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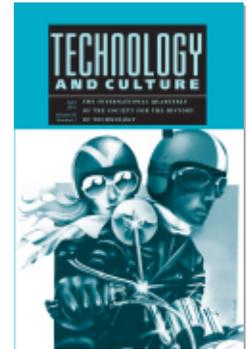
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## **A Case in Point: Romance and Regimentation at the New York City Ballet**

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# A Case in Pointe

## Romance and Regimentation at the New York City Ballet

WHITNEY E. LAEMMLI

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes the ballet dancer's pointe shoe as a technology of artistic production and bodily discipline. Drawing on oral histories, memoirs, dance journals, advertisements, and other archival materials, it demonstrates that the shoe utilized by dancers at George Balanchine's New York City Ballet was not the quintessentially Romantic entity it is so often presumed to be. Instead, it emerged from uniquely twentieth-century systems of labor and production, and it was used to alter dancers' bodies and professional lives in particularly modern ways. The article explores not only the substance of these changes but also the ways in which Balanchine's artistic oeuvre was inextricably intertwined with the material technologies he employed and, more broadly, how the history of technology and the history of dance can productively inform one another. Fundamentally, this article recasts Balanchine, seeing him not as a disconnected artist but as an eager participant in the twentieth-century national romance with American technology.

When it premiered before a French audience in 1832, *La Sylphide* was considered the quintessential Romantic ballet, and its star, Marie Taglioni, the quintessential Romantic ballerina. Part of this perception sprung from the ballet's plot—a tale of dark spirits and tragic, unrequited love—but part came from a more material source: Taglioni's pointe shoes. Although the true identity of the first ballerina to ascend to the tips of her toes has long been the subject of controversy, Taglioni's appearance in *La Sylphide* is frequently pointed to as a signal moment in the history of ballet.<sup>1</sup> Already

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1. For an introduction to some of the debates about the origins of pointework, see Sandra Noll Hammond, "Searching for the Sylph." Drawing on dance technique manu-

known for her uncommon delicacy and grace, Taglioni's fame skyrocketed when she rose momentarily to her toes, fleetingly entering the titular sylph's otherworldly realm. The pointe shoe too gained significant cultural cachet. After Taglioni's final performance in 1842, one of her used shoes was sold for two hundred rubles, cooked, served with a sauce, and eaten by a group of adoring fans.

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Today, the pointe shoe has lost little of that popular mystique. The iconic footwear adorns the bedrooms of countless young girls, while the bloody feet of professional dancers are objects of widespread fascination. In 1988 a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* wonderingly mused, "the pointe shoe is among the world's great anachronisms . . . it has changed little since it was invented in the early 1800s," and scholars tend to see similar continuity.<sup>2</sup> Dance historian Judith Chazin-Bennahum, for example, has asserted that the "Romantic Ballet is the true ancestor of our ballets today. Choreographic and technical inventions of the period, along with the evolution of the tutu and pointe dancing, were major developments that founded our modern concepts of dance and costume."<sup>3</sup> Nearly two hundred years later, the Romantic-era links between the pointe shoe and the supernatural, the transcendent, and the effusively feminine are still strong.

This article questions these associations by analyzing the pointe shoe not solely as a cultural symbol but also as a material technology. It examines the pointe shoe's physical form, patterns of use, artistic meaning, and physiological effects during one revolutionary period in its history: George Balanchine's directorship of the New York City Ballet, from the years leading up to its official founding in 1948 to the early 1980s. Ballet's paradigmatic modernist, Balanchine is widely considered to be the creator of a new, particularly American brand of ballet, characterized by its abstraction, technical difficulty, complex musicality, and what critic Deborah Jowitt called its "rapid, propulsive, and stinging" character.<sup>4</sup> During these years, Balanchine also made significant changes to the pointe shoe, though these transformations have generally been less remarked upon. This article knits these two historical strands together, contending that the novelty and modernity of Balanchine's work went far beyond choreographic aesthetics: it both depended upon and shaped the material tools he utilized—the pointe shoe prominent among them.

Not only did the pointe shoe Balanchine championed rely on uniquely

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als, Hammond rightly points out that pointe technique did not necessarily owe its earliest expression to the nineteenth-century Romantic ballerinas.

2. Michelle Higgins, "The Ballet Shoe."

3. Judith Chazin-Bennahum, *The Lure of Perfection*, 219.

4. Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*, 253. Recently, Gay Morris has added nuance to this story by illuminating the ways Balanchine was actively constructed as prototypically "American" by prominent dance critics and boosters. Gay Morris, *A Game for Dancers*.

twentieth-century American systems of labor, production, and consumption, it aided in the creation of new kinds of modern dancing *bodies*—bodies that were streamlined, powerful, and effectively interchangeable. This is not, of course, to say that no technological change occurred between the nineteenth century and the NYCB of the 1940s. In fact, late-nineteenth-century Russian pointe shoes also looked quite distinct from their predecessors.<sup>5</sup> Balanchine, however, made additional, significant changes to the pointe shoe and its use, drawing on earlier innovations without being defined by them. In short, this analysis is a case study, one that demonstrates that the mid-century pointe shoe was far from frozen in a mythic past but rather evolved in conversation with larger cultural, economic, and social forces.

