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Rex Nettleford
takes KATE
CALVERT on a
search for
inspiration

“ART is one of the ways to escape oppression. If you listen carefully to the music youngsters make in the ghetto, the reggae, the lyrics in particular, there is a kind of hope in despair.

“They are decrying, they are making social comment, knocking the Babylon, knocking the iniquities and the inequities of Western life and yet there is tremendous hope. They are at the same time trying to forge solutions, and so their art is informed by the quest for redemption.”

Unshamed admiration from one of Jamaica's leading cultural spokesmen, yet Rex Nettleford also realises that Caribbeans of his educational background feel too sophisticated to be associated with reggae. “(But) I have no problems with that.”

At 21, Nettleford came to England as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, where he became president of the Ballet Society and listened to Isiah Berlin define freedom as hopping from one foot to the other. He believes he was lucky to have avoided the fate of other similar scholars: “They became black Englishmen.”

Nettleford went home and



Nettleford's dancers: striving for classical status

CARIBBEAN QUEST

didn't go into politics. “I went into education and culture which have far-reaching political effects. Politics is the ra, ra, ra.”

He talks with the poise of a man who has decided on moderation as the best, not just the safest, way of getting things done. He is intellectually, as well

as physically, a natural noble figure, standing tall and talking in a deep, smooth voice.

Although he is now Professor of extra-mural studies at the University of the West Indies, Rex Nettleford is still director of the Jamaica National Dance Theatre Company he founded

24 years ago. The company of dancers, singers and drummers all have other jobs but are highly professional dancers.

Nettleford's aim is to create a recognition of Caribbean dance's classical status. “Anything classic is usually rooted in your own soil.

“In the case of the Caribbean we have to go back to what the people themselves have produced out of their imagination and intellect. I think that is fundamental to all human civilizations. In fact the exercise of their imagination is really the bottom line of all human achievement.”

The New York press preferred the folk-based works, describing Sulkari (a dance about fecundity and fertility) as a ‘HIT.’ However, a large part of the London programme consists of dances like Court of Jah, a tribute to Jimmy Cliff, or Vibrations, described as an evocation of the spirit of reggae.

“There is a kind of ignorance among certain critics and a definite prejudice and bias. I mean you read some of the stuff they write and quite frankly it is very narrow.”

But, he is reasonably hopeful the artistic effort of Caribbean people is beginning to be recognised. He hopes festivals like the Caribbean one will help revitalise and rejuvenate a society he believes is going through a rather dull patch.

JAMAICA NATIONAL DANCE THEATRE COMPANY will be at the Commonwealth Institute Aug 9-10 tel: 603 4535 and Riverside Studios Aug 12-16 tel: 748 3354.