



MISTY COPELAND

MISTY COPELAND

TEACHES ————— BALLET TECHNIQUE AND ARTISTRY

MISTY COPELAND

MASTERCLASS

Introduction: Owning Your Power

“As dancers, we’re constantly pushing ourselves to be perfect. It’s great to be able to push yourself and aim for something, but also know that you will never achieve perfection.”

Misty Copeland made headlines in 2015, when she was promoted to principal dancer at American Ballet Theatre, the first African American woman to be named to that position at what is arguably the country’s most prestigious ballet company. She had struggled for years—both personally and professionally—to be recognized as someone who has a voice. And, now, she had finally arrived.

Since that moment, Misty has been in the spotlight more than ever. Not only has she performed lead roles in classical ballets around the world, but she has danced in a Disney feature film, launched a signature apparel line with Under Armour, appeared as the face of an Estée Lauder fragrance campaign, posed for this year’s Pirelli calendar, and been the subject of countless newspaper and magazine articles. But she has never lost sight of her true passion—ballet—and how much she enjoys telling stories through movement.

Misty grew up in an unstable, broken family in San Pedro, California, and started taking ballet lessons when she was 13—far later than most girls, who often begin training as young as two. Her ballet teacher at the time immediately recognized Misty’s talent. Within just a few years, Misty had won the distinguished performing arts Spotlight Award from the Music Center in Los Angeles, danced in Debbie Allen’s *Chocolate Nutcracker* at UCLA’s Royce Hall, and was accepted into the Summer Intensive program for American Ballet Theatre.

MEET YOUR FELLOW DANCE ENTHUSIASTS

Head to community.masterclass.com to meet Misty’s other students, share your own training tips, and ask questions about all things ballet.

Misty’s life may sound like the fanciful storybook ballets she’s performed, but she does not think of it that way. Now 37, she continues to work hard to improve her ballet technique, to grow artistically, to speak publicly about racial diversity in her field, and to mentor other African American dancers and give back to her community.

She has turned the negative comments she's received during her career into "fuel" to propel her forward, with greater determination, to succeed in the world of classical ballet.

A dancer's body is always changing, she says. "We're constantly starting over again. Every time you dance, that's just another chance to be reborn. And so, I think, just own your power and your voice."

Welcome to Misty Copeland's MasterClass.

MISTY'S ABT MILESTONES

1999 – 2000

Participated in the
Summer Intensive Program

SEPTEMBER 2000

Joined ABT Studio Company

APRIL 2001

Joined the corps de ballet

AUGUST 2007

Promoted to soloist

AUGUST 2015

Promoted to principal dancer

BALLET ————— T E R M I N O L O G Y

For pronunciations of the French ballet terms, see American Ballet Theatre's online dictionary.

À LA SECONDE

"To the second." The placement of the foot in second position or moving one's body to second position in the air, as in **plié à la seconde** or **grand battement à la seconde**.

ARABESQUE

A pose in which the dancer is supported on one leg, either straight or demi-plié, while the other leg is extended straight behind and at a right angle. The shoulders are square and the arms are held in various positions to create a long line from fingertips to toes.

ATTITUDE

A pose in which the dancer stands straight on one leg, with the other leg lifted in back or front and bent at 90 degrees. The arm on the side of the raised leg is curved over the head, and the other arm is held to the side.

BATTU

A step in which one foot is beaten against the other foot or leg.

CABRIOLE DEVANT

A movement in which the dancer's legs beat in front of the body in the air, then the legs change and beat again, and again, before the dancer lands on the leg he or she jumped from, leaving the other one extended in the air. Also known as **pistolet**

DÉGAGÉ

Pointing the foot in any direction with a fully arched instep while the dancer's weight remains on the straight supporting leg.

DÉVELOPPÉ

Moving one leg up to the knee of the standing leg and slowly extending it in the air, holding the position as the hips are kept square according to the direction the dancer is facing.

ÉCARTÉ

A position in which the dancer faces one of the two front corners of the room. The leg nearer the audience is pointed in the second position or raised to the second position in the air. The arm on the same side as the extended leg is raised, with the head turned up toward it and looking into the palm of the hand, while the other arm is in demi-seconde position.

EN SECONDE

"In second." A movement in the second position

FOUETTÉ

A whipping movement. It can refer to one foot whipping in front of or behind the other foot, or when the body whips around from one direction to another.

GRAND BATTEMENT

Lifting one leg in the air from the hip, with the knee straight and the standing leg straight, and bringing the working leg down again without bending the knee.

GRAND JETÉ

A high jump in which the legs are extended to 90 degrees. It is preceded by a preliminary movement, like a **glissade** (a gliding step).

PAS DE DEUX

A dance for two in classical ballet.

PASSÉ

A passing movement, in which one foot passes in back or in front of the knee of the supporting leg or one leg passes the other in the air.

PENCHÉ / PENCHÉE

Leaning or inclining, as in **arabesque penchée**, in which the dancer's body leans far forward, with the forward arm and head low and the foot of the raised leg behind high in the air.

PIQUÉ EN ARABESQUE

A movement in which the right foot is in front in fifth position, then the dancer demi-pliés and dégagés the right leg to step onto the point of the right foot, extending the left leg in arabesque.

PIQUÉ TURN

A pirouette where the dancer steps onto pointe or demi-pointe and raises the other leg in any position. Also known as **piqué tour**.

PIROUETTE

A complete turn of the body on one foot, either turning inward or outward, with the body centered over the supporting leg, the arms propelling the turn but remaining stationary during the turn, and the eyes "spotting" a fixed point while the head quickly turns.

PLIÉ

Bending the knees in either a **grand plié** (full bending of the knees) or a **demi-plié** (half bending of the knees), with the legs turned out from the hips and the knees open and over the toes.

PORT DE BRAS

The passage of the arms from one position to another.

RELEVÉ

A movement in which the dancer rises up to pointe or demi-pointe, on one foot or both feet. Each ballet method/school of thought uses a different technique to bring the dancer to this raised position.

RENVERSÉ

The bending of the body during a turn, such as a pirouette, which shifts the dancer's normal balance but not his or her equilibrium. The body bends from the waist, sideways and backward, with the head following the movement of the body.

RONDE DE JAMBE

A circular movement of the leg, either clockwise or counterclockwise and with the working leg either in the air or with a foot touching the floor.

SISSONE

Jumping from both feet onto one foot, except for *sissonne fermée*, *sissonne tombée*, and *sissonne fondue*, which land on both feet.