This approach places the pointe shoe in dialogue with contemporary technologies for shaping corporeal experience. In the realm of industrial production, scholars like Jennifer Karns Alexander have documented the ways in which ergonomic technologies imposed a “mechanical discipline” on the bodies of early-twentieth-century factory workers, while Anson Rabinbach has demonstrated how concepts of the human body as “motor” became pervasive in the mid-nineteenth century. In the history of sport and recreation, Patricia Vertinsky and Sherry McKay have commented upon the ways in which mid-century “modernist” gymnasiums sought to control how visitors moved—whether actively exercising or merely passing through the gymnasium space. In the history of medicine, Thomas Schlich has insightfully described orthopedic surgeon Lorenz Bohler’s World War I “healing factories,” clinics whose medical and organizational technologies both drew on and helped to produce a “normalized and typified” vision of the human body.<sup>6</sup>

The common thread in these accounts is the sense that twentieth-century bodily technologies functioned to suppress “the distinguishing features and gestures that express individual autonomy,” while instead promoting regularity and uniformity of movement.<sup>7</sup> In certain ways, the story of the modern pointe shoe follows these general contours. Still, as historians of technology have long known, the relationship between user and tool is rarely unidirectional. Historians of technology and the body have been particularly conscious of this reciprocal exchange, demonstrating that indi-

5. For more on this topic and the history of classical and neoclassical ballet more generally, see Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points*; Tim Scholl, *From Petipa to Balanchine*; Sheila Marion, “Recording the Imperial Ballet.”

6. Jennifer Karns Alexander, “Efficiency and Pathology”; Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*; Sherry McKay and Patricia Vertinsky, *Disciplining Bodies in the Gymnasium*; Thomas Schlich, “The Perfect Machine.”

7. Alexander, “Efficiency and Pathology,” 310. Importantly, however, not all scholars see the drive toward standardization as entirely hegemonic, and some find a particular reservoir of individuality and heterogeneity in the realm of (nonballetic) modern dance. See Patricia Vertinsky, “Isadora Goes to Europe as the Muse of Modernism”; Hillel Schwartz, “Torque.”

viduals engage with their “external appliances” in complicated and constantly shifting ways.<sup>8</sup> The story of the pointe shoe is no different: the pointe shoe was both deeply shaped by its users and quite literally shaped them in return.<sup>9</sup> Such work is particularly important because it succeeds in uncovering experiential aspects of the body-technology relationship that are often difficult to access.<sup>10</sup> Much existing historical research has, of necessity, concentrated on the ways in which those in power—managers, administrators, intellectuals—have thought about, engaged with, and sought to control the bodies of others.<sup>11</sup> Less scholarly work has been completed on individuals’ experience of their own bodies, the phenomenology of everyday life and work.<sup>12</sup>

The study of the pointe shoe also contributes to the nascent literature on the interactions between technological and artistic endeavor. In recent years, historians of technology, including Julie Wosk, Emily Thompson, Karen Freeze, and John Tresch, have begun to think more critically about these intersections.<sup>13</sup> Even so, the tendency to see these realms as inherently opposed is still strong.<sup>14</sup> As a corrective, Caroline Jones and Peter Galison have suggested that researchers focus their inquiry not merely on the seemingly dissimilar *products* of scientific or artistic efforts, but rather on “the commonalities in the *practices* that produce them.”<sup>15</sup> In excavating

8. Materially grounded studies of prosthetic technologies have been particularly conscious of these reciprocal exchanges. See, for example, Katherine Ott, “The Sum of Its Parts.”

9. Edward Tenner, Bernard Rudofsky, and Lawrence Langer all make specific mention of the pointe shoe in their accounts, although none provides an in-depth analysis. Rudofsky, however, sees shoes in general as paradigmatic body-shaping technologies, in part because designers have overwhelmingly sought to mold the foot to the shoe rather than vice versa. Bernard Rudofsky, *The Unfashionable Human Body*, 114; Edward Tenner, *Our Own Devices*; Lawrence Langer, *The Importance of Wearing Clothes*.

10. Eden Medina hints at some of this generative potential in a short but suggestive essay on her own childhood experience with pointe shoes. See Medina, “Ballet Shoes.”

11. Steve Sturdy, “The Industrial Body.” For one example of how this kind of work is done well in dance studies, see Susan Leigh Foster, “Dancing Bodies.”

12. Dancers’ eagerness to discuss their own corporeal experience is somewhat unique—perhaps in no other profession do multiple books so enthusiastically dissect a workplace implement. See, among many others, Daniel S. Sorine and Stephanie Sorine, *Dancershoes*; Walter Terry, *On Pointe!*

13. Julie Wosk, *Breaking Frame*; Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*; Karen Freeze, “Czechoslovak Theater Technology under Communism”; John Tresch, *The Romantic Machine*.

14. It may also be worthwhile to consider the role gender has played in the omission of the pointe shoe and tools like it from the history of technology; the feminized art of ballet is certainly far removed from the traditional masculine realms of steel girders, Model Ts, and microprocessors. On dance’s “femininity,” see Susan Leigh Foster, “The Ballerina’s Phallic Pointe.” On the subject of gender and technology more generally, see Nina Lerman, Ruth Oldenziel, and Arwen P. Mohun, eds., *Gender and Technology*.

15. Caroline Jones and Peter Galison, eds., *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, 2.

the technological foundations of one strand of modern ballet, this study can be seen as one response to Jones's and Galison's call to action.

