

Rex Nettleford

I want to see a Jamaica that will be able to throw up people who are concentrated, integrated, well-rounded, productive and resourceful ... a young generation of black people who will find a place in this society. I want for them never to feel less than good or less than equal in a society like this ... we cannot allow the next generation to grow up with the same doubt and lack of self-confidence."



Professor Rex Nettleford ...found a place in both the world of academia and that of the arts ...

Forget what he looks and sounds like. Forget his real name even. Rex Nettleford is not stoosh, at least he does not think so.

"I think you have to blame the dance for what I look like ... it's just the way I carry myself, just the way I walk," he said laughingly as he spoke to Class recently.

His real name is another matter entirely -- that he thinks is a little bit beyond him. He was christened Ralston Milton Nettleford although he has been called Rex all his life.

"Ralston? isn't that dreadful?" he asked, "Rex is so much nicer ... I guess it's my thing for rhythm, Rex Nettleford has a much better resonance ... besides Ralston is a little bit too stoosh."

Nettleford thinks that he and the many other unfortunate men in Trelawny who bear the name Ralston were probably named for some busha from the area.

From as early as six ...

Nettleford was born in Trelawny, in a little district called Bunkers Hill and he grew up, he said, in "an extended family of mother, grandmother and a whole heap of

aunties." He went to elementary school in both Bunkers Hill and Montego Bay and spent much of his early childhood doing what was to become half of his life's work. He danced and threw himself wholeheartedly into anything that had to do with the stage.

As early as six years old, Nettleford was choreographing.

"I wouldn't call it choreography really, I merely assembled steps together and put them to folk songs."

He wrote playlets and acted in them. "I would blush at the sight of them now, they were quite horrible ... I wouldn't want them to see the light of day now," he said, horrified at the thought of resurrecting them.

He also wrote "hundreds of dialect poems" and performed those as well. He was a 'mean' boy soprano who emerged into a somewhat shaky tenor. Nettleford will not sing now: "Oh no, not when I hear people who can really sing doing it ... I wouldn't attempt to at all."

Nettleford did all these things for school and yard concerts and for the various variety shows in which he participated.

He was about 11 years old, he said, when he joined up with "Worm" Chambers and his vaudeville group in Montego Bay.

"We would put on these variety shows and pack the Roxy and Strand theatres every first of August, Christmas Day and Boxing Day ... we would get some big names from Kingston down to perform ... once we even came to Kingston and performed at the Ward Theatre," he reminisced.

Wanted a good education

Nettleford probably would have become an actor if conditions had been right. But "one has to earn a living you know," he said.

And then again, he might have become a priest, "I had given it some thought when I was at school"; or a psychiatrist. He

forgot about psychiatry, however, when he found out that he had to do a general medical degree first and then more years of specialisation.

Nettleford might even have got married. But he did not. "I was too busy ... but it was on the cards ... I just decided against it."

In fact, Nettleford seems to

have made only one decision about what he wanted to do -- and that was to get a good education.

"That was all I wanted, a good education that would prepare me for anything." You see, he did not have a clue about what he wanted to do with his life. He only knew what he did not want to do.

"It's difficult you know, I've never really sat down and selected anything ... People think I sit down and scheme a future ... not at all ... I just went along and whatever I did at any given time I did well and that in itself opened up new areas ... it was really an evolution."

