

# Copeland leaps into history as first black ballerina in ABT principal role

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Misty Copeland (right) and Brooklyn Mack rehearse "Swan Lake" at the Eisenhower Theater at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in April. Copeland made history on Tuesday when she was promoted to principal dancer of the prestigious American Ballet Theatre, becoming the first African-American ballerina to reach the elite dance company's top rank. Lillian Cunningham/The Washington Post

Misty Copeland has become the first black ballerina to reach the highest rank of the American Ballet Theatre (ABT). She made history Tuesday when the ballet company named her a principal dancer.

Copeland, 32, has become one of America's most famous female athletes. She is deeply respected and admired for her unlikely rise in an art world notorious for featuring slim white ballerinas.

## **A Star Who Bucks Ballet's Norms**

And her star power has stretched far beyond dance. She has written a best-selling book about her life. This year, she was featured on the cover of Time magazine's "100 Most Influential People" issue. She also starred in an Under Armour ad that went viral on the Internet. The ad showed her twirling while a woman's voice is heard, reading a rejection letter declaring that she has "the wrong body for ballet."

"Bringing on Misty Copeland is the best decision we've ever made," said Adrienne Lofton. She is senior vice president of global brand marketing for Under Armour, the Baltimore-based sportswear giant.

"We've always had powerful female athletes," Lofton said. "But we've never had a story as dynamic as Misty's, with that underdog mentality she has ... bucking up against all these traditional norms, showing men, women and kids that athletes come in all shapes and sizes."

## **First Black Woman To Dance The White Swan**

Copeland's new position will start August 1. She was widely expected to be among the three women selected as principals this year. Copeland has performed many starring roles recently for the company. She played the female leads in "Romeo and Juliet" and "Firebird."

Earlier this spring, Copeland made her American debut in the lead role of Odette/Odile in "Swan Lake." It was a symbolically significant moment in American culture. Copeland became the first black woman to dance the role of ballet's white swan. From the moment tickets went on sale months earlier, all of her performances were sold out.

"I haven't come from the typical path or background of someone who would make it to this level as a ballerina," Copeland said at the time.

She grew up in a single-parent home and her mother struggled financially.

"My mother definitely instilled in me and my siblings this strength, this will, to just continue to survive and succeed."

## **A Late Start Didn't Stop Her**

When she was 13, Copeland took her first dance class on a basketball court at a Boys and Girls Club in San Pedro, California. Beginning years after most young ballerinas start their training, she was inspired by a television movie about Olympic gymnast Nadia Comaneci.

Curvier and more muscular than most ballerinas, she nevertheless rose to become the American Ballet Theatre's second-ever black soloist. She was only 24 at the time.

Copeland's popularity and name recognition have quickly grown beyond the world of ballet lovers. She has starred in Dr Pepper and BlackBerry ads. She also has performed in concert with the musician Prince and judged Fox television's "So You Think You Can Dance."

The film rights for her best-selling book, "Life in Motion," were bought last summer. Copeland has also written an illustrated children's book, "Firebird," named for one of her first big roles with the American Ballet Theatre.

## **An Underdog In Under Armour**

Perhaps her biggest star turn, however, has come through her sponsorship deal with Under Armour. Copeland became the symbol of its worldwide "I Will What I Want" ad campaign.

Under Armour now calls that ad campaign its most successful in history. Lofton said that underdog stories like Copeland's helped turn a new wave of women onto the sports brand.

The Under Armour ad that captures her efforts to break through the barriers of classical ballet has been viewed more than 8 million times on YouTube. She has more than 500,000 followers on Instagram and Twitter.

Last year, Copeland told the sports network ESPN that the Under Armour deal pays her more than she makes as a ballerina. Her company's soloists typically earn between \$50,000 and \$100,000 a year.

On social media, congratulations poured in for Copeland from companies, the ballet community and fans. Among them was television personality Star Jones. She wrote "crying tears of joy for @mistyonpointe and all the little girls she will inspire," referring to Copeland by her Twitter handle.

And yet, as Copeland told the Post, her accomplishments are still as important personally as they are publicly.

"Every time I step onto the stage, it's not only proving to the audience that I'm capable, but to myself."