

# Dancing Toward Dreams

Ballerina Misty Copeland faces life with grace.

By Sara Matson



Misty Copeland dances the role of Odette in *Swan Lake*.

**M**isty Copeland spends most days twisting, twirling, and leaping. She practices and perfects the graceful movements of her art. When she isn't performing, she is practicing. When she isn't practicing, she is stretching. She takes classes almost every day. She takes care of her body so she doesn't injure it when she goes to work as a soloist with American Ballet Theatre, one of the most famous ballet companies in the world.

"I treat [my body] with the respect that any musician would their instrument. I accept all that it is and do my best to make it the best it can be," says Misty. "I love my body," she adds.

Misty didn't always feel so confident in herself. The challenges she has faced over almost 20 years of dancing have made her strong.

She was a shy child and avoided the spotlight. But Misty loved music and movement. When she was 13, she joined the drill team, a dance line at her school in San Pedro, California. One day, Misty's coach suggested she attend a free ballet class at the Boys & Girls Club, where she often went after school. For two weeks, Misty sat on the gym bleachers watching the class, afraid to join in. Finally, she gave it a try.

## Beginning Ballet

At first, Misty felt out of place in the class. She didn't know

anything about ballet, and she was older than most of the students. And instead of the tights, slippers, and leotards the other girls wore, Misty had on a T-shirt, baggy shorts, and sweat socks. Over time, however, she began to enjoy the lessons. She discovered that her body—especially her long legs and strong, flexible muscles—was just right for ballet.

After the class season ended, Misty received a scholarship to a nearby dance studio. Most ballerinas start their training much younger than 13. But Misty's natural abilities and hard work helped her improve quickly. After only two months at the school, she danced *en pointe*—on her toes—for the first time. Soon after, she danced in her first show. The more she learned of ballet, the more important it became to Misty.

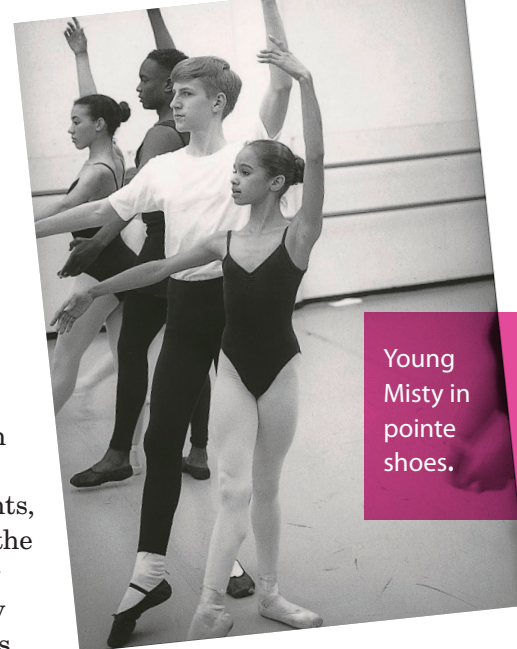
Over the next five years, ballet was Misty's life. She practiced, performed, competed, and attended summer ballet programs. "Performing was my favorite part because I felt really open and free onstage," she says. "For the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged."

After she graduated from high school, she joined American Ballet Theatre's Studio Company. There, her feelings of belonging began to change.

## Changes and Challenges

At the age of 19, Misty suddenly gained weight and developed curves. "My body changed completely over the course of a couple of months," she says. Misty had always been long and lean, which was considered "perfect" for a ballet dancer's body. But now, she says, "I was being told that my proportions just weren't right anymore." This shook her self-confidence. In addition, Misty was the only African American ballerina in a company of 80 dancers. Because of this, she sometimes felt as if she didn't fit in. Misty says this time was "one of the toughest moments of my professional career."

Even though Misty felt discouraged, she didn't quit. She talked with others who had struggled with similar problems. With the support of these friends and mentors, things slowly improved. She learned to care for her body by eating healthier foods. She learned training techniques specific to her body type. And Misty—the girl who had always been shy—



Young Misty in pointe shoes.

Misty Copeland as the Firebird.



learned to stand up for herself. As she did, she began to believe again that she belonged in ballet.

Today, Misty says, "I've learned to embrace my appearance, skin color, and figure." She wants to help other dancers, especially ballerinas of color, accept themselves, too. She wrote a picture book, *Firebird*, in which her character encourages a young African American ballerina. In a note at the end of the book, Misty tells readers to follow their dreams: "No matter what that dream is," she writes, "you have the power to make it come true with hard work and dedication."

Misty continues to follow her own dreams, too. In July 2015, she was named a principal dancer—a ballerina of the highest rank—at American Ballet Theatre. She is the first African American woman to achieve this goal.

"Every morning, I wake up and think, *Today I can be better than yesterday*," she says. "And that's pretty cool." **4**