



Freed of London makes its pointe



By Toni Bentley

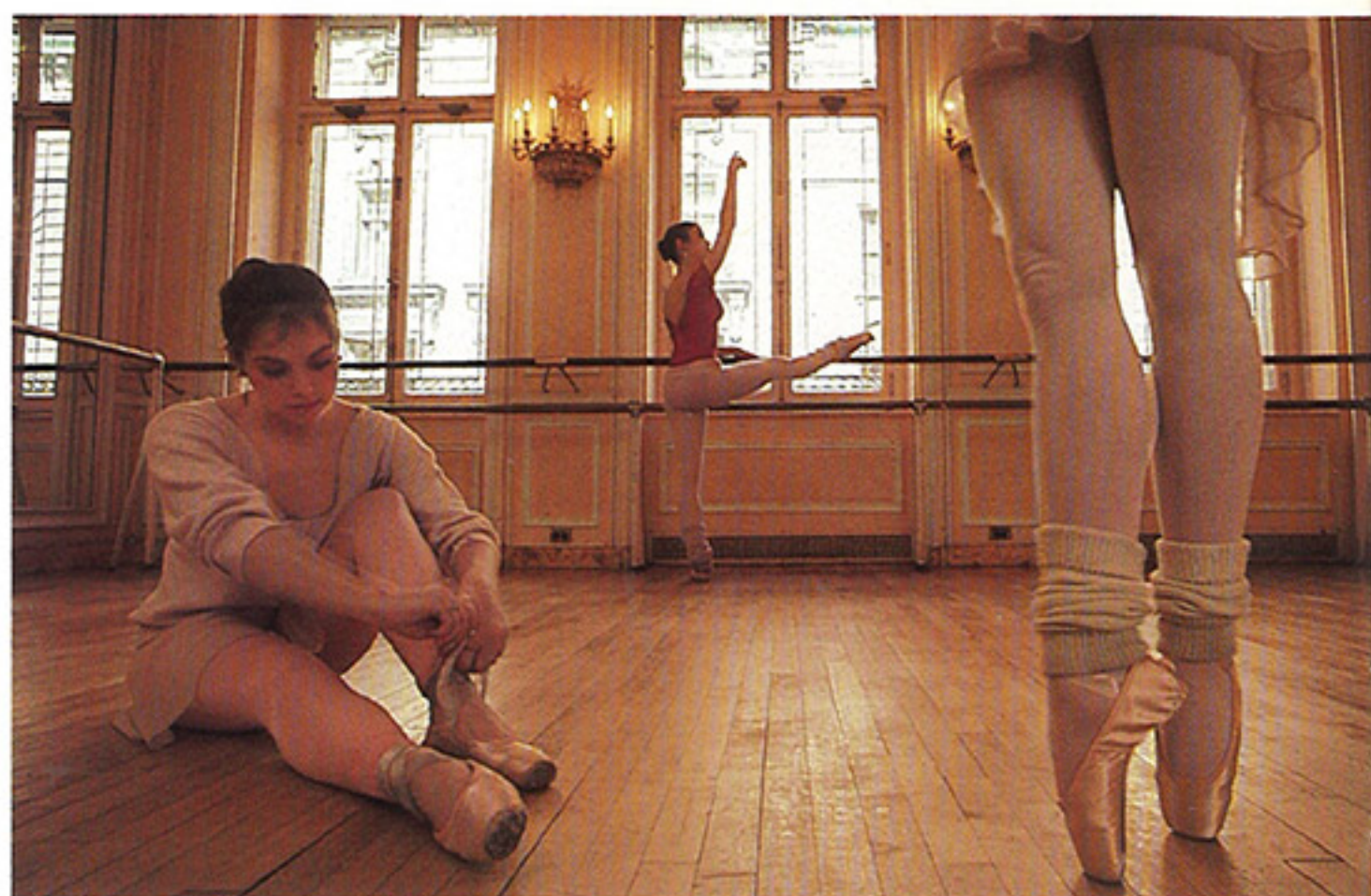
# The heart and sole of a ballerina's art: her toe shoes

*A New York City Ballet dancer interrupts a European tour to visit Freed of London's shoe factory, where she 'meets her maker'*

This is the story of a business with a beautiful product that has never been so in demand. It is bought in vast quantities by women between the ages of 13 and 40—maybe 45. The business is British, with no franchises and, in this customer's eyes, no plausible imitators. Though the company has no monopoly on its product, it exports to virtually every country in the Western world. The product is expensive and its life span short: it is the toe—or pointe—shoe produced in Freed of London's factory.