Moreover, although dance scholars are certainly aware of the dramatic ways in which Romantic and twentieth-century pointe shoes differ, none has yet stopped to consider whether that *material* difference might be a potentially *meaningful* one. In many ways, this orientation points to larger gaps in dance studies, a field that has frequently failed to engage with the material processes by which dance is made, the daily realities of its practitioners and their tools. With substantial recent exceptions, dance scholarship has historically fallen into one of two categories: critical choreographic analysis or hagiographic biography. Though each of these approaches has produced valuable knowledge, neither is oriented toward a consideration of the material conditions of dance production. Sondra Fraleigh and Alexandra Carter characterize this problem particularly well, noting that "the whole notion that dance performance is a job is still underexplored."<sup>16</sup> Such a methodological gap leaves scholars without crucial tools for understanding some of the most central artistic moments of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup>

Conversely, the pointe shoe can serve as a useful reminder to historians of the body and historians of technology that the "central movement experiences" of the century were not confined to the factory floor. Scholars such as Hillel Schwartz, Norman Bryson, and Patricia Vertinsky have begun to grapple with this new landscape, highlighting the complex interactions between various "regimes of bodily discipline" and noting the ways in which dance served as an important "site of contention about the nature of movement, performance, art, and even nationhood."<sup>18</sup> Still, much empirical work remains to be done.

As such, this article begins with a brief background sketch of the situation of ballet in mid-twentieth-century America. It then continues with an account of the pointe shoe as used at the New York City Ballet, focusing on the profound ways in which it differed from its nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predecessors. The article concludes by thinking through the effects of this material transformation on dancers' bodies, on the development and reception of twentieth-century ballet, and on the relationship between technology, bodily discipline, and artistic production.

16. Alexandra Carter, ed., *Rethinking Dance History*, 16. See also Sondra Fraleigh, "Consciousness Matters."

17. As Karen Freeze notes, theatrical "artifacts are made explicitly to express an idea" and thus present a particularly useful entry point into the vision of a creator. Freeze, "Czechoslovak Theater Technology under Communism," 456.

18. Vertinsky, "Isadora Goes to Europe"; Schwartz, "Torque"; Norman Bryson, "Cultural Studies and Dance History."

## Twentieth-Century American Ballet

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At the turn of the century, although ballet was thriving in Europe, it was not yet a major force in America. This is not to say that Americans had no interest in the art form. On the contrary, Americans had long been fascinated by ballet: when the famous Austrian ballerina Fanny Elssler toured the United States in 1842, Congress adjourned to attend her performance, and admiring fans pulled her coach along the cobbled streets of Boston and Philadelphia.<sup>19</sup>

Americans did, however, lack the infrastructure for training domestic talent. Although European touring companies became more regular visitors as the nineteenth century wore on, and a few of those European stars stayed to teach American children, these arrangements were largely temporary. There were few serious, permanent training schools and a similar dearth of professional ballet companies in which those children might eventually perform.<sup>20</sup>

This was the landscape Russian-born George Balanchine encountered when he arrived in America in the early 1930s. At twenty-nine, Balanchine was still relatively young, but he had already logged substantial experience as a dancer and choreographer with, among others, Sergei Diaghilev's famous Ballets Russes. But when the Ballets Russes disintegrated after Diaghilev's death, Balanchine struck off alone and formed his own company, the short-lived Les Ballets. In 1933 Les Ballets toured in New York City, and it was after one of their performances that Lincoln Kirsten, a young would-be impresario, persuaded Balanchine to move to the United States to establish a uniquely American ballet company.<sup>21</sup> The following section suggests how the pointe shoe helped Balanchine accomplish this task, both by making American ballet professionals and by crafting a balletic body suited to his particular artistic aspirations.

## New Shoes for New Dancers

By the mid-twentieth century, the pointe shoe worn by the dancers of the New York City Ballet was almost nothing like its Romantic predecessors. Pictured here is the kind of pointe shoe Marie Taglioni would have used (fig. 1). Constructed of either cloth or leather, the nineteenth-century

19. Ivor Guest, *Fanny Elssler*, 136.

20. Jennifer Dunning, *But First a School*, 4; Reynolds and McCormick, *No Fixed Points*, 106.

21. Dunning, *But First a School*, 15. As Lincoln Kirstein put it, their collective aim was to establish "a national ballet corresponding to the famous Russian Ballet but created by American artists to express an American tradition" (as quoted in Bernard Taper, *Balanchine*, 151). For a fuller history of the New York City Ballet and its precursors, see Lynn Garafola and Eric Foner, *Dance for a City*.



**FIG. 1** (Top) Pointe shoe worn by Marie Taglioni ca.1842. The shoe is unblocked, and the only additional support is provided by darning beneath the shoe's toes and up its sides. (Source: Cyril W. Beaumont Bequest, Victoria and Albert Museum. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.) (Bottom) Marie Taglioni as a weightless sylphide. Lithograph by Alexandre Lacauchie, ca.1832. (Source: Henry Beard Print Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.)

