

entrepreneur

new shoes to soar in

Ballet dancers are grateful to Eliza Minden. Using modern materials and her firsthand knowledge of dance, she has rebuilt the **pointe shoe**, that all-important fulcrum of a demanding art.

by Kim Waller

Victoria



SORE TOES WERE A COMMON COMPLAINT IN Eliza's family when she was a teenager. From time to time, she and her sister Emily (who became a professional dancer), as well as her ballet-teacher mother, all suffered because of traditional toe shoes that swiftly lost their strength and flexibility. "Their construction - basically paste and cardboard-had barely changed in a century," says Eliza. Meanwhile, she was skiing on new laminates and skimming the waves on a fiberglass sailboard. Surely, a better pointe shoe could be made safer, more enduring, quieter.

"I can't believe no one did this before," says Eliza, now that Gaynor Minden, the Company she runs with her husband, John, is shipping hundreds of custom shoes to dancers each week. And when she thinks of the past few years, sometimes she can't believe what she did.

"There I was, a twenty-five-year-old former English major, calling up plastics companies to find the right tough, flexible material for the shank of the shoes. I tested every prototype on my own foot, and had my sister and Joffrey Ballet School students test them." But then, perfectionism has always been synonymous with ballet.

When the wicked Black Swan in *Swan Lake* dazzles audiences with thirty-two whipping turns (fouettés) on one foot, she seems to be all fire and air. Recently, Gillian Murphy of the American Ballet Theatre performed this feat to raves - wearing Gaynor Minden toe shoes.

At the other end of ambition's spectrum are the eleven and twelve-year-olds many brought to Eliza and John's Manhattan showroom by their teachers - who are being fitted for their very first pointe shoes, "Oh, it's such a thrilling rite of passage," Eliza says, recalling the moment she rose shakily on her own first pair. These days an even younger regular at the showroom is the Mindens' baby daughter, Lucy. Just as Eliza has succeeded in uniting a love of dance with technology, "I'm determined," she says, "to combine motherhood and work in my life."*



PATENTED CONSTRUCTION, above, makes Gaynor Minden's shoes (top) more enduring than those of the usual cardboard. Top: Eliza gives a history of pointe on her company Web site, www.dancer.com. Sweater, Adrienne Vittadini. Left: Olivia Gintel of the Joffrey School of Ballet being custom-fitted by Sarah Estley, also a dancer. Olivia's sweater, Brooks Brothers; jeans, DKNY; Sarah's suit, Banana Republic.