Rex Nettleford takes KATE CALVERT on a search for inspiration

"A RT is one of the ways to escape oppression. If you
listen carefully to
the music young-
sters make in the ghetto, the reg-
ggae, the lyrics in particular, there
is a kind of hope in despair.
"They are decrying, they are
making social comment, knock-
ing the Babylon, knocking the in-
iquities and the inequities of
Western life and yet there is
tremendous hope. They are at
the same time trying to forge
solutions, and so their art is in-
terred by the quest for redemp-
tion."

Unashamed admiration from
one of Jamaica's leading cultural
speakers, yet Rex Nettleford
also realises that Caribbeans of
his educational background feel
too sophisticated to be associ-
ated with reggae. "(But) I have
no problems with that."

At 21, Nettleford came to
England as a Rhodes scholar at
Oxford, where he became presi-
dent of the Ballet Society and
listened to Isaiah Berlin define
freedom as hopping from one
foot to the other. He believes he
was lucky to have avoided the
date of other similar scholars:
"They became black Eng-
lishmen."

Nettleford went home and
didn't go into politics. "I went in-
to education and culture which
have far-reaching political ef-
effects. Politics is the ra, ra, ra."

He talks with the poise of a
man who has decided on
moderation as the best, not just
the safest, way of getting things
done. He is intellectually, as well
as physically, a natural noble
figure, standing tall and talking in
a deep, smooth voice.

Although he is now Professor
of extra-mural studies at the
University of the West Indies,
Rex Nettleford is still director of
the Jamaica National Dance
Theatre Company he founded

24 years ago. The company of
dancers, singers and drummers
all have other jobs but are highly
professional dancers.

Nettleford's aim is to create a
recognition of Caribbean dance's
classical status. "Anything
classic is usually rooted in your
own soil."

"In the case of the Caribbean
we have to go back to what the
people themselves have produc-
ed out of their imagination and
intellect. I think that is funda-
mental to all human civiliza-
tions. In fact the exercise of their
imagination is really the bottom
line of all human achievement."

The New York press preferred
the folk-based works, describing
Silkari (a dance about fecundity
and fertility) as a "HIT."
However, a large part of the Lon-
don programme consists of
dances like Court of Jah, a
tribute to Jimmy Cliff, or Vibra-
tions, described as an evocation
of the spirit of reggae.

"There is a kind of ignorance
among certain critics and a
definite prejudice and bias. I
mean you read some of the stuff
they write and quite frankly it is
very narrow."

But, he is reasonably hopeful
the artistic effort of Caribbean
people is beginning to be recog-
nised. He hopes festivals
like the Caribbean one will help
revitalise and rejuvenate a socie-
ty he believes is going through a
rather dull patch.

JAMAICA NATIONAL DANCE
THEATRE COMPANY will be at
the Commonwealth Institute
Aug 3-10 tel: 603 4535 and
Riverside Studios Aug 12-16 tel:
748 3354.