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pointe shoe was simply a modified version of the soft slippers that dancers wore on a daily basis. The sides of the shoe and the tips of the toe were darned in order to provide a modicum of support, but the essential form was unaltered. Moreover, dancers themselves performed all the necessary construction. The resulting product allowed the wearer to rise to her toes for just a few moments—enough time to produce a sense of otherworldly weightlessness but not to perform any complex technical feats.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, mid-twentieth-century pointe shoes were qualitatively distinct from dancers' soft slippers and made not by the dancer but by a new coterie of professional cobblers, many of whom were relatively indifferent to the dancers' art. In fact, when New York City Ballet dancer Toni Bentley visited the Freed factory in London in 1984, she guilelessly asked the factory director, Bernard Kohler, if the men posted photographs of the ballerinas to inspire them. Kohler smiled slyly and responded, "I think you'll find the men have other kinds of girls on their walls." When asked if the makers knew much about ballet or the dancers who wear their shoes, Kohler again replied in the negative, "These men are more interested in Saturday-afternoon soccer." As most of these men were paid by the piece without contracts or benefits, their concerns tended to be practical and financial rather than artistic.<sup>23</sup>

The darned tip of the toe morphed into the "box," constructed on a last out of layers of felt, burlap, or linen and held together by proprietary glue blends. A shank fashioned from stiff leather and cork formed the back of the shoe, and the whole apparatus was surrounded by a cloth and satin covering. The extra fabric was gathered into carefully made pleats just below the toes, providing both an aesthetically pleasing finish and additional support. As one might suspect, these shoes were far harder than their Romantic equivalents and allowed the dancer to stay on pointe for significantly extended periods<sup>24</sup> (figs. 2–3).

With these shifts in production, dancers' shoes became relatively more standardized. While it is difficult to overstate the extent to which individual dancers customized their professionally made shoes—in fact, dancers' "breaking in" rituals could easily be the subject of their own essay—the basic canvas with which they worked was created elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> This was

22. Hammond, "Searching for the Sylph," 27–31. It is important to note that despite their material dissimilarity, nineteenth-century pointe shoes were no less technologies than their twentieth-century counterparts. There was, in fact, a particularly strong technological tradition within the Romantic theater, one that proudly employed elaborate tools and new scientific knowledge in the creation of its fantastic spectacles. See Tresch, *The Romantic Machine*, 128.

23. Toni Bentley, "The Heart and Sole," 96.

24. "How Toe Shoes Are Made," 45.

25. Such practices included the application of everything from water and rubbing alcohol to door hinges, hammers, cement blocks, and industrial floor polish. In later years, dancers were able to have shoes adjusted to their specifications at the point of production, but personal customization practices never diminished.

March 5, 1929.

S. CAPEZIO

1,704,281

TOE AND BALLET SLIPPER

Filed Oct. 22, 1927

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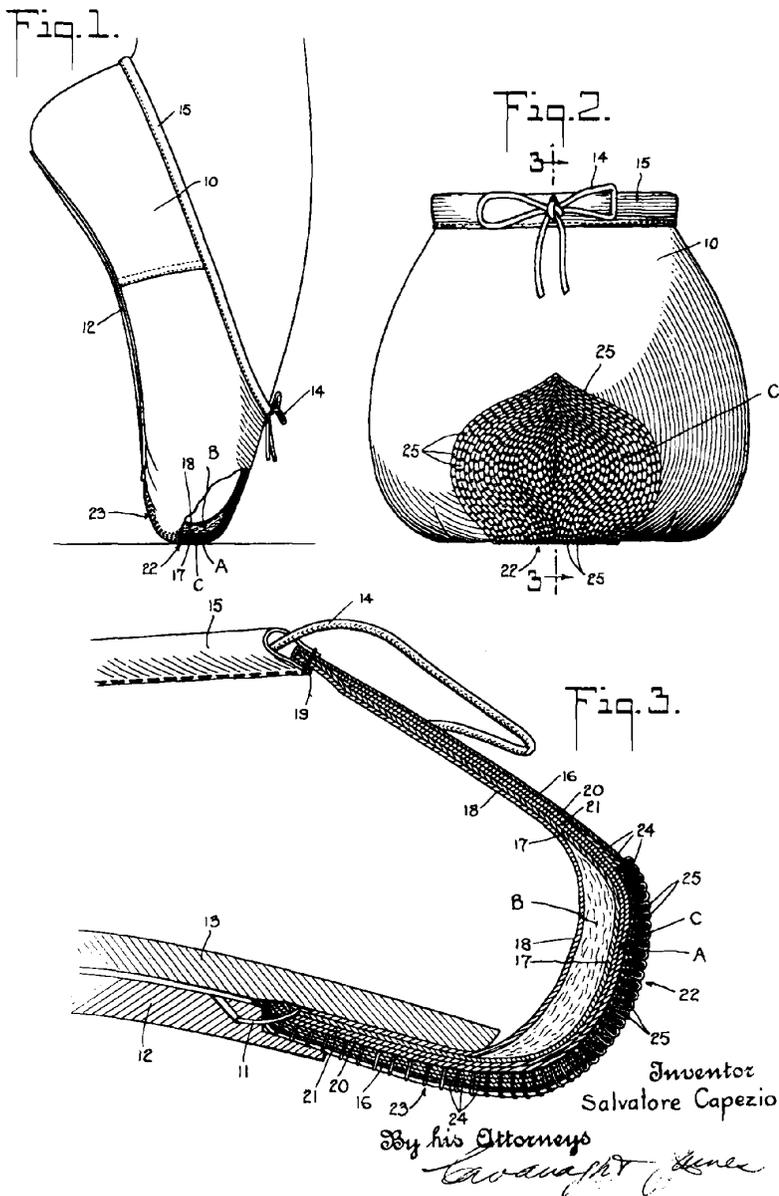


FIG. 2 Pointe shoe schematics. Salvatore Capezio. Toe and ballet slipper. U.S. patent 1,704,281. Filed 22 October 1927 and issued 5 March 1929. (Source: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.)

