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Looking for Dance Inspiration?

Misty Copeland's historical journey to becoming one of ballet's most famous figures emerges in A Ballerina's Tale

by Vivian Reach

Why should dance majors watch *A Ballerina's Tale*? Even if students do not want to be ballerinas, this documentary motivates the audience to never give up on their dreams. The documentary showcases Misty Copeland, who against all odds, became one of the most famous ballerinas in the world when she was promoted to principal dancer at the American Ballet Theatre. Copeland has a unique voice in the world of dance and media. For example, she is the face of Under Armor's "I will what I want" campaign for women's apparel and has her own doll designed by *Barbie*. She has been on the cover of major magazines, such as *Time*. Since Misty is all over the world, it is important for dancers to know about her and how she is changing the standards of ballet.

Copeland's background, body type, and ethnicity provide her with a matchless opportunity to represent both dancers and non-dancers worldwide. In particular, her story speaks to people who were told "no," they did not fit the requirements of ballet, or those who come from under-served communities. Misty has said that she "had been given a platform to speak about diversity," and wants to encourage dancers through her life story. *A Ballerina's Tale* shows how hard work, commitment, and perseverance are necessary to follow a dream that seems impossible. She is motivating hundreds of dancers and inspiring thousands in the non-dance community.

This 2016 documentary gives dancers and future teachers a wonderful story to analyze and discuss. Made by Nelson George, it chronicles Copeland's journey, starting with footage from her dancing at a Boys and Girls Club and finishing with her promotion to principal dancer. You get to see her rehearsals, performances, physical therapy, and travels. It reveals her struggle through an injury and the strength she needed to return to the stage. In addition, the documentary gives insight into her personal life and relationships.

This film also showcases the heritage of African-American ballerinas in the dance world. The dancers who are briefly shown include Raven Wilkinson, a soloist with Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo; Janet Collins, the first black dancer to be hired at the Metropolitan Opera; Carmen De Lavallade, who was a member of the Lester Horton Dance Theater in 1949; and twenty-one-year-old Michaela DePrince, who lived in an orphanage during a civil war in Sierra Leone and now dances with the Dutch National Ballet. Since the ballet world is still largely populated by frail-looking, extremely thin white ballerinas, this film demonstrates how ballet is changing. Because of Copeland's growing popularity, she has become the face of diversity in ballet; therefore, it is important for dance majors to be able to discuss how ballet has evolved in an intelligent conversation.

Why should dance majors turn from the endless viewing of flashy YouTube clips to watch *A Ballerina's Tale*? Misty Copeland's story can leave you with a sense of hope that change is possible. American Ballet Theater, one of the major ballet companies in the world, made a huge step towards change by promoting a ballerina of color to principal dancer in their company. The ballet world stereotypes are changing one step at a time. How can dance majors be a part of this change or start making waves in other genres of dance?

Vivian Lee Reach is scheduled to receive her MFA in June 2017, alongside her sister Savannah (also in this DMJ issue). After graduation she hopes to stay in Irvine to continue teaching and choreographing. In the future she plans to pursue a Ph.D. in Performance Studies and start a contemporary company with her sister. Her thesis research on Dante's Inferno has inspired her to continue writing in order to publish a book regarding a choreographer's voyage within Dante's Nine Circles of Hell.
