Prof. Nettleford was nominated in the field of arts and culture. The award will be presented at a special function at La Meridien Jamaica Pegasus Hotel, New Kingston, on January 10, 2002.

Born to be Rex

Melville Cooke
FREELANCE WRITER

It is important to stress the importance and force of the exercise of the creative intellect and the creative imagination; in other words, the exercise of the mind in (a) re-defining a vision of the future with a social philosophy that makes sense for Caribbean people, (b) shaping a new and civilized order out of乱者, revolution and their aftermath, and (c) building democratic nations out of erstwhile colonial fiefdoms.

Introduction to Inward Stretch, Outward Reach: A Voice From the Caribbean (Rex Nettleford).

Rex Nettleford does not — cannot — keep still as he speaks about his early years in Trelawny and St. James. It is not, however, the fidgeting of the uncomfortable, nor the unease of the ashamed. The barefooted country boy, who grew up to be a man of words, letters and the world — and well-worn shoes, moves constantly to the remembered rhythms of the Baptists and the infectious pounding of pocaomnia, with the exquisite timing of Cornwall College’s drama club. Then he leans forward, claps his hands, narrows his eyes and says: “I was a leggo beast, all right.”

And still is — for the two seconds it takes us to burst into laughter. Real country belly laugh, made from the hills, the rivers and the soil, from open spaces, which test the padded door and seem to make the Vice Chancellor’s offices of the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, just a little larger.

“I was born in Falmouth and went to infant school, nothing like kindergarten, then went to Bunker’s Hill, to Unity Government School. Then I went to Montego Bay and did a year at Montego Bay Boys’ School, Barracks we call it, and then prepared, really, under Rupert Bent for the one scholarship per parish, which was what was given in those days. And I won a scholarship to Cornwall College,” Professor Nettleford said.

That Rupert Bent is the father of the Rupert Bent who is now a part of the Third World band.

“In elementary school in those days, you learned so many things. We had to up and down the modulation — you know, do ra me fa so la te do. She touches a key and you really had to find it. You learnt that way.”

However, identifying the genesis of Ralston Milton Nettleford’s lifelong passion for culture is not as easy as finding Middle C.

Continues on 10A
Professor Nettleford in action many years ago.

Rex Nettleford's grandmother was strong on the day that slaves earned their freedom. Add to this his time on the choir as boy's soprano, singing Handel's Messiah to a pump organ ("I suppose we sang it badly") and other European classics. And always, there were teachers ("What those teachers did to expose us!").

"One of the things that I am particularly grateful for, is that I was never brought up in a situation where there was any dichotomy between that highly liturgical music and my folk songs - I think later on it helped me to get things into perspective. So the thing of whether this was better than that did not arise. My grandmother was a little bit of a pillar of the Baptist Church and we would go to Christian Endeavour, which was part of a kind of prayer meeting for children on Sunday morning. But we would rush from there and go to a Pocomania meeting, which was across the street from where we lived.

"There was also Zionist revivalism and Jonkonnu. "None of this really had me confused. These were different forms of worship (he trails off into laughter). I am able to put it this way now because I have a little education, but at the time — well, there was absolutely no problem. And I say this because my own efforts later on to make sense of what we do, people like us create for ourselves, and in terms of our survival and what have we, didn't have to be necessarily ruling out other people's thing. It is just that they have done their thing, we have got to do ours."

"And this has guided me very strongly — and of course it led me to question what is ours — I was in Amsterdam just recently giving the keynote address at the Prince Claus Foundation award ceremony. And I repeated something which I have been working on. People like us are part African, part European, part Asian, part Native American, but totally Caribbean."
and rigorous analysis of one's own history and identity.

New introduction to "Mirror, Mirror: Identity, Race and Protest" (Rex Nettleford, 1998)

"It's very interesting, people have often spoken to me about racial discrimi-
nation — you know, the only place I really have been cursed black is Jam-
ika," Professor Nettleford said, his reedy teeth showing in a smile which
seemed to tarnish the mahogany of his skin to an even deeper burnish.

"You had to come to terms with that too, because as a younger growing up if
you were black you were ugly, so it was black and ugly. I went through all of
that, all throughout my secondary school life. Not in the elementary school (the
sentence is completed in a half chuckle), since all of us looked alike, barefoot and
all that."

So you were not supposed to be on the hill, The Sunday Gleaner
says.

