Professor Rex Nettleford

Jamaican academic, writer, university administrator and dance company founder who promoted his nation's cultural individuality.

Professor Rex Nettleford was an academic, writer, dancer, manager, orator, mentor, cultural activist, historian and social and political critic. Sometimes described as the "quintessential Caribbean man", his contribution to the academic, cultural and political development of his native Jamaica and the Caribbean region was considerable. He was Vice-Chancellor Emeritus of the University of the West Indies (UWI) and founder and artistic director of the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica.

He was also as the voice of ordinary people, particularly the poor. His own life showed how far a boy from rural Jamaica could go with determination, resilience and "smalldifficating", a term used of an outsider with character who is accepted socially.

In all his many activities Nettleford was motivated by the desire to help Jamaicans to find and enjoy their multiracial identity. Through his writings, lectures and choreography he sought to free the Caribbean spirit and imagination from the residual mental slavery of colonial times and replace in the region's cultural landscape.

Nettleford was awarded his country's Order of Merit, the third-highest honour, in 1975. In 1980 he became one of only four people to be appointed a Fellow of the Institute of Jamaica, which presented him also with the Gold Musgrave Medal. Although he confessed that he had lost count of the number of awards he had received, Nettleford was proud of the Order of the Caribbean Community, to which he was appointed in 2008, because it put him in the distinguished company of his mentor Sir Philip Sherlock, as well as Alister McIntyre and Steward "Sonny" Ramirez.

Among his many other distinctions Nettleford was a member of the Inter-American Committee on Culture, a founding governor of the International Development Research Council, and a consultant to the Caribbean Community Secretariat. Caricom the Organisation of American States, the International Labour Organisation, the World Bank, the Government of Ghana, the Festival of African Culture the Caribbean Free Trade Association and UNESCO.

Edward "Rex" Melton Nettleford was born in 1933 at Falmouth in the parish of Trelawny on the island's northern coast. It was in this rural upbringhe close to the inaccessible hill Cockey Country, and at Bunker's Hill school, that he experienced the rhythms of country life that stimulated his creative imagination. He credited his mother, Lellertta, who died last year aged 103 and grandmother, who brought him up, with developing his country boy consciousness of community.

After graduating from Cornwall College in Montego Bay and attaining a history degree at the University College of the West Indies (London University), Nettleford went on a Rhodes scholarship to read politics at Oriel College, Oxford, in 1957. Forty-seven years later the Rhodes Trust, in marking the centenary of Rhodes scholarships in the Caribbean, established the Rex Nettleford Fellowship in cultural studies tenable at UWI.

Nettleford resisted the temptation to stay on in England, fearing that he would lose touch with his roots, and in the early 1960s returned to Jamaica to take up a post at UWI under the tutelage of Sherlock, its founder. He made his mark particularly with the Department of Extra-Mural Studies. On becoming Vice-Chancellor, from 1998 to 2004, he was the first graduate of UWI to head the region's premier institution of tertiary education. It has been said that his self-effacing leadership could be discerned at every stage in UWI's development. In that, he was true to his own maxim that Man must achieve his full potential through education.


Nettleford was also a fine orator. He had a speaking schedule that would have daunted most people and a boundless energy and generosity of spirit that endeared him to all he met. He was in the US to attend a fundraising gala for UWI when he suffered brain damage from a heart attack and was taken into intensive care at the George Washington Hospital, Washington, where he died a week later.

Professor Rex Nettleford, scholar, was born on February 3, 1933. He died on February 2, 2010, aged 76.

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