

Report by Ian McCurrach

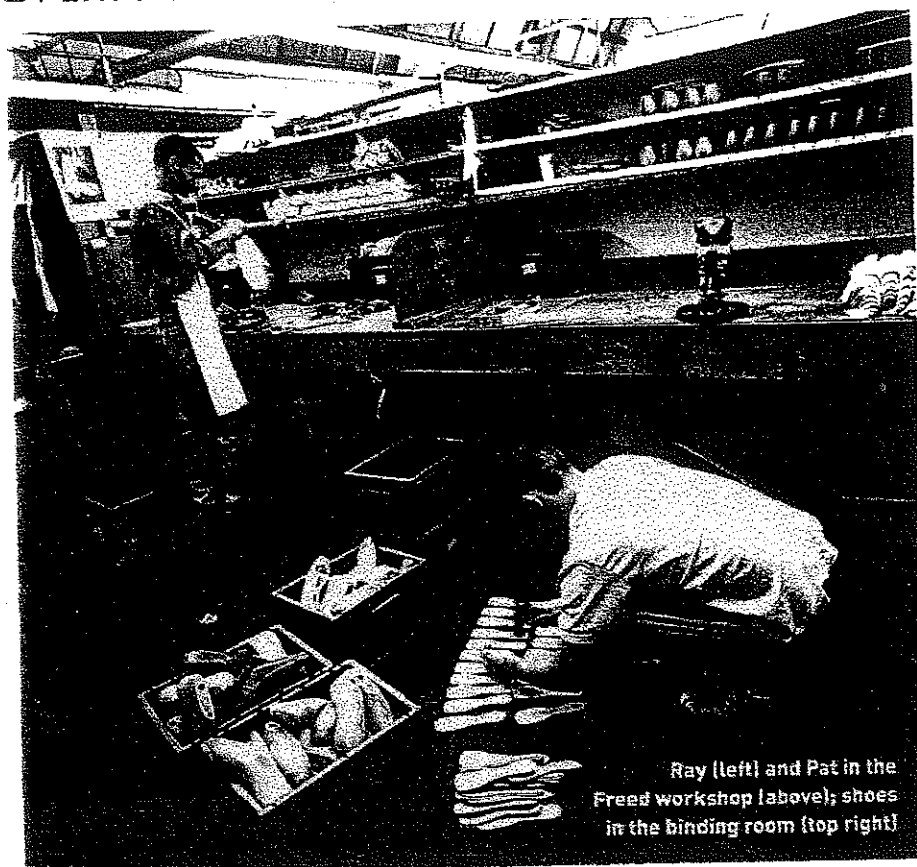
# THESE SHOES WERE MADE FOR DANCING



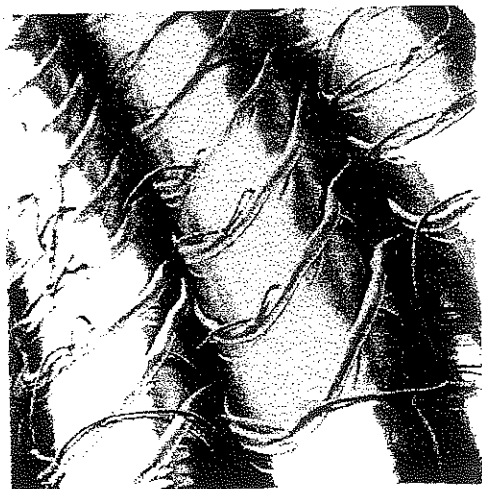
**IN 1842, WHEN THE SWEDISH-ITALIAN BALLET** star Marie Taglioni gave her final performance in Russia, a group of devoted fans paid 200 roubles for her worn and frayed pointe shoes, boiled them and ate them in a stew. These days, Darcey Bussell's admirers would have a hard time chewing their way through a casserole of her shoes. While Taglioni's footwear was little more than tight, cotton-stuffed slippers that braced the bones, modern dancers sport papier-mâché pumps made of satin, calico, card, hessian and thick brown glue: altogether more of a mouthful.

