

Remembering Rex Nettleford: The Guardian of our Crossroads

Honor Ford-Smith

The first time I met Rex Nettleford was when he came to our Kingston High School in 1968 around the time of the Rodney uprising to speak to our 6th form about Black Power. I don't remember what he said because I didn't understand it. His vocabulary consisted mainly of words I had never heard before and his utterances bounced off my 16 year old brain before I could catch hold of them and translate them into plain English. But I remember vividly how his presence filled our Presbyterian classroom and how his pink shirt glowed against his obsidian skin. I remember the elegance of his postures and the hand that moved back and forth, back and forth with his words.

I mention this not to dramatize my pubescent interest in bodies, though that was likely a factor, but because what remains with me is what he performed in that still-colonial space that is now just a memory. Rex's body and the effortlessness of his speech, delivered without notes and punctuated with his always moving forearm, was itself a lesson. It was a lesson in what he called the inward "reach" a concept so often seen in his choreography, a movement embodying what you yearned for, something not yet brought into being. It was about imagining us ourselves as we might be, using what we had to hand.

That imagined community was the community of nation and he brought it into being by choreographing and performing it with others. You knew that this community had come into being when you rose at the end of the NDTC performance of **Kumina** or **Gerrebenta** or **Pukkumina** to move with the drums and dancers, to clap until your hands were sore and the lights faded. You knew it when Patsy Ricketts and Barry Moncreiff moved in effortless unison to Jimmy Cliff's Many Rivers to Cross in **Tribute to Cliff** or when Yvonne DaCosta or Sheila Barnett or Arlene Richards danced their solos.

All this sounds a simple enough insight but it was actually one of Rex's most complex contributions, arising from his careful negotiation of the realms of the critical and the artistic. As opposed to the much contested but still prevalent separation of mind and body in Western knowledge (I think therefore I am), I read Rex's work as being rooted in the body, community and movement and in so doing proposed a way around the impasse of the Cartesian binary which has been so central to modern Imperial thought. For him, knowledge could not be confined to the verbal or to the archival. The body and its actions were a key site of postcolonial struggle and a source of emancipatory knowledge. The origins of this idea were generated in the period of plantation slavery. which he theorized as the moment when the dance became a primary instrument of survival that furthered cultural resistance. As he argued in 1985:

First, it (dance) is a skill that depends on the physical and mental capacities of the survivor. One's body belongs only to oneself, despite the

laws governing chattel slavery in the English-speaking Caribbean, which until 1834 allowed a person to be the "property" of another. Second, the language by which the body expresses itself does not have to be anyone else's language, least of all the master's; even when there are borrowings, which are inescapable in a multi-cultural environment, they can be given shape and form on the borrower's own terms. *These strategies are crucial in a situation of pervasive dependency, where all influences are dictated by the overlord ... A hold on any activity beyond the control of a cynical power is a valuable weapon of cultural self-defence. The art of dance, comprising the dancer's own body movements informed by his own spiritual and emotional states is such a weapon.*

This "valuable weapon of self defense" is the knowing body, an idea which as he lays it out, is complex. It comes into being as a result of the coercive institutions, and violence of the "overlord" but it is also sustained by what he called "the worship of forbidden but persistent gods and the configuration of the world beyond the master's grip."

This maverick existence at the threshold or crossroads of sacred and secular power, at the boundary of imperial knowledge, is critical to his ideas about what Caribbean culture and identity can be. His name for this shifting and mercurial creative spirit was *cultural marronage* and this was the conceptual framework for

his artistic work. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Richard Price, Nettleford theorized the dance as a moving cultural reserve, a space that operated in covert political ways through secrecy, cunning and fugitive sensibilities. The term cultural marronage is a metaphor that draws on the movement of the maroons who through displacement and/or flight away from slavery, managed to both resist the colonial order and partially construct another. From their place in the hills, the maroons raided the plantation and fought the colonizers. In Nettleford's rendering, this was not an act of authentic warriors or a romance of rebellion, it was strategy and when translated into dance it would bring a safe community into being from which other challenges to the hierarchical order could be mounted. The dance was an existential space called home as much as it was the process of finding a way home. We see this over and over again in his choreography in which the dancers move diagonally across the stage in alternating waves entering and exiting, overlapping and becoming visible and then disappearing offstage only to return over and over again till finally the entire company is present on stage in the finale.

Movement in community is the place of being and becoming. It is a path to knowledge and it is the basis on which communities of resistance can give rise to new subjects. Bodies can move back and forth both within and outside the dominant order of knowledge, slipping away from the grasp of the verbal

language and the written knowledge of the colonizers, shaking off the violence of their gaze. Dancers move in the spaces between words and in this space act to generate new ways of self-identification. Within this language of action bring new human subjects into being. Once these come into existence, they can demand and win recognition.