In 1928, Frederick Freed, his wife and one helper left Gamba's, then the leading English toe-shoe factory, to begin one of the most successful toe-shoe businesses in history. In the period since Freed and his assistant started sewing shoes in the basement of what is now the retail shop at St. Martin's Lane, a short walk from Trafalgar Square, the popularity of ballet has soared. Today there are more professional and student dancers than ever before, and thousands of them buy from Freed's. Any dancer who spends as much as eight hours a day on her feet can tell you why: Freed's peach-color toe shoe is the lightest, slimmest, most elegant one available. It is also as comfortable as a tight, hard-toe shoe can be.

*Cover:* Freed's makes the toe shoes, but dancers sew on their own ribbons for precise fit. "I wouldn't let anybody else, not even my mother, do it," says one.



Shoes must accommodate changing shapes, positions of the feet from at rest (left) to on pointe (right).

To accommodate its enormous clientele, Freed's factory has grown to 200 employees—and from two shoe "makers" to 25—at three locations, with the largest in Hackney in London's East End, and produces about a half-million pairs of toe shoes a year. Should Freed's ever close down because of fire, strike or bombing, the ballet world would be under a cloud while hysterical, flat-footed ballerinas protested that they could wear no other pointe shoe.

When the New York City Ballet was touring Europe last summer, our first stop was London. Many of the dancers wanted to visit the factory where our shoes are made. Their intention was to speak with their respective makers to discuss alterations; we are forever changing our requirements for both practical and esthetic reasons. Often a foot has simply changed shape from the endless maturing and shaping a professional career brings about: the metatarsal has grown wider and flatter; various lumps, bumps, corns and calluses have grown, changed or been removed. Sometimes the heel of the shoe must be cut down to virtually nothing because of sore tendons, bone spurs or sensitive nerves on the lower ankles. With new orders placed four times a year, we have four opportunities to alter our shoes' shapes, but with the long distance and paperwork that lie between us and our makers, we have grown skeptical about the amount of communication possible, and most of the ballerinas were determined to meet their makers in person.

A professional working dancer may easily use 12 pairs of new toe shoes a week, and often more. Under average circumstances, a pair lasts for 15 minutes of performing and is then ready for class, rehearsal, autographs or, most often, the trash can. A used toe shoe is not revivable—this is the secret of the eternal demand for new ones. A toe shoe is as eccentric as the ballerina who wears it; their marriage is a commitment.

*Photographs by Mark S. Wexler*



Though experts at demolishing a new shoe, we had been ignorant of the materials and processes that precede our more destructive actions. A brand-new pair of toe shoes presents itself to us as an enemy with a will of its own that must be tamed. With the combined application of door hinges, hammer, pliers, scissors, razor blade, rubbing alcohol, warm water and muscle power—followed by repeated rapping against a cement wall—we literally bend, rip, stretch, wet, flatten a new shoe out of its hard immobility into a quieter, more passive casing for our feet.

Without music, lights, scenery, costume or false eyelashes, a ballerina can still dance, given some space. But if her shoes are taken away from her, she loses her technique, her grace and her ephemeral quality. She will literally descend into the world as a mere mortal if her means of support is taken from her. In the ballet *La Sylphide*, the sylph loses her wings and is thereby destroyed. But it was not wings that gave the famed original sylph, Marie Taglioni, her lightness, it was her pointe shoes. At her debut in 1822, Taglioni brought classical ballet onto pointe, and it has stayed there, sometimes shakily and with much pain, ever since. It is Taglioni whom we have to blame. Had she not been so charming, so ethereal and so graceful on her toes, the whole idea might have been dismissed as an unsuccessful experiment. Each time one of us stands on our toes it is still an experiment that we would often condemn as unsuccessful. But we are 160 years too late in voicing our feelings—besides, the applause contradicts us! And so we are silent; our complaints could not begin to compare with those of the early ballerinas.