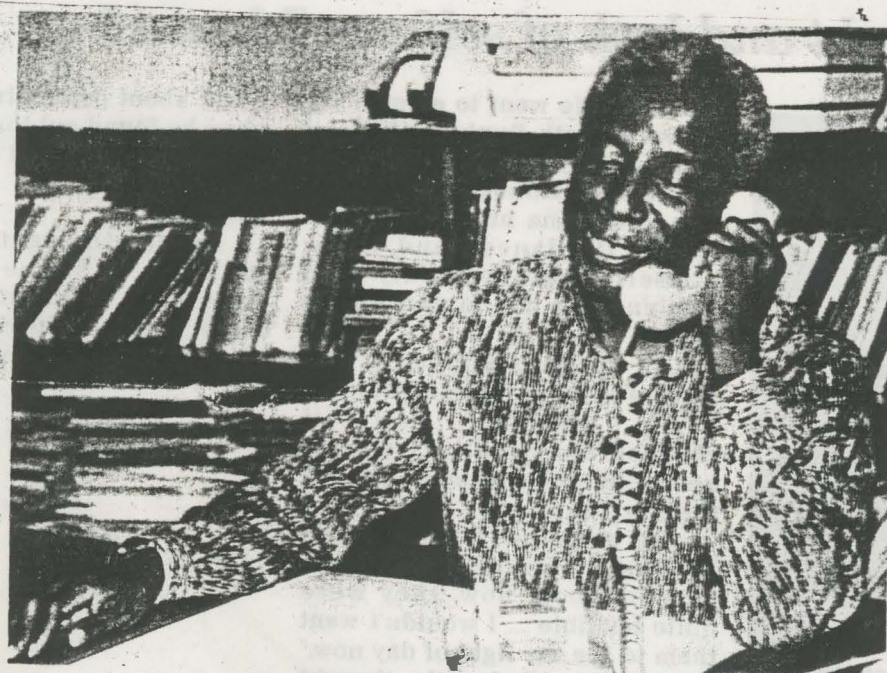
So Nettleford evolved into a teacher. The process began when he choreographed or taught his peers steps for the variety and yard concerts. It continued after he left Cornwall College when he spent a year at his alma mater

teaching "everything ... from general science to English."

He took his undergraduate degree in history and did a stint with the extra-mural department of the University of the West Indies and then went to Oxford University to read politics.

Brains and style

Back in those days, Nettleford had about as much brains as he had style. He walked off with both the Issa and Rhodes scholarship and actually entered



...finds his work at the university satisfying

Oxford on the Issa scholarship. Of course, when he found out that he had won the Rhodes scholarship too he gave up the Issa and continued at Oxford on the Rhodes.

Oxford was "wonderful" he said, he was exposed to the most brilliant political minds of that time.

And he spent much of his time dancing or at the library.

"I had already done the undergraduate scene at university here and I did not want to repeat it so I spent most of my time at the library."

He became president of the Ballet Club and choreographed for every major production at Oxford between 1957 and 1959.

After Oxford he came home to work in the university's extra-mural department and he is still there. He has been through several jobs in the department.

He was resident tutor in adult and continuing education, staff tutor for education and now director of studies for the Trade Union Education Institute.

He finds his work at the university satisfying, that is why he has never left. "I have been part of a fellowship ... my job has been to interface with the community ... I've never lost touch with the community."

It is important to Nettleford to be part of a community, to work with people. His involvement in the arts has helped him too, he said. "It's a sure means of exercising contact with the people and the community."

He wants to stay in contact with the society because he has a contribution to make to the dream he has for Jamaica.

Optimistic

"I want to see a Jamaica that will be able to throw up people who are concentrated, integrated, well-rounded, productive and resourceful ... a young generation of black people who will find a place in this society. I want for them never to feel less than good or less than equal in a society like this ... we cannot allow the next generation to grow up with the same doubt and lack of self-confidence."

Nettleford is optimistic that this can happen: "Lots of us have overcome it ... it all has to do with mastery over this thing called the mind ... that's why I remain a teacher." He wants to pass on what he has learnt. He has no blueprint, just advice.

"This notion that people are artists and therefore need not read or exercise their intellect is nonsense ... it is always better when the intellect is informed by the arts of the imagination." He has managed to find a place in the worlds of academia and the arts. "That's because one knows that all knowledge is inter-related."

It is also important to him that he was named a fellow of the Institute of Jamaica (IOJ). Recently Nettleford was given the IOJ's highest award and made the fourth fellow in the 110-year history of the institute. The other three fellows are Edna Manley O.M., C.L.R. James, Trinidadian

A Sense of Place and Purpose

By Debra Anthony

thinker and Sir Phillip Sherlock. The honour will give him a say in the IOJ's policy-making. The IOJ is the "flagship institution of cultural development," he explained.

Best of both worlds

Nettleford is impatient with a lot of things, most of all with the Jamaican tendency to waste time: "We as a people do not manage our time well at all ... we don't work hard enough ... I know of absolutely no other way of achieving anything unless one works for it."

And he finds Jamaican society wearisome: "There's too much envy and malice... we indulge in too much trivia... there's a tendency to tune in to people's weaknesses instead of strengths ... and if a decision has to be taken there are so many points of reference to call upon before that can happen. You have to be careful who you hurt ... we're so small, so intertwined," he explains.

