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Ballet Review



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Robert Johnson on
Misty Copeland
at American
Ballet Theatre

On the cover: Tiler Peck and Robert
Fairchild in Balanchine's *Who Cares?*
Photograph by Paul Kolnik, NYCB



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Misty Copeland in *Romeo and Juliet*. (Photo: Rosalie O'Connor, American Ballet Theatre)

Misty Copeland

Robert Johnson

Whatever else we may take away from 2015 (and at this writing, the year has not yet ended), ballet lovers will recall it as the season dancer Misty Copeland saw her dreams come true. After making high-profile debuts in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Swan Lake* during American Ballet Theatre's spring engagement at the Metropolitan Opera House, the company announced in June that it was elevating Copeland to the rank of principal dancer.

The promotion took "only" fourteen years for Copeland to earn. She joined ABT in 2001 and now, nearly thirty-three years old, she is approaching an age when many ballet dancers retire. Yet any frustration she may feel must be outweighed by a sense of relief. A scarcity of principal openings is typical at ABT, where careers often advance at a snail's pace and young dancers must have luck timing their entrance into the company. Copeland's promotion might not have been possible, even now, without the retirement of three senior dancers including Julie Kent, who was named a principal in 1993 (then aged twenty-four) and who became a fixture.

Whether by design or by coincidence, Copeland's debut as Juliet was originally scheduled to take place on the afternoon of Saturday, June 22, with Kent's farewell performance in the same ballet to follow that evening – poignantly juxtaposing Copeland's arrival with Kent's departure. Unforeseen circumstances advanced Copeland's debut to Tuesday, yet the casting of the Saturday matinee, with dashing young Joseph Gorak as her Romeo, still seemed like a changing of the guard. Viewers came away feeling they had caught a glimpse of ABT's future; and the pairing of Copeland and Gorak, who share a silken movement quality and a way of kindling in the spotlight, suggested a potentially brilliant part-

nership. These two look wonderful together.

As if this once-in-a-generation shuffling of personnel were not enough to make ABT's seventy-fifth-anniversary season historic, there was the added drama of racial politics. It has escaped no one's attention that Copeland is black, and the first woman of color to earn principal status at ABT, in a nation and an industry where racial bias runs deep. Overcoming the race barrier is unquestionably a part of this ballerina's triumph; and it is a victory for ABT, too – not only on moral grounds, but also for practical reasons.

When Copeland appeared in starring roles this season, the composition of the audience changed markedly. Suddenly black spectators appeared in large numbers, packing the Metropolitan Opera House stalls where before there had been a sea of white faces. Many of those newcomers might never have purchased a ticket to see *Swan Lake* or *Romeo and Juliet*, were it not to admire one of their own. Copeland's thank-you gift to ABT, in exchange for her promotion, is this fresh and excited public, which is arguably the best gift that a venerable arts institution could receive. This expansion of the audience likely will be the crowning achievement of the seventy-fifth anniversary season.

The subject of race is still not a happy one to raise, however, because inevitably Copeland's success will fail to satisfy everyone. Those who hope the number of black dancers at ABT may grow to reflect the proportions of American society as a whole will not be content with a single promotion – nor should they be. Less justifiably, others are arguing that Copeland enjoyed an unfair advantage because of her ethnicity and because of the publicity attending her rise, including an advertisement airing on national television. And while Copeland is an eloquent and beautiful dancer, her talent is not of the kind that will silence such skeptics definitively.

Meanwhile, the problems bedeviling minority representation in ballet will remain entrenched, and are also likely to remain undiscussable: the ways in which the ballet body

represents a European ideal of beauty; the aforementioned problem of job scarcity; and the insidious way those two factors entwine. Ballet is unquestionably elitist, like every activity that requires skill and professional training.

Yet ballet is not racist in the manner of the wealthy country club whose members guard their privileges behind closed doors. The ballet's rules were not designed to exclude people of African descent out of greed or out of ignorance, out of fear or plain malevolence. Its rules were written for a different society in another time and place. In its original European milieu ballet discriminates against individuals the way any selective institution discriminates. It is a meritocracy that measures individuals against standards of beauty as well as other benchmarks of excellence.

Only when transferred to a multiethnic society like the United States does this art begin to discriminate against whole classes of people on the basis of their physical appearance. Naturally, throughout the profession, individual teachers and directors hold their own views on race, with some likely to be biased and others not. Dance Theatre of Harlem, formed in 1969, has greatly expanded opportunities for black artists, many of whom have gone on to careers as teachers and artistic directors enriching the profession.

