# Choreographer Coral Messam battles back after stroke to reclaim her art and strength



Coral Messam, a rising star in the world of choreography, has recently shared her harrowing experience following a stroke that significantly altered her life and work. Reflecting on the moment she realised something was profoundly wrong, she described it as akin to a horror movie—a painful betrayal that felt entirely at odds with her identity as someone who has dedicated her life to movement and expression. "This is far, far from who I was. It is soul destroying to the maximum,” she stated, revealing the gravity of her emotional struggle.

Messam's trajectory as a choreographer has been nothing short of impressive. Prior to her medical crisis in 2023, she had collaborated with acclaimed filmmaker Steve McQueen on his latest film, Blitz, and had taken on the role of movement director for the stage prequel to the hit Netflix series, Stranger Things. Her résumé brims with notable credits, including her work on Small Island at the National Theatre and much-acclaimed projects such as Michaela Coel's I May Destroy You. She expressed her artistry simply: “I create work from the heart. It’s my superpower. I seem to bring out the magic in a cast – I’m all about you being yourself, and just having a really good time.”

Sitting in a bar adjacent to the Phoenix Theatre in London, where Stranger Things opened, Messam articulated her mixed feelings about returning to a space filled with memories of professional triumphs as well as deeply personal challenges. Despite her physical limitations—her left arm, heavily impacted by the stroke—she resolutely navigates her surroundings with a sense of defiance and determination, although she acknowledges the emotional toll this journey has taken on her. The strokes of grief often break through in tears, as she reflects on the highs and lows of her recent past.

The collaboration with McQueen has proven particularly formative for Messam. They first joined forces on Lovers Rock, part of McQueen’s Small Axe series, and she asserts a powerful connection with him. “I will do anything for him,” she remarked, noting their shared instincts and the creative synergy that characterises their work. In Blitz, she crafted intricate dance sequences for various settings, bringing to life the vibrancy of London during World War II, where diverse cultural influences intersected in the nightclubs of the time.

The work she undertook for Stranger Things was formally initiated with a captivating video call with directors Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin, who were impressed by Messam’s reputation within the industry. The National Theatre’s Rufus Norris had enthusiastically recommended her, saying, “You’re looking for a fucking good movement director called Coral.” With a clear vision for the show, Messam immersed herself in research, employing the lindy hop—an iconic dance born from African American culture—to depict the play's small-town setting in the rebellious atmosphere of 1959. Each character’s engagement with this dance symbolises a quest for freedom, with the troubled Henry Creel standing out as an exception whose aversion to the uninhibited nature of dance reflects his internal struggles.

Despite the joyful resonance of movement, Messam’s life took a jarring turn in July 2023, when she suffered her stroke unexpectedly at home. The subsequent weeks in hospital and intensive rehabilitation reshaped her reality. "From being on top of the world, loving life, being free in my body, it was a massive change," she recounted, articulating key moments of trauma alongside the end of a long-term relationship. Her own challenges mirrored the character of Henry, whose transformation initiates with a similar focus on his left side—a striking parallel that continues to inform Messam's artistic lens.

Carly Christensen, a neurophysiotherapist who began working with Messam after their paths crossed at a retreat, offered insight into the profound impact a stroke can have. She remarked on Messam’s resilient spirit, affirming, “When I met Coral, I knew she was still in there.” This shared tenacity fuels their relationship, with Messam beginning to reclaim her strength and agency. In a light-hearted moment, she adeptly taught the entire therapy team how to lindy hop, showcasing her innate ability to cultivate joy through movement.

As Messam edges back into her professional life, she is engaging with the current cast of Stranger Things, sharing her knowledge and passion for dance. Her commitment is evident, underscored by a determination to rise stronger than before. “I want to be stronger than I was before. I’m a lover of life, and I’m not done yet,” she expressed, embodying a spirit of resilience that stands as an inspiration for both her colleagues in the arts and those facing their own struggles.

### Reference Map

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Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/20/choreographer-coral-messam-steve-mcqueen-stranger-things> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/20/choreographer-coral-messam-steve-mcqueen-stranger-things> - An article detailing choreographer Coral Messam's experience with a stroke in 2023, her work on Steve McQueen's film 'Blitz,' and the stage prequel to 'Stranger Things.' It highlights her contributions to productions like 'Small Island' at the National Theatre and her collaboration with Michaela Coel on 'I May Destroy You.'
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