But there are other good things about the society, "a generosity of spirit sometimes," and he tries always to focus on the positive things in our country.

being."

Luckily, he does not have to. He has the best of both worlds. He is very much a first class citizen here and abroad as well.

"One of the things vindicating one's attachment to this society is that one can stay here and be hunted out," he notes. He frequently travels the world giving lectures, but he never goes anywhere unless what he does has some relevance to what he does at the university. And during his career he has sat on dozens of boards for dozens of developmental committees both here and abroad.

Nettleford has been to most places, except Brazil and mainland China. He has travelled as an academic and as a performer with the National Dance Theatre Company he helped to found in 1962. He is the group's artistic director.

Stopped dancing

Although his name is so intertwined with that of the NDTTC, Nettleford can see a time when he takes a back seat in the company. He will still want to help with administration, of



...chairing one of the several committees he sits on.

He will never leave Jamaica to live anywhere else, though. "Of course, one had the opportunity, but one does not want to live as a second class citizen anywhere ... I don't want to go anywhere where I am on the margin as a human

course, but he is willing to stick around and choreograph for as long as he is able to function and as long as the group will tolerate him.

Can they throw him out?

"Oh yes, of course, I've never

given the impression that all the rules do not apply to me as well."

Nettleford has already made one step in adjusting to the advancing years and to a reduced role in the company. He has stopped dancing.

"It wasn't difficult for me to stop dancing ... I've never liked performing as much as people thought I did ... to go out there and perform before an audience and satisfy them was traumatic ... but I felt I had to subject myself to the discipline."

He does not think about growing old much. "It's a matter of spirit ... I'm not doing anything now that I wasn't doing 30 or 40 years ago," he says. In any case he was never all that young to begin with. "As a child I was always way ahead of my peers in my thinking ... I always had older friends ... now it's the reverse," he adds on a laugh.

'Oh I cry..not much...'

But the advancing years are starting to tell on him -- he's beginning to get soft in the head. "Oh I cry ... not much, but as one gets older one gets a lot softer in the head ... I didn't quite cry at the ceremony when I was made a fellow of the IOJ but I did feel very moved."

He is moved by many, simple things. "I am moved by genuine friendships." He has some of those. "I have one or two people who frankly I adore and who are good to me and who I trust implicitly."

He does not consider himself to be a celebrity. "I hope I'm not one or a personality either ... people must make a distinction between people of substance making a contribution and lightweights with glitter."

And he does not take himself too seriously. It's a strategy to keep himself from getting too big-headed from the many honours he has received.

In fact, he sees himself as a humble person, who does not indulge in trivia, malice or envy and who strives to attain peace with himself. "I'm not goody-goody at all ... and I don't want to give the impression that I will turn the other cheek ... oh no, I will fight back in my own way ... but I don't need bombast at all ... I'm sufficiently endowed with a sense of place and of purpose not to have to jostle anyone to displace them."

Nettleford is not too religious in the church-going sense of the

word.

"One has a strong commitment to belief systems, yes," he says. He can quote the Bible and thinks it is valuable as "a record of human experience over time."

One regret

Nettleford is suspicious of the "fire-eating, God-is-on-my-side, evangelical fundamental position ... it is intolerant, too self righteous and very often does not square with the reality ... one of the reasons we settled on protestantism is because it is predicated on the fact that you and I are simple human beings who also have our own hotline to God."

And if he does not quite believe in re-incarnation, he does not quite disbelieve in it either.

"One has a strong attachment to the concept found in African philosophy that life has to do with those gone, those with us and those yet to be born."

Nettleford wants to be remembered as having "passed this way" and that he "probably will again."

It's all a process, he says, and that is why when he dies he hopes the foundations he has helped to lay will be built on and become stronger.

Nettleford has not succeeded in everything he planned to do. "One never totally succeeds ... all jobs are only half-way done."

And his only regret in life is that he never learnt to read music properly. He used to play the piano by ear, he says, but he wished he had spared the time to learn music well because so much of what he has done with his life required a knowledge of music.

What with sitting on several committees, teaching, lecturing, dancing, choreographing, where would he have found the time?

Somewhere between twilight and dusk, I dare say.

