

Orphan #27: Michaela DePrince takes journey to stardom

By CHERYL WANG
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Almost 17 years ago, yet another little girl became an orphan in the war-torn Sierra Leone. However, because of her skin condition vitiligo which discolored her skin on her body, she was thought of as the “devil child” and was immediately sent to an orphanage. There, out of 27 orphans, she was ranked orphan No. 27.

Born Mabinty Bangura, Michaela DePrince, now a world-class ballerina at Amsterdam’s Dutch National Ballet, was orphan No. 27.

DePrince’s journey from the Sierra Leone orphanage to the international stage and Hollywood, where a movie based on her memoir “Taking Flight” will soon be released, is one of the most inspiring stories of determination and strength.

“When I look back at all the things I’ve been through and everything I’ve accomplished,” DePrince says to Glamour Magazine, “I realize, Wow, I am very blessed.”

DePrince was orphaned when she was just 3 years old after her father had been shot by rebels at a diamond mine in Sierra Leone. Her sick mother starved to death shortly after,

leaving DePrince to her uncle who sent her to an orphanage.

There, she was ranked last out of all the orphans and consequently received the worst care. It was almost by a stroke of luck that couple Elaine and Charles DePrince from Cherry Hill, New Jersey decided to adopt her at the last minute along with Mabinty Suma.

While the journey to America through the adoption process was grueling and now the details are fuzzy,

DePrince clearly remembers just one thing she had with her the entire time, a page from a magazine that blew in her face one day at the orphanage featuring a “white lady...wearing a very short, glittering pink skirt that stuck out all around her.”

That ballerina on the cover, DePrince writes in her memoir, not only inspired her to later pursue a career in dance, but more importantly “reminded me I was alive.”

“When I saw the joy in her face, I was determined to be happy too...At that point in my life, I decided to be exactly like that lady someday,” DePrince writes.

In America, that tattered photograph remained her source of motivation, inspiration, and hope. At

the age of 14, she won a scholarship to the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School at the American Ballet Theatre in New York. At the same time, she was featured in the documentary, *First Position*.

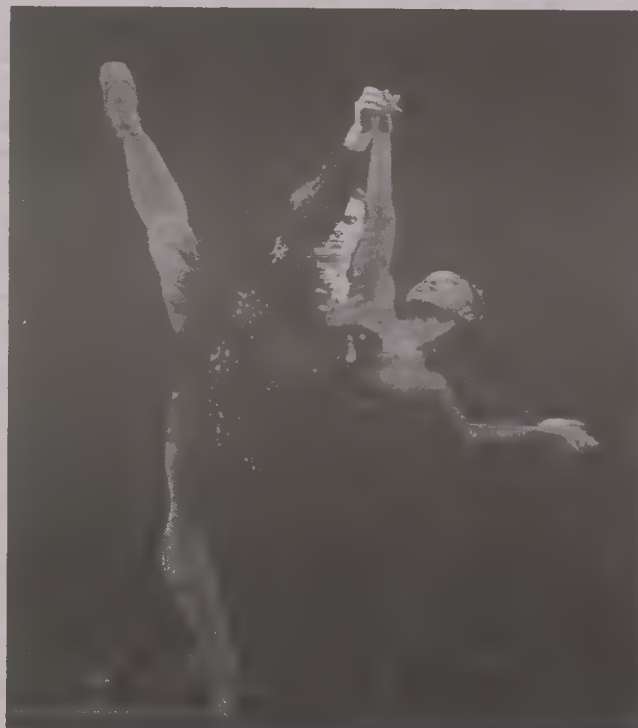
However, her journey to become the world-class ballerina at Amsterdam’s Dutch National Ballet that she is today was not without obstacles. Even after coming to America, DePrince continues to battle racism.

She was often told that her skin color and muscular body type are not suitable to star in certain roles. “I put up a front that I was fine with being the only black girl or not getting a role,” DePrince explains.

