



Misty Copeland in still from 'Flower.' All images courtesy of Life in Motion Productions

## The Town blooms in Misty Copeland and Leyla Fayyaz's dance film 'Flower'

Produced by Nelson George, the short feature celebrates organized resistance in the face of community displacement.

By **EMILY WILSON**  
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Groundbreaking ballerina Misty Copeland and the former dancer and Emmy-winning television producer Leyla Fayyaz were inspired by Oakland's vibrant community organizations when it came to the setting of their company Life in Motion Productions' first film.

"If you think of ballets, they were written in the 1800s by European white men, and most of the storylines in classical ballets have to do with a woman scorned, who, because her lover is somebody who's a higher social status, she ends up killing herself or going mad and losing her mind because of her lost love," said Fayyaz in a phone interview with 48hills.

“If we’re trying to draw audiences into the art form and make it more accessible and normalized, why are we telling stories that are just not relatable at all? So, the first thing was OK, where’s the community that feels really authentic and relatable and socially aware—and that was Oakland.”



And so the scene was laid for “Flower,” a 28-minute story that deals with gentrification and housing insecurity. The film will be co-presented by the Oakland Ballet at the Paramount Theatre on September 29, and at Brava Theater Center on October 1 as part of the San Francisco Dance Film Festival.

On the same call Copeland, the first Black woman to become principal dancer for American Ballet Theater, underlined the importance of connection between the film and communities like The Town.

“We wanted to bring art to people in a palatable way that’s relatable to them,” she said. “The type of content we’re creating is not just dance, it’s not just ballet — it’s focused on women of color telling stories.”

The executive producer of “Flower” is Nelson George, who also directed *A Ballerina’s Tale*, a documentary about Copeland’s stunning work onstage and off. He suggested making “Flower” in the style of a silent film, and proposed setting it in Los Angeles, where Copeland grew up. But though they loved the idea of a mute story, Copeland and Fayyaz (who met when both were dancing at ABT) decided to set the film in Copeland’s husband’s hometown of Oakland.

They say that was because of the city’s history of social justice and how they saw young people using the arts as a way of address those issues. On a research trip to the city in 2019, they saw how the housing crisis and gentrification affected people. The two cited local organizations doing work that impress them, such as Destiny Arts, Youth Spirit Artworks, and Youth Uprising.

Copeland and Fayyaz say they loved being involved in a new venture in which they had artistic freedom.

“To step into the space where Leyla and I really are in charge and kind of creating everything from the ground up, from fundraising to the concept to bringing on the team of artists involved—every little detail was just really eye-opening, because that’s not something I’ve ever had control over throughout my career,” Copeland said.

San Francisco's Alonzo King of LINES Ballet, a longtime mentor of Copeland, was tapped to choreograph the film with Rich + Tone Talauega.

"We knew this was not the same as creating a ballet that's going to be onstage," Copeland said. "Alonzo allowed me to really have a voice with the choreography, and in the way I wanted my character to be portrayed. The acting and the nuances are much smaller and more detailed than typically what I'm doing onstage when I'm projecting to the top tier of the Metropolitan Opera House—but I enjoy that. I think something that I've always battled with in the ballet culture is that, even if I'm on a big stage, I want it to be as natural as possible."

The two have taken strength from the way audience members are moved by the finished "Flower."

"Someone said you don't usually get to see Black men dance like this. Our main character [played by] Babatunji Johnson can dance in any style and he's just so brilliant," Fayyad said. "We've had fathers tell us, 'My son dances and he gets made fun of, and I can show him this.' To hear that feedback is really exciting and eye-opening."

Copeland said she's been inspired by the way the film has caught the attention of children as young as three years old who have seen "Flower."

"Dance is a language, and it's universal, and it connects with people no matter what language they speak," she said. "That's been such a beautiful thing."

**FLOWER** screens September 29 at Paramount Theater, Oakl. [More info here](#). It screens October 1 at Brava Theater Center, San Francisco. [More info here](#).