

INSIDE:

Ballet Shoe Maker
Makes A Leap Page 19

OPRAH'S

NEW YORK BUSINESS®

Vol. XI, No. 51

Ballet shoe firm making strides with footwear



KEEPING BALLERINAS ON THEIR TOES: John and Eliza Gaynor Minden's ballet shoes are the products of personal experience; Ms. Gaynor Minden comes from a family of ballet dancers.

Slippers built for durability, comfort gain a toehold among weary dancers

BY CARA S. TRAGER

SET IN A CHELSEA brownstone, the Gaynor Minden ballet shoe shop exudes a strong sense of tradition. Even its rose-colored Victorian sofa seems to pay homage to the past.

But looks can be deceiving.

Taking its cue from today's high-tech athletic footwear, Gaynor Minden Inc. has created toe slippers that may be a great leap forward for the dance world. They emphasize comfort and durability, features of interest to sore-footed dancers and their increasingly budget-conscious dance companies. The design has helped the 3-year-old company win orders from dancers in some of the world's top ballet companies.

"We want to get the word out that ballet dancers are elite athletes, every bit as deserving of high-tech shoes as basketball players and runners," says John Minden, the company's chief executive. "What we've done is to bring the pointe shoe into the modern era."

Design same for 160 years

But getting a bigger toehold in the market will not be easy. Dancers are as traditional in their slipper-buying as their performing. *The Nutcracker* at Christmas. Until Gaynor Minden came along, the basic design for toe shoes hadn't changed in 160 years, and the company faces two well-established rivals. Though dance companies pay for their performers' footwear, they don't dictate what they wear.

"It's difficult to break in because

dancers already have the company and the maker at the company they like," says Michael M. Kaiser, executive director of the American Ballet Theatre.

Gaynor Minden's design was born of personal experience. Eliza Gaynor Minden, Mr. Minden's wife and the company's president, hails from a family of ballet dancers. She knew how much dancers' feet hurt from dancing in pointe slippers and how often their shoes needed to be replaced. The shoes can last one performance or sometimes only part of a performance.

The classic pink pointe shoe, which first appeared on the ballet stage in the 1830s, is constructed of leather, cardboard, layers of burdap and special paste, and it must be broken in before a professional dancer can take her first step in it. Often, dancers hammer the toe box to soften the sound of the slipper, and they cut the shank to make it conform better to their feet—which also accelerates the shoe's deterioration.

In contrast, the Gaynor Minden shoe is made of a synthetic rubber-like material sandwiched between layers of shock-absorbing cushion, and its shank can be adjusted with a

Toe shoes worn by ballet performers can only last one performance, or only part of a performance

hair dryer. As a result, Ms. Minden says her slipper lasts three to five times longer.

With its retail price of \$70, the Gaynor Minden shoe costs about \$10 more than the average pointe

slipper from Freed of London. No market-share data are available, but ballet slippers made by Freed or by Capezio Ballet Makers Inc. in Totowa, N.J., are generally regarded as the strongest sales performers in the pointe market.

"We feel we could charge more, but we don't want to discourage trial use," says Ms. Minden. Such a strategy appears to have helped. Gaynor Minden counts among its customers dancers in the Kirov Academy of Ballet, the Joffrey Ballet, the Dance Theater of Harlem and the Houston Ballet. It also ships to Europe and Asia.

Gaynor Minden, with 12 employees, expects sales to reach \$1 million this year.

On rare occasions, the company will provide top professional dancers with sample shoes, but most of its marketing efforts are focused on advertising and building national retail distribution in dance specialty shops.

New shoes mean savings

For ballet companies, which generally foot the bill for their dancers' slippers, Gaynor Minden's durability could mean substantial savings. But American Ballet Theatre, which spends about \$500,000 a year on footwear, is typical of most companies in that it doesn't dictate what shoes its dancers wear.

Instead, Gaynor Minden must try to get a leg up on the competition by pitching to individual dancers and retail stores, as well as to ballet students and teachers.

Julienne Viola, general manager of the U.S. distributor of Freed of London in Manhattan, says hooking ballet students at the start of their pointe training is a pragmatic way of penetrating the market.

"Buying traditions start at the

beginning, and depend upon who the dancers' teachers are and what shoes they are exposed to," says Ms. Viola. "Dancers have a deep-rooted alliance with the brand of slippers they have worked with."

But Gaynor Minden is discovering that if the shoe fits, a dancer will wear it.

Lenore Pavlakos, a dancer with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, switched to Gaynor Minden shoes from the Freed slipper after getting a free sample. She says the new shoe alleviated the pain she suffered from an overstretched tendon in her toe.

"The Gaynor Minden allows me to roll up and down and not feel the pain," she says. "The shock-absorbent material is really nice when you're standing throughout the day." Depending upon her part, the slipper lasts for five to 10 performances.

Still, Ms. Pavlakos doesn't believe Gaynor Minden will have an easy time convincing other ballerinas to tiptoe in its shoes.

"It's very difficult to get dancers to switch if they are comfortable with what they have," she says. "It was hard for me to do and took a little bit of an adjustment." ■