Rex's commitment to imagining national community in performance and finding the strategy to bring it into being was accompanied by a stunning record of scholarly publications which together constitute a philosophy of Caribbean nation. Despite being part of the generation coming to voice precisely at the moment of political independence he avoided the banal and formulaic modernism of much of development studies. In spite of his position in academic and institutional management, he never succumbed to the manipulative languages of management and human resources and he was never seduced by economic or political reductionism. His cultural work was characterized by its embrace of complexity and contradiction, and the recognition that ambivalence could be a productive force, because culture itself is almost always about negotiating contradictory forces.

In his early work he focused on translating embodied and oral knowledge into written and later visual forms and from there into theoretical and institutional spaces where both students and citizens could learn about them and where they could find the space to try out using and transforming them. Some examples of this work of inventorying, documenting and interpreting include the authoritative report on the Rastafari Movement in Kingston Jamaica which he coauthored with Augier and MG Smith in 1960. ***Jamaica Labrish*** the first complete anthology of

Louise Bennett's poems appeared in 1966 edited and introduced by him and was an important first step toward the legitimizing of Bennett as a writer performer who mixed oral and written form of English and Jamaican. But it was his **Mirror Mirror: identity race and protest** in Jamaica (1970) which marked him as writer who could tackle the complexity of race and cultural identity when the subject was still taboo.

This ability to embrace conflicting forces and to make them generative of something new explains why I think of him as one embodiment of the archetypal Papa Legba, the guardian of the crossroads. I invoke the figure of Legba because it is he who is able to open a space within which reasoning, understanding and exchange can take place across difference and across the borders of time and space. He is simultaneously male and female, black and white, past and present, old and young, lame and potent. As a guardian of intersections and junctions, Rex Nettleford worked to create a network that brought together an amazing range of people from diverse persuasions and various institutional spaces. This interdisciplinarity and cross fertilization has touched all the peoples of the region without their even knowing. The University of the West Indies, that National Dance Theatre Company, the Edna Manley College, the Little Theatre Movement of Jamaica, the Institute of Jamaica are just some of those institutions he served. He worked so that they would serve the formation of community across the crevasse of class, colour and shade, education and gender that so divide the region. Within each of these institutional spaces he encouraged and sustained an incredible mix of people and disciplines such as Trade unions and dance, writing, anthropology and education, cultural management and social welfare.

As a young actress and teacher of drama I saw Rex most often in the 1970s when I worked as a teacher at the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts (then called the Cultural Training Centre). He had created the conceptual brief for the schools of art, dance and drama in the 1970s. He conceptualized the curriculum of the college to produce what he called a *cultural agent*, someone who was not a conventional teacher but rather someone who could practice their art, talk about it and teach it. This cultural agent was the antithesis of the western idea of the individualized artist. It was an artist responsive and responsible to the community they served and named, who would develop, discuss and teach ideas about what it meant to be a Caribbean person by drawing from popular forms of all kinds, interpreting, enacting and representing them in communities, theatres, cultural centres, galleries, studios and schools.

As chairman of the Council of the Institute of Jamaica along with novelist Neville Dawes, he helped to make sure that the research needed to support the work of these folks was happening. Researchers, dancers and musicians like Cheryl Ryman, Beverly Alleyne, Joyce Campbell, Marjorie Whyllie observed and recorded traditional dances and spoken language from districts around the country. They documented and discussed what they found often tracing the African or Asian origins of these forms to make these visible where before the journey they had taken to the region had been denied and denigrated. These were then imaginatively transposed to the classroom. They found their way on to urban stages in the performances of the National Dance Theatre whose dancers effectively transposed the regional form into national cultural capital. The

traditional movements were organized into dance and music curricula and became recognizable and familiar to Caribbean people through the theatre and through national festivals. The Kumina rhythms for example which forty years ago was particular to one part of Jamaica and in danger of dying is now commonly played throughout the region and is clearly identifiable to many as a Jamaican rhythms.

All this work was just one part of what Rex did. It was just one piece of teaching the meaning of community and citizenship. Within this vocabulary several generations learned new forms of identification. It cannot have been easy to do all this. To move from his rural working class origins to what was then an elite colonial boarding school and then on to Oxford, to learn to combine art and social critique, to work across disciplines and to take on enormous leadership and administrative responsibility over and over again, not to mention the sheer physical work of running a large dance company and attending frequent rehearsals. That he did not do it alone, that he created and inspired teamwork and volunteerism among his colleagues and fellow artists is testimony to what was possible with strong leadership in the face of limited resources. Rex' endurance over a period of fifty years gave the cultural institutions he led a reassuring stability. He engendered a filial relationship with many young performers, artists and scholars. Obviously we didn't always agree with him. Many loudly criticized but most found in him a teacher who challenged and motivated folks to do more than they thought they could, an artist and scholar of enormous integrity and optimism who was never afraid to fail or to keep going, a colleague with whom we could disagree and a man who fought fiercely for the institutions he served. He learned from his students, opened doors and walked with you across thresholds.

In the exchange of emails after news of his death spread last week a friend wrote "Who will remind us to dance, who will force us to ask hard questions about ourselves, who will make us smile about the ways in which we render "smaddification" upon each other?" Who will indeed? Will you?

The author teaches in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. She worked in the Caribbean women's movement, primarily through her involvement in collaborative theatre in Jamaica.