Style Blog

Orphan No. 27 pirouettes to stardom

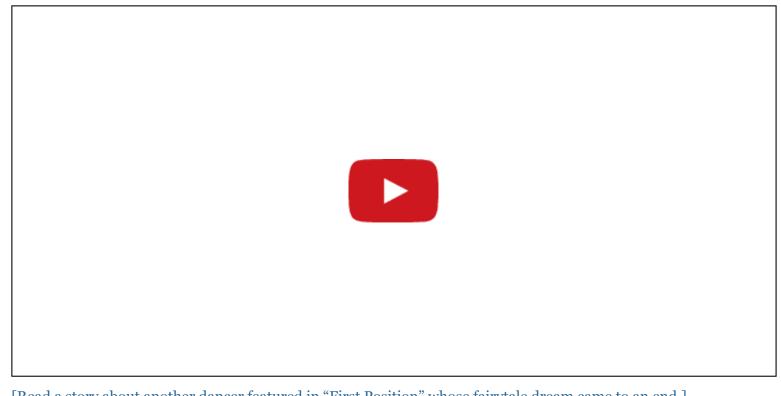
By Sarah Kaufman July 21

What does Michaela DePrince have left to conquer? As a 4-year-old orphan in Sierra Leone, the thought of being adopted made her physically sick, but she overcame her fear to enjoy a loving family life in New Jersey. At the orphanage she'd been called "the devil child" because of a skin condition called vitiligo, which created a mottled appearance on her neck and chest, but she resolutely pursued the skin-baring art of ballet.

Her mother hand-dyed her tights and pointe shoes to match her skin color, but being the only black girl at the barre and being passed over for roles "was very difficult," <u>DePrince</u>, <u>20</u>, <u>tells the August issue of Glamour magazine</u>. She is featured in a two-page spread as one of its "Glamour Women."

It's an accurate title: DePrince, wearing a lacy Maison Margiela bodysuit, is beautiful, chic and effortlessly poised in an abdominal-testing twist. Check out the elegant carriage of her shoulders, and those graceful legs. Her arresting, seen-everything eyes project gentle sympathy, as if to say, "I know you can't do this, but that's okay; I'll take it on. Just relax and enjoy."

It's no wonder <u>MGM has acquired the rights to DePrince's memoir</u>, "Taking Flight," for a feature film. Her story of boundless tenacity and against-the-odds optimism swoops from one extreme to another. Her birth parents died in Sierra Leone's civil war. She grew up in a suburban family of 10 other kids, most adopted. At 14, she won a scholarship at the prestigious Youth America Grand Prix ballet competition, and she was one of the dancers spotlighted in "First Position," an engaging 2012 documentary about the contest.



[Read a story about another dancer featured in "First Position" whose fairytale dream came to an end.]

Now DePrince is a ballerina in Amsterdam's Dutch National Ballet, one of Europe's most interesting and forward-looking ballet companies.

"You don't have to hold on to your past," DePrince says in Glamour, sounding wise beyond her years. "If you can find a way to overcome the bad parts, great things can happen."

But her ultimate goal? To open a school in Sierra Leone. For now, DePrince also works with the Girl Scouts and <u>War Child</u>, helping kids recover from life in a war zone. Inspiration can come in great leaps—like becoming a black ballerina in a mostly white art form—or small steps, like spreading love. Says DePrince, "Sometimes you just need to make a little ripple to open the doors for others."

Sarah Kaufman received the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Criticism. She is the author of THE ART OF GRACE: On Moving Well Through Life, coming in Nov. 2015. She has been The Washington Post's dance critic since 1996, and after logging time in opera houses, black boxes, and dive bars, what moves her most is seeing grace happen where she least expects it.