TEMPS LIÉ

“Connected movement.” A combination of steps and arm placement based on the fourth, fifth, and second positions. It prepares the dancer to maintain balance and control while shifting his or her weight from one position to another.

TENDU

“Stretched,” as in *battement tendu*. One foot slides across the floor with the toes not lifting from the floor, both legs are straight, and then the extended leg returns to the position from which it was extended.

VARIATION

A solo in classical ballet.

POSITIONS

1. FIRST

The heels are kept together, and the feet are turned outward in a straight line.

2. SECOND

The feet are separated by a distance of one foot, and they are turned outward in a straight line.

3. THIRD

The feet are turned outward, and the heels are placed together, one in front of the other.

4. FOURTH

The feet are separated by a distance of one foot, and they are turned outward with one foot in front of the other, parallel to each other, so that if you drew a line from the heel of one foot to the toe of the other, they would form the sides of a square.

5. FIFTH

The feet are turned outward, one foot is placed directly in front of the other, and the first joint of the big toe extends past each heel.

For more on the five basic ballet positions, go to [masterclass.com/articles](https://www.masterclass.com/articles).

BALLET'S RANKS

1. PRINCIPAL DANCERS

Those who perform the leading roles, including *pas de deux*. These are the stars of the company.

2. SOLOISTS

Dancers who are promoted from the *corps de ballet* and given more complicated roles, performing solos on stage and venturing into partnering work.

3. CORPS DE BALLET

Members of the company who perform on stage together as a group. This is the level at which dancers enter the company as professionals.

4. APPRENTICES

Dancers who train and rehearse with the company but who are not yet members of the *corps de ballet*. Think of them as interns.

Misty's Technical Transformation

“If you have the right training, you can accomplish everything in the technical repertoire.”

Recently, Misty began training her body in a new way—she’s studied with many teachers over the years, but she believes she may not have learned how to move correctly. She feels that flawed training combined with her hypermobility—not to be confused with flexibility—may have contributed to many of her injuries during her career. Now she’s following a new, simple training approach. See Chapter 4: Barre Warm-Up: Pliés and Tendus, Chapter 5: Barre Technique: Temps Lié, and Chapter 6: Barre Technique: Ronds de Jambe to get a sense of the exercises that have become most crucial to Misty’s training routine.

HYPEREXTENSION AND HYPERMOBILITY

The extension of a body part, especially a joint, beyond the range of normal motion. As a result of her new training, Misty has built up muscle around her knees for the first time, which has made her glutes, lower back, and hips stronger. Gaining that muscle has made her legs straighter, and she’s no longer as hypermobile. “I do have the ability to strengthen my body,” Misty says, “and get it to do whatever it is I want it to.”

Learn More: **THE BALLET METHODS**

These are the six standard methods, or schools of thought, when it comes to ballet training:

VAGANOVA METHOD (RUSSIAN)

- Developed by: Agrippina Vaganova (1879–1951)
- Emphasis: strong, precise movements but with a softness underneath
- Star students: Natalia Makarova, Rudolf Nureyev, Mikhail Baryshnikov

CECCHETTI METHOD (ITALIAN)

- Developed by: Enrico Cecchetti (1850–1928)
- Emphasis: strict exercise routines using the five basic ballet positions
- Star students: Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky, Serge Lifar

FRENCH SCHOOL (ÉCOLE FRANÇAISE, FRENCH)

- Developed in: the 17th-century court ceremonies of French royalty
- Emphasis: elegant, soft, serious, graceful movements

BOURNONVILLE METHOD (DANISH)

- Developed by: August Bournonville (1805–1879)
- Emphasis: dramatic movement, expressive mime, lightness, arms held in front of the body
- Star students: Erik Bruhn, Johan Kobborg, Nikolaj Hübbe

ROYAL ACADEMY OF DANCE (RAD, UNITED KINGDOM)

- Developed by: Dame Adeline Genée, Tamara Platonovna Karsavina, Phyllis Bedells, Édouard Espinosa, and Philip Richardson in 1920 in London
- Emphasis: attention to detail, slow progression of lessons in order to master basic techniques
- Star students: Mary Day, Ana Paula Höfling, Tara Sutaria

BALANCHINE METHOD (AMERICAN)

- Developed by: George Balanchine (1904–1983)
- Emphasis: extreme speed, long lines, high jumps, deep pliés, athleticism, neoclassic style
- Star students: Suzanne Farrell, Allegra Kent, Patricia McBride

When Rudolf Nureyev joined the Paris Opera Ballet as director in the 1980s, the French school became, in a sense, the Nureyev school. He emphasized quick footwork, a reflection of Nureyev's own style. His star students included Manuel Legris, Laurent Hilaire, and Isabelle Guerin.

LEARNING FROM CRITICISM

Most people think that *Swan Lake*'s 32 fouettés have always been part of the ballet. In reality, choreographer Marius Petipa inserted the sequence specifically for an Italian ballerina named Pierina Legnani, who before stepping into the role of Odette/Odile had previously performed 32 fouettés in an 1893 staging of *Cinderella*. Since Legnani's performance, legendary ballerinas like Anna Pavlova, Alexandra Danilova, Alicia Markova, and Maya Plisetskaya have avoided the fouetté sequence altogether, replacing it with alternate steps that still create the same sort of whirlwind movement. Despite a strong technical foundation and having successfully performed the 32 turns during her *Swan Lake* debut with ABT in Australia, Misty was unable to complete all 32 fouettés during her debut performance as Odette/Odile in New York. As a result, the criticism of Misty's incompleteness culminated in a social media post that questioned her worth as a ballerina. Misty has since turned what was initially a disappointing experience into a larger discussion on bullying in ballet and the unfair expectations placed on artists, noting that finishing the turns is not indicative of whether a ballerina is strong or talented.

Learn More: **SWAN LAKE**

Swan Lake debuted in 1877 at the Imperial Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow and was re-created and revived in 1895 at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. The second version, with choreography by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, inspired ABT's premiere in 2000, with choreography by artistic director Kevin McKenzie. The ballet is based on a German legend: An evil sorcerer has put a spell on Princess Odette, leaving her a woman by night and a

swan by day. Prince Siegfried falls in love with her, and there is hope that the spell will be broken. But he is tricked into falling in love with the evil sorcerer's daughter, Odile, who's been disguised as Odette. In desperation, Odette and the prince throw themselves into the swan's lake, to be reunited in the afterlife. Generally only the most accomplished principal ballerinas are given the coveted roles of Odette and Odile, but Misty was asked to perform as Odette/Odile when she was still a soloist.

