

B/W Nettleford, Rex

Jamaica's dance man

LONDON, April 23:

Rex Nettleford is a dancer and Professor of Extra Mural Studies at the University of the West Indies. He is also a political theorist, choreographer, broadcaster, writer and Jamaican cultural hero: a Caribbean Renaissance man.

Nettleford is one of many leading figures who will be visiting Britain over the next nine months to participate in Caribbean Focus '86, an ambitious arts festival organized by the Commonwealth Institute. Events include the tour, which began this week, by the 30-strong Jamaican Folk Singers troupe.

Last month, Nettleford was here wearing his academic hat, but he returns in the summer wearing his dancing shoes for one of the highlights of the festival: a tour by the Jamaican National Dance Theatre Company, of which he is co-founder, choreographer and artistic director.

"Until the Caribbean has a proper sense of its own identity, it cannot progress", he says. "We've been paralysed by self-abnegation for too long. This is what I try to teach, whether I'm in the lecture hall or the dance studio."

Nettleford studied history and politics as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford in the late 1950s. He was also President of the University Ballet Club and it was at Oxford that he conceived the idea of establishing a Jamaican national dance company.

He cut short his studies and returned to Jamaica. There he continued his academic career, but spent his free time developing his self-taught dancing skills.

In 1962, the year of Jamaica's independence, he helped found the Jamaican National Dance Theatre Company. Even today, its members — like Nettleford — are amateurs after a day in the office or factory. "But their standards are wholly professional", Nettleford is quick to add.

In each dance Caribbean style dominates. "We had to escape from the belief that serious ballet only comes out of Sadler's Wells", he says.

"Whereas European classical dance is full of courtly posturing, and American is sleek and steely, like sky-scrapers, we're altogether softer in our lines. And more sensuous. But if people come expecting exoticism — black bodies writhing all over the place — they'll be disappointed."

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