

REX

B.N.
Nettleford Rex
by JEAN FAIRWEATHER

If there is one indelible memory I have of Rex Nettleford, it is of him as Kumina King in "Kumina."

He is the dance and the dance is him. There is the trace of arrogance and the sense of humour. There is all the grace and discipline of the man as dancer, refining and distilling but at the same time retaining and illuminating the earthiness and sensuality of traditional Kumina.

"Kumina," choreographed by Rex and danced by the full Company, is a glorious experience in its totality. To me, it is Rex's triumph.

Clive Barnes, distinguished New York Times critic, said of Rex: "Mr. Nettleford never for one moment spurns the ethnic note in his choreography."

"What he means," Rex told me, "is that even when my dances appear to be formalized, sophisticated exercises, their source in the Jamaican (Afro-Caribbean) roots or in the wider black roots of plantation America is evident."

When I talked to Rex recently it was to discover more about his grounding with the "roots" — what kind of influences had shaped the man. I had seen him as dancer, as news analyst with Anglicized accents and also as lecturer: I had also seen him as member of the Festival Commission, talking to the staff, and cutting through emotional fog, tradition and prejudices, to get to the core of issues.

I was aware that he was a member of several boards and committees — chairman of the board of governors of the Institute of Jamaica; member of the JBC board; chairman of the Prime Minister's cultural advisory committee; member of the National Continental Corporation board of Directors, to name some of them, here in Jamaica. On the international scene, he is a governor of the International Development Research Centre, with headquarters in Ottawa, an Associate Fellow of the Centre for African and African-American studies at the University of Atlanta and general consultant on Black Studies to a number of universities.

He is Director of Extra-Mural Studies and Head of the Trade Union Institute at the University of the West Indies. He is also artistic director of the NDTC.

But where did it all begin for Rex?

He was born in Bunkers Hill in Falmouth, and lived with his grandmother in the early years. She had eighteen children, nine of whom survived.

"It was a sort of mini small farmer setting," Rex said, "where one did all the chores."

He was too young to cut cane, but he could thresh it, weed it, tie it up into bundles and carry it to the gate. The older people did the cane cutting.

Rex had memories of his grandmother breaking stones. The children would help carry the stones to the gate, for measuring by Parochial Board staff.

In the idyllic rural setting, there were two main farming areas — "mountain," where bananas were planted and "ground" where there were ground provisions and corn.

"As a child I never went to 'mountain.' This was done by my uncle and stepgrandfather. The children

used to go to 'ground' to plant corn and this we'd do very early in the morning. We would get up at four in the morning and by five we were planting corn by the light of tin lamps. After that we would go to school."

Another chore the children had was gathering ears of corn. They also had to drive away parakeets from the corn field: "We used to beat old kerosene pans, and old enamel plates and go around the fields singing folk songs."

Going to the river was an every day occurrence. "All bathing was done in the river. When we had to carry water, we would put bush in the kerosene pans to keep the level of the water."

Bunkers Hill, at the base of the Cockpit country, was rich in legend and lore.



Rex with the Coverley's at Swing Awards Ball.

"I was mortally afraid of 'ribba mumma' (river maid) and 'black heart man,' Rex remembered.

Religion played a very important part in Rex's grounding. The leading Church in the district was Baptist, and though his mother was a Baptist, he was christened in the Anglican Church. Rex did not restrict himself to any one Church.

He "had a strong boy soprano" and would sing on the Presbyterian Church choir early in the morning on Sunday, and later on in the day on the Baptist Church choir.

He gained exposure to both the 'melody of Europe and the rhythm of Africa,' to borrow a phrase from his essay of the same title in "Mirror Mirror".

"One was exposed to the great liturgical music of Europe as well as Sankey choruses. I used to leave Christian Endeavour (a Baptist youth-oriented organization) and go straight to a pocomania meeting. At the same time, one had strong academic exposure — lots of religion and lots of the three 'R's'."

The elementary school, Unity School, was a pilot school for the 4-H movement, and "gardening was a must," according to Rex. Being industrious was an important virtue and he remembers some of the projects he undertook — picking guavas and making his own guava jelly, planting a plot of ground and

preparing sisal and making it into bags and place mats.

"I grew up in a situation where the poorer one was, the more fussy one was about cleanliness," Rex said. There was a test at school every morning and the teacher would look out for uncombed hair and dirty finger nails — "I used to clean my finger nails with pinngwing macka on my way to school."

Of the total experience at Bunkers Hill where there was "lots of theatre — very basic, and lots of folklore," Rex says:

"That gave me my real honing about Jamaica — that growing up in the country. I lived the sort of thing that is now coming out of the mouths of the middle class. It is now coming out in the NDTC for we do organic things...."

"I enjoyed myself in the country but there were difficulties in the home. I was not the grandchild of my grandfather. And it now seems clear to me that the main problem was that my grandmother felt that he had no jurisdiction over me. My mother was in Montego Bay and I literally jumped on a bus and went there."

Rex continued his education at Montego Bay Boys School where Rupert Bent was headmaster:

"Rupert Bent had something going at Montego Bay. There was a real sense of community there and it was a continuance of the exposure at Unity."

