

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Misty Copeland & Under Armour

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, July 22nd, 2015

When Misty Copeland became the first African American to be made a principal dancer in the seventy-five year history of American Ballet Theater this past week, it marked a small but significant step forward in the world of classical dance and a tiny step towards leveling the playing field. Long the stuff of fantasy for young girls with its pink ribbon ballet slippers, frilly tutus, and sparkling diamond tiaras, classical ballet has fed directly into the fairy tale princess aesthetic perpetrated by Disney and other mainstream conglomerates – a place held historically on all fronts – literature, film, merchandising and more – by lithe and ethereal looking white girls.

With its origins dating back to the 15th Century Italian Renaissance high court, where it was used in spectacle and celebration and began to be elevated to an art form in part by King Louis XIV himself, classical ballet has continued over the centuries to necessitate and tacitly signify a degree of financial privilege and social refinement. Cut to the 21st Century US where the mantra has long been *you can never be too rich or too thin*, ballet has been a breeding ground for just that. The training requires time, access, money, and ideally, thinness. Rigorous daily classes, devotion, and doting mothers are a regular feature.



Misty Copeland's muscular legs en pointe in Under Armour's "I Will What I Want" ad

Misty Copeland almost lost this privilege. She started dancing at the ripe "old" age of thirteen, when she was invited to train at the local ballet school in San Pedro. Initially, Misty declined the offer because her mother didn't have a car, but she continued when her ballet teacher Cynthia Bradley began picking her up from school. Despite this assistance and soon being recognized as extremely gifted, Misty was nearly forced to drop out of ballet. She was the subject of a bitter custody battle between a struggling mother who wanted her home, and her ballet teacher who wanted her to continue with the opportunity to train. Luckily for the world, the two reached an agreement and Copeland was allowed to carry on. At fifteen, her recognition and career was jump started when she won first place at the Los Angeles Music Center Spotlight Awards held annually at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.



Another Misty moment

Under Armour, the purveyors of cool, high performance athletic apparel, had the foresight to recognize Copeland's story as an opportunity for their new marketing campaign, "I Will What I

Want,” in which “will trumps fate.” In this short ad/dance film, we hear the voiceover of a young girl reading a rejection letter from a ballet academy – seemingly one sent to Copeland – in which she is told in detail that she lacks “*the right feet, Achilles tendon, turn out, torso length and bust*” and told that on top of having “*the wrong body for ballet,*” at thirteen she is “*too old to be considered.*” As the camera slowly pans up from a pair of pointe shoes and commanding legs, we see the present day Misty Copeland, who at the time this was filmed was still just a soloist at ABT. On top of being African American, Copeland’s body is extremely developed in its muscularity, and lacks the winsome and delicate pre-pubescent thinness so common to most ballerinas. As the ad plays on we soon see Copeland’s body in full force and potential, and we see also that beyond being visibly and singularly muscular, she is an amazingly accomplished and passionate dancer.



Misty Copeland kills it in Under Armour’s “I Will What I Want” ad.

Dance is an instinct we are all born with as infants, and too often over time we are discouraged from pursuing for one reason or another, not the least of which is because of body type. I love this ad because it challenges this notion and for the statement that Misty Copeland being boldly true to herself inherently represents — that dance should be open, that the odds *can* be defied, and that all girls *can* be simultaneously beautiful, graceful, powerful, and of color.

Go Misty.

https://youtu.be/ZY0cdXr_1MA

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