SWAN LAKE ————— THROUGH THE YEARS

These are some of the most well-known 20th-century productions of the ballet:

DATE	COMPANY	CHOREOGRAPHER
1950	Kirov/Mariinsky Ballet	Konstantin Sergeyev
1951	New York City Ballet	George Balanchine
1964	Wiener Staatsopernballett	Rudolf Nureyev
1984	Paris Opera Ballet	Rudolf Nureyev
1987	Royal Ballet	Sir Anthony Dowell
2001	Bolshoi Ballet	Yuri Grigorovich
2016	Zurich Ballet and La Scala Ballet	Alexei Ratmansky

Performance: Black Swan Variation

“I want to be able to feel confident in things that have scared me before.”

PREPARING FOR PERFORMANCE

A professional ballerina relies on her pointe shoes like a chef relies on a sharp knife. Pointe shoes are essential to her performance. Preparing them beforehand allows a dancer to perform safely and successfully.

Misty doesn't use pads in her pointe shoes, as many dancers do. She was trained not to have anything come between her feet and the shoes so that she can have more control over articulating her toes. (If you're a ballet student who uses pointe shoes, check with your instructor on what the best approach should be for you.) Misty's also been coloring her pointe shoes, to match her skin color, since she first started dancing. She's determined that one day, pointe shoes will come in varying shades for brown and black dancers and not only in "European pink."

For *Swan Lake*, Misty likes to use a hard pointe shoe for maximum support. For *Romeo and Juliet*, she prefers a softer pointe shoe because the role of Juliet is performed

through mime and emotion rather than intense technical steps. It also requires her to walk and run on stage, and softer shoes allow for a quieter foot articulation.

FOOT CARE

Misty prefers to keep her foot care basic since she has spent years strength training her feet. She views calluses and bunions as the armor that makes a dancer's feet resilient. Misty recommends the minimal maintenance of keeping toenails trimmed, however, it's important to be attentive to more serious issues such as corns that can occur at pressure points on the bottom or sides of a dancer's feet.

CONQUERING THE BLACK SWAN

The Black Swan variation appears in Act 3 of *Swan Lake*. Initially, Misty found the choreography challenging, beginning with the very first step: a double pirouette that goes into an attitude turn then finishes in a plié in attitude. There is no storytelling in that first moment. Misty always better connects to the steps of a ballet when there is a story being told.

Learn More: **WHO IS THE BLACK SWAN?**

Odile is the Black Swan in *Swan Lake*. In late-19th-century and early-20th-century productions of the ballet, however, Odile was not known as the Black Swan and she did not wear a black costume with feathers; she was simply the daughter of the evil sorcerer who had put a spell on Odette. The tradition of calling Odile the Black Swan probably dates to a 1941 staging by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. The choreographer had ballerina Tamara Toumanova wear a black costume as Odile so that audiences could distinguish her from Odette, who wore white. Toumanova was not the first dancer to wear black to make this distinction, but this particular staging set in motion the idea of the Black Swan.

As a character, the Black Swan is alluring, fiery, and extroverted in comparison with Odette, who is strong and passionate yet cautious. Essentially, they are two halves of the same being. *The New York Times* summed it up this way: “Nowhere else do the classic ballets of the 19th century achieve the psychological depth to be found here; nowhere else do they achieve such tragic heights.” The Black Swan tradition made its way around the world and eventually found its way to Hollywood: The 2010 Darren Aronofsky film *Black Swan*, starring Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis, is a psychological thriller that explores the dark facets of the Black Swan’s persona.

Learn More: **MISTY’S ROLE AS ODETTE/ODILE IN SWAN LAKE**

In June 2015, Misty made her New York debut as Odette/Odile in American Ballet Theatre’s production of *Swan Lake* at the Metropolitan Opera House. According to *The New York Times* review of that performance, “As Odette, the Swan Queen, Ms. Copeland has moments of courage and grandeur when you feel the heroic scale of Tchaikovsky’s celebrated drama. She runs boldly around the stage like a creature accustomed to vast space; she raises her arms with the epic sweep of mighty wings.” She had danced the most epic role in world ballet—even if she had not completed the traditional 32 fouettés. And she wasn’t the first acclaimed ballerina not to make all the turns. (See the class video for Chapter 2: Misty’s Technical Transformation.)

Despite that one technical challenge in the fouetté sequence, this was a historic moment for an African American woman at ABT: There was no African American principal ballerina in its ranks at the time. In her memoir, *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*, Misty explains that there is a genre known as “white ballets.” *Swan Lake*, along with *Giselle* and *La Bayadère*, are among them. These ballets feature otherworldly characters who usually wear white, and it is considered standard procedure for the corps de ballet and the principal dancer to look the same. Misty broke through these barriers because of her skin color—and in August 2015, just two months after her debut as Odette/Odile, she was promoted to principal dancer at ABT, becoming the first African American woman in the company’s history to achieve that title.

Barre Warm Up: Pliés and Tendus

*“Less is more. Less repetition,
more quality work.”*

Artistry and stage presence came to Misty very naturally. As she has gotten older, she has shifted her thinking and training to embrace the idea that if she moves her body less by refining her technique, she will conserve energy and have more stamina when performing on stage. Her warm-up barre work reflects that concept.

Her barre routine consists of very minimal, highly focused movement, and she does much of it while facing the barre. This is her “meditation,” she says, in order to prepare herself to perform and to maintain her strength as a professional ballet dancer.

DEMI-PLIÉS

- Start in second position and engage your core.
- Engage your hips to make them strong.
- Straighten your knees.
- Lock in your shoulders and keep them open.
- Push down through your heels without lifting them from the floor for the demi-pliés. Don't put the weight on the balls of your feet.
- Fully straighten your legs after each demi-plié without lifting them from the floor.

Misty's movements are so small and controlled that they're almost imperceptible. In 30 seconds, she's warmed up. She's less interested in repetition and more interested in doing quality work, considering each part of her body continuously and being mindful of how one part of her body influences another.

FURTHER READING

In her book *Ballerina Body: Dancing and Eating Your Way to a Leaner, Stronger, and More Graceful You* (Grand Central Life & Style, 2017), Misty shares the ballet exercises—like demi-plié and battement tendu—and meal plans that help maintain her physique.