"Precisely. In truth and in fact, Cornwall College was set up for small
farmers' sons anyway, so that was ridiculous. Lots of the high brown fellows and
who were there - One of the redeeming factors (he pause to laugh) and this is
probably the irony of it, but I laugh at it, because I said I was able to cope
because they were all dunces!"

After a half a belly laugh, Professor Nettleford continues. "Despite all that, I
enjoyed Cornwall College. It helped me tremendously, all my experience in lead-
ership. Because we had a very strong pre-
flect system. We really ran the school,
under the direction of course of the
masters and so on."

But Cornwall College was not all about
academics and leadership. There was
drama, singing, dance — and not all of it
in the scholastic world.

"I hooked up — as a little boy — with
Elkema Worm Chambers and his variety
group, which performed on August
Morning, Christmas Morning and
Boxing Day at the Strand and the Rosy.
It was purely by accident. I had to deliver
something to him at a rehearsal and
when I arrived there I saw them rehearsing. I was a little boy, y'know, 11, 12, and
these are grown men, y'know. And I said to him, can I show you what I can do? And he
said sure, go ahead. And I did. I... those days it was the local Bing Crosby, the
local Ella Fitzgerald, the local Sinatra. I
took that and introduced Jamaican folk
songs which I had been doing in the
country and putting movement to them
(there go those hands and feet again),
because all those folk songs are action
songs, digging songs (somewhere Prof.
Nettleford portrays a man digging in a
field while sitting in his chair so well you
can almost smell the earth and not the
air conditioning)."

The performances not only earned
Rex extra money, but also gave him
more experience in management. As a
teenager he began to run the group - a
rehearsal of sorts for co-founding the
National Dance Theatre Company
(NDTC) in 1962. He thought he had
duped the headmaster by sneaking off to
perform, until he saw his file, detailing
every single one, years later.

Fifty years later, the NDTC just back
from a tour of Brazil, is still a voluntary
organisation, forsaking cash at a price
to save the majesty of his skin to a
even deeper burnish.

The dancing, which began in the west
was continued when an experienced
researched Rex Nettleford, joined up
with Baxter in Kingston.

The student Rex, having won that
scholarship to Cornwall, also won a
scholarship to the University College of
the West Indies and afterwards gave up
the Jasa Scholarship to take up the
Rhodes for Oxford.

"Could you have afforded to go if you
had not won the scholarships?" The
Sunday Gleaner asks and gets an
amused, incredulous look and a definite
reply. "Oh, My God, what are you asking me? You could look at me like me and ask me a question like that, definitely not."

A Honorary Life Member of the
Institute of Jamaica, Professor The Hon.
Rex Nettleford has been awarded an
Order of Merit and counts among his
awards, the NDTC's 1988, the highest award an alumnus can achieve.

Elephant Man would be hard-pressed to
find fault with Professor Nettleford's
seated rendition of the 'Log On' dance,
although the talk of weight distribution
and can'tilevers may be a bit more formal
than the dancehall.

And what about those immortal nine
words, that "a bootoo in a Benz is still a
bootoo"? As Rex Nettleford puts it, "I
hope that a car becomes something
because I am in it."

If he were to live his life over again,
there are two things he would do differ-
ently, "I would learn to play a musical
instrument and learn several foreign lan-
guages."

I have often claimed that Jamaicans are too
sophisticated to be racist, but that is not what he learned to be race conscious. And on this delicate bal-
cancing of sensibilities, the Black majority
function in response to a society and its wider
Western counterpart which frustrates many an
effort at Black empowerment with noncritical
tions of ethnic cultural inferiority and the
exclusion of all things African, from art to politics.

New introduction to 'Mirror, Mirror:
Identity, Race and Protest' (Rex

Harvest Savings Plan and arranged for
his alma mater, the University of the
West Indies, to be the beneficiary to
the entire proceeds of his million dol-
lar savings.

Delivered the keynote address at the
sixth conference of the
Commonwealth Journalists Association
which was held in Abuja, Nigeria.

Participated in the Sixth World and
General Assembly of the International
Council for Adult Education.

Led a team from the University of the
West Indies to the United Nations
World Conference against Racism,
Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia
and Related Intolerance held in
Durban, South Africa.

Was the rapporteur for the
International Scientific Committee of
UNESCO's Slave Route Project.

Remains artistic director of the
National Dance Theatre Company and
NDTC Singers.

Has remained steadfast and committed
to the dream which is Edna Manley
School for the Visual and Performing
Arts.