

Dancer, scholar, lecturer, political pundit...

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The genius of Nettleford

By NIALA MAHARAJ

"Our aim in touring the West Indies is to find out whether our art can touch an answering chord within other West Indians.

"If even only some of it does, we shall be satisfied."

These are the words of Mr. Rex Nettleford, artistic director of the Jamaica National Dance Theatre Company which has been drawing packed audiences at the Queen's Hall and Naparima Bowl over the past few days.

Mr. Nettleford, himself a dancer in some of the pieces, acts as main choreographer to the group which comprises 25 other dancers, 10 singers, and six musicians including a drummer.

From his performances with the group it is obvious that he makes an inspiring leader.

The dance movements, competently performed by the other members of the cast, reach perfection in his own dancing.

There is no evidence of strain in his movements, his body becomes so perfectly attuned to the rhythm of the music that not even a sense of discipline is apparent.

BACKYARD

This is in keeping with Mr. Nettleford's admission that he has been dancing for as long as he can remember.

Ever since he was a child growing up in Montego Bay, he says, he has been arranging dances whenever he heard pieces of music. "I used to be planning sequences for use on the stage all the time."

To the question 'What stage?', Mr. Nettleford replies promptly: "My backyard, I used to get people together there for performances. I used also to belong to a vaudeville group when I was a young boy; I used to do quite a lot of acting and producing.



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Express Sunday August 21, 1971

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GRADUATE

"Then, while I was at the University of the West Indies, in Mona I danced with the Ivy Baxter Dance Group."

Ivy Baxter is the Jamaican equivalent of our Beryl Mc Burnie, and her group is similar to the Little Carib.

At the University Mr. Nettleford was a contemporary of such Trinidadian artists as Derek Walcott, Slade Hopkinson, and Jimmy Lee Wah.

After he obtained his first degree there he moved on to Oxford University on a Rhodes scholarship to do graduate work there.

PROFESSOR

During his stay at Oxford he choreographed every major production that came out of the University.

At present Mr. Nettleford is the Director of the Extra-Mural Department at the UWI in Mona, Jamaica. He is also a professor of Political Thoughts and acts as head of the Trade Union Edu-

cation Institute.

Part of his job is also to edit the 'Caribbean Quarterly' and added to this he serves as a radio commentator on politics in Jamaica.

Where does he find the time to carry out all three responsibilities and still drive the JNDTC to achieve the standards they have been showing night after night at Queen's Hall.

In answer to this question Mr. Nettleford smiles gently and replies:

"There are a lot more hours in the day than we care to think, you know. Besides when you are doing something rewarding which you enjoy, you do not get tired as easily as you do otherwise."

The other dancers of the troupe all hold demanding full-time jobs as well there are teachers

civil servants, a solicitor a scientist, a telephonist and several business people among them.

According to Rex Nettleford, when members of the JNDTC marry, they generally make arrangements, for dividing their time between their families and their dancing.

INFLUENCES

"We do not pretend to be a democratic organisation in that everyone gets a share in the decision making," Mr. Nettleford says. "But we all understand what we're aiming at, and there's ethos about the group which binds us together."

The main aim of the group's efforts is "to evolve something of our own" as its director puts

it, to utilise the whole Jamaican experience, the folk, art, the Afro-Caribbean survivals, the group's own spontaneous reactions and to try to develop something that is truly Caribbean.

Mr. Nettleford confines his art to the Jamaican sphere rather than that of the whole Caribbean because he believes that although we will be able to gain a great deal from one another our framework is basically the same and we should concentrate individually for the time being on the materials which immediately surround us, develop this as much as we can and then proceed further afield towards one another.

One reviewer expressed the opinion that the company showed influences of Les Ballets Africains.

"This," says Mr. Nettleford is utter rubbish. We only saw Les Ballets Africains after we had developed these dances. The Africans were very good, and of course there are some similarities of their dances to our art because of the Afro-Caribbean movements which form part of our dances, but we definitely have not copied anything from that particular dance company."

EXPERIMENTS

Mr. Nettleford also maintains that the JNDTC does not use the European ballet form as a model.

They are, he says, trying to find something that is genuinely West Indian and in so doing they experiment with everything

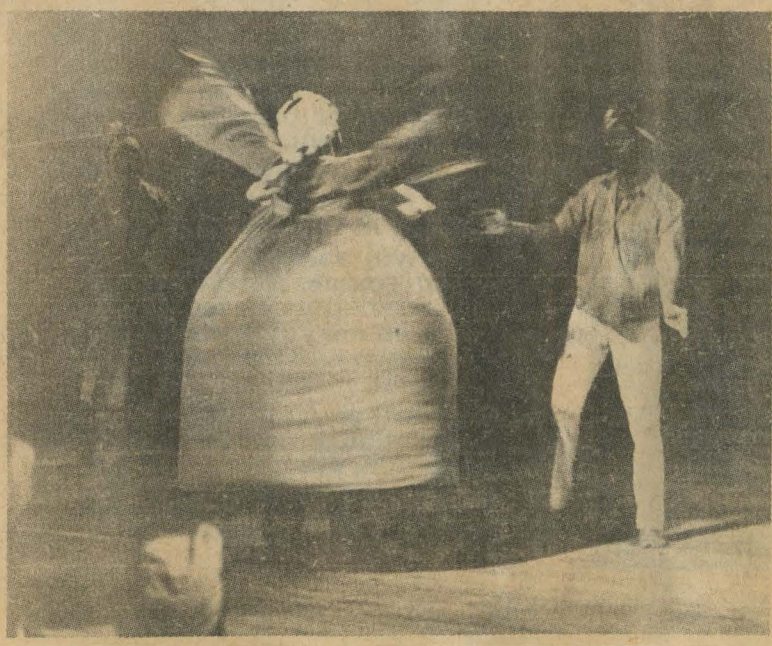
possible and draw from all sources.

"I am certain," Mr. Nettleford insists confidently "that one day there will be something to which we can point as being completely our own, and I take a great deal of joy in taking part in the creative process."

"As to whether he has yet noticed the reaction in Trinidadians which he has come to seek, Rex Nettleford says a definite 'Yes'.

"Some of our work has certainly stirred something in the people who have seen them. And, as he has written in the Company's brochure,

"To be appreciated by strangers is flattering, but to be appreciated by one's own carries a special joy! Hopefully we will find yet more common bonds."



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Express, August 21, 1974