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“I APPROACH every day like it’s my first ballet class,” Misty Copeland says. “Like I’m still that girl striving to get into ABT.” ABT would be the prestigious American Ballet Theatre. The now-33-year-old landed among its ranks at 17 and was promoted to principal dancer last summer. She’s the first black woman to hold the title in ABT’s 76-year history.

The road to the top wasn’t easy. While Misty was growing up, her family bounced between homes in Southern California. She took her first ballet class at 13—super late in bunhead years. Once at ABT, she found she had to prove herself in new ways. “I had times when, as an African-American woman, I felt that I didn’t belong in the ballet world,” Misty says. When Prince cast her in a 2009 music video, “I began to understand my full potential,” she says. She’d be the icon’s muse and friend until his death last April. “Having someone say ‘I trust you and your talent’ was all it took to start feeling like I could be in control of my career and make things happen on my own.”

And she has—in a huge way. See her multiple endorsement deals (her Under Armour ads are viral hits), a TV show and biopic in development, even her own Barbie doll. This month, she launches her first dancewear line, *Égal Dance*. She credits her baller(ina) status to her barriers-be-damned determination. “Even when you think you’ve arrived, you have to keep working. Not everyone is going to like you or think you’re the right fit. But hearing *no* makes you stronger.”



“There’s no wrong way to create your own path, but you have to find support. On those days when you want to give up, you have to have people in your life who are going to keep you striving.”

HOODIE, TOP, *Égal Dance*.  
JEANS, *7 For All Mankind*  
*b(air) denim*. EARRINGS,  
*Pearl Collective*