

MAN OF THE YEAR

VICE-CHANCELLOR OF THE UNIVERSITY of the West Indies, Prof. Rex Nettleford, has been named Man of the Year by a distinguished panel of

judges who selected him from an impressive field of nominees for the Gleaner Honour Awards. The other category winners are: Orville 'Shaggy' Burrell - entertain-

ment, Courtney Foster - voluntary service, William 'Bill' Clarke - business, Dr. Peter Phillips - public service, Anthony Porter - science and technology and Marvin Anderson - sports.

Prof. Nettleford was nominated in the field of arts and culture. The award will be presented at a special function at Le Meridien Jamaica Pegasus Hotel, New Kingston, on January 10, 2002.

Born to be Rex



- Norman Grindley

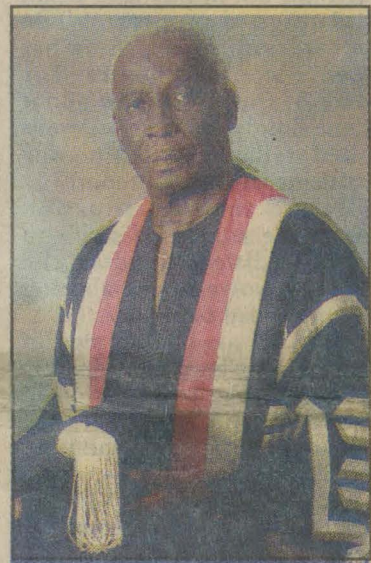
■ Prof. Rex Nettleford

MELVILLE COOKE

FREELANCE WRITER

It is important to stress the importance and force of the exercise of the creative intellect and the creative imagination; in other words, the exercise of the mind in (a) re-defining a vision of the future with a social philosophy that makes sense for Caribbean people, (b) shaping a new and civilised society out of slavery, colonialism and their aftermath, and (c) building democratic nations out of erstwhile colonial fiefdoms.

Introduction to 'Inward Stretch, Outward Reach' A Voice From the Caribbean (Rex Nettleford).



■ Vice Chancellor Nettleford

REX NETTLEFORD DOES not — cannot — keep still as he speaks about his early years in Trelawny and St. James. It is not, however, the fidgeting of the uncomfortable, nor the unease of the ashamed.

The barefooted country boy, who grew up to be a man of words, letters and the world — and well-worn shoes, moves constantly to the remembered rhythms of the Baptists and the infectious pounding of pocomania, with the exquisite timing of Cornwall College's drama club.

Then he leans forward, clasps his hands, narrows his eyes and says: "I was a leggo beast, all right."

And still is — for the two seconds it takes us to burst into laughter. Real country belly laugh, made from the hills, the rivers and the soil, from open spaces, which test the padded door and seem to make the Vice Chancellor's offices of the Univer-

sity of the West Indies, Mona Campus, just a little larger.

"I was born in Falmouth and went to infant school, nothing like kindergarten, then went to Bunker's Hill, to Unity Government School. Then I went to Montego Bay and did a year at Montego Bay Boys' School, Barracks we call it, and then prepared, really, under Rupert Bent for the one scholarship per parish, which was what was given in those days. And I won a scholarship to Cornwall College," Professor Nettleford said.

That Rupert Bent is the father of the Rupert Bent who is now a part of the Third World band.

"In elementary school in those days, you learned so many things. We had to up and down the modulation — you know, do ra me fa so la te do. She touches a key and you really had to find it. You learnt that way."

However, identifying the genesis of Ralston Milton Nettleford's lifelong passion for culture is not as easy as finding Middle C.

Continues on 10A

Born to be Rex

Continued from 1A

"The cultural thing started really from Bunker's Hill, Unity Government School, where we used to have annual sort of closing ceremonies in schools, and it was in the church. And I remember somebody misbehaved very badly in the church one year, so we changed it to a Spelling Bee. Generally, country concerts, yard concerts, I was brought up on that tradition; the singing of folk songs, all of that, both at school and at home. Because I never really heard the radio until I was about 11. And we amused ourselves. My grandmother told stories — lots of story-telling, duppy stories and what have you. And we would play moonshine baby, ring games, so I was brought up in that. This isn't anthropology. I wasn't an anthropologist scholar going out to see what the folks (he emphasises that word) did," Professor Nettleford said.