March 5, 1929.

S. CAPEZIO

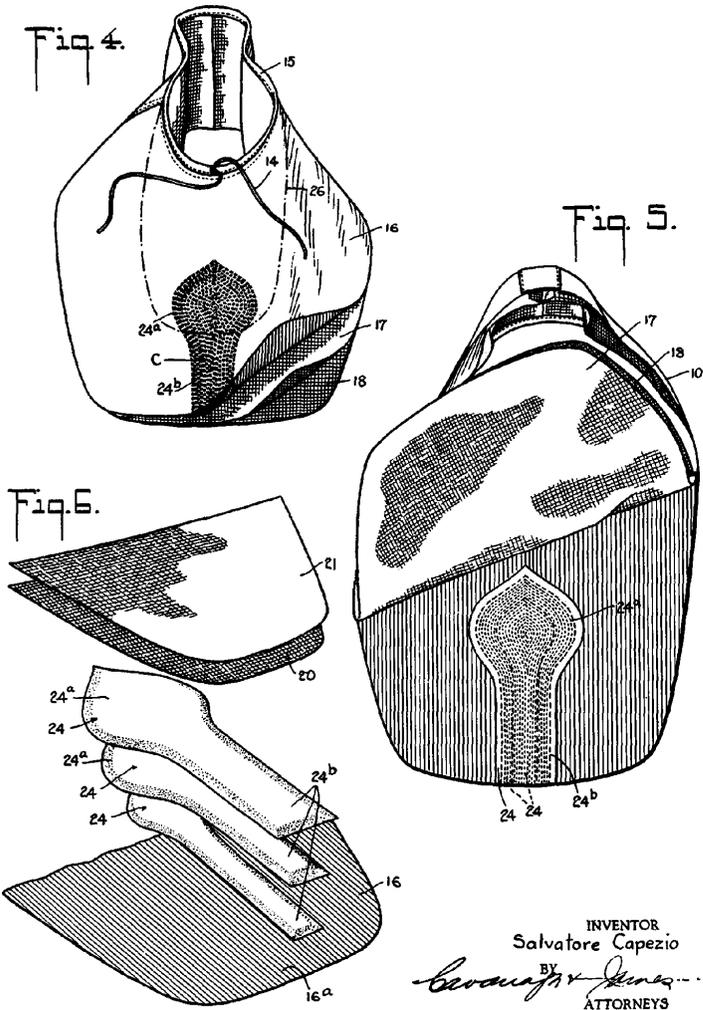
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TOE AND BALLET SLIPPER

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INVENTOR  
 Salvatore Capezio  
 BY *Caravaggio & Jones*  
 ATTORNEYS

FIG. 3 Pointe shoe schematics. Salvatore Capezio. Toe and ballet slipper. U.S. patent 1,704,281. Filed 22 October 1927 and issued 5 March 1929. (Source: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.)

nowhere as true as at the New York City Ballet, where Balanchine exercised an unprecedented amount of control over the ways in which his dancers interacted with their shoes. It is the substance of this ongoing, dynamic interaction that perhaps most distinguishes Balanchine's engagement with

the pointe shoe from that of his predecessors. Though some features of what are now considered “modern” pointe shoes—the platform, box, and shank—were in use as early as the late nineteenth century, under Balanchine, the shoes’ particular configuration, as well as the ways in which dancers, directors, and choreographers interacted with them, were quite different.<sup>26</sup> In fact, early in the company’s history, Balanchine worked with Capezio to create a special shoe for the students at the School of American Ballet, the New York City Ballet’s preprofessional feeder school. He saw this collaboration as fundamental to the making of a new generation of American ballet dancers.<sup>27</sup>

The most essential pointe shoe characteristic was, for Balanchine, “lightness.” For while NYCB shoes were far harder than their nineteenth-century counterparts, they tended to be substantially “softer” and “lighter” than the shoes used by dancers in contemporary companies. Such shoes, Balanchine frequently complained, were unflattering, clunky, and loud: their size broke the continuous line of the leg and made the shoe an unwanted participant in the performance. More importantly, however, Balanchine felt that overly supportive shoes required too little of the dancer. A softer shoe, by contrast, forced dancers to use their muscles in new ways and—as this essay will later discuss in greater detail—served as a tool for creating the strong feet and long, slender musculature for which City Ballet became known.

Dancers’ accounts from the period attest to Balanchine’s success in altering prevailing notions of the ideal pair of pointes. Said NYCB dancer Kay Mazzo in 1962: “One word that immediately comes to mind when I think about pointe shoes is ‘light.’ It’s crucial that I have a very lightweight shoe. Anything that feels like a pointe shoe, I don’t want. I must feel that I’m the one who is doing the dancing, not the shoes.”<sup>28</sup> Leslie Browne, a fellow company member, echoed this sentiment: “I don’t want to feel an actual shoe on my foot; I want the shoe to become part of me.”<sup>29</sup>

Mazzo and Browne started their careers with the New York City Ballet, but Balanchine’s preferences also influenced those who came to the company later in life. Violette Verdy, for example, was trained in France, where harder shoes were still used. In an interview with journalist and dance critic Walter Terry, Verdy noted that she initially found the transition to the softer American shoe quite difficult, although she came to appreciate

26. My focus on dancers’ day-to-day use of the shoe, Balanchine’s preferences and modifications, and the material effects of contemporary aesthetic ideals accords well with the history of technology’s recent focus on technologies in use rather than as static determinants of behavior. See: Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor J. Pinch, eds., *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*; Nelly Oudshoorn and Trevor Pinch, eds., *How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technology*.

