

DANCE

Ballerina draws on her own life in acting debut

By Rachel Howard

Famous since her teenage years as a ballet prodigy caught in a custody battle between her mother and her dance teacher, Misty Copeland is known as American Ballet Theatre's first Black principal ballerina, a philanthropist, author and a product spokesperson for Under Armour, among other brands. Now she has added a new role: actress.

As it happens, her 28-minute debut film is set in Oakland. Directed by Lauren Finerman, "Flower," which Copeland co-produced with Leyla Fayyaz and Jon Brewer through her company Life in Motion Productions, is scheduled to screen at Oakland's Paramount Theatre on Sept. 29, as a special event with the Oakland Ballet Company, before also screening as part of the 14th annual San Francisco Dance Film Festival on Oct. 2.

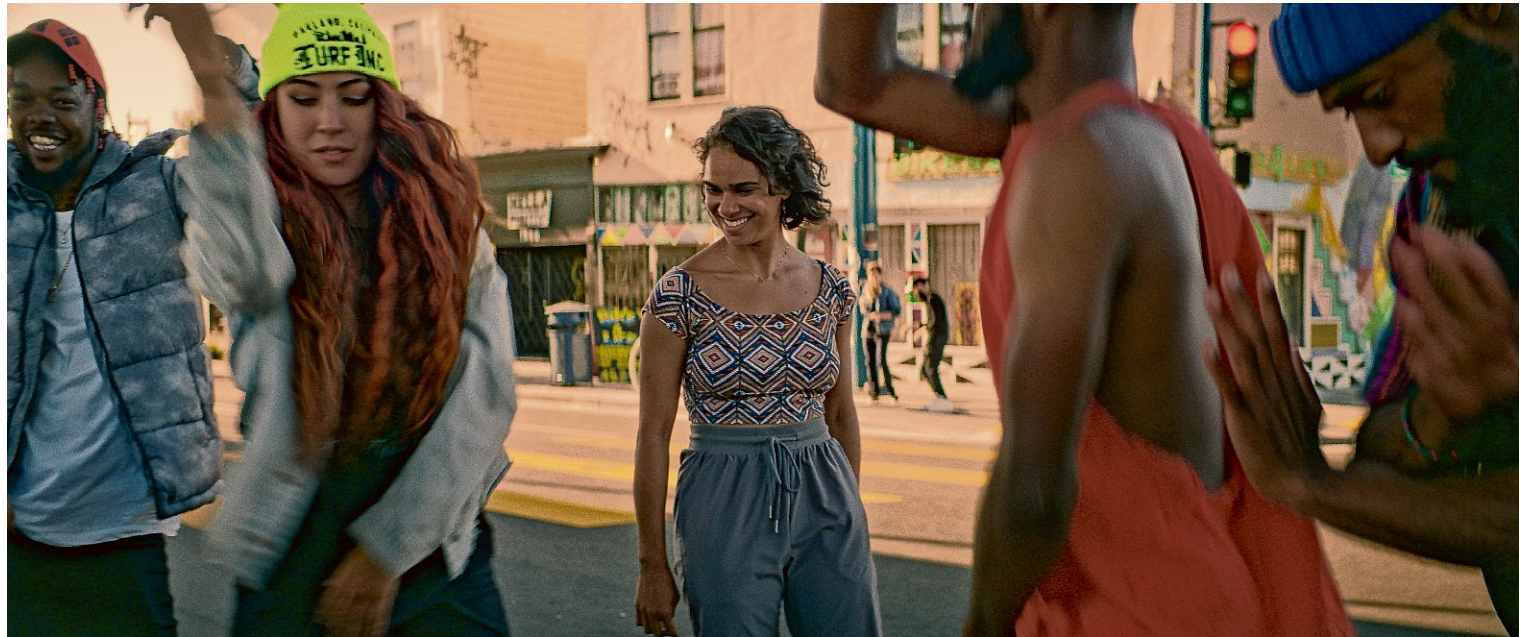
Moving between fantasy and reality, Copeland stars as Rose, a dancer whose mother is on the brink of eviction in West Oakland.

