

## Living and thriving in motion From krumping to ballet to big screen, Babatunji Johnson finds home in dance

By Rachel Howard

“Flower,” the new short film co-produced by and starring the world-famous, trailblazing ballerina Misty Copeland, opens with an unforgettable scene: A panorama of rippling waters at the Port of Oakland pans to a dock, where a man lies writhing on a platform. As the music finds its pulse, the man seems to levitate on one knee, then rises as if pulled up by the air, snaking his arms, popping his chest, pounding the ground. Finally he slinks away like an apparition of superhuman movement.

The scene is 1 minute and 44 seconds long, shot in one take. On a recent weekday, it seems to spring into real life on the shore of Lake Merritt when Babatunji Johnson swings off his bicycle with casual grace for an interview with the Chronicle and asks, “Do you hug?”

One gets the sense that Johnson, with his clean-cut beard, shining eyes and glinting gold necklace, is always, somehow, glowing. Today he attributes his high energy to a wealth of reasons. Not only does he appear opposite Copeland in “Flower,” which was well-received at the Tribeca Film Festival and will make its West Coast premiere in Oakland on Friday, Sept. 29, and San Francisco on Sunday, Oct. 1, but also the bum knee Johnson’s been rehabbing is healing. In just a few weeks, on Oct. 12, he plans to fully return to the stage with one of the world’s most acclaimed contemporary ballet companies, Alonzo King Lines Ballet, which he first joined a decade ago.

But what really lights Johnson up is talking about how he just moved to Oakland with his wife of three years, fellow dancer Charmaine Butcher.

“Do you know the elementary school that’s up there?” he asks, pointing to his new neighborhood not far from the lake. “Just hearing everyone picking up the kids, everyone laughing — it’s so happy.”

A love of Oakland is not the only element connecting Johnson to his character, Sterling, a charming stranger who invites Copeland’s character, Rose, into the joys of the local community. A central concern in the plot-

line of “Flower” is housing instability, an experience Johnson knew as a child in Los Angeles, though he doesn’t talk about those days much now. Instead, he prefers to highlight the heroism of his mother, who home-schooled six children (“the schools in our neighborhoods weren’t the safest”), earned an advanced college degree and saved enough money to move the family to Hawaii.

“My life really started there,” Johnson says.

And so did dancing — but in an unusual way.



Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

Bay Area dancer Babatunji Johnson at Lake Merritt in Oakland on Sept. 7. Johnson stars in Misty Copeland’s film set in Oakland.

**Oakland Ballet Company screening of “Flower”:** 7 p.m. Friday, Sept. 29. \$17-\$50. Paramount Theatre, 2025 Broadway St., Oakland. oaklandballet.org/flower

**San Francisco Dance Film Festival screening of “Flower”:** Followed by a Q&A with Misty Copeland, choreographer Alonzo King and director Lauren Finerman. 7 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 1. \$30-\$75. Brava Theater, 2781 24th St., S.F. <https://sfdancefilmfest.org>

**Alonzo King Lines Ballet’s Fall Home Season 2023 Performances:** 7:30 p.m. Oct. 12-14; 5 p.m. Oct. 15. \$40-\$115. Blue Shield of California Theater at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 700 Howard St., S.F. [linesballet.org/fall-2023](https://linesballet.org/fall-2023)

In 2005, when Johnson was 14, the movie “Rize” came out and he soon found himself obsessed with krumping. The style, which originated on the streets of South Central L.A., featured chest pumps, stomps and punchy arm swings in elaborately improvised dance contests known as “battles.”

“I was an angsty kid,” Johnson says. Krumping offered release. He studied it on YouTube and recruited his friends to form a dance crew. Soon they were making money on street corners, where dance studio owner Pier Sircello recognized

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Alonzo King, founder of Alonzo King Lines Ballet

their charisma and recruited them to teach classes. “But we had, like, no pedagogy,” Johnson recalls. So Sircello enrolled them in classes, including ballet, so they could learn how to teach.

