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 over­ taking Jamaica and its influence on the sense of self could remark: “A buttoo in a Benz is still a buttoo.”

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 heritage,” Mr. Lewis said, quoting 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 phase of music from the composition of Bob Marley, or a line from the poetry of Derek Walcott would not render such an unexpressed Englishman or Russian less whole.”

If called upon to do the ‘Log On’ he may just surprise. After all, he is not ‘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.”

If called upon to do the ‘Log On’ he may just surprise. After all, he is not ‘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.”

Professor Nettleford had this to say about the African Presence: “One unifying force in the Caribean heritage is undoubtedly the African Presence. We may 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.