



Picture: STEPHEN LOCK

Arch rivals

Could high-tech US ballet shoes threaten the traditional makes? By Ismene Brown

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A pink pointe-shoe, the instrument of the illusory magic of the ballerina. It could be a Freed, the world's leading type, hand-made with cardboard and glue in a method that goes back almost a century. Or it could be a modern mutant as controversial as Dolly the sheep, which has caused such a furore in America that many people will not even say the maker's name.

Gaynor Minden uses moulded-plastics technology derived from trainers, and its marketing ethos attempts to blast the cold wind of science and factory standards into a hand-made, mystique-ridden world. Minden claims that its revolutionary technology will consign the old pointe-shoe to history on health, cost and aesthetic grounds. And now the feet rapidly becoming among the most famous in the ballet world are about to be sheathed in them.

Alina Cojocaru, dazzling young star of the Royal Ballet, is being fitted with Gaynors. At least 35 ballet-shoe brands compete aggressively to get their shoes on to the foot of the ballerina of the moment, all of them bar Minden's made in the traditional way. Minden's UK distributor, Beverly Kirkup of Dancia, who has been fitting 21-year-old Cojocaru, is ecstatic. It could be a huge sales coup.

The Minden hard-sell focuses on claims that its new-tech elastomeric shoe lasts longer, encourages correct dancing and offers unprecedented protection against injury. Indeed, Cojocaru's trial of Gaynors is partly remedial.

The distortion to her toe-joints from her Kiev training in Russia's notoriously bad pointe-shoes was exacerbated by an exceptional performance schedule last year. It is hoped that specially moulded Gaynors will help the star's toe-joints to heal.

But an even more crucial question is whether Cojocaru can maintain her uniquely aerial style, feet licking the ground as delicately as a cat's tongue, in shoes so different from the traditional ones.

A dancer's relationship with her pointe-shoes is far more passionate and intimate than with any partner. The world over, she picks up three or four new pairs of shoes before a performance and gives them a long "breaking-in", to make them feel like a second skin.

As a result, they will not give her more than one performance and a class or two. And when she throws them away, it is £25 gone. A £65 Gaynor could give her several performances and weeks in class, with a guarantee that every pair is identical to the last.

So why have these podiatric miracles not pushed the old Freeds and Blochs out of Britain's companies? Physiotherapists at the Royal Ballet and Birmingham Royal Ballet are pro Minden, or at least pro trials to back up the injury claims, but BRB has no Minden users, English National Ballet has only one, and the Royal Ballet a mere handful.

Yet when I talked to Vanessa Palmer, 32, a Royal Ballet soloist who switched from

Freeds to Gaynors six years ago, she said the change had saved her career.

"My Freed maker died, and I couldn't get a good feeling from the next one. I would have stopped if it hadn't been for Gaynors," she says. "They do take a lot of getting used to because it is harder at first to go smoothly on to pointe due to their pre-moulded back, and you have to dance absolutely correctly to get up there. But they've elongated my muscles, improved my legs, and definitely saved me from injury. They are also incredibly comfortable, and you can balance in them for ages."

On the other hand, she concedes, she has a regular foot that off-the-shelf Gaynors fit well, and as a soloist she has less at stake than a leading ballerina such as Tamara Rojo. Rojo, 28, has considered Gaynors, but is not prepared to give up the level of control she can have over fragile, familiar Freeds tailored by her personal maker.

"I would definitely give Gaynors a go if I was starting out," Rojo says. "But Freeds give you a very good line, a very personal line." Even so, she spends an hour heavily doctoring a new pair, cutting, slicing, thinning, breaking, sewing.

Some days she will spend four hours to get half a week's shoes perfect - not just for each ballet, but sometimes even specific scenes within a role. "It becomes a habit of mind.

You become more and more specific about what you expect."

This is where one of Minden's claimed advantages comes unstuck. The Royal Ballet buys 3,500 pairs of pointe-shoes a year, a pair or two per dancer per week, roughly £90,000 annually. In America, Minden claims that companies could save up to \$250,000 a year by switching to their shoe. But, in Britain, Gaynors cost more and Freeds less, and the drama-heavy British repertoire uses more shoes.

As Freed's chief fitter, Michele Attfield, pointed out, for a ballet such as David Bintley's Arthur, each Guinevere needs eight differently coloured pairs of shoes. Even in Swan Lake, a ballerina will need light and shiny in the "white" acts, firm and matte for the bravura "black" act, with a super-hard extra shoe to put on for the climactic 32 fouettes.

"When you look at it like that," she says triumphantly, "the cost argument looks rather different, doesn't it?"

What is more, she believes, even with thousands of moulds, Gaynors could not match the retailing that Freed's 26 shoemakers can provide. "Dancers' feet constantly change, when they're injured, when they do a new role, when their weight changes. Our makers are constantly adjusting their recipes." As for the injury argument, Attfield says well-trained feet in well-fitted shoes are rarely injured.

Despite the war of words, there is no clear winner. The new technology will not be stopped, but it has to accommodate artistic psychology and the foot's limitless differences. Minden's long-time supporter, the influential US teacher David Howard, who introduced them to the Royal Ballet, has adjusted his opinion slightly.

Plastics have magnificent shock-absorbency and he believes that they can reduce injuries, but they lack breathability and aesthetic adaptability. He plans to develop a shoe halfway between Gaynors and Freeds with another firm.

Meanwhile, Minden need not worry. If customised Gaynors save Alina Cojocaru's feet, both art and commerce will be winners.



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