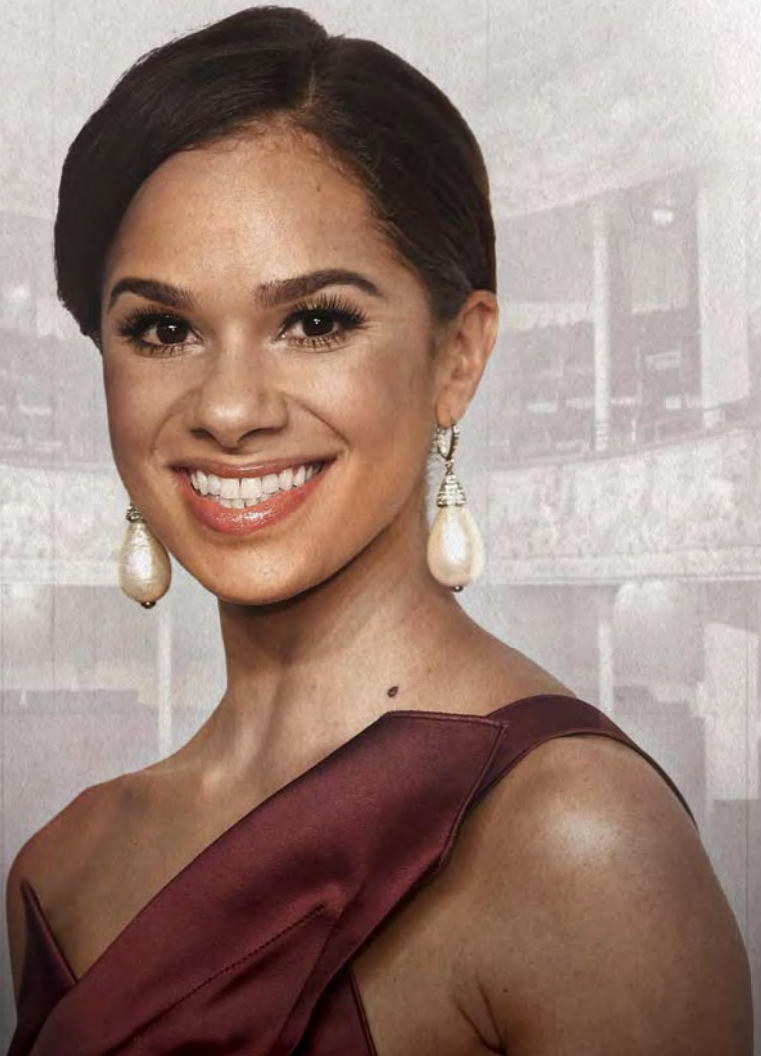


BY C.L. LANEY

MISTY COPELAND

PRIMA BALLERINA



CHAPTER 1

Who Is Misty Copeland?

Picture a ballerina. What do you see?

Most people think of a graceful dancer. She floats across the stage. Her costume is pink and perfect.

Few picture strength. Even fewer see an athlete.


Misty Copeland brings together all these traits. **Poise** and strength have helped her rise. Today she is at the top of the ballet world. The odds, however, have never been on her side.

Most professional ballerinas are white. Copeland is Black. Lack of **diversity** has always been an issue in ballet. Now, though, that is changing. Dance companies are becoming more diverse. Copeland has played a big role in this.


In 2015, Copeland made history. She was a dancer at the American Ballet Theatre (ABT). Then she was promoted. ABT is a ballet company. It is one of the best in the world. Copeland became the first Black principal ballerina in ABT history. Principal dancer is the highest rank in a company. This role is also called prima ballerina. These dancers get top parts. They earn more money too.

Copeland does not fit the typical ideal of a ballerina. She started dancing later than most. Her body does not look like other dancers. None of this matters to Copeland. “Belonging shouldn’t mean you are like everyone else,” she has said.

To her, skill is the most important part of being a dancer. She has worked hard to be the best. Copeland’s talent changed her life. It has also changed the face of ballet.

A photograph of Misty Copeland performing in the ballet Giselle at the Metropolitan Opera House in 2015. She is in the center of the stage, wearing a white tutu with a red and gold bodice, performing a dance move. The background shows other dancers in period costumes seated on the stage.

Misty Copeland played the role of Zulma in the ballet *Giselle* at the Metropolitan Opera House in 2015.

A photograph of Misty Copeland and other dancers in a ballet studio. They are standing in a line, holding onto a wooden barre. The studio has light blue walls and windows with white shutters. The dancers are wearing dark leotards and leggings.