Basic Principles of Classical Ballet: Russian Ballet Technique by Agrippina Vaganova (Dover, 2018) is the standard text of the Vaganova method, which teaches the Russian classical ballet style we know today. It was first published in Russian in 1934, then translated into English in 1946.

YOUR ALIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Knees are pushed back.
- Hips should not be tucked.
- Lower back should not be arched.
- Back, hips, and thighs are tightened.
- Core is pulled in and up.
- Shoulders are down and pushed back.
- Chest is slightly lifted up and out.
- Middle back is straight.

Learn More: **DEMI-PLIÉS**

The word *demi-plié* means “half bend,” with the heels never lifting from the floor. Demi-pliés can be done in any of the five positions of the feet. They strengthen and develop the tendons and the muscles of the thighs, calves, ankles, and feet. They prepare the dancer for a grand plié, or full plié, and are the foundation for the jumping movements the dancer will execute in the center of the floor. Misty demonstrates how the demi-pliés set her up for sissones and développés while she stays aligned and symmetrical.

The plié is such a fundamental ballet step that Agrippina Vaganova, who inspired what has come to be known as the Vaganova method of classical Russian ballet technique, said, “If a dancer lacks plié, her performance is dry, coarse, and devoid of plasticity.”

TENDUS

Misty prefers to wear socks, not ballet slippers, for her barre work, which allows her to feel the floor with her entire foot and not hold tension in her insteps or in her toes.

- If your joints are hyperextended, like Misty’s, start in first position with your knees touching and your heels open. Otherwise, start in first position with your knees touching and your heels touching.
- Keep your body as straight and aligned as possible.
- Glide one foot across the floor to second position with both legs straight.
- Push through the heel of your working leg, then the ball of your foot, and finally point your toes and hold the position for a few seconds.
- Slide your foot back to first position without bending your knees or lifting your working leg off the floor.
- Stay stationary. Don’t shift from side to side.

Misty makes small adjustments (say, if she incorrectly sticks out her rib or hip).

YOUR ALIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Shoulders are down.
- Chest is slightly lifted up and out.
- Ribs are in and not splayed.
- Knees are straight.
- Glutes are engaged.
- Hips stay forward.
- The standing leg is straight.

Do several tendus slowly on each side and then speed them up. Stretch or shake out your legs between each set if you need to release the tension in your legs. Remember to breathe and not hold your breath.



FURTHER READING

The Classic Ballet: Basic Technique & Terminology by Lincoln Kirstein and Muriel Stuart (Alfred A. Knopf, 2016) provides an overview of the entire range of ballet exercises—at the barre, in the center, and on pointe—accompanied by illustrations. Kirstein established New York City Ballet with George Balanchine.

Technical Manual and Dictionary of Classical Ballet by Gail Grant (Dover, 2018) is a comprehensive alphabetical list of terms, from abstract ballet to wrapped position, for the ballet student and teacher.

Learn More: **TENDUS**

The word *tendu* means “stretched.” Tendu is a step that’s seen, for example, in battement tendu to strengthen the dancer’s legs, turn out the legs and feet, and develop insteps. *Battement* means “beating,” in which the leg is extended and then returns to the position from which it was extended. The foot slides from the first or fifth position to the second or fourth position without lifting the toes from the floor, and it’s often performed en croix, which means in the shape of a cross: to the fourth position front, to the second position, and to the fourth position back (or vice versa).

Agrippina Vaganova called battement tendu “the foundation of the entire technique.”

Barre Technique: Temps Lié

“This is an exercise that will prepare you for pirouettes.”

Temps lié allows you to adjust your weight from one foot to the other in a seemingly effortless way. Practicing this exercise while facing the barre helps you remain stable as you shift your weight. Once you’ve mastered a sense of control and balance, you can transition to larger moves in the center of the floor. Temps lié is preparation for pirouettes, arabesques, and développés.

For pirouettes, you start on two legs and end up with your weight on one leg, trying your best to move in an upward motion and not shift your weight to the side. Here, temps lié utilizes both the demi-plié and tendu exercises Misty taught in the previous chapter. See Chapter 4: Barre Warm Up: Pliés and Tendus.

YOUR ALIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Knees are pushed back as they bend in demi-plié.
- Shoulders are down.
- Middle back is engaged.
- The core is in and up.
- Glutes are tightened.
- Legs are straight.

TEMPS LIÉ VARIATIONS

In this sequence, Misty extends one leg into développé while remaining stationary on her standing leg to better show you how temps lié is a setup for pirouettes. Practice this exercise first with one working leg and then the other in order to avoid favoring one side. Go slowly, and don’t forget to breathe.

YOUR ALIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Keep both legs fully straight as you lift your leg.
- Push through the heel of the standing leg as you tendu to the front, side, or back.
- Back is straight.
- Shoulders are down.
- Core is engaged.
- Chest is lifted up and out.
- Knees are straight.
- Thighs are engaged.
- Glutes are squeezed.
- Hands are placed lightly on the bar.
- Hips are square to the bar.
- Knees are pointed outward during plié.



Learn More: **TEMPS LIÉ**

The term *temps lié* means “connected movement.” It’s an exercise most commonly seen in center work, though Misty shows how it can be practiced at the barre. Through a series of steps and arm movements based on the fourth, fifth, and second positions, *temps lié* trains dancers to shift their weight smoothly when changing positions while maintaining correct posture and muscle control. The Vaganova method teaches this exercise in beginners’ classes, and the lessons gradually increase in difficulty—in the same way that Misty demonstrates by first starting with both feet on the ground (going through demi-pliés and tendus) and then lifting one leg in the air (transitioning from tendu to *développé*). *Temps lié* applies to movement that’s done forward, backward, in the air, in pointe shoes, or while turning.

Barre Technique: Ronds de Jambe

“We’ll focus on maintaining proper alignment while adding motion in preparation for turns.”

The term *rond de jambe* means “round of the leg,” or a circular movement of the leg. It’s an exercise done at the barre or in the center of the floor. The leg turns either clockwise or counterclockwise, with the working foot touching the ground or pointed in the air. The movement can be done with the standing leg in relevé.

Rond de jambe appears in almost every classical ballet movement. For example, it helps you turn out of a tendu position and to prepare for a piqué en arabesque or piqué turn. Here Misty demonstrates how rond de jambe is the setup for fouetté.

Start by facing the barre, with both hands on the barre. Glide one foot forward, with toes pointed, the foot turned out, and both legs straight. Then glide the working leg to the side and to the back, passing your leg through first position as you move it forward again to complete a circular pattern. As you rotate your body and one leg out, away from the bar, leave one hand on the barre and be sure that your shoulders, hips, back, and legs move in unison. No one part leads the other.

