"I want to see a Jamaica that will be able to throw up people who are concentrated, integrated, well-rounded, productive and resourceful ... a young generation of black people who will find a place in this society. I want for them never to feel less than good or less than equal in a society like this ... we cannot allow the next generation to grow up with the same doubt and lack of self-confidence."

Professor Rex Nettleford ... found a place in both the world of academia and that of the arts ...

Forget what he looks and sounds like. Forget his real name even. Rex Nettleford is not stoosh, at least he does not think so.

"I think you have to blame the dance for what I look like ... it's just the way I carry myself, just the way I walk," he said laughingly as he spoke to Class recently.

His real name is another matter entirely - that he thinks is a little bit beyond him. He was christened Ralston Milton Nettleford although he has been called Rex all his life.

"Ralston? isn't that dreadful?" he asked, "Rex is so much nicer ... I guess it's my thing for rhythm. Rex-Nettleford has a much better resonance ... besides Ralston is a little bit too stoosh."

Nettleford thinks that he and the many other unfortunate men in Trelawny who bear the name Ralston were probably named for some busha from the area.

From as early as six ...

Nettleford was born in Trelawny, in a little district called Bunkers Hill and he grew up, he said, in an "extended family of mother, grandmother and a whole heap of aunties." He went to elementary school in both Bunkers Hill and Montego Bay and spent much of his early childhood doing what was to become half of his life's work. He danced and threw himself wholeheartedly into anything that had to do with the stage.

As early as six years old, Nettleford was choreographing. "I wouldn't call it choreography really, I merely assembled steps together and put them to folk songs."

He wrote playlets and acted in them. "I would blush at the sight of them now, they were quite horrible ... I wouldn't want them to see the light of day now," he said, horrified at the thought of resurrecting them.

He also wrote "hundreds of dialect poems" and performed those as well. He was a 'mean' boy soprano who emerged into a somewhat shaky tenor. Nettleford will not sing now: "Oh no, not when I hear people who can really sing doing it ... I wouldn't attempt to at all."

Nettleford did all these things for school and yard concerts and for the various variety shows in which he participated.

He was about 11 years old, he said, when he joined up with "Worm" Chambers and his vaudeville group in Montego Bay.

"We would put on these variety shows and pack the Roxy and Strand theatres every first of August, Christmas Day and Boxing Day ... we would get some big names from Kingston down to perform ... once we even came to Kingston and performed at the Ward Theatre," he reminisced.

Wanted a good education

Nettleford probably would have become an actor if conditions had been right. But "one has to earn a living you know," he said.

And then again, he might have become a priest, "I had given it some thought when I was at school," or a psychiatrist. He have made only one decision about what he wanted to do and that was to get a good education.

"That was all I wanted, a good education that would prepare me for anything." You see, he did not have a clue about what he wanted to do with his life. He only knew what he did not want to do.

"It's difficult you know, I've never really sat down and selected anything ... People think I sit down and scheme a future ... not at all ... I just went along and whatever I did at any given time I did well and that in itself opened up new areas ... it was really an evolution."

So Nettleford evolved into a teacher. The process began when he choreographed or taught his peers steps for the variety and yard concerts. It continued after he left Cornwall College when he spent a year at his alma mater...
teaching "everything ... from general science to English."

He took his undergraduate degree in history and did a stint with the extra-mural department of the University of the West Indies and then went to Oxford University to read politics.

Brains and style

Back in those days, Nettleford had about as much brains as he had style. He walked off with both the Issa and Rhodes scholarship and actually entered Oxford on the Issa scholarship. Of course, when he found out that he had won the Rhodes scholarship too he gave up the mind mastery over this thing called the scholarship. He found his work at the university satisfying, that is why he has never left. "I have been part of a fellowship ... my job has been to interface with the community ... I've never lost touch with the community."

It is important to Nettleford to be part of a community, to work with people. His involvement in the arts has helped him too, he said. "It's a sure means of exercising contact with the people and the community."

He wants to stay in contact with the society because he has a contribution to make to the dream he has for Jamaica.

Optimist

"I want to see a Jamaica that will be able to throw up people who are concentrated, integrated, well-rounded, productive and resourceful ... a young generation of black people who will find a place in this society. I want for them never to feel less than good or less than equal in a society like this ... we cannot allow the next generation to grow up with the same doubt and lack of self-confidence."

Nettleford is optimistic that this can happen: "Lots of us have overcome it ... it all has to do with mastery over this thing called the mind ... that's why I remain a teacher." He wants to pass on what he has learnt. He has no blueprint, just advice.

This notion that people are artists and therefore need not read or exercise their intellect is nonsense ... it is always better when the intellect is informed by the arts of the imagination." He has managed to find a place in the worlds of academia and the arts. "That's because one knows that all knowledge is inter-related."

