

GLEANER HONOUR AWARD NOMINEE

Rex Nettleford – man of culture

By Melville Cooke
Staff Reporter

HIS LEONINE head, steady gaze and rhythmic baritone are as integral to Jamaica as ackee is to saltfish. But instead of looking down that impressive nose at the island's culture he has flared his nostrils, inhaled deeply and exhaled a passion for and understanding of what makes Jamaicans Jamaican.

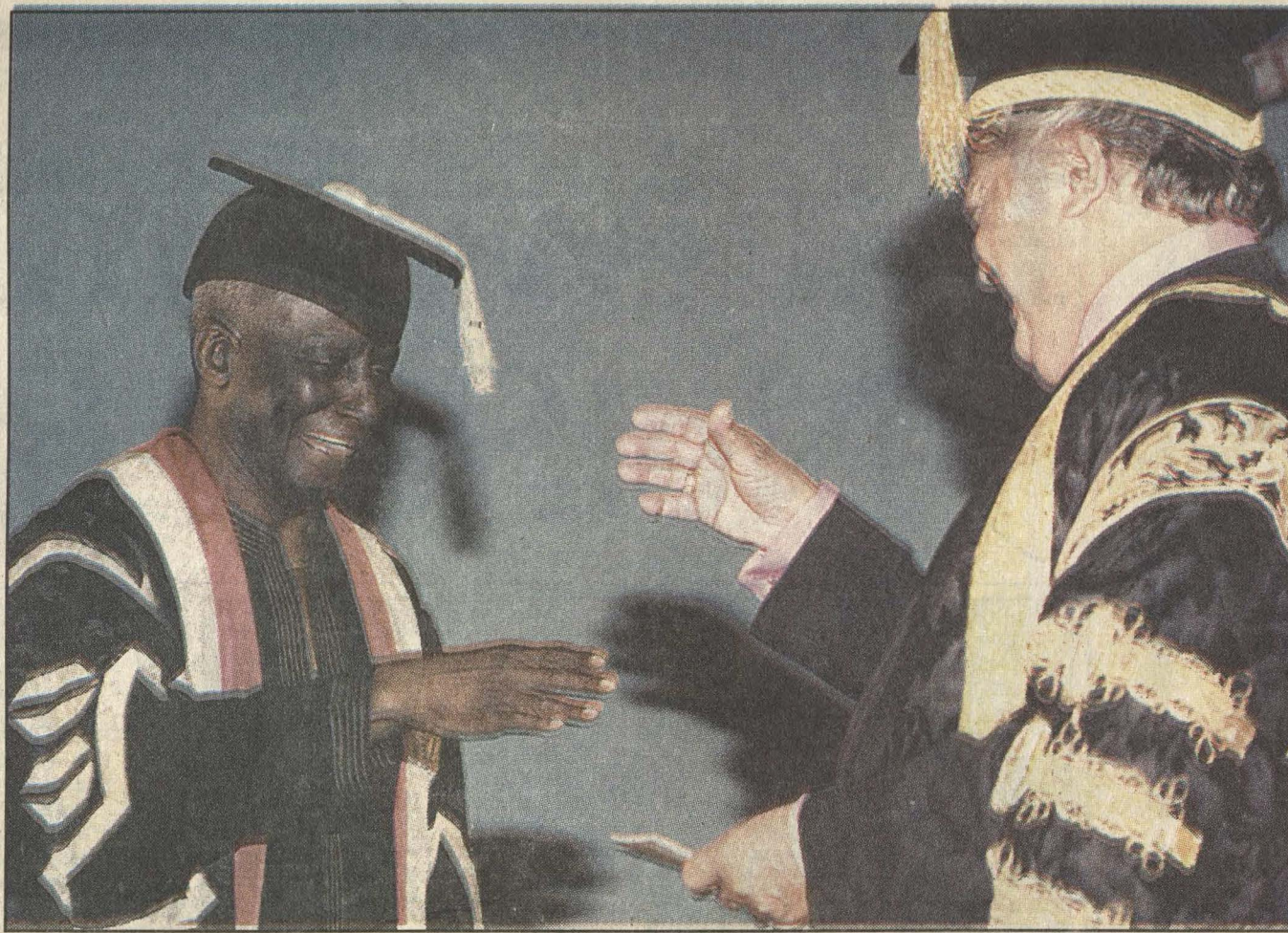
He is Rex Nettleford and he has been breathing life into not only the land of wood and water, but also the wider Black Diaspora, for close to four decades.

Professor Nettleford may be now Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies (UWI), but he is by no means an armchair general. As much a part of the National Dance Theatre Company (NDTC) today as when he co-founded the troupe in 1962, Rex Nettleford's mental ferment is matched by his physical prowess. He has been as much at home in the hallowed halls of Oxford, where he earned a B.Phil in Politics on a Rhodes Scholarship, as on stage as the 'King of Kumina', his bare feet beating a frenzied tattoo to the throb of the drums.

And if called upon to do the 'Log On' he may just surprise. After all, he is no 'Dinosaurus Rex'. Only someone acutely in tune with crass materialism overtaking Jamaica and its influence on the sense of self could remark: "A buttoo in a Benz is still a buttoo."