The slippers themselves might have changed, but the fanatical fascination felt by dancers and fans alike for their footwear has continued throughout the centuries. Today, backstage in the shadowy wings of the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, a group of ballerinas prepare for rehearsal, descending to the stage like beautiful bag ladies, clutching an assortment of carriers containing the precious tools of their trade: dozens of pairs of pink satin pointe shoes and all the paraphernalia that goes with them. As it gets close ▶

Darcey Bussell bashes hers into shape, while Sylvie Guillem prefers a Stanley knife. Some passionate fans have even eaten them. For dancers, little girls and even the people who make them, it is clear that the ballerina's pink satin pointe slipper is so much more than a simple shoe



Ray (left) and Pat in the Freed workshop (above); shoes in the binding room (top right)



## 'THE BALLET WORLD IS FULL OF RITUAL. GIRLS SQUASH

to the moment of their performance, a ballerina bathed in the pale-blue light that spills out from the stage sprays her tights and feet with a water spray. She scratches like a chicken in the rosin tray at the side of the stage, coating her feet and the soles of her pointe shoes with the sticky amber residue which will stop her slipping. Another ballerina bandages up her toes before squeezing her bony feet into her shoes. Before tying up her ribbons, she goes up on to pointe, adding a good six inches to her height. Like all ballerinas, she is very particular about her pointe shoes and she struts around the wings like a stork, deciding if these are the ones she is going to wear for rehearsal.

Suddenly, superballerina Darcey Bussell bounces offstage into the wings, rubs her hands in the rosin tray and then on her bottom. She is required to sit on the deck at one point in the next sequence and she doesn't want to slide. "How much of my bum can you see in this?" she worries, referring to the short, translucent skirt she is wearing over her leotard, before making her next entrance. Bussell is infamous for working her footwear hard and can go through up to three pairs of pointe shoes per performance. Factories around the world work flat out to meet the overwhelming demand for

pointe shoes, and more than 40 per cent of them are made at the Freed factory in the East End of London. "If you dance in it, we make it," says Patrick Cornelius, the factory manager. Cornelius, a kind-faced gentleman with smiling eyes, has been in footwear for more than 40 years, overseeing the pointe shoes that have supported the feet of some of the world's leading ballerinas. "The way the shoes are made

they need to find a new one. While all pointe shoes are made in roughly the same way and on the same last, each maker has slight personal differences, which are like a signature. To protect the integrity between the shoemaker and the ballerina, the makers put individual symbols on the sole such as a Key, Castle or Crown.

The ethereal scene at the Royal Opera House seems light and sound years away from the filthy, glue-covered Freed factory floor. Female pin-ups and football posters adorn the walls and the cacophony of radios, banging and machinery is deafening. Pat, a strapping twentysomething who is the Key maker, has been making pointe shoes for six years. "My Uncle Ray, the Crown maker, got me the job," says Pat. "Mr Cornelius had a look at my hands and said that he thought that I'd be able to make shoes." Pat's strong, glue-covered hands move

**As Anna Pavlova lay dying in 1931, she asked for her swan costume to comfort her.**



has changed very little over the past hundred years," says Cornelius.

Freed shoes are hand-lasted by a group of makers who have mostly been with the company man and boy. A ballerina tends to become associated with one maker when she is a student and will go on to wear the same maker for the rest of her career. It is a ballerina's worst nightmare when a maker retires or something happens to them and

swiftly as he talks. "It takes two and a half years to train and to get your shoes known around the world," he adds. "I got some really nice letters from ballerinas saying that they appreciate my work." And as he talks, Pat never takes his eyes off the shoe he is making, layering it up with glue and strips of card.