YOUR ALIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Hips remain stationary and square to the barre.
- Thighs and glutes are tightened.
- Ribs stay aligned over hips.
- Shoulders are down.
- Back is engaged.
- Feet are turned out.



RONDS DE JAMBE WITH FOUETTÉ PREP

In this exercise, Misty explains how the fouetté is used at the beginning of the Black Swan variation (see Chapter 3: Performance: Black Swan Variation).

Misty recommends that you do these ronds de jambe exercises quickly in order to find your own rhythm and pace. Repeat them on both sides, and keep breathing.

YOUR ALIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Maintain your posture in a straight line.
- Push through your standing heel.
- Lift your leg straight to the side.
- Hips stay forward and the working knee stays back as you battu.
- Avoid pitching your upper body forward.

Learn More: ROND DE JAMBE

Rond de jambe is essentially a rotary movement of the legs from the hips, which creates flexibility in the hips as well as in the ankles and insteps. When rond de jambe is done in the air (ronds de jambe en l'air), with the working leg extended at 45 degrees or 90 degrees, the torso and entire leg develop strength, better control, and greater range of movement. The part of the leg from the knee to the toe especially becomes more pliable for fouetté turns.

In her book *Basic Principles of Classical Ballet: Russian Ballet Technique*, Agrippina Vaganova said that rond de jambe en l'air is “a very important movement playing a serious part in the further classical development of the body. It should be done in a particularly precise manner. Never let the leg shake in the knee joint, otherwise it will not get the full benefit from this exercise.”

Performance Breakdown: Black Swan Variation

How technique informs artistry

“What makes dancers so special is that you have to be so many things. You have to be an incredible actress, you have to be a technician, you have to be an athlete, you have to be able to adapt and be present and selfless.”

As Misty performs the Black Swan Variation from *Swan Lake*, notice how the basic ballet techniques of plié, temps lié, and rond de jambe are used to elevate her artistry:

- A plié builds strength for sissone.
- A temps lié is preparation for arabesque, which then transitions to développé.
- A rond de jambe is preparation for renversé.

Misty reminds us that the classical ballet technique is straightforward, with each step setting up another step.

Two more examples:

- A tendu is preparation for a dégagé.
- A grand battement is preparation for a grand jeté.

If you're at the beginning of your ballet career, Misty says you should focus on learning technique. Don't worry about your artistry yet. By learning the ballet basics at the barre, you'll develop a strong foundation on which to build.

Once those fundamental lessons are understood, you can add on layers of artistry. You can become a character in a ballet or add a flourish to a step that makes it your own. Without a strong technical foundation, Misty says, the artistry can appear disjointed and overwhelming.

STORYTELLING THROUGH MOVEMENT

“Dancing is storytelling,” Misty says. This has been her guiding principle since she first started taking ballet lessons. For her, finding a story helps bring more meaning to the steps.

When Misty is preparing for a role, she does as much research as she can to understand what the people, setting, culture, and society were like at the time. All of this helps paint a picture in her mind. When she “feels” the ballet internally, she’s more successful in executing the steps when on stage.

Misty refers to the ballet *Don Quixote* as an example of storytelling through body language—specifically, the position of the heroine Kitri’s elbows and how she places her hands on her hips.

Learn More: **DON QUIXOTE**

The ballet *Don Quixote* is based on the novel of the same name by Miguel de Cervantes, which tells the story of an aging knight who sets off on an adventure with his squire, Sancho Panza, after reading romance novels and falling in love with a vision of a woman named Dulcinea. It was published in two parts, first in 1605 and then in 1615. The ballet, choreographed by Austria’s Franz Hilverding, premiered in 1740 in Vienna. Numerous adaptations followed before Marius Petipa, one of the most influential classical ballet choreographers of the 19th century, debuted his production in 1869 at the Imperial Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow.

The version of the ballet we know today focuses on the character of Kitri, a spirited young woman who’s in love with one man but promised to another and appeals to Don Quixote for help. ABT premiered its staging, based in part on Petipa’s choreography, in 1995 in New York. Misty talks about how the placement of Kitri’s hands on her hips, with her elbows forward and shoulders back, is a trademark move of this character role. It’s emblematic of Kitri’s spunk and sass, which is also represented by her quick footwork

and explosive jumps. Misty’s debut as Kitri for ABT in 2017 was a full-circle moment. In 1997, Misty won a Spotlight Award from the Music Center in Los Angeles for performing the same role. That early success, when she was just 15, helped drive her dance career forward.

FURTHER READING

The Marius Petipa Society is an online archive that offers a thorough survey of the famous choreographer and his work.

In her memoir, *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina* (Touchstone, 2014), Misty describes her Kitri performance at age 15 and how she “just felt a connection” to the role.

DRAWING FROM YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES

Misty’s difficult childhood has long been public knowledge, and she doesn’t shy away from discussing it here. She recalls that she had many stepfathers; she lived in many cities, in poorer parts of town, even in a dingy motel. She was extremely shy and quiet as a child and wanted no one to know about her complicated life.

In looking back at her first performance as a 13-year-old ballet student, in the lead role of Clara in *The Nutcracker*, she sees it as a defining moment when she found her “voice.” She felt comfortable performing on stage, embodying a character—an ease she attributes to the range of emotions she experienced in her young life.

Learn More: **MISTY'S CHILDHOOD HARDSHIPS**

Misty speaks openly about her difficult childhood in her autobiography, *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*. In her book, Misty says her ballet teacher at one point urged her to seek a legal remedy to escape her family situation: petition the court system to be declared an emancipated minor. Then, Misty would no longer live with her mother, and decisions about her well-being would be made by her ballet teacher instead. The custody battle became so fierce in 1998 that the local media reported on it.

Ultimately, Misty never went through with emancipation, and she remained in the care of her mother. Despite all the drama, she continued her ballet classes—and kept excelling.

KNOWING YOUR WORTH

Find a ballet studio where you're going to thrive, not where you are the focus of taunts or criticism because of the color of your skin (or, for that matter, your gender or age). In other words, find a place where you fit in.

