

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

INSTALLATION AS FELLOW OF THE INSTITUTE OF JAMAICA

Monday, November 27, 1989 - Little Theatre

by Rex Nettleford

Let me express my sincere and humble thanks to the Council of the Institute of Jamaica for first of all thinking that I am worthy of this honour and then inviting trouble into its portals by actually conferring it on me. I, of course, have no reason to believe that the Institute is not up to the challenge of the vision that I would naturally wish it to share. But I may still appear to many as too solemnly stubborn in the view that without that vision much of our work - past, present and especially that which is possible in the future - will be in vain.

I am referring, as some will guess, to the continuing quest, I think we are on, for that voice which will be distinctly and distinctively ours, serving to enrich the already textured sphere of human reality which to many is cacaphony and chaos itself especially at end of century when the only thing that is certain about the future is its uncertainty.

The increasing complexity of the human condition demands of us the sense and sensibility that must be the product of

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the specific life-experience of each of us - individually and collectively, if we are to contribute at all to the harmony of the spheres. I see this to be cause, occasion and result of culture - of that process involving all who would wish to call themselves human. And I recoil with fear and trembling from everything that would deny us the option of witness to that process or would refuse acknowledgement of our right of engagement. To recoil is not to surrender however; and one soon resorts to the grit and stamina that life in these parts extracts from those of us who are determined to survive with some sense of dignity and human purpose.

It is such grit and stamina which I think brought to the attention of the Institute the first three Fellows ever to be installed - the late Edna Manley and C. L. R. James and the Honourable Sir Phillip Sherlock who is here with us tonight.

In the shaping of the new social order both here and in the wider Caribbean, all three have been among our most important voices - all three the seminal intellects and harbingers of a creative artistic vision with an astute knowledge of culture in all its variety and texture, offering the generations of today and tomorrow a clearly marked road to follow, demonstrating through their work that society - any society - must look inwardly at its daily creative work to find and to perfect its own tools for progress, its own instruments for develop-

ment, its own modalities for growth.

Such has been the boldness of their vision. And they have all been "universal", precisely because they have been specific in their focus - rooted but unbound, engaged but not fettered.¹¹ None of them wished to play Michaelangelo, Lenin, Shakespeare rather than themselves. And as a direct beneficiary of that boldness of vision through the course they set and the process they helped to give form and purpose, I humbly pay tribute and offer my heartfelt thanks.

I want to thank, as well, all those with whom I have been walking the path set by our mentors, and in all that I have tried to do. It goes without saying that the University of the West Indies, which provides me with bread must take full credit for facilitating the work of people like myself. Its presence in the region over the past forty years has made it possible for those it employs to offer the kind of public service that could have been otherwise lost to it; and I regard this very honour tonight like all others as a recognition of the tremendous contribution of that institution and its supporting governments to the improvement of the quality of life in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean over the past four decades.

I now crave your indulgence in permitting me to single out the founders, the early supporters and patrons (formal and informal) as well as the subsequent and current members

of the National Dance Theatre Company for special thanks. For it is they who have provided me with a laboratory for sustained exploration - a prime source of energy first for discovering the power of the arts and the creative process in this whole matter of self-definition; secondly for interpreting ourselves to ourselves; and thirdly for demonstrating to a wider constituency of humankind all over the globe that in the field of art and culture where the kingdom of the mind is most rigorously tested no less than in science, there is no "developed" and "developing" world as the economists understand those categories, that in the realm of excellence there is no hierarchy, and that belief in self through the mastery over the creative intellect and imagination is the surest guarantee for one's own liberation.

They have taught me, too, how powerless power can be. The conductor for all his vision, insight, aesthetic energy, and magical powers cannot play all the instruments. I wish to thank all in the NDTC and the wider world of Jamaican creative arts for allowing me the opportunity of leadership and for giving me faith to persevere in the face of the greatest of odds, some of those odds subtly crafted at the best of times.

For this sun-drenched beach-^{frilled}filled isle in which we live can be a most intimidatingly wearisome one in which to exist. Coarsened sensibilities vie with basic civility for ascendancy and frequently win. Envy, besides being rife,

larded with malice not only aforethought but also without the tempering juices of perception. Venality supplants moderation in our expectations of success. Failure is impatient of tolerance and understanding while selfishness denies to personal interactions the generosity of spirit on which healthy civilisations must thrive. The simplest of decisions must take into account plural points of reference which our still groping society imposes on us. All this appears to consume invaluable creative energies and grow into a debilitating cancer diverting too many of us away from productive thought and innovative action towards cocktail circuit chatter and all-pervading trivia.

