

Cornwallians, Ladies and Gentlemen! The ~~Kingston~~ Chapter of the Cornwall College Old Boys Association is especially pleased in this year to honour one of its most distinguished alumni, Professor ~~the~~ Honorable Ralston Milton Nettleford, Rex, Order of Merit: Fellow of the Institute of Jamaica.

Born in Falmouth, Trelawny, Rex Nettleford grew up in Bunkers Hill, where the vast expanse of the Queen of Spain's Valley meets the rugged and intricate Cockpit Country. Nettleford entered Cornwall College from the Montego Bay Boys School. At Cornwall his lively intelligence, his prodigious hard work and his unswerving striving for excellence became his hallmark. After a distinguished academic performance he won an open scholarship to the then fledging UCWI where he read History and from which he went up to Oxford, having been awarded both of Jamaica's most prestigious academic awards, the Rhodes and Issa Scholarships.

During his stay in Oxford at Oriel College, he was active in the Oxford University Drama Society, choreographing for the Society many productions. On his return to Jamaica he rejoined the staff of the University of the West Indies (UWI) and was instrumental, not only in the expansion of the Extra Mural Department, but in the founding of the Trade Union Education Institute.

Nettleford has provided advice to governments of various ideological persuasions not only in the fields of the Arts and Culture, but as 'gray eminence', also in the fields of politics and development. He established himself early as an advocate for and an activist in the University's then cutting edge engagement in the society which engendered it and whose interests and challenges as documented by the Moyne Commission it was determined to serve. Very soon his acumen as political analyst, as thinker and as strategist for action was recognized. The 1961 **Rastafari Report** and his participation in the early Mission to the newly independent nations of Africa are evidence of this. Soon he became synonymous with, indeed for the ordinary Jamaican the visible embodiment of the new intellectual generation homegrown at 'UC'.

We remember in particular his involvement in the shaping of the new Jamaica in the post independence era. His was a recognition of the seminal role of

ideas and cultural expression; of the generative importance of notions of the self and of Community for every sphere of development His too was a recognition of the efficacy of the tenets of democracy in its ideal and in practice. The building of institutions which has become for him an *idée fixe*, demands the nurturing of a team: a coalition of the brightest and the best working together with those whose greatest contribution might simply be their doggedly loyal commitment to the task. Representative of this was his work as Chairman of the Institute of Jamaica. He inherited an institution which, committed though it was to the Collection and Dissemination of West Indian, was at its soul and in its vision bound to the past. With a team of trusted associates he transformed it into an institution whose structures and outlook reflected the aspirations of its community of interests, and without eschewing the past, was charged with creating a path into the future. Perhaps though his most enduring contribution is the founding of the National Dance Theatre Company and with it the establishment of Dance as a catalyst for personal and national development It is in this area that we see the expression of the combination of all his ideals as administrator, leader, creator, as thinker, and as visionary. It is here that we continue to see the public expression of a very private man's Eros in single communion with his passion for Logos.

Few of us know that, although he never broke any records at Sabina Park - the home of Boys Champs - his peers at Cornwall recognised and respected his athletic prowess. But we can believe it where evidenced in the athleticism of Nettleford the dancer. For him athleticism, as scholarship, could never be an end to itself. He reflected on the traditions of his forbears on the African continent, whose athleticism was evidenced in the dance which was more than minstrelsy: dance was the embodiment of the ethos of a people, a kinesthetic expression of the human spirit's relationship to space and time simultaneously incantation and communication.

He in a holistic way used this dance at once as aesthetic expression and intellectual statement. It was to become metaphor of the ideas, which he so eloquently expressed in his numerous publications and his now famous radio and television commentaries. No part of this multifaceted action was divorced from the other -the spatial freedom of the plains of his childhood were intertwined with the intrigue and resilience of the hills and their people: the polyrhythms of the drum, which beat at the heart of his endeavours, were syncopated into his experimentation in politics, scholarship, and in the theatre.

In the Dance Theatre Nettleford created a new and innovative paradigm. In the tradition of Lavinia Williams and Katherine Dunham he studied the traditional dances of the New World. In the manner of an innovative artist he isolated movements, reduced them to first principles; he distilled the ethos of their context, and created on stage a meta-language, a new technique, a unique technique, which like that of Graham, or Denishawn, Horton or Merce Cunningham, has become a *typos*, spawning numerous epigones. He has done for the Caribbean that which Alvin Ailey did for the mainland plantation American.