Copeland traveled to Cuba in 2016 as a U.S. Department of State Sports and Cultural Envoy. While there, she met with dancers from the Cuban National Ballet.



The Dance Theatre of Harlem was founded in 1969 by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook. It has become an influential ballet company.

CHAPTER 2

The World of Ballet

Ballet is an art form. It is very competitive. Training takes years. Most dancers train for ten or more. Only then do they **audition** for companies. But many companies are small. Few spots are open. ABT has fewer than 100 dancers. Just 17 are principals.

Some dancers face another hurdle. For a long time, top companies have mostly hired white dancers. Black dancers have always been part of the art form. They've faced extra challenges though. Many were pushed into other types of dance. A few started their own companies. The Dance Theatre of Harlem is one. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre is another. These gave Black dancers a place to perform. Still, many dreamed of joining major companies.

It was the 1930s. Janet Collins was an African American dancer. She tried out for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. This was a big company in Europe. Collins made it. But the offer had a catch. The dancer would have to paint her face white.

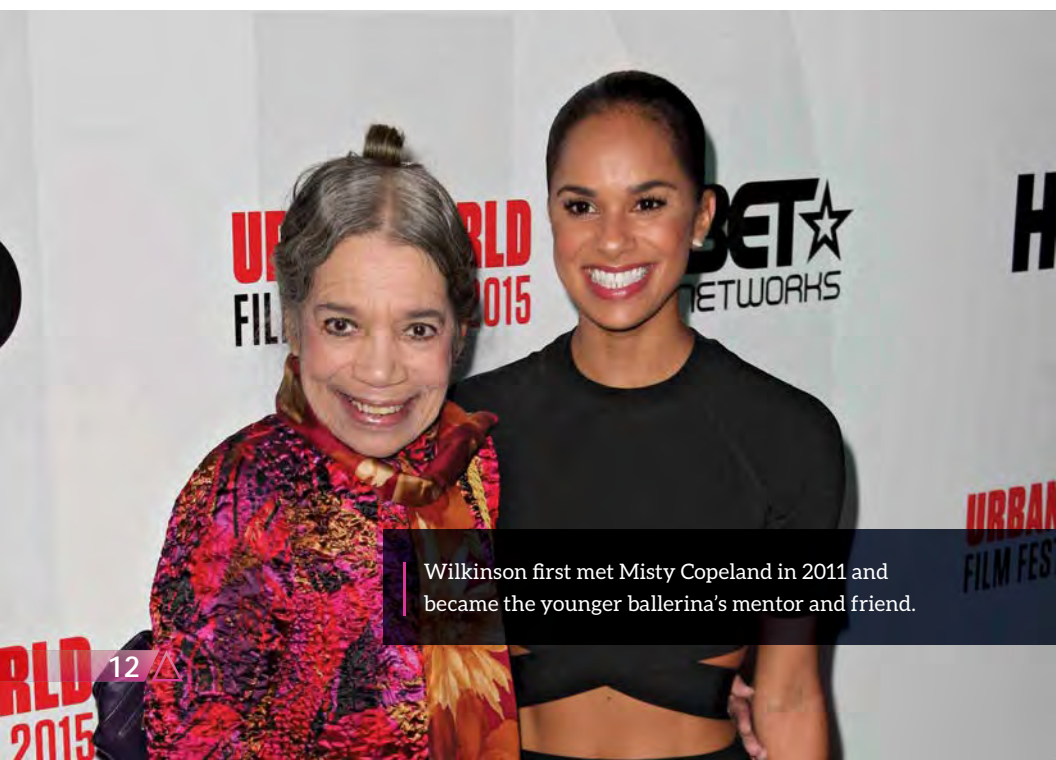
Collins turned down the offer. Still, she kept dancing. She performed on Broadway. Then the Metropolitan Opera Company hired her. That was in 1951. A year later, she became their first Black prima ballerina.

Janet Collins's groundbreaking performance in *Aida* in 1951 led to her becoming the first Black prima ballerina for the Metropolitan Opera Company.





Because of the barriers Raven Wilkinson faced in the U.S. as a Black ballerina, she joined the Dutch National Ballet in 1966.



Wilkinson first met Misty Copeland in 2011 and became the younger ballerina's mentor and friend.

By 1955, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo had a U.S. company. Raven Wilkinson tried out. She became their first Black ballerina. Wilkinson was told to powder her body. This would make her skin look lighter.

