

CultureVulture



DANCE FILM

Written by:

Toba Singer

Flower

Misty Copeland

Babatunji Johnson

Co-creators: Leyla Fayyaz, Nelson George

Director: Lauren Finerman

Score: Raphael Saadiq

Choreography: Alonzo King and Rich + Tone Talauega

28 minutes

San Francisco Dance Film Festival Sept. 22-Oct. 15, 2023

Special Screening: Paramount Theatre, Oakland, Sept. 29, 2023, 7 pm

Tickets: 1-888-348-4577

In this film short headlined by American Ballet Theatre Principal Dancer Misty Copeland, she has ballet telling a modern-day story by setting it in Oakland California, in the company of former LINES dancer, Babatunji Johnson. They find beauty in truth by focusing their lens on the unhoused in an RV community, where they open up a platform for telling that community's stories in the first person. CultureVulture's Toba Singer brought Copeland and Johnson together in a Zoom conversation to talk about what the film meant to them.

Toba Singer: Of the 7 lively arts, it strikes me that classical ballet is the one that harbors the greatest number of “shoulds and shouldn’ts.” From how you should behave in class to how your body should look, to how you should react to casting and promotion postings, and how you should dance through the pain, how you should not show dismay when you age out of certain roles or your performing career. At this stage in your lives, how do you shake off the shoulds and what role does “Flower” play in the shaking off process?

Misty Copeland: Yes, that’s very profound. This work I’m doing now is about getting to the core of what ballet is and how it can play a positive role in young people’s lives by getting rid of the noise, the chaos, the traumas and the “shoulds.” In “Flower,” I’ve been able to grasp the positives by getting to know the importance of others experiencing what you describe with ballet. Keeping a circle around me of people who are mentors allows me to go to them and get rid of that noise, and by starting my signature foundation the BE BOLD Dance Education Foundation, an after-school program, I am creating my own framework for it, and by doing this work, I hope to get rid of those traumas and bring the joy. What are the positives this art form brings? What can I do to change and improve it and not hold onto the negatives, not to complain, but bring awareness and highlight the issues, to make this better. My purpose is to be a Black woman in this space, so that I can tell the stories of so many who are not recognized, not highlighted or acknowledged, who have done the work in ballet and give access and opportunity to next generation dancers to do and tell their stories. This film shows the beauty and structure of ways to tell the story through movement. It’s literally a modern ballet put on film, telling a story about a community that is very relevant to life today.

The film was made to unearth and show the beauty in Oakland, using ballet through a concept film, to take a different approach to dance than telling the same stories from the 1800s written by European Caucasian men, taking the beauty of this dance form to do it, so that it makes sense in ballet today. It is a reminder of why we do what we do—the incredible Black women whose lives I have studied, whether in ballet or not, those who took me under their wing and saw me succeeding and wanted me to succeed. They were the “firsts” in whatever they did and accomplished, but saw a much greater purpose to their lives. I tend to gravitate towards positive people such as Babatunji, whose picture should be in the dictionary as an example of incredible grounding, talent, and freedom. What he does is mind blowing.

TS: Tunji, in a previous interview that I conducted with you around the Fury Road project in conversation with other dancers, your contributions were among the most lively, authentic, and bold. In a profession where dancers feel guarded about expressing themselves honestly, lest they risk losing a role, a promotion, or a contract, you struck me as unafraid. Could you comment on that?

Babatunji Johnson: I am just like every other human being, very afraid. However, my mom instilled a deep bravery in me, and helped me understand that being brave, according to how we’re taught in a masculine way, is to be tough and without fear. Genuine bravery comes with registering your fear and rising above it, acknowledging the fear that you have, and carrying it with you, because it’s there to teach you. I owe it to her. It has given me wings, and a way to connect to a role I’m playing or with another person in need, the role or that person who inspires me to access that braver aspect of myself, understanding that in this moment and in that way, it is bigger than just me. It’s an opportunity to help this person or bolster this role so other people can connect to what is authentic, connect through the bravery with unrelenting, unyielding determination, to find joy or sorrow. I find my bravery in my ability to access deep emotions or states of being. I find my way there because it is something that can help others feel less alone. So, it becomes easier to go there because it’s a pathway to connect and grow.

TS: This isn't an easy film to shoehorn into a genre. The closest we could come was a long form music video, done in silence. How do you classify it?

MC: That's so interesting. I haven't heard anyone characterize it that way. What was difficult about this film is that we created it with individual donations, from grant money, and Ford Foundation support. We had nothing to compare it to. It's a concept video to help make people understand what we're doing, in silence, with ballet, but with a modern take, in a category of its own. We wanted to provoke thought and emotion and highlight issues that are important not just in Oakland but across the United States. and show that through a very human lens. I think that movement and dance couldn't be a more organic and naturally human medium for accomplishing this.

