

# The Next Chapter

Chances are, you're already obsessed with Michaela DePrince. The 20-year-old has been a bona fide star ever since her appearance in the 2011 documentary *First Position*. She's ferociously talented, for starters, and fans can't get enough of her knockout facility and relentless drive. But her story—as detailed in the recently released *Taking Flight*, which she coauthored with her mom, Elaine—is also the stuff of fairy tales: DePrince started out as an orphan in Sierra Leone and ended up a world-class ballerina. Huge talent + huge story = media catnip, and over the past few years DePrince has gotten tons and tons (and tons) of press.

Now in her second year dancing with Dutch National Ballet, DePrince has reached an interesting and unusual point in her career. She has to balance the pressures of international stardom with the challenge of dancing in the corps of an elite ballet company. One day, she's being featured on a TV talk show; the next, she's standing in a long line of swans.

How is she handling it all? With grace and humility. In fact, DePrince refuses to let her now-famous history define her. Instead, she's focusing on her goal of becoming a principal dancer and hopes that the spotlight will soon shift from her offstage persona to her onstage presence. "I'm here not because of my story," she says, "but because of who I am as an artist."

## Settling In in Holland

DePrince, who trained at The Rock School for Dance Education and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School at American Ballet Theatre, landed a spot in DNB's junior company two years ago, after guesting in a production of *The Nutcracker* in the Netherlands. Her friends Rinus Sprong and Thom Stuart, who'd organized the *Nutcracker* run, suggested that she take company class at DNB and recommended her to artistic director Ted Brandsen. "It was immediately clear that she was really strong technically and had an amazing jump," Brandsen says. "I offered her a position straightaway."

DePrince quickly felt at home at DNB, with its varied repertoire of classical and contemporary works and diverse roster of dancers. "I love the atmosphere here—the dancers are all so different," she says. "I can love my body the way it is, instead of eating salads every day and constantly worrying about my shape, like I did in the U.S." Now comfortable in her own skin, DePrince has the freedom and confidence to focus on developing her artistry. She's taken full advantage of some surprise opportunities that have come her way—like performing David Dawson's high-octane *A Million Kisses to My Skin* on opening night after another dancer got injured. "It was crazy! I had only two days to rehearse it before the premiere," she says. "It ended up going well, and I'm happy the company knows it can rely on me."



### Finding Her Voice

While technique comes easily to DePrince, she says it's harder for her to open up artistically. Ballet master Charlotte Chapellier has been helping her figure out how to identify with each role, and how to use her feet, hands and head with greater detail. "She digests all the information very fast, and she's not afraid of working," Chapellier says. "She's eager to learn." These days, there's a newfound depth to DePrince's dancing, and she's blossomed in nuanced, lyrical roles, including as one of the pas de trois soloists in *Swan Lake*.

While she's still working out the kinks in her port de bras—"I used to be a competitive swimmer, and my shoulders are hyperextended, so it's easy for them to sneak up"—DePrince is trying not to get bogged down in self-criticism. "I've had to learn to let go and be less of a perfectionist," she says. "In the end, it's not about having a perfect fifth position, but about enjoying the ballets and sharing the emotion I'm feeling with the audience."

### Handling the Pressure

DePrince is humbled and a bit overwhelmed by all the media attention she's received. She admits she's tired of telling her tale over and over again, but acknowledges that speaking about her experiences has also been therapeutic. "Yes, I wrote the book because I didn't want to tell the story every single day," she says, laughing. "At the same time, I wanted to show how you can use the things you go through to make yourself stronger." DePrince plans to use some of the proceeds from the book—and from the movie version of the story, which is in the works—to open a ballet school in Sierra Leone. "But right now, I want to focus on my dancing," she says.

Brandsen wants her to focus on dancing, too. He put a hold on media requests for a few months this year to give DePrince a break from the frenzy. "As her artistic director, I feel responsible for her artistic and personal well being," he says. "It's not good for a person so young to be under such stress." Still, he's impressed with how DePrince is handling it all. "She's very curious, very open, and is soaking up all the information she can get," he says. "She just keeps growing."



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### Becoming a Grown-Up

DePrince says she's changed a lot in the years since *First Position*. "I don't take life so seriously anymore!" she says. "And I've learned that if you're injured, you have to take the time to rest. You might want to push through pain, but you have to think about your career in the long term." As a young teen, Michaela also ate "horrible foods" and didn't realize the value of a healthy diet. Now, she cooks constantly. ("I love making lentil soup!")

But the biggest change is that DePrince has simply grown up. She lives in her own apartment in Amsterdam, bikes to work every day and travels to Germany twice a month to visit her boyfriend, Skyler Maxey-Wert, a dancer with Dresden Semperoper Ballett. "I loved living in NYC and having my friends and family around," she says. "But here, it's more about the work. Now my goal is to become the artist I've always dreamed of being."

## Skyler Hearts Michaela

Michaela DePrince and fellow dancer Skyler Maxey-Wert are one of the cutest couples in ballet. We asked Maxey-Wert to share the things he loves most about his girlfriend. “Her determination and will to succeed. She has such a strong idea of what she wants and works hard every day to accomplish it.” “Her silly sense of humor. Sometimes she laughs so hard she kind of loses control and can’t form a sentence! That makes me laugh even harder.” “She gets really nervous if I give her compliments or look at her too long. I think it’s adorable. “We can have fun doing anything—from cooking to glow-in-the dark mini-golfing to just hanging out and watching a movie. Every moment we spend together is special.”

### Fast Facts

**Favorite food:** “Omelettes. I can eat them anytime.”

**Weirdest thing in her dance bag:** “A back brace to help keep my stomach pulled in.”

**Latest obsession:** “Onesies! I have a purple one, a red one, a zebra-print one and even a pig-print one.”

**Preshow ritual:** “I have to tie my ribbons twice. I had a dream that I missed a performance because I couldn’t get my ribbons to stay in.”

**Dream role:** “Aurora has been my dream since I was little.”

**Secret wish:** “I’d love to have a leotard line—but the only things I can sew are my pointe shoes!”

**Nickname:** “Arthur Mitchell, the founder of Dance Theatre of Harlem, used to call me Mickey.”

**Most-played music:** “I’m really into Taylor Swift and John Legend right now.”

**Advice for *Dance Spirit* readers:** “Don’t give up on yourself. It’s OK to be different! Never try to be like anyone else.”



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