

Freed of London Pointe Shoes Maintaining Excellence

Taking a tour through Freed of London's main pointe shoe factory outside of London made it very clear the company has maintained their high standards by not deviating from a successful formula. That formula involves respecting a distinguished tradition going back to 1928 when Frederick Freed, his wife and an assistant opened a retail store in St. Martin's Lane where they sewed shoes in the basement.

As Frederick Freed Ltd. prospered, Mr. Freed realized that many dancers stopped dancing because the traditional shoes of his day had a fixed width and were too narrow for some customers. He then began to concentrate on providing custom shoes, a skill and a service that remain Freed's special province.

For generations dancers have prized these shoes for their lightness and sensitivity. Bronya Seifert, Advertising and Production Manager, says that the way they make their shoes is a very old method called turnshoe. That's when the shoes are made inside out until the block is formed by hand, dried and then turned right-side-out. Every street shoe was made this way until the 1870's. It's such a complicated process that Freed's would rather hire people who have had no shoemaking experience at all rather than having to un-do what they have learned and re-train them. It takes at least 6 months to train a "maker"; then a bit longer for them to fit into their own style and find their own rhythm.

Due to the demand of the American market for an 'off the peg' (meaning every one is exactly the same) shoe, the company now has three new models made in a slightly different way. The Studios, Studios II and The Studio Professional have the block made separately and then is inserted into the upper so that all the blocks will be identical, but it is still hand made using all the same biodegradable products and ingredients as the other styles. The Classic shoe, in contrast, will have slight variances due to the fact that every maker is different with their own idiosyncrasies. They're not trying to make them different; it's just that a style develops.

Michele Attfield, recognized as one of the foremost authorities on pointe shoes in the world, is a Director of the company as well as the Main Fitter. Full of confidence, charm and possessing a quick sense of humor, she has been with Freed's for 41 years taking a few breaks to "do silly things like have babies," she laughingly says. As a child, she was an RAD scholar and was fitted by Mrs. Freed when she won the scholarship at age 10.

She prides herself on the fact that all their shoes are made in the United Kingdom whereas many other manufacturers use factories "off-shore"----- Thailand, South America and China. She says that tells you something about their commitment to the quality and control of their production.

While Freed's adheres to tradition, their shoes are constantly evolving along with the dancers and the work they do. She explains several reasons for the evolution. To begin with, after World War II, the students have gotten bigger. That makes a difference. Also, no one lifted their leg above 90 degrees except in an arabesque. Now the legs are high.....up above the line where you're off-balance slightly. The strain is greater, particularly in the metatarsal part of the shoe, when you come off your central axis. The forepart has to be strengthened just as the vamps have to be adjusted. Michele says that the shoe they supplied for Margot Fonteyn would not stand up to choreography by William Forsythe. "The shoe evolves with the dancers that wear it. It always has."

While there have been several provocative newspaper and magazine articles in the last few years where Gaynor Minden's newer, elastomeric method of making shoes is compared to that of Freed's, Michele replies "this business has never been a competition. Everyone wants dancers to be happy. Obviously, we would be happiest if they were happiest in our shoes, but failing that, we would rather they be happy in somebody else's shoes."

One of the issues these days is how long will a pointe shoe last before it's considered worn-out and has to be replaced. Many of the new manufacturers and newer models of shoes advertise that they will last longer than the typical "paste" shoe. Michele feels this is of complete irrelevance because children go on pointe well before they stop growing. She says that children grow like weeds. In the beginning of training the child is probably doing 10 minutes of pointe work at the end of class twice a week. They are always going to outgrow the shoe before it's worn out. She fits the students at The Royal Ballet School and by the end of term, many times the second pair that the school provides the girls has to be returned.

Beyond that, she has always felt that shoes are like an ecosystem; you need shoes at all levels. First you need a new, hard pair of shoes for pas de deux and turns. Next a lighter weight shoe for adage and lastly, a really soft shoe for allegro or anything "white". She explains, "in any 'white ballet' you've got to be so silent." She continues, "the hardest thing for young dancers to learn is to get to the stage where they can wear the same shoes. They have to be strong enough to do a pas de deux in a shoe which is light enough to run down the stairs. This is part of the wonder of learning pointe work which is also part of the mystique."

From a professional dancer's perspective, she also feels having a longer lasting shoe is irrelevant. What if a dancer is doing "Elite Syncopations" and the shoes have to be dyed red? And the next night she's doing "Giselle". Sir Peter Wright always demands that shiny shoes be worn for "white" ballets, but other ballets like "Fille", "Bayadere" or ballets where you have to have naked legs would call for pancaked shoes.

To Michele, the essence of what makes the Freed pointe shoe so good is the forepart. "If you want to look at a shoe and see how good it is going to be for

a dancer, you feel how it is in the forepart. The hand-lasted shoes, even if they have a hard insole, have a slight 'give'.....what we call 'the spring' in this area." This is because of the way the block substance is layered, put on manually and then hammered into the materials. What that means is that there is always air in the shoe. The foot gets warm and the air expands.

When the block is constantly banged.....first by the maker and later by the dancer when she does a relevé.....it becomes warm to the foot and acts as a sort of miniature sandbag. Because of this, not only does it stop shock but also mutes noise. The sound is muffled because it is not a solid sound. Michele continues, "if a block is made of a polymer or a plastic type of material, there is a certain sharpness to the sound when it kicks the ground. You will never get this with a Freed's shoe because there isn't a solid substance in the block." She adds that putting padding inside the shoe may make it more comfortable, but it cannot genuinely dissipate the shock.

Michele feels that she has been very lucky. "If you like dance, this is a job of a lifetime because I get to go all over the world fitting dancers. My reward is to see a rehearsal or a class, which, to me, is like 10 out of 10."

Janice Barringer is a ballet teacher as well as the co-author of *The Pointe Book 2nd Edition* and *On Pointe*, both published by Princeton Book Company. She also has produced two instructional DVD's: *Beginner and Lower Intermediate Pointe Classes* and a new one entitled *Intermediate Pointe Classes*. The latter has an accompanying CD.

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