

# Ballet keeps 'em on their toes

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 19, 2010



Drawing of Carlotta Grisi and Lucien Petipa performing in the pas de deux from *Giselle*, Act 1.

**Photograph by:** Scan, From *Ballet in Western Culture: A History of Its Origins and Evolution*, by Carol Lee.

VANCOUVER -- Even a ballet novice who doesn't know an arabesque from a pirouette knows one thing: Ballerinas dance on their toes.

It's become one of the most iconic images of western culture: a woman balancing her entire body on the extended leg and ankle which meets in a point on the floor. It has become the signature look of classical and romantic ballets, a look that many people, even those unfamiliar with ballet, consider classy and elegant.

But dancing en pointe, as it's called, wasn't always part of ballet. In the 400-year history of the dance form, dancing en pointe has only been a fully integrated part of ballet for less than two centuries.

No one is quite sure when the first dancer decided to incorporate toe dancing into his or her performance. It may have started in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, when various stage mechanisms were built to fly dancers short distances on stage. The wires used to suspend dancers also balanced them on the tips of their toes.

Carol Lee, in *Ballet in Western Culture*, argues that recapturing the illusion of flying without mechanical devices may have been one of the reasons choreographers and dancers started to defy gravity by simpler means.

At first, dancing on the tips of the toes was done simply as a crowd-pleaser to milk the audience for applause. It was considered a trick rather than part of ballet's movement vocabulary or a technique used to develop a choreographic idea.

In its early years, there are several accounts of male dancers such as Antoine Pitrot and Louis Deport wowing audiences with their skill at temporarily rising on their toes. One account from the late 18th century quoted by Lee leaves no doubt that Pitrot danced en pointe. A dance treatise said Pitrot raised his "whole body on the tip of his big toe, and extends all the joints so perfectly, that the whole thigh, leg and foot itself fall into one perpendicular line."

But the first dancer to fully integrate en pointe dancing into ballet was a woman: Marie Taglioni. She first danced en pointe in 1832 in *La Sylphide* at the Paris Opera, under the direction of her demanding father Filippo. He also introduced many other innovations, including delicate port de bras — arm movements — which helped further the impression that the female dancers were weightless creatures able to float on currents of air.

Marie Taglioni was the first to make dancing en pointe seem effortless. She became such a dance star, known not only for her en pointe work but also her soundless landings or balon, that her name became a verb: to Taglionize means to adopt her dancing technique.

After the popularity of Taglioni's dancing in *La Sylphide*, Carlotta Grisi followed her lead by dancing en pointe in *Giselle*, the other artistic high point of 19th-century romantic ballets. From then onward, dancing en pointe became firmly linked with female ballet dancers in France and throughout the western world. Dancing en pointe was the start of what has come to be known as the cult of the ballerina.

Pointe dancing was further refined at the Russian Imperial Ballet in St. Petersburg. For *The Sleeping Beauty* in 1890, dancers wore shoes with boxes — the hard shells that encase the toes and allow the dancers to stay en pointe — made out of newspapers and a flour-based paste. The Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova is believed to have made secret modifications to the soles of her shoes to allow her to dance on her toes longer than anyone thought possible.

Today, one of the leading sellers of pointe shoes in the world is Freed of London. Although traditionally Freed's handmade pointe shoes have been favoured by many of the world's major ballet companies, numerous competitors make top quality pointe shoes such as Capezio, Bloch and Repetto.

Locally, for example, Chan Hon Goh of Goh Ballet founded and operates a company called Principal, which makes dance supplies, including a line of pointe shoes.

Because of the importance of ballet shoes to a dancer, ballet companies around the world have someone responsible for making sure dancers have the right footwear. At Ballet BC, that job is the responsibility of Racheal Prince, the shoe coordinator who is also one of the company's 15 dancers.

"Dancers all need their own specific shoes," Prince said. "In each company, there needs to be someone who knows what each dancer needs and how to order them — everything about them."

All of the company's shoes come from Freed of London. The company pays for 30 pairs a season for each female dancer; Makaila Wallace's cost \$75 a pair. Altogether, keeping dancers in pointe shoes costs the company about \$16,000 a season.

Freed's Classic Pointe shoe is its most popular. The hard block or box is designed to snugly cup the toes. It is made from paper and fabric held together with a paste made from a mixture that includes yeast, flour and sugar. To this day, makers of ballet shoes keep secret the exact formula they use to mix the paste.

In contemporary pointe shoes, the tip of the platform is designed to rest flat on the toes perpendicular to the floor. Ideally, there should be a line through the centre of the hip, knee, ankle and big toe joint as seen from the side — the classic ballet line.

"When dancing en pointe, the weight of the body is supported by the intrinsic muscles of the foot and the longitudinal arches, but it rests on the metatarsals," according to *The Pointe Book: Shoes, Training & Technique*. (Metatarsals are the five long bones in the toes.)

"The pointe shoe is designed to protect the toes and force them to stretch out in a gentle curve, instead of buckling under the weight of the body."

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