The achievements, academic and otherwise, between his early years at Cornwall College and student stint on Taylor Hall at the UWI and his current posting as Vice Chancellor would in themselves be the subject of an entire book. Suffice to say that the president of

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Professor Rex Nettleford (left) about to greet Sir Shridath 'Sonny' Ramphal, Chancellor of UWI. ■

the Historical Society, Group Leader of the Dancing and Gymnastics Group and Student of the Year for 1954 - 1955 has also been honoured by at least a dozen overseas universities from Queen's to Sheffield, in the last seven years.

And he has not compromised his commitment to the African continent to garner this recognition.

While Ralston Milton Nettleford - same Rex - has been active in trade union education, political analysis and academia, it is in culture that he has made his most public mark. A mark so broad in scope and so deep in the national and international psyche that in March 1996 his life's work was the subject of a 'Conference on Caribbean Culture', held on the Mona campus of the UWI.

The words of Rex Nettleford's colleagues as they addressed his ideas on particular issues speak volumes. However, Jean Smith's guest editorial in the *Caribbean Quarterly* that recorded the conference the following year, speaks to the purpose of his work:

"Every Caribbean man and woman understands what he is saying, understands that he feels their pain, shares their anger, understands how they are categorised and put down as having no culture or history of any consequence. He is a powerful voice for the poor, the dispossessed and the 'wretched of the Earth', respected and hailed equally in the Conference Halls of UNESCO in

Paris and in the town halls and country villages throughout Jamaica as, in a language that they all understand, he speaks to the need of every human being to be acknowledged as a person with a heart and mind that longs for respect, for consideration, for love."

Rupert Lewis spoke to Professor Nettleford's critique of the black elite, focusing mainly on Rex's 1970 publication *Mirror, Mirror - Identity, Race and Protest in Jamaica*. "This 15 per cent of Afro-Europeans form the core of the middle class and persist in attitudes which bolster the motto, reprimand the Rastas for turning the clock back, and indulge in a strange love-hate relationship with the whites of both local and expatriate vintage who threaten their claim to the inheritance from Britain. They regard themselves as the true heirs to the governing class despite their small numbers, if only because they were the first to display a capacity to assimilate completely the ideals of the masters," Mr. Lewis said, quoting from Professor Nettleford's *National Identity and Attitudes to Race in Jamaica*.

"The lesson from *Mirror, Mirror* for the 1990s is that unless there is a movement from below that directly intervenes in the social and political process, Jamaica's newly-evolved black elite component of the Jamaican establishment will continue on the course that

Nettleford so obviously despises," Rupert Lewis concluded.

Charles Mills addressed 'smadditizin' at the conference, defining that uniquely Jamaican expression as "the struggle to have one's personhood recognised in a world where, primarily because of race, it is denied". Mr. Mills put forward Nettleford's thoughts on that prime force that insists on being regarded as 'smaddy' — the Rastaman.

"The Rastaman (never) forgets his need to protect his person always from the assault of neglect and psychological denigration. At the heart of his religious system is the notion of his own divinity the first-person image of self — It is the assertion of self which comes through strongest in ordinary contact with the Rastaman," Mills quotes Nettleford.

From music to dance, self and his spirit, the entire conference analysed Rex Nettleford's thoughts on and contributions to Caribbean culture.

The 1978 *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The case of Jamaica*, subtitled 'An essay in cultural dynamics', clearly outlines Rex Nettleford's thoughts on several issues.

On Eurocentricism, he says: "Jamaicans and their Caribbean counterparts are still perceived by themselves and others as extensions of Europe, historically speaking. Their actions are seen as 'responses' or reactions to the initiatives of Europe. Columbus is still supposed to have 'discovered' America; indigenous Amerindian civilisations are

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said to have a pre-Colombian history - We are yet to decide among ourselves whether not being able to quote from Shakespeare or hum Shostakovich should debar us from membership in the human race. There is no doubt in my mind that failure to recognise a phrase of music from the composition of Bob Marley, or a line from the poetry of Derek Walcott would not render such an 'unexposed' Englishman or Russian less whole."

Professor Nettleford had this to say about the African Presence: "One unifying force in the Caribbean heritage is undoubtedly the African Presence. We may as well admit to ourselves the great moral strength that would accrue to Caribbean civilisation were we to eschew once and for all the lingering plantation and colonial assumptions about the natural inferiority of those of its inhabitants who carry the 'stain' of Africa in their blood."

Rex Nettleford is a recipient of the Order of Merit, the Gold Musgrave Medal from the Institute of Jamaica, the Living Legend Award from the Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, USA, the Pelican Award from the UWI Guild of Graduates, the Zhora Neale Hurston-Paul Robeson Award from the National Council for Black Studies, the Pinnacle Award from the National Coalition on Caribbean Affairs, the Second Annual Honour Award from the Jamaican-American Chamber of Commerce (1999) and was made a fellow of the Institute of Jamaica in 1991.

And now he is a Gleaner Honour Award nominee for Arts and Culture, 2001.

The dance, the writing, the honours, the postings and the renowned speeches are all in pursuit of one objective, both in terms of recognition and achievement — that "the wretched of the earth emerge as creative constructive contributors to human history".

He is Rex Nettleford, man of culture.