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# BOUNDARY BREAKER

BALLERINA, AUTHOR, BRAND AMBASSADOR, COMMUNITY ACTIVIST, DANCEWEAR DESIGNER, MEDIA DARLING, AND WORLD TRAVELER **MISTY COPELAND** CONTINUES TO WOW THE CROWDS BOTH ON AND OFF STAGE.

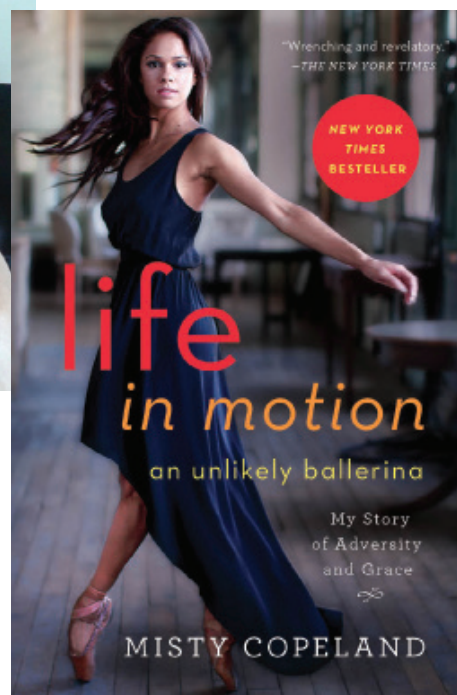
BY CHRISTINA BOHNSTENGER

Misty Copeland is at it again. Throwing her hat into an arena that at first glance might not seem to be her forte, might not seem to be a ring she'd master. But if we know anything at all about the thirty-two-year-old American Ballet Theatre soloist, it's that she has little regard for the way things seem like they should be. And once she sets her sights on something, there is no arena she can't own, no stage she can't call her own, and no one that can tell her no and make her believe it.

So, in 2014, Copeland entered the literary market with not one but two buzz-worthy books and added *New York Times* bestselling author to her long list of defining titles.

The first book, her memoir, *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*, written with Charisse Jones and published in March, has already been optioned for screen adaptation by New Line Cinema. The second, *Firebird*, a picture book for children that she wrote with award-winning author and illustrator Christopher Myers, hit digital and physical bookstore shelves in early September. It immediately garnered rave reviews and praise, with critics calling it lyrical and a celebration of optimism.





**AUTHOR**  
Copeland as *Firebird* (left), a role that inspired her children's book (top center), which is dedicated to her mentor, legendary ballerina Raven Wilkinson (center).

Dedicated to Raven Wilkinson, another no-limits ballet pioneer and Copeland's mentor, and titled after the famed *Firebird* ballet, the book obviously holds a special place in Copeland's heart. In 2012, she became the first-ever black dancer cast in the *Firebird* title role for a major theater, and the first black woman to perform it at New York's famed Metropolitan Opera House.

In both of her books, Copeland seems to seek a noble effect: to inspire others through the sharing of her story. It is no wonder that her memoir is being made into a movie. The harrowing tale of her upbringing has a series of dramatic tragedies seemingly destined to be plot points for a rags-to-riches major motion picture: A single mother struggling to raise six children, one of whom is a ballet prodigy. A custody battle between the ballerina's mother and her ballet teacher provides plenty of plot twists and even introduces high-profile characters such as powerhouse attorney Gloria Allred. Copeland summarizes it as such: "My childhood was pretty much just about surviving." That is, until she found ballet.

Her tale of the transformative power of triumph over tragedy is a well-documented



EN POINTE

## WORLD TRAVELER

We asked Misty to tell us some of her travel stories and habits.

**Her first big travel memory:**

“The first time I really traveled was with American Ballet Theatre. I was nineteen, and the first place we went was China—to Beijing, Shanghai, and then Singapore. It was definitely a situation of culture shock. It was my first time out of the country, and it was kind of overwhelming: seeing different people, hearing a different language, eating different food—even just being on a plane for that long.”

**Her favorite destination:**

“Tokyo is my favorite place to visit—especially for work. I’ve been able to envision myself living there. When you’re spending time there working and you get off the train, you really feel like you’re part of the community, like you’re living there. Japan, I feel, is an easy place to be.”