Cornelius says that a strong pair of legs is required, as well as a good pair of hands, as

a maker will stand at his bench for seven or eight hours a day. "When Pat joined us he was a puny little lad, but he's quite well made now," he laughs. Pink job sheets indicate their workload. Today, Pat's work includes making 20 pairs for Fujioka from the Hong Kong Ballet and ten pairs for Doutrepoint at the Royal Ballet.

Working alongside him is his Uncle Ray, a small man with enormous hands. Ray is working his way through 20 pairs of shoes for Sara Webb from America, four for Salas from Canada, and one sample shoe for Salerno at the Royal Ballet. "It makes me feel good knowing that a dancer will wear my shoes and no one else's throughout a lifetime," says Pat. Angelo, a small elderly man in the corner, who looks a dead ringer for Dr Coppeius, has been at Freed's for 38 years. "In the Sixties I made the shoes of the famous ballerina, Margot Fonteyn," says Angelo proudly, in a thick Italian accent. "But sadly I never met her."

Each maker will bang out 45 pairs a day, and the factory produces up to 7,000 pairs a week. "Pointe shoes are made inside-out

and are unique in that there is no left or right - the dancer will make them that," says Cornelius. "The block is built up by layering hessian with a form of wet tissue paper and fine card, and each layer is spread with a sticky glue-like paste made from flour and dexirene." Beside the makers are racks for the shoes, which at

## Margot Fonteyn's battle-scarred pointe shoes were sold for more than £2,000 a pair at auction at Christie's



the end of the day are wheeled into a huge oven and baked overnight for ten hours, ready next morning for the final stage of production in the binding room.

A team of seamstresses and cutters have the mind-numbing job of trimming the satin and sewing in the drawstrings. Each woman sits in isolation listening to headphones, their whirring sewing machines

decorated with soft toys and tinsel. Olga, a pretty, plump girl from the Ukraine, is the latest recruit. "I got the job from the job centre," smiles Olga sweetly. "Ballet comes from my country, you know." Olga's job is to clean up the shoes, taking off any glue and loose threads. Opposite her sits Arlette, who has been sewing pointe shoes for more than 33 years. "I started off cleaning the floor and worked up from there," says Arlette who, like most of her fellow workers, has never seen a ballet.

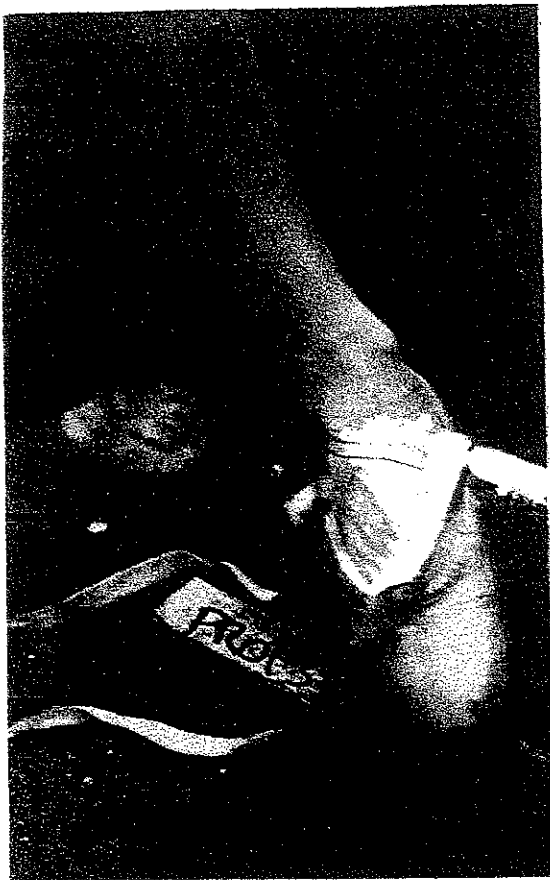
The public face of Freed's is the showroom on St Martin's Lane in the heart of London's Theatreland. Its pale-green frontage has changed little since Frederick and Dora Freed set up shop here back in the early Thirties. Magical displays of fairytale tutus grace the windows, pointe shoes are poised in mid-air and signed photos of famous prima ballerinas adorn the place. Lined up against the walls are big, baroque velvet chairs that wouldn't look out of place on the set of *The Sleeping Beauty*, and glass-fronted drawers are filled with pink satin pointe shoes, rolls of ribbon, and the ▶

