.”

Langston's are often the forgotten or ignored quotient in urban communities, either hidden away or left to the vagaries and dangers of the street. “There's a stigma attached to it,” Gbenga continued. “We are seen as not being strong. But we are having that conversation more and more in the African-American community—mental disabilities, mental health, mental illness, it's becoming, I think, easier to have this conversation.”

Gbenga is banking on KNUCKLEHEAD being used to continue that conversation with its realistic depiction of both mental illness and the obstacles to finding and implementing resources for help in urban communities.

Despite this new found success as a producer and writer, Gbenga is not giving up acting any time soon. “I dig it. I like the act of sharpening a skill, learning something, and I'm still learning. So that's what kept me doing it.

“And now it's enabled me to do other things. I've now produced a few films, I've sold one of the films I produced at Sundance, I've been writing. I'm one of the writers for a pretty successful web series for Sony, I've written a couple of pieces for the [New York] Times—all because of acting. So I'm very grateful for this field, as it's allowed me to explore other fields.

Gbenga's latest exploration is a platform for social activism through his Liberated People [website](#). Through an eco-friendly t-shirts and sweatshirts line, Gbenga highlights the liberation dates of nations around the world.

“It pretty much came from me being a part of different social movements around the world,” he said. “Different protests like Occupy Nigeria. I was on trial in Brooklyn protesting Stop and Frisk, and to the West Bank in Israel protesting. I'd see all these different people who are fighting for democratic and human rights, but oftentimes felt their struggles were unique to only them.”

Gbenga hopes to change that lone wolf—or lone nation—perspective, and foster unity among these individual movements. “After having all these experiences I saw that, no, this is common around the world and if we stood together, and recognized these struggle with our brothers and sisters, that we'd be stronger in our own struggles. Because in the end, we have the numbers.”

## SUGGESTED LINKS

- **Film review: KNUCKLEHEAD premieres at the West Coast Dances with Films Festival**

- Artist Profile: Director Ben Bowman's KNUCKLEHEAD is a 10-year labor of love
  - 2015 Dances With Films Festival launches tonight with THE CHALLENGER
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