It is also important to him that he was named a fellow of the Institute of Jamaica (IOJ). Recently Nettleford was given the IOJ's highest award and made the fourth fellow in the 110-year history of the institute. The other three fellows are: Edna Manley O.M., C.L.R. James, Trinidadian.
Best of both worlds

Nettleford is impatient with a lot of things, most of all with the Jamaican tendency to waste time: "We as a people do not manage our time well at all ... we don't work hard enough ... I know of absolutely no other way of achieving anything unless one works for it."

And he finds Jamaican society wearisome: "There's too much envy and malice... we indulge in too much trivia... there's a tendency to tune in to people's weaknesses instead of strengths... and if a decision has to be taken there are so many points of reference to call upon before that can happen. You have to be careful who you hurt... we're so small, so intertwined," he explains.

But there are other good things about the society, "a generosity of spirit sometimes," and he tries always to focus on the positive things in our country.

He will never leave Jamaica to live anywhere else, though. "Of course, one had the opportunity, but one does not want to live as a second class citizen anywhere... I don't want to go anywhere where I am on the margin as a human being."

Luckily, he does not have to. He has the best of both worlds. He is very much a first class citizen here and abroad as well.

"One of the things vindicating one's attachment to this society is that one can stay here and be hunted out," he notes. He frequently travels the world giving lectures, but he never goes anywhere unless what he does has some relevance to what he does at the university. And during his career he has sat on dozens of boards for dozens of developmental committees both here and abroad.

Nettleford has been to most places, except Brazil and mainland China. He has travelled as an academic and as a performer with the National Dance Theatre Company he helped to found in 1962. He is the group's artistic director.

Stopped dancing

Although his name is so intertwined with that of the NDTC, Nettleford can see a time when he takes a back seat in the company. He will still want to help with administration, of course, but he is willing to stick around and choreograph for as long as he is able to function and as long as the group will tolerate him.

Can they throw him out? "Oh yes, of course, I've never... chairing one of the several committees he sits on.
given the impression that all the
rules do not apply to me as well.
Nettleford has already made
one step in adjusting to the
advancing years and to a reduced
role in the company. He has
stopped dancing.
"It wasn't difficult for me to
stop dancing ... I've never liked
performing as much as people
thought I did ... to go out there
and perform before an audience
and satisfy them was traumatic ...
but I felt I had to subject myself
to the discipline."

He does not think about
growing old much. "It's a matter
of spirit ... I'm not doing .anything
now that I wasn't doing
30 or 40
years ago," he says. In any case he
was never all that young to begin
with. "As a child I was always way
ahead of my peers in my thinking ...
I always had older friends ...
now it's the reverse," he adds on
a laugh.

'Oh I cry... not much...'

But the advancing years are
starting to tell on him -- he's
beginning to get soft in the head.
"Oh I cry... not much, but as one
gets older one gets a lot softer in
the head ... I didn't quite cry at
the ceremony when I was made a
fellow of the IOJ but I did feel
very moved."

He is moved by many, simple
things. "I am moved by genuine
friendships." He has some of
those. "I have one or two people
who frankly I adore and who are
good to me and who I trust
implicitly."

He does not consider himself
to be a celebrity. "I hope I'm not
one or a personality either ...
people must make a distinction
between people of substance
making a contribution and
lightweights with glitter."

And he does not take himself
too seriously. It's a strategy to
keep himself from getting too big­
headed from the many honours
he has received.

In fact, he sees himself as a
humble person, who does not
indulge in trivia, malice or envy
and who strives to attain peace
with himself. "I'm not goody ­
goody at all ... and I don't want to
give the impression that I will
turn the other cheek ... oh no, I
will fight back in my own way ...
but I don't need bombast at all ...
I'm sufficiently endowed with a
sense of place and of purpose not
to have to jostle anyone to
displace them."

Nettleford is not too religious
in the church-going sense of the
word.

"One has a strong
commitment to belief systems,
yes," he says. He can quote the
Bible and thinks it is valuable as
"a record of human experience
over time."

One regret

Nettleford is suspicious of the
"fire-eating, God-is-on-my-side,
evangelical fundamental position ...
... it is intolerant, too self
righteous and very often does not
square with the reality ... one of
the reasons we settled on
protestantism is because it is
predicated on the fact that you
and I are simple human beings
who also have our own hotline to
God."

And if he does not quite
believe in re-incarnation, he
does not quite disbelieve in it
either.

"One has a strong attachment
to the concept found in African
philosophy that life has to do
with those gone, those with us
and those yet to be born."

It's all a process, he says, and
that is why when he dies he
hopes the foundations he has
helped to lay will be built on and
become stronger.

Nettleford has not succeeded
in everything he planned to do.
"One never totally succeeds ... all
jobs are only half-way done."

And his only regret in life is
that he never learnt to read
music properly. He used to play
the piano by ear, he says, but he
wished he had spared the time to
learn music well because so
much of what he has, done with
his life required a knowledge of
music.

What with sitting on several
committees, teaching, lecturing,
dancing, choreographing, where
would he have found the time?

Somewhere between twilight
and dusk, I dare say.