# SHOES IN THE DOOR OR SCRAPE THEM IN A CERTAIN WAY?



The Freed's showroom on London's St Martin's Lane (left and right); Michele Attfield in the Freed shop (below right)





glistening new pointe shoes. The 45 female dancers pirouette and bourrée their way through 3,500 pairs of pointe shoes a year, at a cost of £49,000, and Bredin takes daily deliveries from more than a dozen manufacturers, including Freed, Bloch, Gaynor Minden, Innovation, Capezio and Grisco. Bredin's job is to log them in and out. "Some dancers pop in twice a week and collect shoes, other will come once a month and collect in bulk, but the average allocation is ten pairs a month." All pointe shoes are supplied without ribbon, which the ballerinas will sew on themselves, and

done in a labour of love, tradition and ritual. After breaking in a pair at class and rehearsal, they may end up only being worn for one performance. "The world of ballet is full of ritual," says Palmer. "Some girls will squash their shoes in the door-frame or scrape them in a certain way, and if you prick yourself when you are sewing on ribbons, you have to wipe the blood on the back of the shoe because it is supposed to be good luck."

Before the traditional shoes can be worn they have to be brushed inside with shellac, a sticky solution that seals the inside. "If shoes weren't shellacked, the heat from the dancer's foot would begin to break down the papier-mâché block," says Palmer. "Some girls put nail varnish around the edges to stop them fraying and a lot of people stitch a seam into the shoe to accommodate a bunion."

Fashions also come and go. When Bredin first joined the company eight years ago, no one darned their shoes. Today, many of the dancers darn around the block platform to make it more secure and easier to balance on. Even star ballerinas, who could easily get an assistant to help them, insist on breaking in their own shoes. Darcey Bussell is frequently found banging about backstage, bashing and hammering her pointe shoes into shape. Similarly, Sylvie Guillem is sensational with a Stanley knife, scraping and scratching her pink satin shoes into submission. Each girl will carry around ribbons, tapes, a Stanley knife, a grater, a hammer, various threads, scissors, lighters to singe the ends of the ribbons, nail varnish and stuffing to keep the shoes in shape. Each ballerina has her own method of breaking in her shoes, and some shoes will last longer than others.

Over at English National Ballet, Julie Heggie, ENB's shoe mistress describes herself as "the Gestapo in the wings on tour", chiding the ballerinas for not hammering out the noise from their shoes and for not pancaking them to take the shine off. ▶



**Dancer Deirdre Chapman tries on her pointe shoes (top right); a dancer breaks in her shoes with a sharp knife (above)**

come in four different width fittings: super-narrow USA, X, XX and XXX.

Each ballerina is allocated a big roll of ribbon, cost £12, which has to last a whole season. "Most girls unpick the ribbons from their discarded shoes, wash them and then sew them on their new ones," says Bredin. Vanessa Palmer, a Royal Ballet soloist, is one of the few girls in the company to wear the new plastic shock-absorbing Gaynor Minden shoes,

which are as controversial in the ballet world as Dolly the sheep was in her field. With their moulded-plastics technology derived from trainers, the advantages are that you don't have to break them in and they last much longer. "When I first tried them on they felt strange," says Palmer. "I'd been used to a cardboard insole, but I was determined that these soft moleskin interiors that would last up to three weeks would work for me." Traditional pointe shoes cost just under £30, while the Gaynor Mindens leap ahead to £65.