*From pain and fortitude, a magic symbol*

Before the turn of the 20th century, pointe shoes came in only one size and were *made* to fit. A long narrow tube of satin-covered leather bound and squeezed the foot into the ideal esthetic—an inhumanly-shaped minuscule pointe that did not remotely resemble the naked foot that entered it. The result of this painful effort is the symbolic figure of the ballerina: an unworldly creature of magical qualities and supreme femininity. It is a symbol recognized all over the world, achieved by fortitude and sacrifice in a search for illusion, perfection and beauty. The toe shoe of the 19th century bound the dancer's foot as the Chinese bound their infant daughters' feet and as laced corsets bound the bodies of fashionable women (the satin used for toe shoes is the same silk-and-cotton mixture as corset satin). By the early 1900s, Pavlova was wearing a shoe that resembled the toe shoe of today. There were different sizes by then, but still only one width, and the shoe was leather. Not until the 1950s did the construction of toe shoes improve dra-



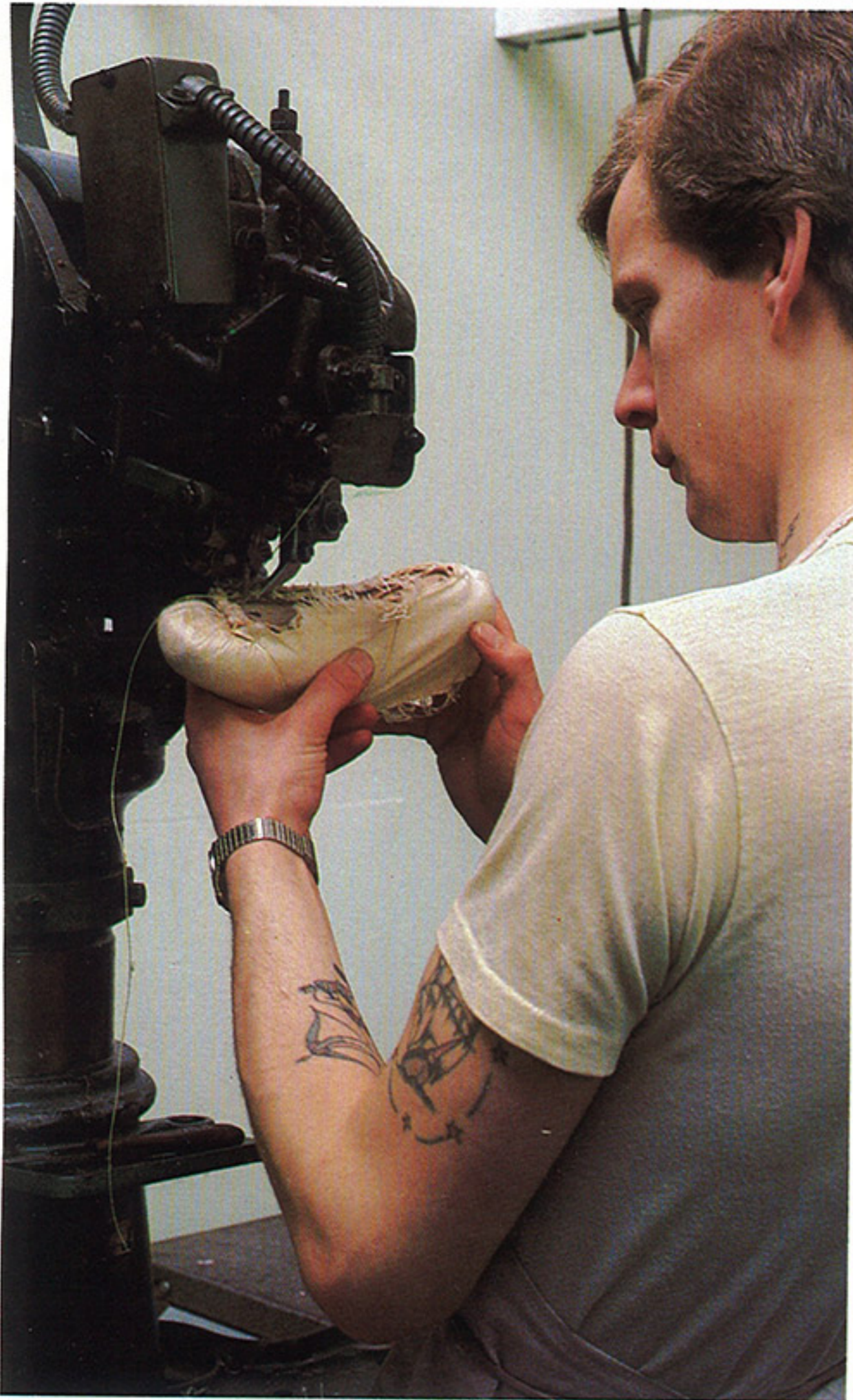
Battered feet stand side by side with instruments of torture: shoes shaped on bunionless, blisterless lasts.