On a recent Thursday evening, Copeland had just returned to her New York home after a photo shoot for her new clothing line when she made time to talk by phone with the Chronicle about the film's aims, as her 17-month-old son, Jackson, babbled happily by her side.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: A lot of people are familiar with the story of your early life in Los Angeles but not your connection to Oakland, which I understand is through your husband, corporate attorney Olu Evans?

A: My husband was born and raised in Oakland, and has family there, so I've spent the last 10 years visiting and just have fallen in love with the community, with the youth



Life in Motion Productions photos

Misty Copeland, center, in a still from "Flower," the prima ballerina's debut film spotlighting Oakland's unhoused.



Misty Copeland co-stars with Babatunji Johnson as Sterling in "Flower."

culture, with the art activism and social awareness of young people there. And I've always felt, "What can I do to help?" Especially after the pandemic and the explosion of the housing

crisis.

Q: And during the pandemic, you ended up living in Oakland for a time to help out with your father-in-law?

A: We were helping him for about two years, living there for weeks or months at a time while he was dealing with a car accident injury that ended up taking his life. My father-in-law got to

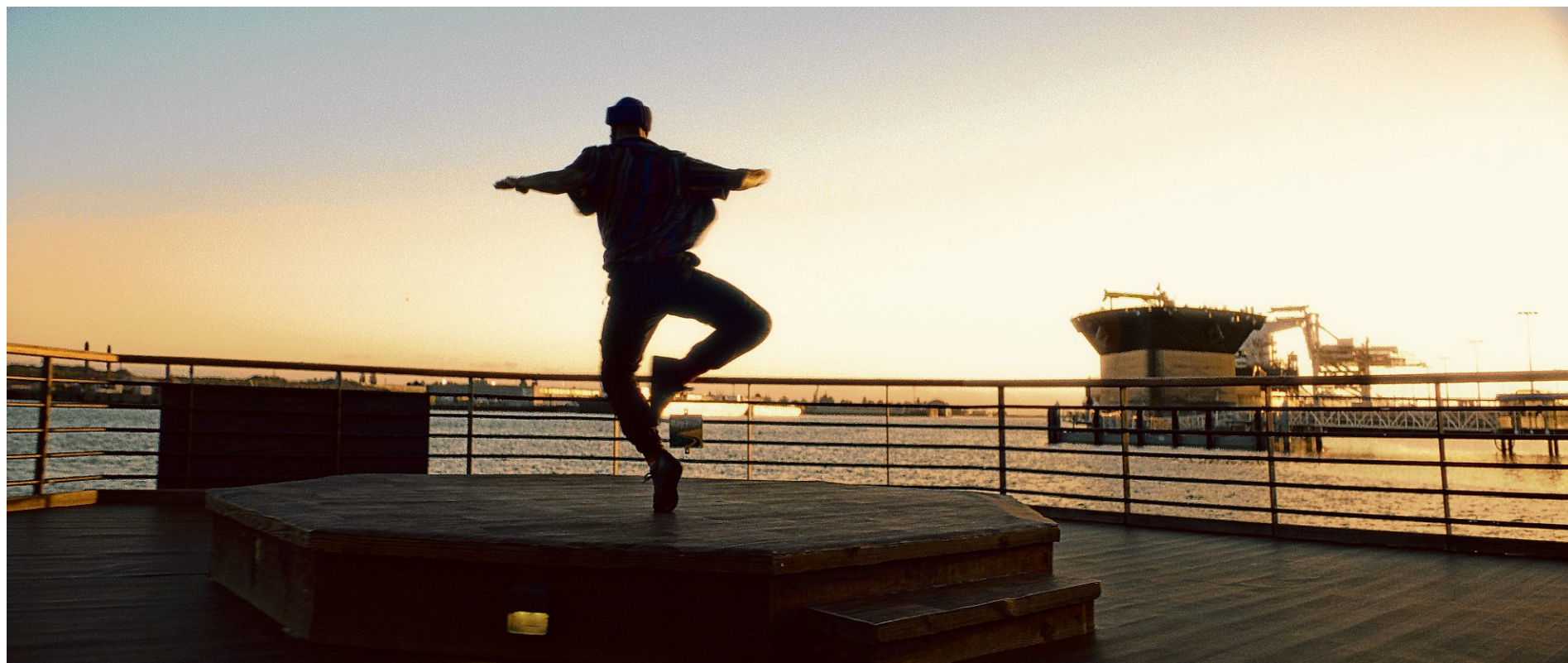
Oakland Ballet Company Screening: 7 p.m. Sept. 29. \$17-\$50. Paramount Theatre, 2025 Broadway St., Oakland. oaklandballet.org/flower
San Francisco Dance Film Festival Screening: Followed by a Q&A with Misty Copeland, choreographer Alonzo King and director Lauren Finerman. 7 p.m. Oct. 1. \$30-\$75. Brava Theater, 2781 24th St., S.F. <https://sfdancefilmfest.org>