Some ballerinas will spend up to an hour or more breaking down and customising a pointe shoe that has already been tailor-made for them. This process is

← hopes and dreams of every little girl.

Freed's chief fitter, Michele Atfield, is a twinkling 59-year-old whose trim figure belies her 39 years fitting the feet of the world's prima ballerinas. Everyone who comes to Freed's, whether professional or amateur, is treated with the same level of polite seriousness. Atfield is just as at home fitting little girls with their first pair of shoes as she is fitting big stars such as Tamara Rojo.

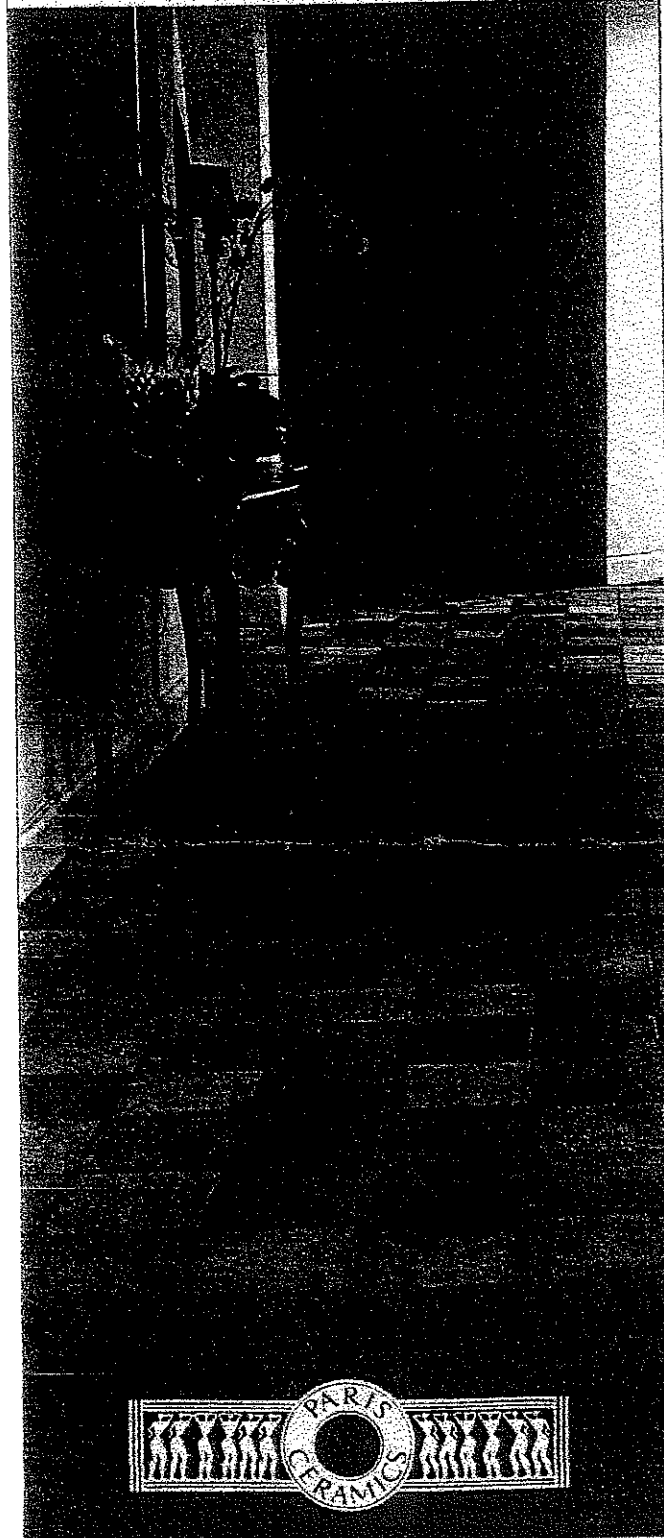
"The main concern with children who start on pointe at the age of 11 is not to damage the physique," she says. "Most dancers with foot problems have their genesis in their very early training. If shoes are correctly fitted, the damage should be kept to a minimum." Atfield works with most of the major ballet companies and liaises closely with their shoe mistresses.