In *Life in Motion*, Misty recounts how she considered leaving American Ballet Theatre in 2004 and joining Dance Theatre of Harlem. She was a member of ABT's corps de ballet at the time—not yet even a soloist. She thought it might be easier to be surrounded by African American dancers and feel accepted. The company was co-founded by Arthur Mitchell, the legendary African American dancer for New York City Ballet who was George Balanchine's protégé. But Misty stayed put, determined to succeed at American Ballet Theatre and prove herself as an artist.

Performance: White Swan Pas de Deux

Partner workshop

“In partnering, the number one thing is trust.”

Misty demonstrates the White Swan Pas de Deux from *Swan Lake* with Calvin Royal III, an African American soloist with ABT. She is Odette, the White Swan; he is Prince Siegfried.

A pas de deux is a dance for two in classical ballet. Traditionally, the male dancer serves as the partner for the female dancer. As a character in the ballet, he is often the hero and the love interest. From a technical standpoint, he is the anchor and support: He is there to hold the female dancer’s waist, for instance, as she pirouettes and goes into arabesque, or he lifts her as she jumps into splits midair.

Learn More: **CALVIN ROYAL III**

Calvin Royal III took his first ballet class at age 14—like Misty, he got what is considered a late start in the ballet world. But it didn’t matter. His talent was undeniable. He joined ABT’s Studio Company (then called ABT II) in 2007 and danced leading roles, including the role of Prince Siegfried in the White Swan/Black Swan pas de deux from *Swan Lake*. He entered the main ABT company in 2010 and was promoted to soloist in 2017. He has performed roles in some of the most popular classical ballets, including *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Nutcracker*, *Don Quixote*, *Cinderella*, *Fancy Free*, and *The Sleeping Beauty*. In January 2019, he and Misty made their debut in leading roles for the ballet *Harlequinade*—a rare and significant moment for two African Americans at ABT.

Creating Powerful Performances

“Stage presence is honesty.... I think the audience can really read when someone is true and honest to what they’re doing.”

A dancer often doesn't have control over the various aspects of a performance—whether it's because of nerves, the costume fitting poorly, a misstep, a miscue, the orchestra playing too fast or too slow. So Misty recommends that you depend on your body knowing exactly what it needs to do in order to perform cleanly and professionally. Don't be hard on yourself, Misty says. Just go with the flow.

RECOVERING FROM MISTAKES ON STAGE

There are going to be moments of brilliance on stage, and there are going to be moments of failure. But how you recover from those low moments is a testament to your resilience and believing in yourself and finding confidence.

By experiencing ups and downs in your level of confidence, you will learn more about yourself. “It's not just this easy, one-note life and career of a dancer,” Misty says. “You're constantly dealing with whatever is coming at you.” It's better to reassess yourself, face your struggles, and not feel complacent in your journey to becoming an artist. In the end, you will perform with more depth.

CONNECTING WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

Misty has won over audiences throughout her entire career, and she has fed off their energy. Perhaps they see in her someone they can identify with: She has overcome both personal and professional challenges, and she is open about how she's still improving herself.

She says she doesn't have any expectations about how an audience will react. She's there to be in the moment and enjoy the process and “live” as the character in the ballet.

Misty's artistic collaborations outside of American Ballet Theatre have shown her how others connect with an audience. See Chapter 15: Style Evolution With Prince.

Performance and Choreography Workshop: Kyle Abraham's *Ash*

"It is so beneficial to be well-rounded."

Misty takes us into the studio for a rehearsal with contemporary choreographer Kyle Abraham to show us how she learns movement beyond the realm of classical ballet. Abraham choreographed the solo *Ash* for Misty, which she performed in October 2019 at New York City Center's "Fall for Dance" program.

Misty says understanding the choreography was "very challenging." She would mimic Abraham's movements, but she needed more of a storyline from him—like the idea of a raindrop falling on her clavicle—in order to connect with the steps of modern dance. Having a storyline, she says, is "something that really motivates me physically and for it to look just more organic and authentic."

FOUR TECHNIQUES THAT WILL HELP YOU LEARN NEW CHOREOGRAPHY

- Break down the piece by sections. You'll memorize the movement more easily if you think of it in terms of individual parts, with each part linking together to form one cohesive whole.
- Use a journal to write down the steps and the techniques you're learning so you can refer to them later as you practice on your own.
- Use video to film yourself (if you're allowed), so you can go back and replay it.
- Think of the steps as elements of a story. Ask the choreographer to tell you his or her version of the story. If there isn't one, then create a story of your own. That way, you can visualize the narrative and then the sequence of steps that tell the story.



Courtesy of Devin Yalkin

Learn More: **KYLE ABRAHAM**

Kyle Abraham is the artistic director of the contemporary dance company A.I.M. and a 2013 MacArthur Fellow. He draws inspiration from the worlds of hip-hop, classical music, and the visual arts. In addition to his recent *Ash* solo for Misty, he choreographed *The Runaway*, a 2018 program for New York City Ballet (he's one of the few African American choreographers to have created a work for NYCB). The 30-minute piece blends both modern and classical dance set to the music of Jay-Z, Kanye West, James Blake, and Nico Muhly. In 2013, he collaborated with former New York City Ballet star Wendy Whelan on her *Restless Creature* project.

Working With Choreographers

“Go in completely open-minded. Be willing to take on challenges.... Come in with the approach of being a blank canvas.”

INFLUENTIAL CHOREOGRAPHERS THROUGHOUT MISTY’S CAREER

Some choreographers know exactly what they want the dancers to do—they know precisely how they want the dancers to execute the steps and convey their vision. Other choreographers welcome a true collaboration with the dancer. They’ll adjust the steps based on discussions with the dancers about what feels best. Misty has experienced both approaches during her professional career. She encourages you to challenge yourself and see what you may be capable of when you work with choreographers.

FORMATIVE YEARS: DEBBIE ALLEN’S CHOCOLATE NUTCRACKER

Misty had been dancing for only about a year and a half when Debbie Allen approached her about performing in Allen’s production of *The Chocolate Nutcracker* (now called *Debbie Allen’s Hot Chocolate Nutcracker*). Misty was 14 at the time and so shy that she was called “Mouse.” She was terrified about speaking in school, about using her voice—and yet she had a small speaking role on stage with Allen during her performance in the lead role of Clare (a twist on the traditional Clara).

“Working with Debbie—she always felt like a second mom to me,” says Misty. “So much energy and so much fun.” Looking back, Misty is amazed “how confident and how effortless things were for me when I was on the stage.... It must have been [Allen’s] warmth and her strength and encouragement. She just always made me feel like I was capable of doing anything.”

