

Celebrating Rex

Professor The Hon. Ralston 'Rex' Nettleford — Feb. 3, 1933 - Feb. 2, 2010



Celebration in honour of Rex



The New Generation Dancers of the National Dance Theatre Company performing the Rex Nettleford choreographed "Kumina" in honour their late artistic director and co-founder of the NDTC Jamaica at the Little Theatre on February 16. TONY PATEL PHOTO

By Nicola Cunningham-Williams
Pure Class writer

As was expected a huge crowd turned out at the Little Theatre on Tuesday February 16, for the National Dance Theatre Company's (NDTC) tribute to its artistic director and co-founder the late Professor, the Hon. Rex Nettleford. Earlier in the morning an official service of thanksgiving for his life was held at the University Chapel of the West Indies.

Friends and supporters who failed to show up on time had to settle for watching the proceedings from a screen situated outside the theatre under a huge tent, as the theatre simply could not accommodate everyone. Extraordinary tributes in speech and songs were interspersed between tributes in dance.

To the right of the stage facing the audience was a gigantic floral arrangement along with a huge photograph of 'Prof'. Moving slowly across the stage from the back left wing was a procession of past and current NDTC members led by co-founder and choreographer Bertie Rose bearing the Norma Harrack created urn with the cremated remains of Prof, which he placed on a draped stand bearing Prof's photograph. After this touching show of respect, the NDTC ensemble took their seats in the audience.

MediaMix CEO, Lennie Little White's compilation of a video presentation showing Professor

Nettleford's love of history, movement, culture, his installation as vice chancellor of the University of the West Indies as well as captioned aspects of his life with headings such as mentor, messenger, maven were interspersed with excerpts from dances, which Nettleford choreographed and danced such as *The King Must Die*, a *Myal* rehearsal, *Plantation Revelry*, *The Crossing*, *Tintinabulum*, *Bujurama*, *Spirits at a Gathering* and *Kumina*. It was poignant and excellent.

The NDTC dancers performed *Incantation* choreographed by Jeanguy Saintus, a spiritual ode to the freedom of dance and this mesmerized the audience. *Steal Away* by Bert Rose was a simple yet sweet Negro spiritual that soothed those who were in deep mourning.

The Company also performed excerpts from dances choreographed by Rex Nettleford, including *Tintinabulum* — Of Sons & Mothers, *Katrina*, *Apocalypse* — Born Again, Born Anew, and *Kumina*. The NDTC Singers led by Marjorie Whyllie offered repatriation songs including the *Lion of Judah*.

Celebratory tributes

In her tribute, the Little Theatre Movement chairperson, the Hon. Barbara Gloudon O.J., spoke about her relationship with Prof, as she also called him, and the relationship between the LTM

and NDTC. She said she chose to wear a bright outfit that she first wore to a party where Rex was at, as he simply adored it. Having toured with the NDTC on their first overseas assignment she said, she quickly realised that writing was her forte.

"The road between the NDTC and the LTM is a long one with a relationship founded on mutual respect. All of us loved that great man. I hurt because we shared similar birth time, I am the 5th and he is February 3rd. I bought his present from December. The question for me is not if the NDTC will survive, it simply must," Mrs. Gloudon asserted.

She spoke of the "clever" man Prof was, at times "playing fool to catch wise." She said he never described his work with the pantomime as "choreography but movement. He was a great and loving man who crafted from nothingness. He taught us to respect Jamaica. Whatever the Pantomime Company has become was because of Rex."

Bridget Spaulding, NDTC founding member, paid her tribute in relationship they shared, and the great man Rex was.

The NDTC Bridge Generation, made up of former dancers, spoke of Rex's anecdotal sayings, totalitarian style and how he brokered no foolishness on stage during rehearsals. The New Generation NDTC members consisting of cur-

rent dancers were more somber, as they came with lit candles and most could not hold back their tears, as they lauded the man they referred to as "Our father".

Ballet mistress Kerry-Ann, Henry, who delivered the tribute, said Prof was still teaching Monday classes. She spoke of the personal letters he would write to each and every dancer after the close of each season. She recalled him saying, "You are here to assist not to take over, and those of whom I speak know whom they are."

She said it was as if he was possessed when choreographing *The Crossing*. For the young dancers, Professor Nettleford was the ultimate role model.

NDTC chairman Jeff Cobham in his closing remarks, said that the hundreds of heartfelt wishes and extraordinary tributes they received have meant a lot to the company.

"We miss him but through it all there was the constant repetition of two words 'renewal' and 'continuity'. The company is extremely gifted and extremely determined that what he has taught them will never be extinguished."

The Company then closed with what is arguably Professor Nettleford's most famous piece *Kumina* and when young Marlon Simms appeared as the king, a role that Rex had breathed life into, the entire audience went wild cheering, as they knew his legacy lived on.