27. Dunning, *But First a School*, 168.

28. Interview with Kay Mazzo in Sorine and Sorine, *Dancershoes*, 34.

29. Interview with Leslie Browne in Sorine and Sorine, *Dancershoes*, 66.

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its utility for preparing for Balanchine ballets.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, a young Allegra Kent had difficulties with Balanchine's dictates, noting: "I really like soft toe shoes, and the harder I work on my foot exercises, the easier it is for me to wear lighter shoes. Before long, I hope to develop the strength of foot that will make it possible for me to wear the very soft shoes that many of the other dancers wear."<sup>31</sup> Soft shoes required more of the ballerina, and Balanchine was eager for his dancers to reach the technical level necessary to employ them.

But not all the changes Balanchine made to the pointe shoe related to its form; he helped redefine *who* used the pointe shoe and *when* they did so as well. In the nineteenth century, pointe shoes were primarily the province of principal dancers. Taglioni was revered because she was among the few; students, corps de ballet members, and even lesser leading lights did not commonly dance on pointe. Moreover, when stars did rise to their toes, it was generally just for a moment, enough to suggest weightlessness but not to require radical changes in physical development. As a result, ballet technique classes rarely involved the wearing of pointe shoes, either for stars or for lower-ranking dancers.

Balanchine, however, required that all his company dancers take class on pointe and instituted similar requirements for intermediate and advanced students at the School of American Ballet.<sup>32</sup> Pointe shoes were no longer worn only by professional dancers practicing a particular "trick." Instead, all professionals and serious students wore pointe shoes for the full two or three hours they were in class each day.<sup>33</sup> Balanchine also consistently put his corps de ballet dancers on pointe on stage, a striking departure from tradition glossed here by dance critic Robert Greskovic:

Until Balanchine taught me otherwise, I thought of pointework as a dramatic moment of balance, exemplified, say, by Margot Fonteyn's supporting foot—simple, strong, steady. . . . The jazzy fluidity of the relevés to pointe in the allegro passages of Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco*, movements performed not just by the ballerinas but by the entire female ensemble, was something else: here were pointes as strong and flexible as an elephant's trunk.<sup>34</sup>

The contrast Greskovic highlights is striking. Pointework was still impressive, to be sure. But instead of a flash of transcendent beauty, a moment in

30. Terry, *On Pointe!* 85.

31. *Ibid.*, 88.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Dunning, *But First a School*, 168.

34. Robert Greskovic, afterword to *Balanchine Pointework*, 62. This is not to say that Balanchine was the first choreographer to put corps de ballet dancers on pointe. Bronislava Nijinska's 1923 work *Les Noces*, for example, includes extensive pointework for both corps and soloists. Instead, it is the extent and institutionalization of the use of pointe shoes in the corps de ballet that I seek to highlight.

which an individual artist held an audience captive, it was now an intensely physical feat engaged in by a large ensemble. Suki Schorer, a City Ballet dancer, echoed Greskovic's observation: "What can elsewhere seem extraordinary, or a trick, becomes commonplace. [Balanchine's] pointework is not isolated or highlighted as if in quotation marks; it is, rather, a given for every woman onstage, an integral part of her expressive being. . . . In Balanchine's ballets, more than in those by other choreographers, she is typically part of an ensemble in which all the women dance basically the same steps."<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, the factory director at Freed of London, the shoe manufacturer to which nearly all the company switched in the 1970s, reported that the City Ballet dancers went through almost twice as many shoes as any other company.<sup>36</sup> In the Balanchine years, an average dancer used nine pairs of shoes each week, and in 1973 the company spent nearly a quarter of a million dollars on pointe shoes alone.<sup>37</sup> So concerned about the expenditure, in fact, was one young dancer that when she was unexpectedly promoted and offered a salary increase, she instinctively exclaimed, "Oh no, the company needs money for toe shoes."<sup>38</sup>

## Bodies at Work

The consequences of these changes were more than just financial: the new tools of their trade also altered dancers' bodies. There has always been some popular interest in the unintentional physical consequences of pointe shoe use—weakened bones if used too early in life, blisters, calluses, and bloody toes regardless—but here I move beyond these inadvertent effects to a discussion of Balanchine's intentional use of pointe shoes as a technology for creating new kinds of dancing bodies.

One indication of these somatic transformations was the difficulty Balanchine-trained dancers began to have dancing in traditional soft shoes. Karin von Aroldingen, a principal dancer with the NYCB, provides one example. Although von Aroldingen initially found pointework in the soft shoes Balanchine favored extraordinarily difficult, she acquiesced because of a belief that "Balanchine's choreography is so intricate and fast that a heavy shoe just wouldn't be suitable." But despite her work to "toughen and strengthen [her] feet to be able to dance in his demanding ballets," they still consistently ached. Unfortunately, the alternative was even more unpleasant: "Nevertheless, I cannot imagine not dancing on pointe, and for me dancing on half-pointe or barefoot is more disagreeable."<sup>39</sup>

35. Suki Schorer, *Balanchine Pointework*, 3.

36. Bentley, "The Heart and Sole," 92.

37. Joseph H. Mazo, *Dance Is a Contact Sport*, 204.

38. Toni Bentley, *Winter Season*, 121.

39. Interview with Karin von Aroldingen in Sorine and Sorine, *Dancershoes*, 74.

Dancer Merrill Ashley had a similar perspective, remarking that, for her, dancing on pointe became an issue of comfort: “In fact, it’s very painful for me to dance on half-pointe, particularly since I tore the ligaments around my bunion.”<sup>40</sup> The pain Ashley feels when off pointe is notable, but even more striking is the way in which she describes her bunion—a common, and often painful, consequence of pointework—as an integral part of her body.