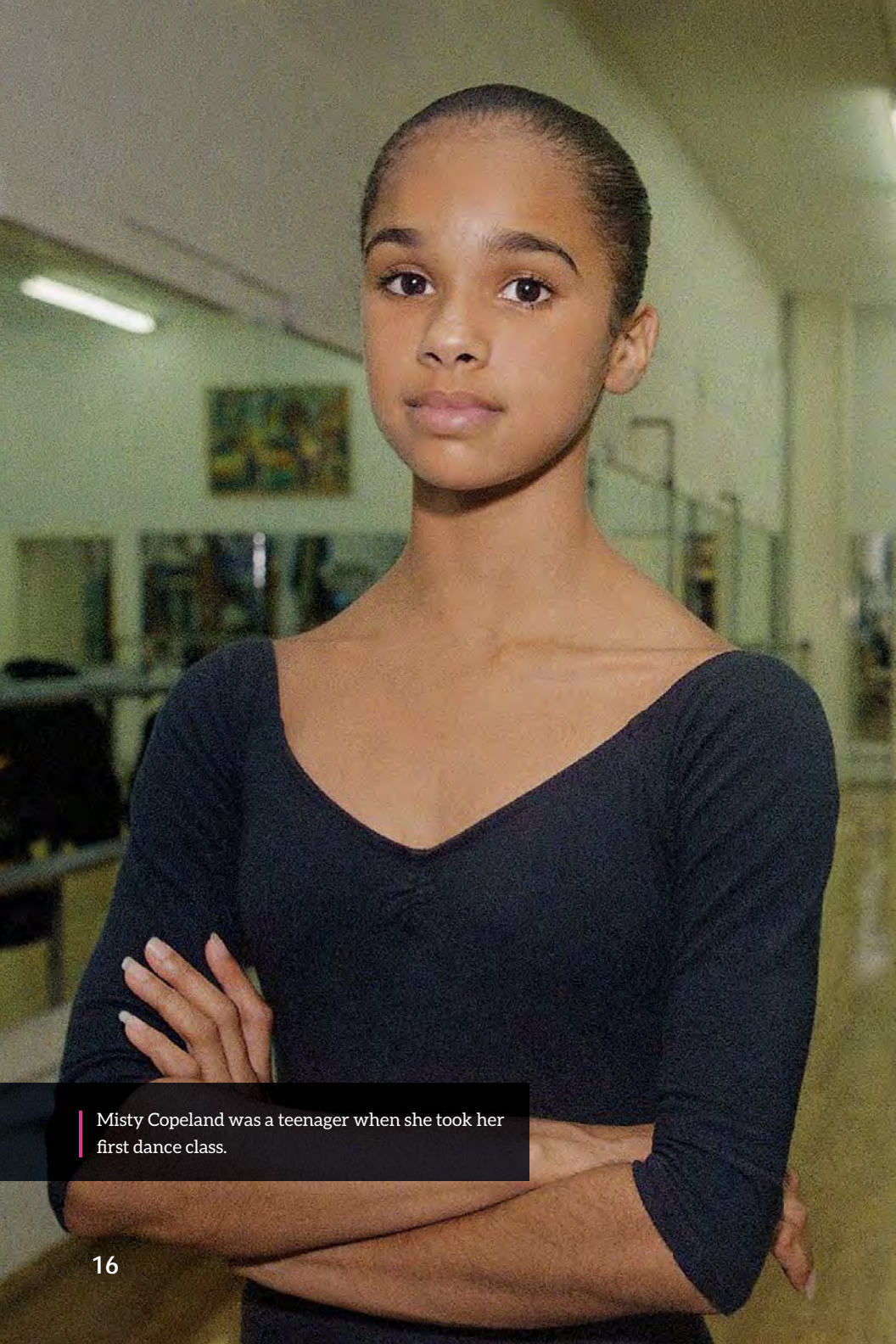
Even then, some did not want Wilkinson on stage. This was especially true in the South. Touring there was not safe for her. People refused to go to the shows. Bomb threats were made. The Ku Klux Klan stopped a performance. Several tour dates had to be canceled.

Prejudice hurt Wilkinson's career. A lack of roles did too. In 1966, Wilkinson left the United States. She moved to Amsterdam. There, she joined the Dutch National Ballet. Copeland looked up to Wilkinson. The older dancer became her mentor.

Decades later, lack of diversity is still a problem. Limited roles keep Black dancers out of big companies. Costumes are an issue too. Most get made with white skin in mind. Shoes and tights are pink. This color blends well with light skin. It makes legs appear longer. On darker skin, these items don't blend as well. Many dancers of color dye their shoes. Then they can match their own skin tones.

Ballet is an art form known for its beauty. But many have seen an uglier side. This was the dance world Copeland stepped into. It was also the one she would conquer.





Misty Copeland was a teenager when she took her first dance class.