TS: Who is this character, Rose, that you're playing?

MC: With my character, Rose, I was drawing on personal experience. Rose is passionate, empathic, and strong, but we had to uncover her strengths over the course of the film, as someone wanting a very human experience, who wants to connect with something bigger than herself, finding a sense of community, even if there's fear of change or loss, to know that you're not in this alone, with losses that are not hers. Growing up, I lived in an unstable and a not in any way predictable environment, which is what drew me to dance. Ballet has so much consistency and stability. Rose finds herself through Tunji's character: he's the representation of Oakland, all the beautiful things about the community that can be often seen from the outside as not beautiful.

TS: The film shows the lack of housing in Oakland: the tents, the RV encampments, but not the grandeur of the places where the wealthy live, those who bear responsibility for perpetuating the conditions that those in unstable circumstances face. Why is that?

MC: We wanted to approach the film as a vessel to show what's going on, but not taking one political side or the other, as if we have a solution. How do we highlight a community, show the beauty and and do this all through movement and dance? We went back and forth about how are we going to show this in a way that's respectful, doesn't exploit, and is authentic. It's the only part of the film that's in documentary style. Do we [want to] have dancers playing the houseless? We had round tables with the community to bring them in, going to places that are raw, like the RV encampment. It was for Tunji and me to step back and let them shine, let this community tell its own story. I'm not from Oakland. Leyla, my creative partner is not from Oakland. We wanted to give this community a microphone and let them tell it. All the creatives were part of that. It wasn't us coming in with a planned idea. It was a very emotional experience, going in and hearing them share their stories.

BJ: Being brought on for the film and understanding the story we wanted to tell, I saw that this is important, and needs to happen. I'm so excited about how this story will be told through dance. The project had so much energy behind it for it to be the final day of filming when we went to the encampment. I felt "OK, this is it! We are putting the story together, to help people, just going there and allowing them an audience from the outside to hear what they have to share in such a raw way. It felt like it had come full circle. Considering all the different ways people say you should help, this became the grass roots way, and then to see the joy on their faces, the tears that they shed, when someone gives them their time, was very beautiful. TS: What was the takeaway from working with choreographers, Alonzo King and Rich + Tone?

MC: I didn't work with Rich + Tone at all, that was more Tunji and the Turf Dancers. To be able to bring in these artists was vital for us, whether it was our director, Raphael, Lauren, or Alonzo from San Francisco who understands what's going on there. Rich + Tone were in on every single call because I wanted their lens. Watching them work with Babatunji and what they brought out of you,

Tunji, emotionally, and through the physicality, was incredible. I have worked with Alonzo for half my life, since I was 16, but to get to work with him at this stage, made for a different relationship. Throughout my career, I've been working with masters in my craft. We want to have that outline, but in this, we wanted their voices to be collaborative in the studio with myself, Tunji, and Alonzo. We filmed the pas de deux when I was pregnant, and that conferred something profound. TS: What a rare moment! How often does a woman dancer get to have a work set on her while pregnant?

BJ: Misty also did a solo following the pas de deux, dancing hours and hours, newly pregnant. Rich + Tone put my feet to the fire. Zero to a hundred, first day, and stayed that way for two weeks. They had me in all my solos, prepared, and they mapped out the group sections. I am not entrenched in the Hip Hop world, and they snapped me into shape. It was extremely grueling but also so very fruitful: In moments like, "Oh I'm so tired, too much, not good enough," they reminded me that they believed in me. No matter how hard they were going on me, at the end of the day, there was, "We believe you got it." I formed a bond with them that will never be broken, my brothers from another mother. Regarding Alonzo, I was with Alonzo for the majority of my dance career and continue to work with him to this day, but this was a special moment because I had previously left his company, Lines, right before the pandemic hit, to carve out my own path, and we had only kept in touch intermittently. Then I learned that he had recommended me for this project and that we would work together again. We rekindled our relationship. It was beautiful to watch him and Misty work and talk together. They seemed like old friends and because I had never seen that side of him, it made us super available, me to him and him to me.

TS: Are there other projects afoot?

BJ: Other projects? I think so [laughter].

MC: This has become an extension of my career and life's work. How do we bring dance and movement to communities that have felt excluded? It's where ballet should be headed. It's why I started a foundation. It crosses all lines, all boundaries. Flower is a starting point. It sets us apart from other production companies, using dance as activism to tell stories. We're in the midst of trying to get distribution. It's the first episode in a series of shorts like this, focusing on social issues around us, using local artists, composers, the bringing of attention to different issues via a beautiful, vessel and source.

BJ: It's intended to get through people's mental blocks by speaking to the heart first, and the mind second.