Nevertheless the uniformity of the corps de ballet, an ensemble sometimes deployed purely as a decorative element, is still cited as a reason for excluding people of varying skin tones from the ranks of companies not specifically devoted to minority representation. This argument is misleading, however, since the corps is composed of individuals most of whose differences are routinely ignored. The women simply dress alike and move in unison. No one asks them to dye their hair, for instance; and wigs have largely fallen out of use in cost-conscious America. Variations in height are minimized by dividing the corps into short and tall casts or by grouping dancers with others of similar height, with tall women positioned at the center of a line. The ballet

already makes room for "little swans" and "big swans."

Drawing undue attention to oneself as a corps dancer or intentionally distracting the audience from the performance of the stars would be frowned upon. Yet fans with binoculars know that even in the corps, each woman's charm or lack thereof resides precisely in her individuality. Because complete uniformity is impossible to achieve, no one has bothered to consider how insipid, robotic, and even monstrous the ensemble would be if everyone in it were truly identical – not to mention that then, among the clones, it would be impossible to identify anyone with superior talent. Spotting talent in the corps, which depends upon noticing distinctions, is a ritual of ballet going and a privilege of regular attendance. Perhaps there really are some people who see the corps de ballet as an undifferentiated (white) mass with arms and legs sticking out, but those people need glasses.

While they are twirling in the limelight the soloists, of course, would prefer that viewers ignore the other dancers in the background. Yet, again, one of the hallowed practices of ballet going, a bittersweet mixture of consolation and revenge, is looking where one is not supposed to look – studying the corps de ballet when the soloists are boring, or when, as the late choreographer Marius Petipa is reported to have said, "Madame no good."

In brief, the argument for a uniform corps de ballet is a racist canard not only because it excludes dark-skinned people from most ballet companies at the point of entry, but also because it thoughtlessly assumes all light-skinned dancers look alike. Evidently the skin tone of corps members is less important than staying in line and doing one's best to dance well. Increasing minority representation in the corps would soon make a dark complexion unremarkable. And in any event the argument for "uniformity" has never applied to soloists and principals, who rise out of the corps because they are gifted and able to distinguish themselves from the herd.

The shape and proportions of the body are



Le Corsaire. (Photo: Marty Sohl, ABT)

another matter and are far more significant in determining a ballet dancer's potential for success than many people realize. No less an artist than Anna Pavlova was in the habit of ordering photographs air-brushed to improve the shape of her feet. Ballet is, among other things, a visual art. Crooked or thick legs; feet that lack a pronounced instep or can't stretch; general lack of pliancy and the "wrong" proportions (short legs and a long torso) will eliminate a candidate at an audition regardless of her strength, skill, or intelligence. At auditions today, dancers whose bodies are per-

ceived as flawed are often cut before they have a chance to display their talents. Ironically just as ballet spread around the globe during the twentieth century, winning admirers among a variety of peoples, the value accorded to an "ideal" figure simultaneously increased as abbreviated modern fashions revealed more of the body.

Because of the variety that exists within populations of different ethnicity and geographic origin, science tells us that the concept of race is a cultural fabrication with no basis in fact. Yet the general dispersal of phys-



As Miss Subways in *On the Town* with Tony Yazbeck as Gabey. (Photo: Joan Marcus, Maxolev Productions)

ical traits throughout humanity has not been helpful in integrating the ballet, because the incidence of certain traits may still vary from one population to the next.

To the extent that non-European origins may predispose an individual to feet with a lower instep, for instance, that person is at a disadvantage in auditioning for a job as a ballet dancer because ballet prizes high insteps almost to the point of fetishism. Prominent buttocks become another disadvantage in this context. The question of inequality does not arise at these auditions, however, because the majority of dancers of European origin are also eliminated either for the appearance

of their legs and feet, or for other physical traits similarly regarded as undesirable.

Body parts and their shape thus assume even greater importance than pigmentation in the hiring of ballet dancers. And while it would be relatively easy to dismiss a bias against dark skin for arbitrarily disadvantaging a particular ethnic group, it is much more difficult to dismiss a bias against a physical trait that cuts across ethnic lines, even when people belonging to one group bear the brunt of this discrimination. Under the second set of circumstances, it becomes possible to disadvantage the members of one group while falsely claiming to treat all people fair-

ly and equally. The results of this attitude speak for themselves.

In ballet today the same rules apply to everyone, but we should note that, significantly, exceptions are often made for men because male ballet dancers are fewer and in greater demand than women. This observation brings us to the economics of scarcity. Ballet, as a profession, becomes more difficult to integrate than other fields that confer status, like law or medicine, for the simple reason that the number of opportunities is so severely limited. For all intents and purposes there is no upper limit to the number of people who can become lawyers or doctors in America, despite the difficulties entailed and the exclusivity of certain law firms. Our most elite universities award diplomas by the thousands. Compare this situation with American Ballet Theatre, which offers corps contracts to a scant handful – perhaps three to five dancers – in any given season.