Allen has become a household name: During her three-decade career as a choreographer, dancer, actress, and director, she’s received three Emmy awards, a Golden Globe, five NAACP Image awards, and a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Her TV directing and producing credits include *Fame*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Jane the Virgin*, *Scandal*, and

Empire. Since 2001, her Debbie Allen Dance Academy in Los Angeles has offered dance and theater arts instruction to young students. Consider the list of celebrity names on its board of directors to understand its reach: Quincy Jones, Phylicia Rashad, Denzel Washington, Shonda Rhimes.

Learn More: **THE NUTCRACKER**

The Nutcracker's world premiere took place in 1892 at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, based on the story *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* by E.T.A Hoffmann. The choreography, the scenery, and the costumes were criticized by the press, and the performance of the ballerina who danced the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy was particularly disliked. But today *The Nutcracker* is among the most popular of the classical ballets, with a beautiful score. It's the production in which most ballet students (including Misty) get their start, performing on stage with their ballet schools for the first time. Countless reimaginings of the ballet have been created over the years for both stage and screen. In 2018, Misty appeared in the film *The Nutcracker and the Four Realms*, giving the world, she says, "a brown ballerina princess."

ABT SOLOIST: ALEXEI RATMANSKY

Alexei Ratmansky is American Ballet Theatre's Artist in Residence, but before landing in New York, he trained at the Bolshoi Ballet School in Moscow and performed as a principal dancer with the Ukrainian National Ballet, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, and the Royal Danish Ballet. These days he's more well-known for his vision and talent as a choreographer. He first choreographed Misty in the role of Adult Clara for his ABT version of *The Nutcracker* when she was a soloist. "It's one of my favorite pieces to dance because I'm telling a story through movement," Misty says. She appreciates the ballet's "whimsical freedom of artistry" and how the choreography takes her across the entire stage, making her performance more visually appealing than if she were isolated to one part of the stage. She describes how effective choreography enhances a production by weaving together

quiet moments and small steps (the "linking steps") with larger steps ("big jumps and big turns"). The "stillness," she says, is as important as the "constant motion."

Ratmansky also choreographed Misty in the title role of Serge Diaghilev and Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird* when she was a soloist (her first principal role in a full-length classical ballet). The production, which was an immediate success and catapulted Stravinsky to international fame,

is based on a Russian folk legend: A prince saves the life of a powerful spirit known as the Firebird, whose magical feathers represent both beauty and protection. The Firebird later helps the prince in his efforts to defeat an evil sorcerer, and the prince is then able to rescue and marry the princess he loves.

FURTHER READING

In her autobiography, *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina* (Touchstone, 2014), Misty describes her ABT *Firebird* performance and how it pushed her to the brink of injury.

ABT PRINCIPAL DANCER: TWYLA THARP

Twyla Tharp is one of the most highly sought after choreographers in the world. She founded Twyla Tharp Dance in 1965, and she has choreographed nearly 200 works since then for both her company and others, including the Joffrey Ballet, the Paris Opera Ballet, Martha Graham Dance Company, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, New York City Ballet, and American Ballet Theatre. Her pieces blend ballet, jazz, boxing, and modern dance while weaving in wit and a street-smart aesthetic.

Tharp is one of the first choreographers Misty worked with—the latter was 16 and attending ABT’s Summer Intensive program. Misty admires Tharp’s “fire and will” in the studio; her energy encourages dancers to give it their all. And for Misty, Tharp represents a woman’s voice and perspective.

Misty performed Tharp’s *Deuce Coupe* with ABT in May 2019. The production premiered in 1973 in Chicago, merging the talents of two companies: the Joffrey Ballet and her own Twyla Tharp Dance. It also merged both classical and modern dance styles—and was set to the playful music of the Beach Boys (“Mama Says,” “Wouldn’t It Be Nice”). With a backdrop of graffiti art behind her, a ballerina carefully performs traditional ballet steps, in alphabetical order from ailes de pigeon through voyagé, as other dancers move around her with arms swinging and hips swaying. It’s an outstanding juxtaposition between classical and contemporary dance.

Though Tharp originally created the piece in the early ’70s, she allowed Misty and the other dancers to make it fresh and relevant to today. It’s incredible, says Misty, “when a choreographer gives you the freedom to make something your own” while trusting you to keep the intent of the original piece.

A FEMINIST APPROACH

Cathy Marston is another female choreographer Misty has worked with and admires. Her strength is storytelling: She’s always had a love for literature, thanks to her English-teacher parents. During a career that’s spanned more than 20 years, she’s created ballets based on interpretations of Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, and D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, in addition to *Jane Eyre*. Her choreography has been performed by companies worldwide.

Misty performed the title role in Marston’s ballet *Jane Eyre*, based on the novel by Charlotte Brontë, in June 2019 with ABT. The production tells the story of Jane, who is orphaned as a young girl and later becomes a governess at Thornfield Hall. Her employer, Edward Rochester, is a dark, intimidating, and mysterious character, and Jane senses secrets lurking within his home. Eventually she accepts his proposal of marriage, but his wife appears before the ceremony and Jane flees the home, heartbroken. She is compelled to return, however, and there she finds that a fire set by Rochester’s wife has killed her and left him blind. Jane proposes that they marry, and in doing so, she becomes Rochester’s equal, not his inferior, and finds love and happiness.

Though most ballets are from the male perspective, Marston’s ballet presents the woman’s voice and a feminist storyline in which Jane strives for gender parity.

Style Evolution With Prince

“It’s extremely important for you to explore every genre of dance that you can expose yourself to.”

Misty believes that ballet is the foundation for every style of dance and that by experiencing other forms of dance, you’ll use your body to its fullest potential. She’s learned more about ballet, she says, by doing contemporary dance, African dance, and ballroom dancing. These different genres have “tested” her body and inspired her to move in new ways.

FINDING YOUR VOICE: MISTY AND PRINCE

When Prince reached out to Misty in 2009, asking her to collaborate with him, she didn’t understand why he was interested in performing together. “But what I learned and gained from him,” she says, “was beyond anything I ever imagined.” She now realizes that Prince saw potential in her as a performer, and he knew “what it was to be a black artist and to be fighting for a voice.”

Misty appeared in Prince’s 2009 music video for his remake of “Crimson and Clover,” the 1968 song by Tommy James and the Shondells. She also toured with him through France, performing in large outdoor venues. At the end of 2010, he kicked off his Welcome 2 America tour, with Misty featured front and center in concerts at Madison Square Garden in New York City and at the Forum in Los Angeles. Prince worked around Misty’s ABT schedule, and for a time she was living an unusual double life. “I grew in leaps and bounds just by being exposed to something different,” Misty says.