There was the same interest in the land and Rex remembers selling peas from the school market garden in the market.

From that school, he won a scholarship for Cornwall College. He worked in the surgery of Dr. Morrison after school hours: "I did everything in that office. Dr. Morrison was of tremendous help. He taught me a lot of things — he taught me that you worked for what you got."

In Montego Bay, Rex continued his career as Church buff, visiting all the churches in the town. "It must have been the theatre of it all," he said. He was once picked up 'by the scruff of his neck' by a nun and thrown out of the Roman Catholic Church because he refused to genuflect.

"I remember telling her something like 'I will not worship graven images,' which I probably picked up at the Seventh Day Adventist Church," he said.

He finally settled for the Anglican Church: "The aesthetics grabbed me — it wasn't too fussy and wasn't too dull."

Rex led an active life. At Church, he sang on the choir, was an altar boy and was a member of the Brotherhood of St. Andrew. "Montego Bay Boys Club was the outlet for leadership, theatre and all the things I do," he said "and I was learning tailoring, and mechanics up to the age of sixteen."

By this time, theatre had become a part of Rex's life. "I was coming from the country with all that folklore stuff and I used to put on a lot of yard concerts in the tenement yards that I lived in." Happily, at this time, he met Elbena ("Worm")

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ces choregraphed by Rex Nettleford illustrating the 'ethnic note'



Pictured are scenes from

1. POCOMANIA

POCOMANIA – three shepherds at the end of the dance which is a staged ritual of a poco festival.

2. MISSA CRIOLLA

MISSA CRIOLLA – Europe meets Africa and the Amerindian past in this folkmass written by an Argentinian composer.

3. AFRICAN SCENARIO

work is reminiscent of folk heritage in Jamaica and the Caribbean but set in traditional African dance-music context. It followed Rex's visits to Africa in 1960 and 1962 when he worked with African groups in Nigeria and Ghana

4. JOURNEYS

sequence done to negro spirituals, another aspect of the African experi-

5. MARRIED STORY

Jamaican folk customs depicted in dance pantomime. Indigenous dances employed are Mento, tambu, vespiano and goombay with a musical theme "Bad Madan Law" inspired by the Jamaican folksingers.

Photos by
LoYocona

Chambers who had a vaudeville group and was well known in Cornwall.

From that first day that Rex lent his creative talents to the group's rehearsal of "Who threw the whisky in the well," he took over the group. He was becoming known as the bright youngster from Cornwall with the feel and flair for theatre and it didn't matter that he was much younger than the people involved.

"The people were from the ghettos of Montego Bay," Rex said. "We had our own local Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra."

"The first show on a boat on the Northcoast was arranged by me. The tourists threw money from Casa Blanca."

Elbena was a stevedore and it was his boat that drew up alongside Casa Blanca with the performers.

The vaudeville group was very popular, staging concerts at Christmas and First of August celebrations and often performing at the Strand and Roxy theatres. Once they performed at Ward Theatre in Kingston, getting tremendous applause from the Kingston audience.

At Cornwall, Rex was very involved in theatre. He used to take part in Schools Drama Festivals, and also write plays. He once dramatized "Great Expectations."

"Since I was never sick, I had to do sports," he said. "In any case you had to do sports to become a house captain." Rex did become a house captain. He ran a good final leg in the 440 relay but he says, "I gained the house captaincy with dance steps."

"I was always dying to get away from long jump practice to go to rehearsal where there was dancing and singing."

After graduation and teaching at Cornwall for a while, Rex came to Kingston in 1953 to attend the University. He was invited to read for a honours degree in History.

"I was lucky," he said. "I came upon a fertile crop of people - Derek Walcott, Ronnie Llanos, Slade Hopkinson, Carol Dawes, and Errol Hill." During that time he did many acting parts but it was really the dance that was his main interest.

Eventually, he went to dance with Ivy Baxter. "Within six months," Rex said, "I began to be noticed. I took part in "Creations in Dance" and in the language of the trade, I got "good notices!"

After graduation from the University, he joined the staff in a matter of three days as acting resident tutor in Trinidad. There, he was able to work with people like the members of "Little Carib" and 'look at a great deal of Trinidad.'

He returned to Jamaica, and became resident tutor. In 1957, he went to Oxford University to read for a B. Phil. in Political Science, having won two scholarships in one year, the Issa Scholarship and the Rhodes Scholarship.

Oxford at that time offered Rex full range for his creative activities. He joined the Ballet Club and introduced the members to "Afro-Caribbean" dancing. All the time he was learning as well as teaching. He was also a member of the Oxford University Dramatic Society and choreographed every major show in Oxford between 1957 and 1959.

"The NDTC started almost by accident," Rex said, "but there was a kind of logic in the whole thing. In 1959 I collaborated with Ivy Baxter and Noel Vaz in the staging of "Once Upon a Seaweed" written by Alma Mock Yen - Eddy Thomas wrote the music. There was overall integration of the

musical, which was definitely a producer's piece. And it showed what happened when people worked together."