"You were the folks," **The Sunday Gleaner** says and the teacher in the dancer in the administrator makes the correction without missing a beat. "I was very much the folk and did everything. And that has always informed my life and my interest in artistic expression. Even before I knew how to articulate it, or articulate why I do it, it was a way of life. And that way of life, I found, very integrated and very satisfying."

"School was an extension of home, home was an extension of school — one learned to read the Bible very early and to read to one's grandparents. My grandmother was not illiterate, but she wasn't highly literate. But she believed in education.

Although the emphasis is on the time in Bunkers Hill, where Louise Bennett gathered a great deal of her material, the young Rex Nettleford was imbued with a sense of history by virtue of living on Cornwall Street in the Trelawny capital which, with its Georgian architecture, is steeped in history. He can recall going to the 'very top' of the parish church's clock tower (the same church he was christened at) and looking at Falmouth's grid style layout. And then there was the Methodist manse, which had a fascinating thing on the side.

The date.

"That's how I grew up, to appreciate the things around you," he said.

That appreciation extended to the way in which life was sustained, as the children had to help in the fields. Even that was turned into a performance of sorts.

"One of the things we children had to do was go to the field and run the parakeets out of the corn. And we used to do that by beating pans and singing folk songs," Professor Nettleford said.

The practical use of creativity was to become a lifelong thread in the fabric of his life.

In the parish of William Knibb it was impossible to escape the Baptist influence and the emphasis on Emancipation. Decades before "Augus' Mawnin" was re-introduced as a public holiday,



— File

■ Professor Nettleford in action many years ago.

Rex Nettleford's grandmother was strong on the day that slaves earned their freedom.

Add to this his time on the choir as boy's soprano, singing Handel's Messiah to a pump organ ("I suppose we sang it badly") and other European classics.

And always, there were teachers ("What those teachers did to expose us!").

"One of the things that I am particularly grateful for, is that I was never brought up in a situation where there was any dichotomy between that highly liturgical music and my folk songs — I think later on it helped me to get things into perspective. So the thing of whether this was better than that did not arise. My grandmother was a little bit of a pillar of the Baptist Church and we would go to Christian Endeavour, which was a kind of prayer meeting for children on Sunday morning. But we would rush from there and go to a Pocomania meeting, which was across the street from where we lived."

There was also Zionist revivalism and Jonkunoo.

"None of this really had me confused.

These were different forms of worship (he trails off into laughter). I am able to put it this way now because I have a little education, but at the time — well, there was absolutely no problem. And I say this because my own efforts later on to make sense of what we do, people like us create for ourselves, and in terms of our survival and what have we, didn't have to be necessarily ruling out other people's thing. It is just that they have done their thing, we have got to do ours."

"And this has guided me very strongly — and of course it led me to question what is ours — I was in Amsterdam just recently giving the keynote address at the Prince Claus Foundation award ceremony. And I repeated something which I have been working on. People like us are part African, part European, part Asian, part Native American, but totally Caribbean."

Beyond being the hewers of wood and drawers of water, Jamaica's black majority, like all of their ilk in the Americas, also have minds. The author is still of the view that the universals we seek for the human condition can be best found through deep investigation into

and rigorous analysis of one's own history and contemporary realities.

New introduction to "Mirror, Mirror: Identity, Race and Protest" (Rex Nettleford, 1998)

"It's very interesting, people have often spoken to me about racial discrimination. And I say — you know, the only place I really have been cursed black is Jamaica," Professor Nettleford said, his ivory teeth showing in a smile which seemed to varnish the mahogany of his skin to an even deeper burnish.

"You had to come to terms with that too, because as a youngster growing up if you were black you were ugly, so it was black and ugly. I went through all of that, all throughout my secondary school life. Not in the elementary school (the sentence is completed in a half chuckle), since all of us looked alike, barefoot and all that."

So you were not supposed to be on the hill, **The Sunday Gleaner** says.

"Precisely. In truth and in fact, Cornwall College was set up for small farmers' sons anyway, so that was ridiculous. Lots of the high brown fellows and who were there - One of the redeeming factors (he pauses to laugh) and this is probably the irony of it, but I laugh at it, because I say maybe I was able to cope because they were all dunce!"