Hammer blows to her toe shoe help Elizabeth Ferrell prepare it for wear at School of American Ballet.



*Freed's toe shoe makes its pointe*



Freed's stitching operator John Weston uses inside-out or turn-shoe method to join satin upper to the sole.

matically in comfort, pliability, balance and strength.

Since I was satisfied with my own toe shoes, I had not visited Freed's, but after three weeks of touring I decided I had to see it for myself and made my pilgrimage from Paris across the Channel. A long tube ride from Heathrow Airport and a small taxi fare landed me at 62-64 Well Street in Hackney, London's oldest industrial area.

Factory director Bernard Kohler, a 35-year veteran of Freed's, welcomed me with lunch in the factory canteen. He trains the new makers himself, preferring to have men (makers are always men) with no previous "shoe experience," just as a good ballet school prefers young girls and boys without previous training. In both cases, time is wasted having to unlearn knowledge incompatible with the job at hand. He is a wiry, energetic man with a strong, handsome face and heavily scarred hands. All makers, as I was to see, have such hands—big, gnarled, scarred and skilled. Their look is poignantly mirrored by the dancers' feet, which are also strong, scarred and misshapen from wearing the shoes. In the making and the wearing, a toe shoe, ironically, is not a kind or gentle object.

*The dilemma: more strength with more comfort*

As we ate, Kohler told me the story of the toe shoe. All of the changes in the shoes' sizing, shaping and raw materials that have taken place since Freed's first opened have been innovations that closely followed the course of classical ballet. The shoes are in service to the dancer just as are the costumes, lights, scenery and makeup. As ballet technique has been dissected, refined, improved and quickened, the toe shoe has changed accordingly. Pointe dancers now spend a great deal more time on their actual toe tips than ever before. Thus the contradictory dilemma of a good shoe arises. The shoe must be simultaneously stronger and harder while being more comfortable. Of the toe shoes currently on the market, Freed's is, to me, the kindest to the foot. It is the softest and lightest, with less substance and less actual weight than other shoes, thus its life span is necessarily short. Yet if a dancer is comfortable, as she continues to dance she can rely less on the shoe (whose support has dwindled) and more on the power in her own foot—a power that is considerable in a well-trained dancer.

A great part of the comfort lies in width. Unlike the 19th-century tubes perhaps only two inches wide, today's shoes come in many widths: narrow, regular, X(wide), double X and, recently, triple X. There has also been a widening of the shoe tip, which has caused a severe problem: in the very center of the flat tip where the pressure is the strongest on pointe, a softening, not unlike a hole, occurred after only a few min-





Caught in motion by photographer's open shutter, two dancers practice arabesques on pointe. Position,

achieved by quick movement, is held for only a split second, but causes great pressure on foot and shoe.

utes of wear. This led to the development of the "platform." The hard tips of Freed's shoes are formed from layers of satin burlap, brown paper and glue; the platform is an extra triangle of burlap added to the layering. This triangle, an inch on each side, has largely eliminated the weakness, and we can now dance without fear of the soft spot through which we could feel the stage far too intimately.

