

American Ballet Theatre's Misty Copeland makes homecoming visit

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The American Ballet Theatre's Misty Copeland teaches a master's dance class at Cal State Long Beach Thursday afternoon. (Stephen Carr / Staff Photographer)

Photo Gallery

LONG BEACH - As easily as if she were flopping into bed, Misty Copeland falls into a ballet position known as a penchee in first arabesque. It's a tough pose in which Copeland has one foot on the ground and the other stretches upward, straight as a compass needle pointing north.

As she grabs her lower leg and foot and stretches even impossibly further, the 35 students in the dance class at Cal State Long Beach laugh.

Of course, the ease with which the only black soloist with the American Ballet Theatre in New York makes the move is a testament both to her natural ability and 16 years of rigorous

training.

Copeland is only the third black soloist with the prestigious dance company and the first in two decades. Her goal, she says, is to become the first black principal dancer for a major U.S. ballet company.

It's a heady goal, but Copeland has been wowing observers ever since she wandered into a weekly ballet class at the San Pedro Boys and Girls Club as a teenager.

On Thursday, Copeland made a quick homecoming, sponsored by Long Beach's MusicUntold as a Black History Month event. In addition to teaching a class at Cal State Long Beach, Copeland met with students at San Pedro High School, Long Beach Poly High and the San Pedro Boys and Girls Club.

Copeland will be back in the Southland in



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March when

she dances the lead role March 30 in Igor Stravinsky's "The Firebird" at the Segerstrom Center in Costa Mesa.

Lorin Johnson, the assistant professor whose class Copeland was guest teaching on this day, saw Copeland when she was just starting out.

From the first moment, he knew she was special.

"In ballet we have a term - aplomb. She just had that natural sense," he said. "In my mind's eye I can still see her standing at the (ballet) barre. Even though she was just learning, she never looked raw."

For Copeland, the draw of ballet began almost from the moment dance teacher Cynthia Bradley coaxed her from the bleachers to participate in the class.

"It was immediate," Copeland said of the allure. "I think I had been craving something like that. It gave me a voice, when I was so shy as a child."

Although a late starter when she took up ballet at the age of 13, Copeland's rise was like something from a fairy tale. She was one of four children living with her single mother in a residential motel. The Boys and Girls Club was her refuge.

Bradley enrolled Copeland in her San Pedro Dance Center and within months Copeland was en pointe and setting off on a rapid rise to stardom.



Misty Copeland, only the third African American soloist with the American Ballet Theatre and first in two decades, teaches a master's dance class at California State University, Long Beach Thursday afternoon. The ballerina, who grew up in San Pedro, is also being inducted into the Boys and Girls Club Hall of Fame. (Stephen Carr / Staff Photographer)

By the time she was 18, Copeland was part of the American Ballet Theatre, one of the foremost dance theatres in the country, and had won a dizzying number of awards, including best dancer in Southern California at 15.

She was also at the center of a well-publicized custody battle between her mother and custodial dance coaches, when she applied to be emancipated but later withdrew it.



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At the age of 24, Copeland became one of the youngest soloists ever with the theater. Soloists rank just below principals in ballet.

Although she has become a star in her own right, dancing on a video for Prince, designing a clothing line and performing modern dance, Copeland says she remains intent on becoming a principal.

Being a rare black performer in a European genre is tricky for Copeland. She says her message can be misconstrued as wanting to change classics that have nothing to do with black culture.

Her goal, she says, is to give young blacks "someone they can relate to, someone who looks like them.

"I'm classical because I love the culture and the stories. This is more about opening doors," Copeland said.

That is what Thursday's tour was about.

Krystia Biebel, 22, was one of just two black dancers in the class Copeland taught.

"I found out about (Copeland) when I was 15. It was nice to see someone who looked like me," Biebel said. "It's really inspiring."

Although Biebel said she has seen Copeland perform at the Metropolitan Opera, it was special to meet her.

Andrew Vaca, the interim department chair of dance at Cal State Long Beach, says he thinks Copeland's life story resonates with students.

"The reality is that you can start (a dance career) anywhere. You don't start at Lincoln Center," Vaca said. "It's an amazing demonstration of someone who started humbly and rose to the top."

Copeland says she spends a lot of time talking to young people and wants them to believe in possibility - that the fairy tales that ballet portrays are sometimes real and can come true.

"I want them to see themselves in me," Copeland said. "I didn't grow up in a classical world. I want them to be able to know it's possible."

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