The competitiveness of admission to ABT and admission to a top university cannot be compared without also eyeing the respective number of applications. But if Harvard College, for instance, admits even 5 percent of applicants, then students seeking a bachelor's degree have much better odds in Cambridge than dancers seeking employment have at 890 Broadway. The process of selecting dancers is simply more drawn out. This year ABT accepted about a third of the 4,600 students of various ages who auditioned for spots in its Summer Intensive programs in twenty-one cities nationwide. In addition, the company has 364 students enrolled at its affiliated Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School, with sixty-four in the preprofessional division.

Of the thousand-plus students accepted for advanced training, however, only a very small number squeeze through the bottleneck admitting dancers to the preprofessional ensemble known as the ABT Studio Company. That ensemble has fourteen members. The artistic director then picks dancers for the professional company from that lot as if straining them through a fine-mesh sieve. And

while American Ballet Theatre is not “the only game in town,” the number of opportunities at regional companies is not remotely large enough to place ballet in the same category with other professions.

While on the subject of scarcity, it also may be worthwhile to imagine what an integrated ABT would look like in terms of numbers. If ABT employs a total of eighty-four dancers, and the ratio of blacks to whites were approximately equal to that of American society as a whole (15 percent), then ABT would employ a total of twelve black dancers of both sexes. The company has a long way to go before it achieves even that dubious mark of fairness. Yet at the same time if twelve jobs represent the best that can be achieved, then dancing for ABT can only be a reasonable goal for a tiny minority of black dance students. Ballet dancing is not a normal profession; the opportunities are too scarce. And for black dancers in particular, working at ABT – never mind being promoted to principal – must be like joining the lonely crew of the first mission to Mars.

Someone had to do it, though, and Misty Copeland just did.

The above remarks are in no way meant to excuse the status quo or as an invitation to complacency. They are made in the hope that a clearer understanding of this system and its values will prompt dialogue and an active response. Finding long-term solutions to facilitate the racial integration of our ballet companies will not be easy. It will either demand modifying time-honored aesthetic ideals or compensating for the varying incidence of physical traits among different communities and applying standards in a manner that appears unequal – both troubling prospects in a conservative art that celebrates rules, tradition, and hierarchy.

Yet we should keep in mind that, however obsessed the dancers themselves may be with their bodies and with the strict criteria governing their selection and advancement, a ballet company does not exist in order to select dancers. It exists for the purpose of staging

wonderful performances. And if modifying our mental picture of the ideal ballet body is part of the solution, then we can take some comfort from the fact that this ideal already has evolved over time; while in our own day ballet professionals of different schools may disagree about it.

When the material of art is the body itself, it may be hard for observers to separate aesthetics from the emotions that bodies arouse. This is especially true in a society with a long and infuriating history of racial bias. But perhaps we can at least do away with passing fashions. Photos from the nineteenth century reveal ballet dancers who were shorter and often stouter than their modern counterparts. Women's busts were pronounced in corseted nineteenth-century costumes, belying the opinion held in certain quarters today that for women, at least, the ideal ballet body is prepubescent.

That bizarre, prepubescent view, surely no more ancient than the 1960s teen model Twiggy Lawson and the latter years of choreographer George Balanchine, violates historical precedent and has done incalculable damage to the self-esteem and even to the bodies of young women. Yet while no artistic director brings a champagne glass into the studio to measure the size of a woman's breasts, awkwardness may arise if a generously endowed performer (like Misty Copeland) is required to wear an unstructured top as part of her costume in a Balanchine ballet. That's the easy fix: it simply requires changing the costume.

Each body is unique, of course, and Copeland has a figure some other ballerinas might envy. Though she looks compact, rather than attenuated, she has high insteps and straight legs turned out from the hips. Her turnout (a form of physical conditioning every ballet dancer works to achieve) is particularly beautiful and allows her to execute certain steps with a clarity and exactitude that are exceptionally gratifying for connoisseurs to observe.

So much of ballet is about the steps. They

exist as pure abstractions in the mind, but must come into the world via rough mechanics. Sweaty and determined, the dancers seek to give this vocabulary a form as close to perfection as possible, simultaneously endowing it with human feeling and the inspiration of music. Because of Copeland's turnout, her *entrechats* and *cabrioles* are lovely to behold, as is any step where she raises her leg to the *side à la seconde* or in *écarté*.