As a toe shoe begins its career, Kohler explained, it has a rapid but smooth progress into softness. With weight, work and sweat, the layering crumbles evenly to form cushioning for the toes. The length of time between a new, rock-hard pointe shoe (it feels and sounds very, very hard—like cement), which is noise- and blister-making, and its transformation into a soft, pliable cushion of padding, is very short. So Freed's has reached an acceptable compromise that favors the dancer while remaining esthetically correct—a compromise between hard and soft. It is these two terms that dancers use to describe their shoes. We have "soft"-shoe ballets with many jumps—Taglioni in *La Sylphide*

—and "hard"-shoe ballets, the bravura ones, with fewer jumps but many pirouettes and bourrées—Patricia McBride in *Tarantella*.

*The reluctant one percent: Who are they?*

Why aren't toe shoes made from more lasting materials? Because leather, rubber, plastic and synthetics are loud, clumsy, painful and, most important, ugly. Freed's shoes, like the dancers who wear them, are beautiful, with a necessarily finite life span. "And you girls in the New York City Ballet use almost twice as many shoes a year as any other company," Kohler said accusingly. Then he winked; after all, it means more business for Freed's.

We are indeed a "Freed's company," with almost 99 percent of our shoes sent from London every year. (Kohler is still trying to find out who the few dissenters are.) We order approximately 50 pairs per girl, four times a year. The American Ballet Theater and the Royal Ballet order 60 pairs per girl, twice a year. "Suzanne Farrell orders over 350 pairs a year"—one a day—Kohler said.

He came to watch a NYCB class while we were in London to try to see why we are so hard on our shoes. He noticed that, unlike the ABT or Royal Ballet

*Toni Bentley took her first ballet lesson at age three. Her book, Winter Season, A Dancer's Journal, has just been published in paperback by Vintage.*





Bernard Kohler holds Margot Fonteyn's size-four shoes and jests: "I lost my hair in the service of ballet."

dancers who follow a more traditional classical training, we tend to pounce onto our pointes. Less concerned with the development and display of the calf and ankle, and with the foot slowly "rolling up" onto pointe, we virtually jump onto our toes. I was reminded of Balanchine. "*Bang!*" he would shout. "Get there! What are you waiting for?" And he would clap his hands quickly and sharply. Kohler thought we were more dependent on the shoe for support than other dancers who strive to create the illusion that the shoe is merely part of the foot. Balanchine liked the shoe to look like a shoe—separate and clean, with shiny ribbons. He did not like us powdering the satin to achieve a more subtle onstage effect.

Special orders comprise 75 percent of Freed's production. If a dancer is not satisfied with her shoes, she will not wear them. With humility and earnestness, Kohler said, "We try to keep our ladies happy." But this is impossible. Both the ballerinas and shoes have their eccentricities, and to find a perfect match on any given day is rare. No two toe shoes are alike, and no two pairs are alike, even though crafted by the same maker. He too has his good and bad days. A finished shoe cannot be altered, so returned shoes are added to the stock shoes and sold in Freed's retail stores, which is why students can be found wearing Natalia Makarova's or Gelsey Kirkland's rejects.

The dancer's complaint is usually something minuscule—a vamp that appears too short or too long, an uneven shank or a heel cut too low—eighth-inch discrepancies, but enough to drive a fussy ballerina wild. We have varying degrees of tolerance—some dancers simply wear all their shoes despite slight problems, others sort out 20 pairs into "unwearable," "for rehearsal only" and "best"—for the performance. More often



Author's "maker," Ron Boorman, glues layers of satin, paper and burlap to make hard block in toe of shoe.

than not, returned shoes arrive with the statement that they "are just not right." Kohler shrugged and smiled: "You ladies are a funny bunch. Miss Fracci, bless her heart, is a lovely lady, but Oh, how she fusses over her shoes! Miss Park is the same." Freed's has an illustrious clientele, including Carla Fracci, Merle Park, Antoinette Sibley, Suzanne Farrell, Patricia McBride and Natalia Makarova.