At that time, Rex continued, there were many good dancers around, but the only outlet for dancers to work together was the annual pantomime. There were classical ballet dancers who felt they were superior to the dancers from Baxter who were involved with creative dancing. There had been joint shows, but no real integration.

As it turned out, one year Eddy who had a group, went on a scholarship to Martha Graham's, and Ivy went to Toronto. Rex had been in Africa and on his return, he found that he was to oversee both groups.

One day, because of time pressures, he took the two groups together. "In a spirit of friendly rivalry, they danced their hearts out," Rex said. This was another lesson in what could be accomplished by 'togetherness.'

The next step to the birth of the NDTC came when Eddy returned. Rex had asked Eddy to oversee his production of "Banana Boy," when he had to leave the island. When Rex returned, he and Eddy continued to work together until the Independence Celebrations provided the base for the formation of the Company. "Mr. Seaga gave us his blessing," Rex said.

Talking of the Company, which has achieved local and international acclaim, Rex said:

"We can't afford self-indulgence like other artists. People in theatre arts have to communicate, for they are community arts. The Company is concerned with building internal discipline - the whole thing of a proper school."

"There are no stars in the NDTC", he continued. "Self indulgent fragmentation will do very little for the arts."

"People are being trained to carry on. More and more people are gaining experience," he said, speaking of the future of the Company and his own role as artistic director.

Rex, with his tremendous versatility, has come to be "lionized" by many Jamaicans. He is on so many committees and he is constantly being sought after. His opinions count. I tried to find out how he saw himself right at this moment.

He answered carefully: "Lots of things I do get immediate attention. One has to be careful about it, not rest on laurels. I want to sustain my energy in the achievement of excellence. We here don't apply ourselves in a sustained way."

"I think there's lots of work to be done. I know that I am only as good as my last work. I don't see my life in terms of climbing up. It's a dynamic experience that can also spiral. I'm not sure that going up is really progressing. Deepening and heightening are what really matters..."

"I'm frightened of being tied to material goods. I have no interest in that kind of thing. I'm trying to achieve a big heart and a big spirit. Status for status sake means nothing to me. One has to work at being honest, at having the capacity for genuinely loving people for what they are and because they exist."

I asked: "Where do you go from here?"

He said: "I've never really planned my life in that way. If you do what you're doing well, the spin off comes eventually. There is always a place for those who work hard. That's how my life is working. Lots of things flow in the same direction." Some time ago, I had asked Rex how he was able

to cope with such disparate activities as academic work, creative dancing and corporate business directorship.

He did not see his activities as disparate:

"... All areas are involved with the human being, who is essentially at the centre of everything. Nothing is mutually exclusive as everything arises and emanates from the human being..."

"We are enriched, not confused, by involvement in different aspects of life and we West Indians are that kind of people - the product of varied forces."

ndtc and reggae

The National Dance Theatre Company has once more taken to the streets by using reggae as its source of inspiration for a dance called *Street People* now on show in the current season of dance at the Little Theatre, Tom Redcam Drive. Rex Nettleford the choreographer has centred his dance-work on a number of street characters - a sufferer, an Iri man, Madame Bag-o-wire, two ladies of the night complete with "psssst." an S.90 brother, a little schoolgirl and three ladies from the church. Reports say it is a riot. Rex Nettleford says that he has used the reggae to let the dancers dance and the audience enjoy it all. For though reggae has been about sounds and pressures it has also been about the celebration of an intensely Jamaican life-style. The pieces used are old favourites like "Poor Me Israelite" "Ben Dung," "Scare Him" and the more recent "Scandal Corner." Jackie Guy leads the cast which include Yvonne Ffrench, Marilyn Sanguinetti, Fitzroy Hunte and such dance-theatre luminaries as Bridget Casserly, Pansy Hassan, Audley Butler, and Jean Binns.

This piece follows on Tommy Pinnock's "*Desperate Silences*" which was done last year, and saw the ghetto in all its contradictions between sadness and laughter. Before that Rex Nettleford had done a passage in "*All God's Children*" to reggae rhythm to mark off the sufferers from the uptowners. This year he stays downtown with the street people in his new work.

Other new works are "*Thursday's Child*" choreographed by Bert Rose who is making his debut as a choreographer. Up to now he has been an NDTC front-liner with high critical acclaim to his credit for his lyrical and dramatic dancing in several roles. He now casts Barry Moncrieffe and Noelle Chutkan in a dance-work as son and mother caught up in the travails of a son's growing up. The place - Jamaica of course. He even spends some time with the spliffs (in the ballet, that is!).

Windsongs is the name of yet another new work for 1973 by the NDTC. It is by the black Philadelphia dancer-choreographer John Jones who has made Jamaica something of a second home and has adopted NDTC. He had given another dance *Resurrection* (to none other than Isaac Hayes' "Do Your Thing") last year. It is on again this season. Then there is *Mountain Women* a work about our peasant folk done to the music of Marjorie Whyllie, the musical director of the dance company and a noted pianist and drummer on the pop scene here.