Swan Lake is full of such *développés*, offering many opportunities to watch those legs unfold. I remember two moments in particular: The first is the Black Swan Odile's *pirouette à la seconde*, with the ballerina's leg extended in space perfectly turned-out and chiseled, with the flat of her thigh angled upward. The second is a small movement that barely qualifies as a step itself but is really the preparation for a step. At the start of Odile's variation, her left foot darts out low to the side gathering energy for a turn. Though it offers the ballerina a chance to display her foot, the moment is so brief and most dancers are so focused on the difficulties ahead that they throw away the opportunity. Copeland's turned-out foot went naturally into position, however, and for the split-second that is the most this art of movement will allow, all was perfection gleaming in a satin shoe.

Copeland's performance in *Swan Lake* was not entirely magical, however, when she made her local debut at the matinee on June 24. Yet before recalling the point at which she came to grief, her elasticity should be mentioned and the way that natural stretch combines with a certain kind of muscle reflex to produce effortlessly lyrical movement that the ballerina can nevertheless, when she chooses, break off suddenly to intensely dramatic effect. Elasticity is, no doubt, the key to her turnout, but natural stretch – as opposed to the hard-won kind – is not only a blessing, as it can reduce the height of a dancer's leap. Compared to others in her profession (not to us, poor mortals), Copeland lacks elevation and can be classified as a *terre-à-terre* dancer in the line of the famous nineteenth-century

ballerina Fanny Elssler. Then, too, while Copeland's feet are attractive they are not terribly strong and sometimes they do not sustain her in turns.

Here is where her *Swan Lake* disappointed, and the letdown was no minor thing. After a

couple of iffy pirouettes in attitude during the Black Swan variation, she still had to face the infamous series of thirty-two fouetté turns in the coda. Though she made a strong start with alternating single and double fouettés, she quickly fell out of them and began keeping



Swan Lake with James Whiteside. (Photo: Gene Schiavone, ABT)

time with single pirouettes from fifth position. Accidents are always a possibility during live performances, making viewers wince, but this one was particularly dismaying. Other ballerinas have performed this sequence with aplomb, but Copeland still had something she needed to prove.

The ballerina had already danced *Swan Lake* in Australia and in Washington, D.C., and clearly she had taken every care to prepare herself for her New York debut as Odette/Odile. At every other moment she appeared polished and in control, mistress not only of the steps and phrasing, but also with a fully developed characterization that reflected her own ideas. Her Odette was liquid and mercurial, with a wild heart beating beneath her modesty; her Odile was elegant, yet cynical and incisive; and, best of all, throughout these changes in persona the ballerina appeared entirely natural without any of the exaggerations or stock expressions that denote fakery. So how could an artist so well-prepared fall at the crucial moment?

The fouettés were a disaster because they opened the door to sneers from those who would go on to question Copeland's abilities and her subsequent promotion. People who know nothing else about *Swan Lake* know how to count to thirty-two. All this seemed unnecessary. Although Odile's fouettés are emblematic, one of the greatest dancers of the twentieth century, the late Maya Plisetskaya, thought nothing of substituting a manège of piqué turns.

Not every ballerina is a "fouetté girl" eager to compete in David Lichine's *Graduation Ball*. Alessandra Ferri, for instance, found the sensual plasticity of Kenneth MacMillan's ballets much more to her liking, and similarly, at New York City Ballet Wendy Whelan gravitated to modern works. When it was Whelan's assignment to fouetté, as Hippolyta in Balanchine's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it always seemed as if the stagehands at the New York State Theater flooded the scene with extra smoke. Then, too, as dancers age they begin to restrict their repertory, eschewing "tours de force"

without necessarily compromising their artistry.

When Copeland performs *Swan Lake* again, she should perform a manège à la Plisetskaya. Then her detractors can say whatever they please. Her fans will be free to enjoy her performance without regrets, and she will have the dignity of having made an artistic decision. The broader lesson to be learned from artists like Ferri and Whelan is that in the future, Copeland must choose her repertory judiciously with an eye to her strengths.

While Kitri in *Don Quixote* has been suggested as an ideal vehicle for her, I don't agree. Kitri is a jumping role, and while a ballerina's extension can distract from the height of her jumps in the opening scene, in the jumps of the so-called "Vision" scene, she has nowhere to hide. Then, once again, the coda of the grand pas de deux in *Don Quixote* involves those pesky fouettés. At some point most of the nineteenth-century Russian classics resort to that deadly whirl, which Copeland should avoid. She will be more at home in the English repertory, in gentle pieces like Ashton's *Cinderella* and *A Month in the Country*. MacMillan's *Manon* would be her apotheosis.

