

I Was Orphan Number 27: Ballerina Michaela DePrince's Inspiring Story

by Erika Hayasaki

Michaela DePrince lost her family as a girl in Sierra Leone; now she's a world-class ballerina, her triumph soon to be a Hollywood movie. But her biggest goal? To inspire young girls.



When she met her prospective mother, Orphan Number 27 was wearing a vomit-stained dress. She'd been living at the shelter, home to 26 other children in her native Sierra Leone, ever since her father was murdered in the country's brutal civil war and her mother died from fever. Only four years old, she was so nervous about getting adopted, she'd gotten sick. After all, adults at the orphanage had told her time

and again she was too ugly to ever be chosen, calling her "the devil child" because of her vitiligo (a skin condition that causes loss of pigment). "But I guess I was a little sassy," she recalls. "Whenever people called me things, I would say, 'I don't care. I'm going to *be* someone.'"

And she is: Today Michaela DePrince stands as one of very few black classical ballerinas in the world, and MGM just snapped up the film rights to her memoir, *Taking Flight*. "When I look back at all the things I've been through and everything I've accomplished," she says, "I realize, Wow, I am very blessed."

Her career seems almost fated: Outside her orphanage one day, the wind had literally blown a magazine onto her face; the cover showed a ballerina *en pointe*. "The dancer looked beautiful and happy—that's what caught my eye," Michaela remembers. "I wanted to be happy." And when she met her new mother, Elaine DePrince, that tattered photo was the first thing she handed her.

"Michaela's story is astonishing, but it's her talent and perseverance that will make her a star."

—Virginia Johnson, artistic director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem

The DePrinces brought Michaela to Cherry Hill, New Jersey, to raise her as one of their 11 children (nine of whom are adopted) and quickly put her in dance class. "There was so much love right away," says Michaela. "I had never been surrounded by something like that." It wasn't long before she knew she couldn't live without ballet, even as she was reminded she didn't fit the dancer stereotype. Her mother spent hours dyeing Michaela's pale costumes and pointe shoes to match her darker skin, and the young dancer was told she wasn't right for various roles because her body was too athletic. "I put up a front that I was fine with being the only black girl or not getting a role," she says. "But it was very difficult."

By age 14 she starred in a documentary, *First Position*, as she competed for—and won—a prestigious scholarship to the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School at the American Ballet Theatre in New York; today, at 20, she's a member of the Dutch National Ballet in Amsterdam and hopes to be a role model for young people, not just through dance but also by working with the Girl Scouts and War Child, a group

that helps children in conflict zones. Her ultimate dream is to open a school in Sierra Leone.

"Sometimes you just need to make a little ripple to open the doors for others," she says. "I still find it amazing how that magazine cover came at the perfect time, just as I was almost losing hope." Last year she actually found the dancer in that photo, Magali Messac, a French prima ballerina who has since retired; the two hope to meet this summer. "Michaela's story—the magic of it, but equally the hard work and belief in her dream—is remarkable," says Messac. "She will inspire other young girls to dream high and believe in themselves."