Bunions, however, were not always inadvertent. Balanchine thought the foot in the pointe shoe was most attractive when it tapered when viewed from the front, a look enhanced by the presence of a bunion on the big toe’s first joint. Dancer Suki Schorer tells this story of her early days in the corps de ballet:

So Balanchine liked the way a bunion made the pointe look. In my own case, the big toe was set in so straight a line with the joint that the tip of my pointe looked squared and my foot a little sickled. With a twinkle in his eye as he said it, Balanchine suggested I go home and work on developing a small bunion. So I went home and walked around on pointe, slightly rolling in toward my big toe. Over time I produced the tapered look that he wanted and that is so beautiful.<sup>41</sup>

Here Balanchine urged Schorer to consciously shape her body in line with the pointe shoe’s dictates outside of the classroom. Schorer was certainly not alone in this experience, but the most common processes of physical transformation took place more gradually, inside the walls of Lincoln Center.

Even in nonprofessional contexts, the pointe shoe was touted as a valuable tool for remaking “imperfect” bodies. With the ballet boom in full swing in the 1950s and ’60s, the popular media—while warning of the dangers of putting children on pointe too early—emphasized that pointework could fix children’s physical shortcomings. One *New York Times* article, for example, reported that pointework “under the right conditions can help develop straight limbs and good arches. One ballet-school mother said that her daughter had been able to discard corrective shoes after studying.”<sup>42</sup>

The shoe’s transformational potential becomes even more evident when one considers that Balanchine also recommended that his male dancers train in pointe shoes.<sup>43</sup> Daniel Duell, a male NYCB dancer who

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“Half-pointe” refers to the position in which the dancer’s weight is balanced on the ball of the foot rather than on the tip of the toe. This position is frequently used when a dancer is wearing soft ballet shoes.

40. Interview with Merrill Ashley in Sorine and Sorine, *Dancershoes*, 45.

41. Schorer, *Balanchine Pointework*, 17.

42. Jo Coppola, “Suburbia on Its Toes.” For a look at early-twentieth-century American concerns about flat feet, see Beth Linker, “Feet for Fighting.”

43. Schorer, *Balanchine Pointework*, 4.

began wearing pointe shoes in company class in the early 1970s, reported the following:

Unlike the ballerinas, who dance for hours and hours every day on their toes, I'm only spending half an hour at a time in toe shoes, and I'm not always on pointe during that time. Already there is quite an improvement in how my feet feel and look, and working in toe shoes stretches my feet as nothing else can; and my feet are becoming increasingly flexible.<sup>44</sup>

Dancer Bart Cook also attempted pointework to strengthen his feet and legs, although he—in contrast to Duell—found the practice far too painful to maintain long-term.<sup>45</sup> Such stories were surprisingly common among the male City Ballet dancers, and they too suggest that the pointe shoe's function extended beyond the purely aesthetic. Though there was no discussion of male dancers appearing on pointe on stage, the shoes still played a crucial part in their physical conditioning.<sup>46</sup>

In his 1973 book *Dance Is a Contact Sport*, journalist Joseph Mazo provided a further perspective on the physical effects of pointework at the New York City Ballet:

Dancers have voluntarily altered the course of evolution, and that practice invariably leads to trouble. . . . Human toes were not designed to stand on. . . . When an organism is as much modified in structure and purpose as a dancer's body, it becomes dangerously fragile. When breeders began trying to produce longer and longer dachshunds, the dachshunds started to die of broken backs—their spines were weakened by over-elongation.<sup>47</sup>

For dancers, similar injuries often awaited.<sup>48</sup> Mazo's particular choice of words, however, emphasizes that, again, not all these consequences were unintentional. In the same way that breeders stretched the dachshund to achieve their own ends, Balanchine used the pointe shoe as a tool for grooming a new species of dancers. Balanchine voiced a similar sentiment

44. Interview with Daniel Duell in Sorine and Sorine, *Dancershoes*, 20.

45. Interview with Bart Cook in Sorine and Sorine, *Dancershoes*.

46. Although this article focuses on material practices of bodily discipline, it is interesting to consider how such techniques intersect with and amplify the disciplining gaze to which dancers—particularly female dancers—are already subject. For more on the gendered gaze in ballet, see Foster, "The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe"; Ann Daly, "Classical Ballet"; Ann Daly, "The Balanchine Woman."