In the meantime, we already have the example of what she can do in *Romeo and Juliet*. Because Copeland is a serious dramatic actress and not a soubrette, the scene of Juliet chasing around a room with childish glee and taunting her Nurse is not this ballerina's finest. Her mischief feels jaded and she is not convincingly giddy. From the moment Juliet begins to mature, however, Copeland steps fully into the role. Her entrance at the Capulet ball is sensational, and not only for the innocent wonder of Juliet's expression as she looks around to assess the glittering assembly – an emotion this dancer, as a child of poverty, may understand particularly well. No, Copeland's entrance is also remarkable for the way her upturned face catches the light, for the quickening of energy that denotes her character's excitement and the artist's eagerness to perform. It's the moment Copeland reveals her-



Romeo and Juliet with Joseph Gorak. (Photo: Rosalie O'Connor, ABT)

self as a star, more dramatically and more genuinely than if someone had snatched a veil from her face.

During the Capulets' ball, she dances with her customary softness, shyly slipping away from Paris with a delicacy and celerity that convey Juliet's youth. After Juliet is discovered in a private tryst with Romeo, Copeland has another stunning moment. When the Nurse whispers Romeo's identity in her ear, this Juliet's face registers a depth of sorrowful understanding that, like a sudden growth

spurt, carries her beyond adolescence. Experiencing the first tingle of romantic attraction is not what makes her a woman as much as coming to recognize the world's cruelty and stupidity.

In the scenes that follow the ecstasy of love-making, Copeland deepens this interpretation and our sense of Juliet's maturity. She is not hysterical, but insightful – an intelligent and determined young woman driven by circumstances to an act of desperation. Copeland's Juliet knows what she wants, and can

see clearly what the consequences of failure will mean. She has had a taste of freedom; and perhaps she dreads losing that agency as much as she dreads losing her true love.

To see Juliet this way— not as an adolescent driven by passions over which she has no control, but as a woman battling for the right to order her own life — is to realize the full potential of the nineteenth-century Romantic movement in ballet, where love and freedom are intertwined and pitted against moral corruption, against conventional notions of propriety and monetary gain, or against the authority of a soul-crushing and despotic regime. This approach suits Copeland and her personal narrative especially well, making it likely that Juliet will be among her finest roles.

It's easy to imagine that Copeland's own struggle has given her some insight into Juliet's character. Romanticism, carried forward into the twentieth century and updated by composer Serge Prokofiev and the librettists of the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, evidently still has revolutionary work to do in the twenty-first century, where many battles for freedom remain to be won.

In the United States of America, discussing racism is essential and cannot be avoided. Those who seek to change the status quo should not be content to focus on racism exclusively, however, as if discussing the economic or cultural systems in which racism embeds itself were merely a distraction or a way of changing the subject and dodging the all-important moral issue. Placing racism first on the agenda can even be counterproductive. Would anyone argue, for example, that racism needed to be vanquished before the United States could abolish slavery? If that were the case, the South would still be in chains.

Because opening people's minds is all the more difficult within fossilized systems that perpetuate racism, changing those systems

must take priority. Slavery was first and foremost an economic institution; and if we could undo the economic segregation that exists in America's housing market today, then racial segregation would also diminish, with the corresponding benefits that accrue when barriers fall and people of different conditions grow accustomed to sharing neighborhoods. The point is that where injustice exists practical steps must be taken to eliminate it without waiting for opposition to soften or for society's consciousness to enlarge. To liberate the mind, we need healthy communities.

To that end, American Ballet Theatre should act immediately to hire more African Americans as guest soloists and principals, drawing upon the existing pool of talent and bypassing the excruciatingly slow "trickle-up" system of promotion from within the company. Some names immediately come to mind: Michaela DePrince, Osiel Gouneo, Brooklyn Mack, and Ashley Murphy. They could begin by performing roles already familiar to them, while using their time in residence to learn other pieces in the repertory and adjust to ABT's house culture. Guest contracts would also have the advantage of not wasting the artists' time (ballet dancers spend an inordinate amount of time waiting to appear on stage), and not robbing, and thus penalizing, the companies that currently employ those dancers. Within a single season, ABT could reach a goal that otherwise might take decades and another generation to attain.

Whether such guest contracts would reduce the pressures on ABT's current standard-bearer, Misty Copeland, or merely add to her burden, the effort is necessary. While Copeland surely has many wonderful performances yet to give, in a sense she has already played her role by breaking through a barrier. A sudden explosion of black talent at America's national ballet troupe now would signal a forward-looking start to the next seventy-five years.