After a half a belly laugh, Professor Nettleford continues. "Despite all that, I enjoyed Cornwall College. It helped me tremendously, all my experience in leadership. Because we had a very strong prefect system. We really ran the school, under the direction of course of the masters and so on."

But Cornwall College was not all about academics and leadership. There was drama, singing, dance — and not all of it in school.

"I hooked up — as a little boy — with Elkena 'Worm' Chambers and his variety group, which performed on August Morning, Christmas Morning and Boxing Day at the Strand and the Roxy. It was purely by accident. I had to deliver something to him at a rehearsal and when I arrived I saw them rehearsing. I was a little boy, y'know, 11, 12, and these are big, big people. And I said to him, can I show you what I can do? And he said sure, go ahead. And I did. In those days it was the local Bing Crosby, the local Ella Fitzgerald, the local Sinatra. I took that and introduced Jamaican folk songs which I had been doing in the country and putting movement to them (there go those hands and feet again), because all those folk songs are action songs, digging songs (somehow Prof. Nettleford portrays a man digging in a field while sitting in his chair so well you

can almost smell the earth and not the air conditioning)."

The performances not only earned Rex extra money, but also gave him more experience in management. As a teenager he began to run the group - a rehearsal of sorts for co-founding the National Dance Theatre Company (NDTC) in 1962. He thought he had duped the headmaster by sneaking off to perform, until he saw his file, detailing every single one, years later.

Forty years later, the NDTC, just back from a tour of Brazil, is still a voluntary organisation, forsaking cash at a critical juncture so that the School of Dance at the Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts could be formed.

The dancing, which began in the west, was continued when an experienced and researched Rex Nettleford joined up with Ivy Baxter in Kingston.

The student Rex, having won that scholarship to Cornwall, also won a scholarship to the University College of the West Indies and afterwards gave up the Issa Scholarship to take up the Rhodes for Oxford.

"Could you have afforded to go if you had not won the scholarships?" **The Sunday Gleaner** asks and gets an amused, incredulous look and a definite reply. "No, Oh My God, what are you asking me? You could look at somebody like me and ask me a question like that. Definitely not."

A Honorary Life Member of the Institute of Jamaica, Professor The Hon. Rex Nettleford has been awarded an Order of Merit and counts among his slew of honours being made a Honorary Fellow of Oriel College (Oxford) in 1998. It is the highest award an alumnus can achieve.

Elephant Man would be hard-pressed to find fault with Professor Nettleford's seated rendition of the 'Log On' dance, although the talk of weight distribution and cantilevers may be a bit more formal than the dancehall.

And what about those immortal nine words, that "a bootoo in a Benz is still a bootoo"? As Rex Nettleford puts it, "I hope that a car becomes something because I am in it."

If he were to live his life over again, there are two things he would do differently, "I would learn to play a musical instrument and learn several foreign languages."

I have often claimed that Jamaicans are too sophisticated to be racist but not that silly not to be race conscious. And on this delicate balancing of sensibilities, the Black majority function in response to a society and its wider Western counterpart which frustrate many an effort at Black empowerment with nonsensical notions of ethnic/cultural inferiority and the calculated devaluing of all things African, from art to politics.

New introduction to 'Mirror, Mirror: Identity, Race and Protest' (Rex Nettleford, 1998).

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF JAMAICA

PROFESSOR REX NETTLEFORD IN 2001

- Awarded the honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Grand Valley State University in the United States. The Degree was awarded in recognition of his many accomplishments in the field of Caribbean Studies.
- Was conferred with an honorary degree from the University of Toronto (U of T).
- Was appointed president of the Council of Voluntary Social Services (CVSS).
- Joined the Credit Union Golden Harvest Savings Plan and arranged for his alma mater, the University of the West Indies, to be the beneficiary to the entire proceeds of his million dollar savings.
- Delivered the keynote address at the sixth conference of the Commonwealth Journalists Association which was held in Abuja, Nigeria.
- Participated in the Sixth World and General Assembly of the International Council for Adult Education.
- Led a team from the University of the West Indies to the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa.
- Was the rapporteur for the International Scientific Committee of UNESCO's Slave Route Project.
- Remains artistic director of the National Dance Theatre Company and NDTC Singers.
- Has remained steadfast and committed to the dream which is Edna Manley School for the Visual and Performing Arts.