Leadership, then, means dying a thousand deaths and conjuring up a thousand and one resurrections. And you dare not play the Son of Man! One is constantly tested for patience, endurance, fixity of purpose, conviction, commitment, dedication and caring. Which is all to the good. But just when you think you have found a solution your people come up with the problems.

In the arts we have a euphemism for it: we call it "creative tension". I certainly was not unmindful of this deep-seated cultural fix when in helping to restructure this very Institute of Jamaica and to give some shape to our country's cultural policy during the challenging daring Seventies, I advocated the sort of institutional framework that would first acknowledge the need for tension and then attempt to contain

t. I have worked in the University of the West Indies almost all my adult life; I should know about the bliss of schizophrenia and the folly and futility of stress-free existence in managing anything in Jamaica, including Jamaica itself.

Yet, for all my reservations about this wearying, irritating, well-nigh ungovernable society of ours, I would choose none other. For I owe to it everything that I would call blessed. That sense of community coupled with an equally deep sense of personal initiative and self-reliance, the privacy of feeling that leaves each one of us with that last inviolable area of self-mastery called freedom by some, conscience by others, and moral responsibility by all; tolerance towards others focussing on strengths rather than on weaknesses; a tenacious grip on the hope that lies deep in every den of despair, and, above all, a belief in self bolstered by our psychic inheritance of struggle and survival which celebrates the invincibility of the human spirit against all efforts at continuing denigration and dehumanisation.

We in the creative arts have been well served by plumbing the depths of our ancestral reality. It would do our economic planners and our new and welcome apostles of science and technology a world of good to do likewise. For the history and existential reality of this country is our safest guide since both rest in what our ordinary people have done and are doing, have been and are, over this past half a millenium. It is the only true basis for the cultural certitude of which I speak

so frequently and for the independent voice that must evolve in every field of endeavour - from politics through science and business to literature and the performing and visual arts.

Imitation, at which we are so adept, may be the handmaiden of dependency but it is also a one-sided affair. And, after all, it takes two hands to clap. All great civilisations, in any case, are the offspring of cross-fertilisation.

I thank Jamaica for such insights and for having prepared me and many others of my generation to cope with the dialectical reality that I have long discovered human life and living to be. I was later to find the Institute of Jamaica an ideal, even an inspired, institutional device for helping Jamaicans to cope in like fashion. Its original remit to encourage literature, art and science was to be innovatively carried out by visionaries like Sir Phillip himself. Small wonder that the institution became in due course an integral part of the civil society that Jamaica after 1838 nurtured for itself providing support and vigour for the self-government movement which came a hundred years after, as well as for political Independence the integrity of which we are still striving to protect.

A great West African poet and philosopher-politician once wrote: "Reason is Greek, Emotion is African". The literary neatness of the aphorism notwithstanding, Jamaica has long taught me that we are too cunning and textured a people to

settle for such a one-dimensional design for the international division of labour. For we think as well as feel. We in fact do many things simultaneously in our ardent quest to have ourselves demarginalised and become the determiners of our own destiny.

I still believe ourselves to be consciously engaged in a battle which is nowhere over. And without the vigorous exercise of intellect and imagination, I see no end in sight to our problems now graphically expressed in terms of foreign exchange shortage, balance of payments difficulties, inadequate net capital inflows, low productivity and the IMF.

Indeed, work in arts-and-culture has long demonstrated the great potential for good that lies in public patronage facilitating private initiative, in private voluntarism prompting from government, action in the public interest - transcending political divisions and class differences, improving our quality of life and enhancing the value of civil society while we build our new Jamaica. It is a unique feature of Jamaican life that is allowed to go easily unnoticed and too quickly taken for granted or ignored especially by the technocrats in the shaping of our development strategies.

On this rests my urgent call for the deserving continuity and strengthening of the resource-base of the Institute of Jamaica and all kindred cultural bodies in any genuine effort to have our people realise within a lifetime that sense of place and purpose without which we have no right expecting

from them loyalty to their society or the high productivity needed for the nation's growth.

With such an agenda of challenge and concern how could I not be grateful for being invited to join the fellowship of this august institution which can find no solace until it achieves what C. L. R. James himself said his Caribbean, the Caliban of our tempestuous history, must achieve.

"To establish his own identity", C. L. R. declared, "Caliban after three centuries must himself pioneer into regions Caesar never knew". The direction is clear. I am happy to be part of that journey.

I THANK YOU..