This was at a time when Misty was a soloist with ABT and unsure whether she would advance beyond that rank to principal dancer. She’d been a soloist since 2007. In retrospect, Misty acknowledges that Prince taught her that “being unique is good.” He encouraged her to improvise on stage as he performed to a live audience, and for the first time she felt a sense of freedom and relief that she hadn’t known before while dancing. She took that newfound knowledge back with her to ABT and immediately felt more confident there.

The Value of Mentorship

“To be able to find support, to find mentorship—I think it’s really about accepting and being ready to take that in.”

When Misty was younger, she wasn’t mature enough to notice when someone crossed her path who might have been a mentor for her. Now that she’s older, she recognizes that it’s important to have a support system and a community of people around you. If you’re ready to explore mentorship, she says, don’t be afraid to approach a teacher or another dancer.

THE MENTOR: RAVEN WILKINSON

Misty wasn’t aware of African American classical dancers when she was starting out as a young dancer. But after watching a documentary on the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and seeing the African American ballerina Raven Wilkinson on the screen, she was intrigued. They connected in New York City when Misty discovered she was living only a block away from the former dancer. It turned out that Wilkinson had been following Misty’s journey as a dancer, even before Misty became a professional. The two became fast friends, and Wilkinson became a mentor. “That type of support I think is so vital,” says Misty. “And had I not found out about her story, and had I not felt this sense of mentorship from her, I don’t know where I would be.”

Wilkinson was born in 1935 in New York and attended her first ballet, *Coppélia*, when she was five years old. It was performed by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, the company she would go on to audition for—and be rejected by—years later as a ballet student. But she persisted, and on her fourth try, in 1955, she was accepted into the company, becoming one of the first African American dancers to perform with a major ballet troupe. Wilkinson appeared in numerous ensemble roles as well as a waltz solo in *Les Sylphides* and the Chinese Tea dance in *The Nutcracker*. She left the company in 1961, however, after experiencing a series of racial incidents during the group’s tours of the South.

FURTHER VIEWING AND READING

Wilkinson was featured in the 2016 documentary *Black Ballerina*.

The children's picture book *Trailblazer: The Story of Ballerina Raven Wilkinson* is written by Leda Schubert, with a foreword by Misty (Little Bee Books, 2018).

MoBBallet.org is an online archive, created and curated by former dancer Theresa Ruth Howard, that preserves the stories of hundreds of African American ballet dancers (both men and women) through oral histories and mini documentaries.

Wilkinson's ballet career picked up again in 1967, when she was invited to join the Dutch National Ballet in the Netherlands. There she performed the Balanchine repertoire and *Swan Lake*, among many other works. By the 1970s, she returned to New York and joined the New York City Opera, dancing and then acting as a supernumerary until 2011.

Misty and Wilkinson grew so close that Wilkinson would call Misty before every performance and leave a voicemail if Misty couldn't answer the phone. "She would always say, 'Let me be the wind at your back,'" Misty recalls. Wilkinson, who died at the age of 83 in 2018, inspired Misty with her stories of perseverance. She had experienced extreme racism while touring with the Ballet Russe through the South in the 1950s, but she "never was like, 'Oh, woe is me,'" says Misty. Instead, she turned those ugly experiences into learning experiences, and she lived her life by being open toward others, accepting others, and embracing whomever she met. Today Misty feels it's her mission to continue to tell Wilkinson's story and "give the next generation more than just one brown dancer to see themselves through."

Learn More: 5 OTHER BALLERINAS WHO BROKE BARRIERS

- **Lauren Anderson:** the first African American woman to become a principal dancer at Houston Ballet, in 1990, where she performed lead roles in *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Don Quixote*, and *Cleopatra*, among other classical ballets.
- **Debra Austin:** the first African American female dancer to join George Balanchine's New York City Ballet. In 1982, she became the first African American woman to be hired as a principal dancer by a major ballet company when she joined Pennsylvania Ballet.
- **Delores Browne:** a member of the New York Negro Ballet in the 1950s who trained with Marion Cuyjet, a pioneer of dance education for African American students in Philadelphia.
- **Janet Collins:** the first African American prima ballerina with the Metropolitan Opera, where she performed lead roles in productions like *Aida* and *Carmen* in the 1950s.
- **Anne Benna Sims:** the first African American ballerina to join American Ballet Theatre, in the 1970s.

MISTY AS A MENTOR: CALVIN ROYAL III

When Calvin first met Misty, she was a soloist with ABT and he had just joined the company. He remembers her as kind and helpful, telling him he could talk to her if he was lonely. "She was always that person to sort of reach out a hand," he says. Since then, she's become an advocate of his—even when pursuing projects outside the company. Misty has tapped Calvin to perform or appear with her at fundraisers and other functions and to be photographed together for the 2019 Pirelli tire company calendar. He knows all of this is groundbreaking: two African American dancers "at the top of their game." No matter the success Misty has achieved, Calvin says is still reaching out a hand. "I love being able to work with her, to make history with her, to break down barriers with her," he says. "It just means so much."

Diversity and Inclusion in Ballet

“My life has always followed this unpredictable path, and so I’ve never really limited myself in terms of what’s possible or what’s next.”

During her career, Misty has allowed herself to be open to new opportunities. And she has embraced a multiplicity of challenges, always eager to grow artistically.

Now, at 37, she’s interested in making her own decisions about what roles she performs on stage—and she just wants to enjoy them.

She’s also at a point in her career where, she says, “I want to bring ballet to more people in another way.” She’s considered producing her own films or TV shows in order to introduce ballet (which she calls “a niche art form”) to a broader audience. Those media platforms and others can open up conversations about diversity in ballet as well.

It’s important that America’s dance companies reflect the diversity of America, she says. This can start from the top, with the executive management, and extend to the dancers on stage and to the stagehands.

Misty believes achieving that diversity in a tangible way starts in ballet schools. Aspiring students of all backgrounds, particularly those from lower-income communities, must have access to ballet: Not only do they need opportunities to learn the craft, they also need to learn that dancers from diverse backgrounds—African American, Latino, Native American—preceded them in this profession and succeeded.

Misty feels it’s her responsibility to help keep the conversation going about diversity in ballet: “To be in a place of power and then to be able to give back to my community is what I’ve worked a lifetime for.”