Suzanne Farrell has worn only white shoes for the past few months. Doesn't she have any peach? "Yes, she does, lots of them, but she says she can't wear them," replied Kohler. Many of us, myself included, find the size and shape of white toe shoes invariably different from the peach. Kohler is again bewildered by this common complaint: "They are the same shoes, made by the same men, but I know you girls don't think so." He's right. And we're right. It's simply one more elusive idiosyncrasy inherent in the toe shoe.

On the subject of pay and price, Kohler was discreet. The makers work without contracts or company pensions and are paid per pair of shoes. A maker who assembles 42 pairs each day will take home twice the pay of one who assembles 21. At Freed's London store, a pair of stock shoes costs £8.90 (\$12.63 at the current exchange rate). At the New York store they cost \$29. Special orders—for professional dancers—cost about \$5 extra. The NYCB bill is close to \$400,000 a year.

The surprising part of Freed's business is that for an enterprise of its scale, work is carried out with such individuality. Each maker is selected by each dancer according to her own needs and expectations. This is good old-fashioned country-store service. As dancers, we are each known by name, just as our makers are known by their signature symbols imprinted on the bottom of each shoe.



"The men will be starting the afternoon work soon, and we can begin our tour," Kohler announced at a quarter to two. But first he wanted to explain an important toe-shoe tradition. They are made inside out and then turned for drying, shaping and cleaning. Turn-shoe making, as it is called, was the method used for all shoes until the 1870s. Today, street shoes are assembled right side out. Toe shoes and some running shoes are the main turn-shoes still being made; when they are reversed, there is a flat, smooth sole seam on the underside. Have they tried to make a toe shoe right side out? "Yes," nodded Kohler, "but it didn't work." Why not? He leaned back in his chair: "Well, shall we just say it wasn't a ballet shoe?"

At street level, in four large bays and several offices, lies the factory. Nineteen of Freed's makers work in one of these rooms. There are large skylights, and old-fashioned ceiling fans keep the air cool. Each maker has his own workbench with his name and personal mementos—it reminded me of our dressing rooms, where each girl has her "place" with mirror, makeup shelves and theater case, and where we, too, sew our toe shoes, attaching elastic onto the heel and ribbons at the sides (the shoes don't come with pre-sewn ribbons so that each dancer can place them to suit herself).

My romantic vision of little old men like Dr. Copélius, bent over, sewing shoes while dreaming of their lovely, far-off ballerinas, was quickly dispelled. Many of the makers are young or middle-aged, and they stand (*always* stand) at their workbenches. I asked if the men had photographs of ballerinas to inspire them. Kohler smiled again: "I think you'll find the men have other kinds of girls on their walls." Indeed they do. Pinups, belly dancers and provocative calendar art are where my wafting Giselles should be. The girls who have been taped haphazardly to the walls have never sported a toe shoe—or anything else.

