

Los Angeles Times

TUESDAY, AUGUST 29, 1995 ★

SMALL BUSINESS / JANE APPLIGATE

Making *Pointes* With New Technology

Redesigning a popular product that's been around for more than 100 years isn't easy. But a personal quest for a more comfortable ballet shoe pushed Eliza Gaynor into a thriving business.

As a student in her mother's Connecticut ballet school, Gaynor loved to dance but hated the pain of dancing on her toes. Traditional pink satin *pointe* shoes appear sleek and elegant on the outside, but inside you'll find burlap, layers of newspaper and tiny nails. Not exactly the most comfortable elements for the rigors of dancing *en pointe*.

An avid sailor, windsurfer and student of karate, Gaynor wondered why the modern foams and plastics used in sports equipment couldn't be incorporated into *pointe* shoes.

"My challenge was making an athletic shoe look like lingerie," said Gaynor, who spent eight years and thousands of dollars experimenting before patenting her shoe.

In 1993, she and her husband, John Minden, a marketing consultant, opened Gaynor Minden Inc. on the ground floor of their brownstone apartment building. The company employs 12 and expects sales to reach \$1 million this year.

On top of the frustration and expense of designing and patenting a new shoe, Gaynor Minden initially faced strong opposition from dancers—their primary customers.

"Dancers get very familiar with one type of shoe," said David Howard, a world-renowned ballet teacher and coach. "It's a very personal thing."

Howard, taking a break from teaching a professional-level class attended that morning by ballet legend Mikhail Baryshnikov, said Gaynor Minden's state-of-the-art shoe is being embraced by younger, more open-minded dancers.

The challenge is persuading dancers at cash-strapped ballet companies to try the shoe. A big company may spend between \$500,000 and \$750,000 a year on *pointe* shoes for its ballerinas. The cost is so high because the shoes often break down and become worthless after just one rigorous performance.

Although Gaynor Minden shoes cost about \$70 a pair, compared to about \$50 for traditional shoes, they usually last two to three times longer, fans say.

"These shoes are expensive but definitely worth the extra money," said Wilma Norman, whose 16-year-old

daughter, Christie Leigh, studies at the School of American Ballet in New York.

"My daughter has fewer problems with her feet," said Norman, who drove from Wayne, N.J., to buy the shoes. "We've tried every shoe out there and these just seem to work for her."

Several professional ballet dancers work part-time as fitters and sales people for Gaynor Minden between classes and performances. The company is gearing up for the Nutcracker season, when thousands of professional and student ballerinas take to the stage to perform the traditional Christmas ballet.

Gaynor Minden shoes can also save a busy dancer time. If a dancer wants to adjust the angle of the shaft inside the shoe, she heats it up with a blow dryer and shapes it. This contrasts with what ballerinas call "shoe bashing." Before dancers can take one step in traditional shoes, they must bash them into shape. They hammer the shank to make it more flexible and scrape the bottom of the shoe with a vegetable peeler. To extend the life of the shoe, they often wax, shellac and bake them in the oven. Gaynor Minden warns dancers not to do any of these things to their new shoes.

Gaynor Minden isn't the only small company competing against dance wear giants Capezio and Freed. Nadine Revene, a former ballet dancer who designed the Isotoner stretch slipper, created the Soloist *pointe* shoe, which also relies on proprietary materials and new technology. The New York company employs 30 people.

"Why can we go to the moon but we haven't been able to make a better *pointe* shoe?" Revene asked.

Like Eliza Gaynor, she said she has had trouble finding a well-fitting, comfortable shoe. Soloist, Revene said, wanted to go the same high-tech-materials route as Gaynor Minden but ended up trying another approach.

"Our shoes are so comfortable people can't believe them," Revene said, adding, "I'm so glad there are at least two new [*pointe* shoe] companies in this country."

Risa Towsky, manager of the Capezio store near Carnegie Hall, said competition from the smaller, new companies is good for everyone.

"Neither Gaynor Minden nor Soloist frighten us," she said. "Capezio's been a name for 107 years."