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How Ballerina Michaela DePrince Was Recruited for Beyoncé's 'Lemonade'

The dancer can be seen in the 'Freedom' portion of the visual album



In **Beyoncé's** new visual album, "Lemonade," many images appear ghostlike: a crown of thorns, a fire-lit stage, a group of silent children—and a ballerina in white with a haunting story of her own.

Michaela DePrince, the dancer in the sequence accompanying the song "Freedom," endured horrors that include starvation, abuse and the death of her parents in war-torn Sierra Leone. Now the 21-year-old, who moved to the U.S. at age four and was taking ballet lessons by the time she was five, is getting a dose of pop-culture exposure with her turn in "Freedom" — a song featuring black women in a setting that evokes the 1800s Deep South.

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The scenes included near the end of "Lemonade," the album that [debuted in an hour-long video form on HBO last weekend](#), feature DePrince in an old-fashioned tutu and headpiece perched in a tree hung with Spanish moss, sitting at a long table with women in white dresses and dancing on an outdoor stage.

DePrince said she thought it was a joke when she heard Beyoncé wanted to cast her in the video. But soon she was boarding a plane to New Orleans from Amsterdam, where she lives and performs as a member of the Dutch National Ballet. She shot the sequence at a plantation over two chilly days in December before returning to the Netherlands to make her debut as a principal dancer in "The Nutcracker."

"She said I looked like I was a creature from another planet," DePrince said of an exchange with the pop star. She recalled being starstruck by the singer. "She walked up to me and said, 'It's such an honor to have you here.' I was really cheesy and said, 'The honor is mine.' I was on cloud nine."

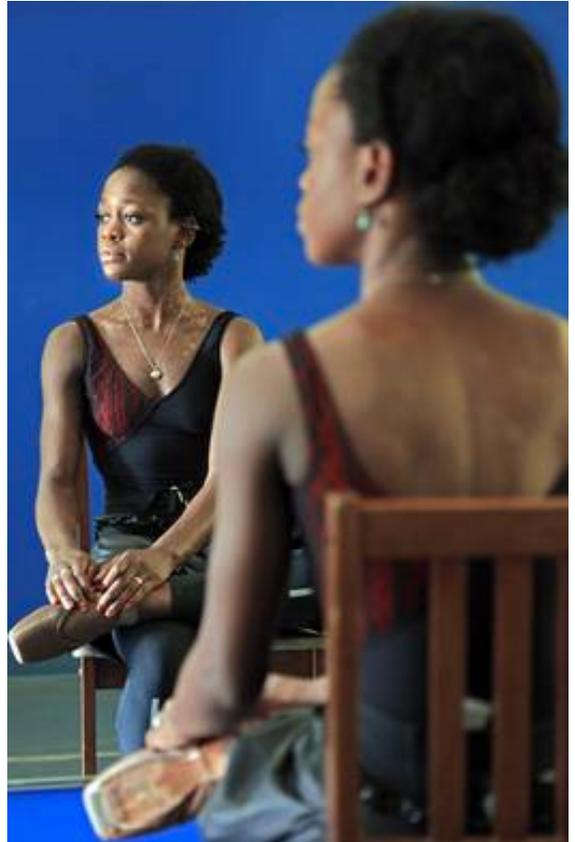
The dancer is now in New York, performing Thursday and Friday for Youth America Grand Prix at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. DePrince, who co-authored the 2014 memoir “Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina,” had suffered tragedies when she was no older than Beyoncé’s own preschool-age daughter, Blue Ivy Carter. The dancer’s father was shot to death by rebels in Sierra Leone’s civil war and her mother, sacrificing food for her family, died soon after. DePrince’s uncle left her at an orphanage. Born with the condition vitiligo, which made her skin appear spotted, she was branded as “the Devil’s child” and shunned. A white American couple, Elaine and Charles DePrince, adopted her, bringing her home to Cherry Hill, N.J. In the ensuing years, they supported her ambitions to become a ballet dancer.

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During the shoot in Louisiana, DePrince put on a harness and got hoisted into a tree with other women who appear like apparitions on its branches. Scared she would fall, she clung to the bark while mosquitoes bit her feet. Next, she shot the dining-table scene in a field. Beyoncé delivered a prayer over the food, which had been sitting out too long to eat. DePrince had a five-minute warning before appearing on an outdoor stage for her ballet sequence. She choreographed her own moves, nervous under the gaze of Beyoncé’s crew. Because she was cold, she avoided large jumps to prevent injury.

Between takes, Blue Ivy showed DePrince ballet positions she had recently learned.

The dancer also introduced herself to Beyoncé’s husband, **Jay-Z**, widely speculated as the subject of the album’s songs about infidelity. “I don’t know if he was bothered by



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