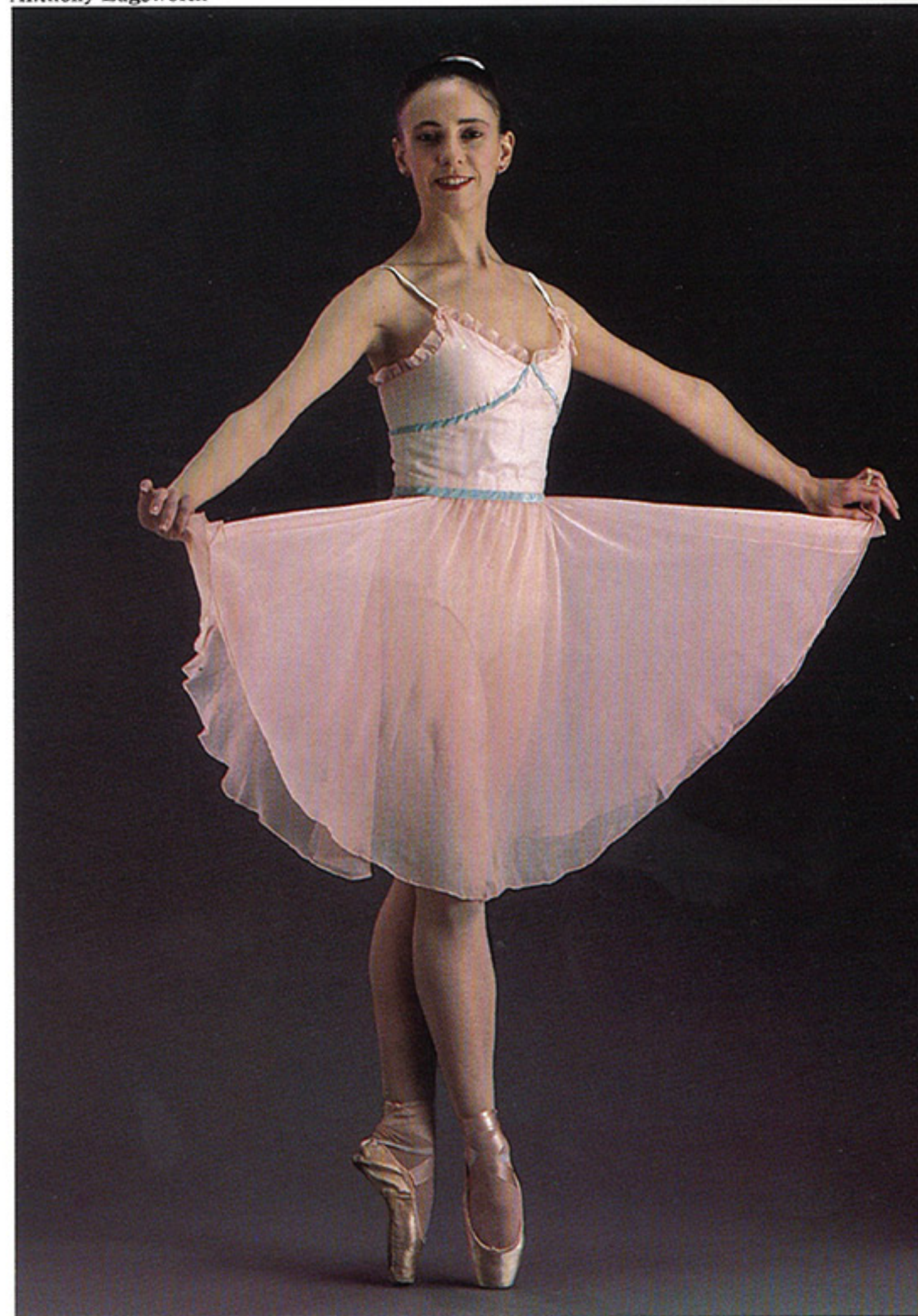
#### *Pushing and pulling toward the pointe*

As the maker begins his work, his bench is already set up with the orders for that day and all the raw materials. "Making" is only a small part of the finished product. The other employees do what the maker does not. Initially, he matches the upper to the shank, pleats the toe and then shapes the shoe after the marking, measuring, cutting and stitching have been done by others. With his hands and various curved pushing and pulling instruments, he molds the still-soft block of paper, glue and burlap into its finished pointe—square, long, flat, oval and curved in all the right places. The shoes are then set to dry overnight in large ovens to preserve the shapes perfectly—until the dancer reshapes them before wearing. It is by their "shapes"

that we know our makers, and it is their shapes that will win for them their "own dancers."