see bits and pieces of the scripts and images, but he never got a chance to actually see the film.

Q: When you started this film production company with a longtime dancer friend of yours, who now has an Emmy-winning film career, did you already have Oakland in mind?

A: Leyla and I started the production company about six years ago by asking ourselves, "How do we bring the arts to the mainstream in America? How do we normalize ballet in
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Life in Motion Productions

Babatunji Johnson as Sterling in a still from the short film "Flower."

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America so that it's not something people feel they can't be a part of, that they have to look a certain way or make a certain amount of money?"

Then the idea of "Flower" really grew from a conversation I had with our executive producer, Nelson George, who I met when he did a documentary about me, "A Ballerina's Tale." He had asked me about acting. You know, I feel that my talent is acting through dance. So we started "Flower" with the idea of a silent film, and then the story continued to evolve, and we brought in more creatives from the Bay.

It was really important for us that we were employing people from the community, we had their voices and input. Marcus Gartley, a playwright who helped us with the story early on, is from the Bay, and so are Rich + Tone and Alonzo King,

"I hope that people have a different perspective, that they see that not every person who's in an unhoused situation has the same issues and problems. I hope people realize that there's not one face to it."

Misty Copeland, American Ballet Theatre's first Black principal ballerina

the choreographers.

Q: How did the lack of housing come into the story?

A: This is something that is very close to my own experience. I grew up in motels for most of my youth, experiencing housing insecurity. Leyla and Nelson and I spent a lot of time researching Oakland and spending time with (local housing advocacy) organizations.

We didn't want to offend anyone. We went back and forth about how we were going to portray the unhoused people: Would we have dancers, actors portraying them? People we talked to said, "No, I don't think that would feel like a true representation of them." And so we made the decision to actually

talk to people experiencing homelessness. We considered just using images of the encampment. But when we experimented with hearing their voices, it made sense that we would use speaking just one time in the film and give that moment to those who are voiceless.

Q: That was a real conversation you had with total strangers that day.

A: Yes, and it was very emotional. (My co-star) Babatunji (Johnson) and I had very similar experiences in our upbringings when it comes to housing insecurity and starting late in dance. And to share those and have people who are in that situation right now offer comfort and say, "We're so proud of you that

you've gotten to where you are," coming from that — it was overwhelming.

Q: Your character, Rose, is caught in a hard spot trying to take care of her mother and teaching ballet when she meets this fella who's a street dancer. How would you describe what happens between them?

A: I think Babatunji's character, Sterling, guides her to see her community in a different way. He shows her that she can find herself and her voice again, and strength and support. To me, in the end, there's a question of "Who is he? Was he a real person at all? With this something that she kind of created in her mind as a way to

like, connect and find herself again?"

Q: When it comes to fixing the problem of the unhoused, no film is going to be able to offer up easy answers. But do you think there are things people could be spurred to do by seeing the film?

A: I hope that people have a different perspective, that they see that not every person who's in an unhoused situation has the same issues and problems. I hope people realize that there's not one face to it.

If you look at someone from the outside, someone like Rose, you might not assume that she's one paycheck away from being on the streets. I feel there's such a stigma, that people just assume that these people have put themselves in the situation when there's such a range of people struggling and everyone needs empathy and support.

Rachel Howard is a freelance writer.