SPOTLIGHT:

The Jamaica National Dance Theatre Company

By Olive Vassell

Rex Nettleford is a compelling man.

Author, prominent lecturer, and former government adviser, he speaks with special passion about his present position as artistic director of the Jamaica National Dance Theater Company.

Nettleford remembers well when the NDTC was founded in the heady days of the island's independence from its British colonizers in 1962.

Back then 20 dancers, some of them trained in Britain, others with no formal training, but highly skilled at sports, built the company-adapted existing works, and above all, developed new pieces to reflect the life and times of the peoples of the Caribbean.

"Dance, like music and literature, reflected the new spirit of independence," said Nettleford, who also choreographs many of the NDTC's works. "The politics were changing and new institutions were being formed.

"The NDTC was the flagship of the movement, reflecting the pulse of the Caribbean. We no longer imitated the European masters, but began to try to reflect our own culture."

Today, the company boasts 50 dancers, each one from some corner of the numerous islands in the Caribbean sea.

None of the members are paid. They hold down other jobs, in between travelling around the world to places as far flung as Australia.

But the NDTC always returns home to Jamaica to perform before the loyal audience it has developed there.

The company plays to packed houses for at least two seasons during the year, and gives a special sunrise performance on Easter Sunday, to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ.

For Nettleford's group, however, the element of religion is but one theme in a vast and varied repertoire. Bach and Beethoven are included as well, he said. But most of all, the NDTC portrays the Caribbean, dancing to the words of prominent Caribbean writers, or the music of stars like reggae's Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, dub poet Mutabaruka and other local musicians.

Musicians play a vital role in the company. A group of singers travels and performs with the dancers on all the NDTC's tours.

The caliber of each performer is closely observed by Nettleford and his colleagues. Dancers undergo a four-year diploma course, during which they dance with the company either at home or abroad.

As for Nettleford, he continues to wear an impressive number of hats with no qualms. Books on Rastafarians and a catalogue of the speeches of Norman Manley are just some of the works to flow from the pen of this political scientist.

He proclaims himself a nationalist, saying "I love my country, but I'm not a chauvinist. I know we all are part of the human species."

It's this love that is developed in his work, which according to Nettleford, feeds off the creative juices from every area of his life.

Washingtonians will be able to sample the company's delights at the Kennedy Center Sept. 18 during the company's one night only engagement.

Then, as always, Nettleford said the company "will continue its celebration of Caribbean life."

(Photo by Maria LaTacona)

CELEBRATIONS — Pieces celebrating Caribbean dance and music are part of the Jamaican National Theater Dance Company's repertoire.

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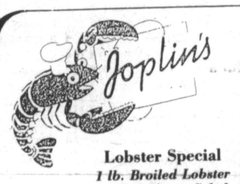

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