

Silent film by renowned ballerina highlights Oakland housing crisis

Misty Copeland's 'Flower' is screening at the Paramount this Friday.

by Azucena Rasilla
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Misty Copeland stars as Rose in the silent short film 'Flower.' Credit: courtesy of Life in Motion Productions

World-renowned ballet dancer Misty Copeland knows what it's like to experience housing insecurity. Before she broke barriers and burst onto the scene in the 1990s as the American Ballet Theater's first Black principal dancer, Copeland spent her early childhood in the middle of a custody battle and, growing up, experienced housing insecurity firsthand. As an adult, she's witnessed the Bay Area's homelessness crisis worsen, having visited Oakland for the past 10 years thanks to her husband, attorney Olu Evans. The couple lived in Oakland on and off for about two years while caring for Evans' father.

Copeland was able to draw on all of those life experiences in her latest creative effort.

Flower is a silent short film co-produced by and starring Copeland, who plays the role of Rose, a dancer who has to put her dreams on hold to care for her mother, Gloria (Christina Johnson), who is living with dementia. As Rose struggles to pay the bills, she sees that her Oakland neighborhood, like her mother's memory, is rapidly disappearing. It's a fellow dancer, Sterling (Babatunji Johnson), who helps her see the power of resilience and community.

The film will screen at the Paramount Theatre on Sept. 29 at 7 p.m. in partnership with the Oakland Ballet Company.

"Oakland is a community that's dealing with this, and it is magnified, but communities across America are dealing with this," Copeland said of the housing and homelessness crisis during a virtual interview with The Oaklandside. "It is something that so many people can connect with and relate to."

The 28-minute film is the first from Life in Motion Productions, co-founded by Copeland with fellow dancer turned Emmy-award-winning producer Leyla Fayyaz. The short is directed by Lauren Finerman and co-created by filmmaker, author, and journalist Nelson George.

The duo began working on the project in 2019, and their pre-production research included a meeting with then-Mayor Libby Schaaf and roundtables with local youth and housing advocacy organizations like St. Mary's Center, Youth Uprising, Youth Spirit Artworks, Operation Dignity, and Every One Home.

Copeland and Fayyaz sought to remain authentic and avoid sensationalizing homelessness while also staying as true to Oakland as possible by filming on location and hiring local talent.

They also enlisted Grammy-award-winning Oakland singer and songwriter Raphael Saadiq, who composed the score and contributed an original song called *Here Now*.

"He was so invested and involved. I can't believe he gave so much of his time. He was sitting in on weekly Zooms with our entire team when we were still coming up with what the story was going to be," Copeland said.

The choreography is by Bay Area dancers Rich and Tone Talauega (Rich + Tone) and Alonzo King (of San Francisco's Alonzo King LINES Ballet). Bay Area dancer Babatunji Johnson co-stars with Copeland, and turf dancers and students from the Oakland Ballet School also star in the film.

Fayyaz sees the film as an act of "art activism," and said it was made silent to increase its impact and get more people seeing what's happening in Oakland. "When you're watching a film without dialogue, you're forced to pay attention," said Fayyaz.

In their respective roles, Copeland and Sterling tell the film's story through their movements and dance.

“It is a true representation of what we want to say, and how we want to use movement and dance, to tell stories that are relevant to so many communities today,” Copeland said.

The duo consulted with the local organizations they’ve worked with during the making of the film to figure out the best approach to talking to unhoused residents and incorporating their stories in a way that wouldn’t come across as offensive or inaccurate.

The only dialogue in the movie comes during a scene with actual unhoused residents in West Oakland, depicting a conversation between residents of an RV encampment in West Oakland, Copeland, and Johnson, in which the residents describe what it is like to be unhoused and talk about the misconceptions surrounding it.

“We didn’t even know if we were going to end up using that footage, or how we were gonna use it,” Fayyaz said. But “once [Finerman] showed it to us, we were like, ‘That feels so right.’”

Through Life in Motion Productions, Copeland and Fayyaz hope to continue telling stories of women of color and the issues they face in society. Their projects will likely include more silent films, as well as documentary and feature films.

But for now, both look forward to sharing *Flower* with communities in Oakland, a city that Copeland holds dear.

“I’ve never really felt such strength in community. There’s something so beautiful about how people come together and are so proud to represent where they come from, especially the young people,” Copeland said.

“No one’s telling them how to do things or what to do. They’re coming up with these creative ways to have a voice and talk about social issues and through art activism. It’s so inspiring.”

Correction: Leyla Fayyaz did not write the short.