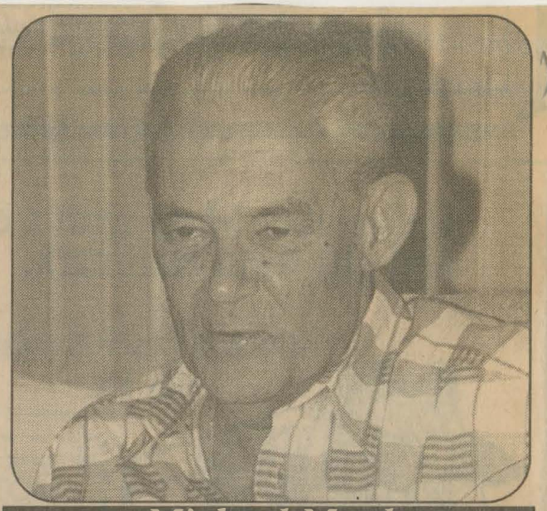
B/N NETTLEFORD, Rex

Michael Manley:

An appreciation of Rex Nettleford



■ *Michael Manley*

TO be asked to write an article about Rex Nettleford is a great honour but it is also to be invited to undertake a daunting task. This is so for two reasons. How do you do justice to a man so multi-faceted, a man who has made seminal contributions to so many areas of our national life? Even worse, how do you find anything new to say? If, per chance, anything had been unsaid before this year, the omission would have been corrected during the remarkable Conference on Culture dedicated to his work.

The Conference itself was both significant and successful. It was significant because it came at a time when the cultural energy which preceded, adumbrated and helped to cause the independence movement in the English speaking Caribbean, seemed in danger of losing both direction and momentum. Most of the member states of CARICOM are beset by economic crisis. All feel vaguely threatened by the impersonal forces which are creating a much discussed but little understood global marketplace. The people see the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as the forerunner of a larger economic grouping which will embrace the entire region. It seems that hemispheric integration is upon them before they have come fully to terms with their own, more modest efforts in CARICOM and implying integration with one set of people, in Latin America about whom they know little; and another set of people, the United States, too powerful to understand as partners.

Then there is the all-pervasive culture of that same giant to the North with whom they are told they must soon enter into this partnership which they do not understand. It threatens to replace everything that we used to regard as our own with a set of persuasively presented illusions. Our expectations as a people may soon lose all contact with reality. In domestic politics there is the cynicism that attends an electoral practice which has tended to substitute the seduction of the promise for the reality of process.

It is against this background that historians, social scientists and practitioners in the various fields of cultural activity came together in sincere tribute to one of the greatest of their number; but also to take stock of the Caribbean condition. In an interesting way the Conference did more than pay tribute to Nettleford. The fact that it could happen at all was largely because of his work and because of both the quality and the unswerving character of his contribution.

To discuss Rex Nettleford with any hope of adequacy, one has to bear in mind that he is artist, historian, social analyst, explorer of the psychology of identity and, critically, a philosopher. It is also important to see Rex Nettleford in the context of an historical process. He started out as an artist and thinker of great originality and energy, but still as a product of and heir to the pioneering work which preceded him. But very soon he was to establish his own pioneering credentials, particularly when he began to explore the questions of ethnicity and African heritage. It is at this point that we discover Nettleford's revolutionary spirit.

As late as 1930, Jamaica and the rest of the English-speaking Caribbean were still asleep, perhaps stifling, in the embrace of colonialism. However, the sleep was becoming increasingly disturbed. Marcus Garvey had struck a profound chord. The 'mighty race' may not have been yet fully ready to arise, but deep forces had been stirred and now laying waiting for a new alchemy of circumstance and leadership to erupt.

As if on cue, and in that order, Edna Manley, Louise Bennett and Ivy Baxter were to emerge. The artistic life of Jamaica was never to be the same again. Popular culture had always been there, expressed in the Mento, Pocomania, Kumina, Story-telling and John Canoe. But the middle-class, with patronising disdain, saw these as the quaint attempts of 'those people' to amuse themselves. This could never have been accepted as a part of the artistic heritage of a nation! As far as the practitioners were concerned, each activity represented a response to social reality as it was perceived, but there was no sense of what being part of a nation implied, and therefore, no awareness of the wider implications of the art forms which they practised.

The middle and upper class practice of art which painted daffodils which had never been seen, or snow in which they had never shivered, is well documented. Nor did it end with these tiny minority groups. To many a working class child in elementary school these reflections of another people's experience defined 'art' as distinct from the songs which their parents sang and to which they danced.

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