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The Ballet Shoe Gets A Makeover, but Few Yet See the Pointe

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Real Ballerinas Tend to Stick
To Tradition; Bad Feet
As a Badge of the Art

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NEW YORK — Ballet is a thing of beauty but the *pointe* shoe is another matter. Almost everyone who wears them agrees: The traditional ballet slipper is a beast.

"Prehistoric," says Alice G. Brandfonbrener, editor of a performing-arts-and-health journal.

"We call them little tiny torture chambers," says Jody Jaron, director of Garden State Ballet of Newark, N.J.

They also cost about \$50 a pair and can wear out after just one robust performance. So surely, in this era of ultralight, high-tech, super-performance sports shoes, the world is ready for a new *pointe* shoe, yes?

Well, not exactly.

Slipper of Pain

Traditional ballet footwear — technically, the *pointe* shoe — is among the world's great anachronisms. It is essentially an elegant satin shoe with a cardboard sole, and linen or burlap glued stiff at the tip. It has changed little since it was invented in the early 1800s when the first ballerina rose and pranced on her toes — *en pointe* — and sealed ballet's signature. This was also at a time when women still wore bone corsets.

Thomas Novella is a modern Manhattan podiatrist who has spent 20 years looking at dancers' feet. He mulls the advances in orthopedics since the 1800s, not to mention the grueling toe regimens of today's highly athletic dancers, and lists the *pointe* shoe's toll — deformed toes and "sinewy wedges" that turn feet blocky. The first time a ballerina yanked off a traditional slipper and showed him her foot, "I was scared," he says.

With that in mind, Eliza Minden had a great idea, taking a cue from those folks at Nike Inc. some years back: She, among others, designed and began marketing a high-tech shoe, with high-impact supports and toe cushions, for the ballet world. After all, does Michael Jordan play hoops in old-fashioned tennis shoes? Would any self-respecting jogger today run five miles in dress loafers?

Not to mention one other thing: The ballet world, professional and amateur, spends about \$150 million a year on shoes, says Owen Goldman, publisher of *Dancer*, a trade magazine.

"Dancers need this shoe," says Ms. Minden, a former amateur ballerina who co-founded Gaynor Minden Inc. to start making high-tech ballet slippers. Agrees Daniel White, a New York City chiropractor who has treated the bad necks and backs of dancers related to spending hours on their toes in traditional shoes: "It's a fantastic thing."

If that's true, then what explains Christine Dunham's attitude?

Classic Resistance

Everyone agrees that Ms. Dunham does fantastic things just to stay on her toes. She's a principal dancer with American Ballet Theater. She sometimes numbs her feet in icy water after performances and pays frequent visits to the company's physical therapist. She dances through zaps of toe pain that she calls "zingers" during performances.

The one thing she won't do: Dance in high-tech *pointe* shoes. She tried them briefly but went back to her old-fashioned slippers, pain and all. "I knew right then

Please Turn to Page A6, Column 5

Cool Debut for a New Ballet Shoe

Continued From First Page

that they weren't for me," she says. "I'm totally settled into what I'm doing."

So, apparently, are most other professional dancers. Defying the marketing convention that has worked so well in sports—build a better, higher-performing shoe and the world will beat a path to your door—the selling of high-tech pointe shoes has proved to be no mean feat. Perhaps it's an example of art thumbing its nose at life. Pain, deformed feet, suffering—these are all part of the ballet tradition.

"Ballet isn't about health. It's an art form," says Suki Schorer, a former principal dancer with the New York City Ballet who studied under ballet master George Balanchine and now teaches at the School of American Ballet in Manhattan. She isn't opposed to the new shoes: She just won't wear them, or recommend them to her students.

"I haven't had much success" with the new high-tech shoes, adds Mary Day, director of the Washington School of Ballet in the nation's capital. She says that precisely because the shoes are made stiffer, to provide extra support, some of her dancers who have used them had trouble getting up on pointe.

A Tough Sell

To Ms. Minden and a small circle of others dedicated to reforming the ballet slipper, this is all as discouraging as a stumble during a pas de deux. Ms. Minden figures, in fact, that probably no more than one or two dancers in each of the nation's professional ballet companies use her shoes—disheartening considering that the New York City Ballet alone burns through about \$500,000 in shoes a year. Another concern, Sansha Productions Ltd. of Hong Kong, also began making untraditional slippers with reinforced shanks and supportive plastic insoles a few years back. It reports similar acceptance among professional dancers.

Michael Heck, vice president of a company that manufactures toe-pad inserts that make even the traditional pointe shoe more foot-friendly, admits the pads also have proved a hard sell. He compares the resistance to tennis players who stubbornly cling to clumsy wooden rackets while getting thumped by opponents using high-tech ones. "It doesn't make sense," says Mr. Heck, of Bun Heads Inc. of Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

In New Jersey, sense—in the view of the reformers—is beginning to take root, however. Having not made much of a dent in the professional ballet ranks, companies like Gaynor Minden have started, with some success, to pitch them to teachers and kids in amateur ballet schools. At Garden State Ballet, which has about 350 students, Ms. Jaron, the school's director, waxes positively missionary about the high-tech slippers. "It's been a long time coming and, believe me, we need it," she says.

After seeing bulky muscles slim down

from the shoe's extra support, she put all her students in Gaynor Mindens three years ago and made them the school's official shoe. She also says the new shoes are quieter than the old. In traditional slippers, "if you've got 16 girls out there doing Waltz of the Flowers [in the Nutcracker Suite] on pointe, it sounds like a heard of elephants," she says. With the new shoes, the girls don't sound as clunky, she adds.

Sweet Music

This is exactly the kind of reaction Ms. Minden had in mind about eight years ago when she first decided to merge a knowledge of manufacturing with her interest in ballet to develop a more orthopedically correct ballet slipper. She had been a runner and wind-surfer and had seen the rapid evolution in equipment for both, spearheaded by lighter, performance-enhancing materials coupled with a growing knowledge of body mechanics. It is true her shoes cost about \$20 more than traditional pointe shoes, which are manufactured by about a half-dozen companies around the globe. But because they are made of new-age materials, they last longer—in fact, can be blow-dried back into shape after even the most grueling performance, she insists.

What Ms. Minden hadn't counted on, however, was the stubborn tradition—indeed, almost superstition—that the ballet world attaches to its shoes. Among serious dancers, just breaking in the shoes often involves individualistic rituals—bashing them with hammers or slamming them in doors, for example. For many, the new-age shoes just don't seem as malleable. Says dance writer and former New York City Ballet dancer Toni Bentley: "People don't want their individuality messed with."

Freed of London Ltd., a British maker of traditional pointe shoes, won't even consider toying with the original style. "I always feel sorry for people who try to innovate," a spokeswoman says.