Up on the fourth floor of the Royal Opera House, Susannah Bredin, the Royal Ballet shoe mistress, holds daily shoe surgeries in the Pointe Shoe Room to discuss problems the dancers may be having with their footwear. The long narrow room is lined from floor to ceiling with neatly labelled pigeonholes, each piled high with

The dancer  
Nicholas Legat,  
Nijinsky's  
master, had  
his four  
front teeth  
knocked out  
while partnering  
a pirouette



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Floor shown above: Antique Blanc Rose Terracotta

**■ FEATURE**

◀ Julie dreads hearing the corps de ballet coming on stage like "a herd of elephants arriving". Alice Crawford, a senior soloist with ENB, is infamous for almost remaking her shoes with gaffer tape and glue. When she slides off her slippers, her narrow feet are a patchwork of corns, her heels are lumpily misshapen and her squashed big toes bound up with plasters and bandages. "When you first begin to go on pointe it feels like all the blood is rushing to your feet, and it's thrilling," says Crawford. "I could have slept in my shoes. I adored them so much."

Ballerinas' dressing rooms are frequently taken over by their shoes. At the Royal Opera House, Royal Ballet first soloist Jane Burn's make-up table is nowhere to be seen under piles of pointe shoes in various states of distress. Burn admits she is neurotic about her footwear and, like ENB's Crawford, pulls her shoes apart and then remakes them, before darning the tops. "It's quite aggressive sewing," she laughs, "it's not dainty and it's definitely

**The 19th-century prima ballerina Emma Livry died when her costume caught fire**



not Jane Austen." Burn darns with book-binding thread, while others will use dental floss, darning or embroidery thread.

Dancers end up wearing their pointe shoes for up to six hours a day. "I always like to have a pair up my sleeve," says Burn, "that I know I'm going to wear for certain performances." Burn is regularly to be found banging the noise out of her shoes on the concrete stage weight in the corner of the dressing room, which displaces the rigidity of the block and makes them quieter.

On tour, flying can be problematic, and not just because of the risk of swollen feet. "We are always asked to take a pair of pointe shoes in our hand luggage, just in case the rest of the wardrobe doesn't turn up," says Burn. "I've often had customs officials going through my bag because they had never seen a pointe shoe before, thinking it looked highly suspicious. The other thing, of course, is that we used to take our sewing kit, but we can't do that any more."

On the stage at Covent Garden, rehearsals continue with *Raymonda* Act III, part of a tribute to Rudolf Nureyev. Before she is due to perform, Sylvie Guillem comes into the auditorium sporting an old denim jacket, baggy black track pants with a beautiful tutu frothing out in between. She cuts an odd figure that is far removed from her magnificent persona on stage. Soon it is the turn of Guillem to take centre-stage. She simply dazzles as *Raymonda* and is hardly ever off pointe, her steep instep straining in her shoe as if it is fit to burst. For Guillem this is a highly emotional work, since it was Nureyev who first discovered her talent at the Paris Opéra, when she was a slip of an 18-year-old. Up on pointe and as graceful as a fairy, Guillem is the epitome of a prima ballerina and the very stuff of every little girl's dream. ●

English National Ballet performs *Coppélia* at Sadler's Wells from July 8-12, and is on tour throughout the UK with a mixed programme (020-7581 1245 or [www.ballet.org.uk](http://www.ballet.org.uk)). The Royal Ballet is currently booking for its 2003-2004 season at The Royal Opera House, which begins on October 17 with *La Bayadère* and includes *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Mayerling* and *Romeo and Juliet* (020 7304 6000 [www.royalopera.org.uk](http://www.royalopera.org.uk))