He forged a link, an organic link to Africa, the wellspring, to the root, without becoming gratuitous, at the same time combining the influences of the metropole with the idiosyncratic peculiarities of that experience which is the Middle Passage, the Crossing.

His choreographic work, like his scholarship, has consistently challenged the mainstream, the establishment: not mere mimesis - although that too - but sometimes confrontational: always insidious, always ironic, and always, critical: the scholar Rex.

For most Jamaicans in the post independence era the name Rex Nettleford has become synonymous with excellence in many areas simultaneously; indeed almost automatically we identify him with the ideals of the Rhodes Scholarship: academic excellence, extra curricular excellence, unquestioned integrity and unflagging service to the society. He has perhaps more than any other living Rhodes Scholar given credence and authority to these noble ideals: the embodiment of the concept of the Renaissance man. He has however brought to this concept, to the nexus of *via comtemplativa* and *via activa* another dimension: that of real innovation: indeed the creation of rebirth.

In the same way that the founding fathers of the West Indian nation created out of the gog and magog of the post colonial Caribbean, a new polis, Nettleford has been pivotal in creating, in giving shape to an attendant philosophical and cultural ethos – in recreating through his research, in his documentation and his agitation. Singular and signal has been his ability to communicate this ethos, to permeate the polity, to infuse into the political reality a critical appreciation of that which underlies it: to create an understanding, as does Derek Walcott in another medium, of the adamic nature of the West Indian, the imperative of creating our own our peculiar

reality. His work in the University epitomizes this: characteristically he has been at those moments, which most directly impact on the society.

Appointed to a personal chair at the University in the late 1970's, he has been Pro-Vice Chancellor, and deputy Vice Chancellor: in July 1998, he was appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West Indies (UWI) and entrusted with the leadership of the regional University into the next millennium. Many alumni know him most as teacher, in the formulation of ideas, in the analysis of discrete data, in the building of continuity. Over the years his sphere of influence has extended beyond Jamaica and the Caribbean – evidenced by the establishment of the CTC, now the Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts -: he has been Chairman of the Commonwealth Arts Foundation and Chairman of the Executive Committee of UNESCO.

Nettleford is always deferential and grateful to those who nurtured him: to his community in Bunkers Hill, to his mother, to Dr Morrison, whose nurturing of so many other Cornwallians is legendary. So too as an artist his tributes to Bob Marley, to Jimmy Cliff, to Stevie Wonder, to his precursors: Ivy Baxter and Beryl McBurnie are signal. As an educator Nettleford understands himself in a tradition: the tradition of Rev. Leader, Rupert Bent, Nathan Brisett, Rupert Miller, N.S. Jackson, Elsa Goveia and Phillip Sherlock, of his collaborators Roy Augier and M.G. Smith.

He himself has continued this tradition, as mentor, preceptor, teacher, and friend to so many students. Despite his duties as administrator, as government advisor, as Artistic Director - he finds time for personal intervention in the lives of his students, unearthing talent, challenging to excellence, nurturing self-esteem in the diffident, and giving hope in those who despair. A prodigious letter writer, he maintains a worldwide network of contacts, the original worldwide web.

He has been honored on numerous occasions, locally and internationally. He is the recipient of many honorary Doctorates and last year was elected, by acclamation, a Fellow of Oxford University. We here, proud of our own, have bestowed on him the Order of Merit; the Institute of Jamaica has awarded him the prestigious Musgrave Medal in Gold, and has made him a Fellow, one of only four in its 120 year history.

It is rare, Fellow Cornwallians that we honour an alumnus who entered the

school more than two generations ago, of whom our anticipation of future achievement is as great as our recognition of past feats. Nettleford's life, as his work, has been epitomized by his quest for vision. He has distilled the collective wisdom of the Caribbean people and their antecedents, into a singular personal Vision, which he shares with the Caribbean people of tomorrow.

Fellow Cornwallians, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is indeed befitting that we honor him: Scholar Educator, Choreographer.

Man of Ideas,  
Man of Letters,  
Man of Action,  
Man of Vision.  
Rex.

Kingston  
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Written and read by Michael Cooke at the  
Kingston Chapter of the Cornwall Old Boys Association  
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