**What’s in her carry-on?**

“Food, compression socks, and my iPad with movies already downloaded. When I travel, I usually wear a tank top with something over it, like a pashmina that can be a fashionable scarf throughout the trip. I have some big ones, and I’m pretty small, so they’re like blankets for me on the plane.”

**She never travels without:**

“An amazing, hydrating oxygen mask by Bliss. I use it whenever I get off the plane feeling dehydrated and my face needs brightened up. It works really well, and after you use it, your skin feels like it has a layer of silk on it.”

**What she does upon arrival:**

“Whether traveling for work or for vacation, the first thing I always do is eat. And drink lots of water.”





one, having been covered by both the well-respected and the heavy hitters in print, television, and digital media outlets. From her days in gym shorts and socks learning ballet on a basketball court at the Boys & Girls Club, in San Pedro, California, to the tutus and toe shoes she donned on New York's grandest stage, Copeland found the odds of success were stacked against her.

First, she is black. Second, she was very late to the whole dancing game. She didn't take her first ballet class until age thirteen. That didn't stop her from being en pointe a mere three months after strapping on her first slippers—an unheard of accomplishment. Just two years into her training, Copeland won the Los Angeles Spotlight Awards and was named the Best Young Dancer in the Los Angeles area by the *LA Times*. Third, she was a late bloomer, and once she hit puberty at age nineteen, she was too curvy and didn't have a body for ballet. At least, that's what she was told time and again by some industry professionals who seemed to hold the keys to her successful future at an arm's length away.

Copeland was undeterred, spending the summers of 1999 and 2000 with American Ballet Theatre's summer intensive program. Out of the 150 performers in the 2000 class, six were chosen to join American Ballet Theatre's prestigious Studio Company. Only six years into her training, Copeland was among the chosen few. In 2007, she realized her dream of becoming a soloist, while simultaneously earning headlines and a spot in the history books as the third black soloist to ever take the stage for American Ballet Theatre.

If the five-foot-two dancing powerhouse didn't hit your radar during her rise to super-ballerina status, you most likely didn't escape 2014



“BY BALLET STANDARDS,  
SHE DIDN'T FIT THE MOLD.  
SO SHE BROKE IT AND  
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without hearing traces of her greatness—of both character and athletic prowess. Her role in the I Will What I Want ad campaign for Under Armour certainly upped her name recognition among the women in its target audience. The spot Copeland stars in is a striking commercial that shows her muscular calves flexing and dancing on the screen while the voice of a young girl narrates this rejection letter:

“Dear candidate: Thank you for your application to our ballet academy. Unfortunately, you have not been accepted. You lack the right feet, Achilles tendons, turnout, torso length, and bust. You have the wrong body for ballet. And, at thirteen, you are too old to be considered.”

The idea behind the spot—and seemingly behind the ballerina herself—is best summarized in Copeland's bio on the Under Armour website: “By ballet standards, she didn't fit the mold. So, she broke it and cast a new one.”



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**CENTER STAGE**  
 From top right: Supporting the Boys & Girls Club.  
 Dancing as a young prodigy.  
 On stage with American Ballet Theatre.

The female-empowering spot, released on July 31, 2014, garnered four million YouTube views in its first week and was the first for a company known to market heavily to a male demographic.

Copeland's American Ballet Theatre accomplishments are awe-inspiring, as is her résumé, the highlights of which include being introduced by Prince while dancing on his 2010 Welcome 2 America tour; starring in commercials for Diet Dr. Pepper and for Coach; a guest-judge appearance on the 2014 season of Fox's *So You Think You Can Dance*; and becoming a dancewear designer. She has been named to the President's Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition, recognized by The Council of Urban Professionals as the Council's Breakthrough Leadership Award winner, and honored as *ABC World News's* Person of the Week. Yet it is her community involvement and social responsibility that could be most impressive.

Today, Copeland is a national ambassador for the Boys & Girls Club and a spokesperson for Project Plié, the American Ballet Theatre's diversity and outreach program that aims to bring classical ballet to every community with every ethnicity. "My passion is diversifying classical ballet," Copeland says, "showing that as magical as it is, it is attainable."

With so many personal and professional accomplishments already checked off the list, what's left for Misty Copeland? Her goal of dancing as a principal with American Ballet Theatre. Until then, she will earn another spot in the history books as the first African-American ballerina to dance lead in American Ballet Theatre's *Swan Lake*. ■