Johnson only did ballet because his friends did — “At the time I was very insecure in my own masculinity,” he says — but when Johnson talks of his early dance epiphanies, it makes sense that he would find his way to Alonzo King Lines Ballet. King’s choreographic process urges dancers to pull unexpected, sometimes even raw movement from their most vulnerable selves in order to transcend an isolated idea of selfhood; Johnson’s conversion moment came in a school talent show when he realized he wasn’t just basking in attention but participating in a communion.

“I wasn’t thinking, ‘Am I gonna be popular? Are they gonna love me?’” he remembers. “I was just realizing everyone was in a state of joy and I was facilitating that.”

It’s incredible, then, that he

### ONLINE EXTRA

For the Chronicle’s interview with Misty Copeland about “Flower,” go to [datebook.sfchronicle.com](https://datebook.sfchronicle.com).

almost missed his connection to Lines.

“I skipped class to go to the beach that day,” he says, with a laugh. “My teacher calls and she’s like, ‘What are you doing? There’s a master class right now with Alonzo King!’”

Johnson didn’t make it to the class, but he did get to that night’s performance of King’s masterpiece “Rasa,” which overwhelmed him with its combination of tabla master Zakir Hussain’s mesmerizing rhythms and the dancers’ otherworldly movement.

“I asked my teacher, ‘What is that?’” he recalls. “And she was like, ‘That’s what happens when you take all the strength that you gain from ballet, you deconstruct it, and you put it together in any way you see fit.’”

Still, it took Johnson two years as a business major in

college, and his mother’s intervention, to fully believe in himself.

“She told me, if you go (to San Francisco), and you try and you fail and you come back, everyone here will be even more proud of you, because you were brave enough to try,” he says.

His boss, King, remembers the day, after two years in the trainee program, when Johnson knocked on his door and asked him if he wanted him for the company.

“Babatunji has incredible will,” King said, chuckling. “You know, to go from street dance to *tendu-fondu* — that’s a big step. He put in the studio time molding his body.”

Eventually, Johnson joined Lines in 2013. But his story has not been a simple happily-ever-after. He’s too restless for that.

In 2019, Johnson left Lines for a few seasons. In 2020, he married Butcher. He credits her with helping him claim a true feeling of home, in part by moving from a guest apartment in Pacific Heights to Oakland, where he feels more free. But even as he keeps moving, Johnson seems to end up exactly where he’s meant to be.

Take “Flower.” Copeland’s production company found Johnson on Instagram and tried to hire him for a “proof of concept” filming, but Johnson wasn’t available. Then King

**Johnson continues on B10**



Jamie Lyons/Alonzo King Lines Ballet

**Vocalist Lisa Fischer and dancer Babatunji Johnson perform in the world premiere of Alonzo King Lines Ballet's "Deep River."**

## JOHNSON

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ended up doing half the choreography for the final product (the street dance choreography is by Oakland's Rich + Tone Talauega, incidentally also the producers of "Rize").

"Alonzo said, 'If you want someone who can do hip-hop, but can also partner you on pointe, he has it all,'" Copeland recalled.

That includes an authentic emotional presence up close: a large part of Johnson's role as

Sterling involves his character's burgeoning friendship with Rose. The two characters even visit a street encampment together to talk with the unhoused.

Whether acting or dancing, his presence commands the screen.

"That opening solo Babatunji does? Yeah, it wasn't supposed to be the opening," Copeland said. "We kept rearranging the dance numbers and how they fit in, and we just felt to open the film that way was incredible. There were a lot of tears on the set watching him the

day we shot that."

At 32, grateful his knee is on the mend, Johnson is already thinking about bodily disintegration, as dancers tend to do. But he's been expanding his skills into choreographing, and the results of his acting in "Flower" hold promise, too.

"I'll never be who I was yesterday," he says with a shrug. But as he heads back up the hill on his bike, one gets the sense he'll always be at home in himself.

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*Rachel Howard is a freelance writer.*