Entering the factory, I was struck by two things: the shoes, which are everywhere—40 pairs at a time stacked in four-foot-high cones of shiny silk—and the lasts. These are the heavy plastic molds around which each shoe is shaped. They are blue, green, brown and yellow, and there are 8,000 of them at Freed's. They resemble the idealized smooth, slim, elongated shape of a dancer's foot, and they give the Freed's shoe its distinctive shape. The natural foot lives and works inside a toe shoe that is molded to an ideal perfection; the bumps, lumps and angularities that a dancer's foot develops are the compensatory results. Were our feet as smooth and symmetrical as our lasts, we could

Anthony Edgeworth



The author on pointe in silk chiffon; she became a member of the New York City Ballet company at 18.



emerge unscarred from our shoes. A last is a compromise, fashioned to have the hypothetical curve that lies somewhere between a dancer's flat foot and arched foot—two very different sizes and shapes, yet the same shoe must serve both.

The women who inhabit the large room next to the makers perform the last stage in the birth of a toe shoe. It is one of the wonders of their skills that in just 30 seconds the "drawstring lady" can stitch the string and its casing to the edge of the satin shoe. At the heel end of the outside shank, Freed's famous trademark—two standing toe shoes—is pressed into the leather; the toe end gets a crisscross design to help prevent slipping. The name of the dancer is then written by hand on the shank. Kohler explained that because different-color pens are sometimes used to inscribe each shoe in a pair, dancers often complain that they did not receive a true pair. As all toe shoes are the "same"—there is no left or right—the dancer decides which shoe goes on which foot. The date of the shoe's birth is stamped on the shank to help in sorting out returned shoes and tracing complaints. Shoes are cleaned, bagged and sorted for shipping. The women's workroom is more bright and convivial than the makers'. Here there are no pinup girls, but family snapshots and calendars of Princess Diana, Prince Charles and the Royal Baby.

As we leave the workrooms, great tubs of gooey pale-brown glue being mixed for tomorrow are churning in a corner. The floor is covered with leather shavings and little pieces of peach satin. What other factory has such dainty droppings?

Bernard Kohler and I get coffee from a machine and return to his office, which is decorated only with bags of unused old toe shoes—his museum. He sits before a desk covered with papers: orders, measurements, complaints. A single new shoe lies to his right. He opens a tin of tobacco, rolls a cigarette and seems pleased by my enthusiasm for what I have just seen in the factory. After all, at the very base of the ballet business is the toe shoe—and its maker.

It takes three years of training before a maker can expect to get his own dancers and a steady flow of orders. He may then work for 30 or more years—far longer than most ballerinas. I asked Kohler if he and the makers know or care that we deliberately mutilate our new shoes. He laughed. "Yes, we know what you girls do. . . ." He held his hands out helplessly and said, "This is our business. We make the shoes and you wear them." Do the makers know much about the ballet or who their dancers are? "Not really," he replied. "These men are more interested in Saturday-afternoon soccer."

My maker until two years ago was Mr. Y. We Y dancers were told that he was no longer working (we thought he had died, but he'd semiretired) and so we had to choose a new maker. Mine now signs his work with the playing-card symbol for the ace of spades.

Kohler then got up and from a shelf pulled down a dusty brown box. "Here's something you might appreciate." He took out an old unused pair of toe shoes. They were tiny—size four. The name on the shank was Fonteyn. "These are from her last order," he said. He told me that in her career of more than 40 years she had had three makers just as she had had three partners. The shoes still shone, and the blocks were as hard as the day they were made, only now little bugs had crept inside to feed on the dry glue. He shook out the bugs and put the shoes back in their box.

As we left the office, Kohler asked if I would like to talk to *my* maker. My heart jumped and I followed him. "Mr. Spade" was Ron Boorman, 25, slim, strong and handsome. He was also very shy. It was after 4 o'clock and he was finishing up his day's orders, placing them in one long row. Boorman is unusually successful for such a young maker, with many devoted customers like myself; he makes 36 pairs a day. I asked him if he had ever been to the ballet. He hadn't, but he'd seen a little on TV. I thanked him for making my toe shoes and enabling me to dance. He blushed and looked at the shoe in his hand, then thanked me for giving him my orders and enabling him to work.