Determined to use her experience to help other girls, DePrince’s ultimate goal is to open a free school for dance in Sierra Leone to provide girls in poverty the opportunities she was once denied.

“There is no way that anyone could experience a war and witness all the horror that it brings without gaining a greater respect for life and its possibilities,” DePrince writes. From her past and her journey, she “also learned about courage, compassion and sacrifice.”

However, the inspiration behind Michaela DePrince’s



Michaela DePrince performs with partner Samuel Wilson. photo courtesy of The Dance Enthusiast

story lies not in her war-torn past nor her arduous trek to America, but rather in her resilience in times of adversity, hope for the future, and determination to help others the way she was helped.

“Michaela’s story is astonishing, but it’s her talent and perseverance that will make her a star” says Virginia Johnson, the artistic director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Especially for an American audience, DePrince’s journey reveals the inequality that is

inherent in this world, and through telling her story, reminds us about the privileges and opportunities many of us have at their fingertips.

It is then only right that her story inspires and motivates us to not squander the opportunities we are given, but work harder so that one day, we can provide the same chances to children in underprivileged areas.

“Sometimes you just need to make a little ripple to open the doors for others.”

Plastic water bottles not a sustainable alternative to tap water

By MARGAUX WINTER
STAFF WRITER

Bottled water is often marketed as a cleaner alternative to tap water, but this advertising may be misleading.

This product is not as closely regulated as consumers think. According to Peter Gleick’s book, “Bottled and Sold: The Story Behind Our Obsession With Bottled Water,” 45% of bottled water brands come from tap water.

These municipally sourced brands, including Aquafina and Dasani, are not required to note the source of their water on their label.

Words such as “glacier water,” and “mountain water,” are unregulated, and “may not indicate that the water is necessarily from a pristine area,” according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Despite over 170 bottles water companies selling 50 billion plastic water bottles per year, only one person in the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) oversees bottled water regulations.

Bottled water manufacturers are only required to perform

their own tests on sources and products, and a submission of their results to the FDA is not required.

In addition, FDA cannot regulate in-state commerce, yet 60 to 70% of bottled water is produced and consumed within state lines.

On the other hand, all municipal sources of water are tested multiple times a day. In cities exceeding a population of one million, tap water is tested 300 times per month, and water treatment centers are subject to random quality checks by the EPA.

Considering that so much bottled water comes from municipal sources, then wouldn’t that mean it is safe for consumption? Well, yes, but the quality of water is far from the only issue with bottled water, not to mention the difference in price.

Making bottles to meet the demand for bottled water uses over 17 million barrels of oil annually, enough to fuel 1.3 million cars for a year.

Adding to the environmental harm, only about 23% of purchased water bottles were recycled in 2014. This means that 38 billion plastic water

bottles were wasted, around \$1 billion worth of plastic.

Wasted plastic often ends up in the ocean. When eaten by wildlife, it fills their stomachs without providing nutrients, leading to death. In 2008, the Western Pacific Garbage Patch had 46 times as much plastic as plankton.

With the average world recycling of beverage containers being 50%, the U.S. is falling short. An obvious answer would be to recycle more, but it should be noted that around 50% of Americans don’t have curbside recycling.

One solution can be found with container deposit legislation (CDL). CDL is any law that requires a collection of a monetary deposit on the reusable packaging of drink containers at the point of sale.

When the container is returned to an authorized redemption center, the deposit is refunded to the redeemer.

Although this does cost the bottled water companies, it is a fraction of their profits. For

example, Poland Springs brand water costs Nestle just 6 to 11 cents a gallon to extract, process, and package, and yet they sell it at a price of \$6 a



photo courtesy of AJ Goren

A water bottle filling station outside of First Beall, featuring a display tracking how much waste it has saved in terms of plastic water bottles.

gallon.

The 10 states with a 5 cent return credit have a 70% return

rate, while Michigan, with a 10 cent return credit, has a 97% return rate.