47. Mazo, *Dance Is a Contact Sport*, 230.

48. In one sense, Mazo's concern is simply a manifestation of the public's growing interest in the emotional and physical problems of ballet dancers in the 1970s and '80s. Flamed by books like former NYCB and American Ballet Theater alum Gelsey Kirkland's 1986 tell-all, *Dancing on My Grave*, and Lawrence Vincent's 1979 *Competing with the Sylph*, the ubiquity of anorexia, amenorrhea, drug use, depression, and isolation in the ballet community was rapidly coming to light.

in a 1972 interview, albeit perhaps less subtly. Speaking about the children who entered the School of American Ballet at a young age, he noted that “I have all these children from my school from the beginning, they were before my children, they’re growing up, and they become a company, and they all look alike, like from the same model,” acerbically concluding, “and if you like it that way stay, and if you don’t like [it] go somewhere else.”<sup>49</sup>

The evidence suggests that such efforts were remarkably successful. By the middle of the twentieth century, the ascendance of the “Balanchine look” at the New York City Ballet was a well-known phenomenon. This “look” is often explained as a consequence of Balanchine’s preference for very thin dancers. It is widely acknowledged, however, that the uniqueness of the “Balanchine body” also depended on particular kinds of novel muscular configurations, configurations that themselves owed much to the pointe shoe: leg muscles that had been shaped to appear unusually lanky, feet that were elongated, enormously flexible, and tapered. These were bodies that were not only capable of new kinds of technical achievements but whose streamlined forms—like other technical and artistic achievements of the era—celebrated speed and motion even when still (fig. 4).

### The Tools of Modernism

Many scholars have commented upon the complicated ways in which modernist artists worked in conversation with new scientific and technological ideologies, cataloging the fascination these boundary-crossings held for artists in genres as diverse as painting, collage, music, cinema, and poetry.<sup>50</sup> Little attention, however, has thus far been paid to dance.<sup>51</sup>

Nonetheless, previous scholarship does shed useful light on the milieu in which Balanchine was operating, and the work of Cecelia Tichi on American artists and writers is particularly illuminating. Early-twentieth-century Americans, Tichi contends, encountered a world of “gears and girders,” populated by bridges, railways, Erector sets, and a new breed of

49. Interview with Phyllis Winifred Manchester. Recorded 20 March 1975 at the New York Public Library. Intended for use on the National Public Radio series *Ara-besques*, but never broadcast. “Interview with George Balanchine [sound recording],” New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Collection.

50. Among others, consult the work of Stephen Kern, Jimena Canales, Linda Henderson, Emily Thompson, Lisa Cartwright, and, earlier, Lewis Mumford. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time*; Jimena Canales, *A Tenth of a Second*; Linda Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension*; Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*; Cartwright, *Screening the Body*; Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*. Not all these authors reach the same conclusions about the specific relationship between artists, science, and technology, but they all recognize the ongoing contact and exchange.

51. Among the few dance texts that do grapple with modernism in a historically grounded fashion, Gay Morris’s *A Game for Dancers* stands out for its cogent analysis of the varied, conflicting modernisms that characterized post–World War II America.



FIG. 4 A new breed of New York City Ballet dancers surrounds George Balanchine in 1969. Photo by Bernard Gotfryd. (Source: Getty Images.)

engineer-heroes. As these structures rose up, so too did a poetic philosophy centered on “the functional, efficient arrangement of prefabricated components into a total design” and a complementary approach to the visual arts based on transparency. “Open to view, so obviously *designed*,” Tichi states, “the world of girders and gears invites the onlooker to see its internal workings, its component parts. . . . It insists upon the recognition that it is, in fact, an assembly.”<sup>52</sup>

Balanchine can also be placed within the twentieth-century national romance with American technology. He too was eager to highlight the technological qualities of the performance experience, including—and perhaps especially—the pointe shoe. Romantic ballerinas, hoping to maintain the illusion of their magical otherworldliness, had sought to conceal their shoes, often using makeup to match the color of their pointes to that of their legs. In photographs or paintings, they frequently requested that their pointe shoes be altered—the already minimally blocked toes whittled down to near-nothingness—so that the dancer looked as if she were rising to the sky entirely of her own power. Balanchine, in contrast, was enamored of “fresh,

52. Cecelia Tichi, *Shifting Gears*, 5.

shiny pointe shoes” and barred his dancers from altering their color to achieve a more subtle effect on stage.<sup>53</sup> He wanted the shoe to be distinct from the leg, a sentiment one of his male dancers shared: “I feel strongly about wanting to see the shiny pointe shoes. . . . Those special shoes and feet should be seen by the audience.”<sup>54</sup> Balanchine even explicitly praised the shoe’s unnatural character in journalist Walter Terry’s 1962 book, *On Pointe!* Reports Terry, “For those who complain that the toe shoe is artificial, Balanchine has an answer. He agrees but he approves. ‘Ballet is artificial,’ he says. ‘It is like poetry, it is invented. It is the unreal versus the real. Where words fail, poetry can succeed and the same is true of ballet: something you cannot explain can be expressed on pointe. You can’t tell a story with the pointe but it can, when imaginatively used, give you an extra feeling similar to modulations in music or color intensities in light.”<sup>55</sup> For Balanchine, therefore, the pointe served multiple artistic functions. Each time the shoes appeared on stage, they simultaneously operated as practical tools and as symbolic nods to a new aesthetic of transparent construction.

In fact, Balanchine explicitly sought an identity as a kind of technologist. He had long heaped praise upon the technological achievements of the age—the skyscrapers and subways of his adopted home in the “great impersonal bee-swarm of New York” were particularly beloved.<sup>56</sup> By the 1950s, he had also begun to speak of his own work in terms of engineering.<sup>57</sup> In a 1958 article in *Dance Magazine*, for example, he characterized himself as a “carpenter” and analogized the work of choreography to the construction of a cabinet. He evocatively described his famous *Agon* as “a machine, but a machine that thinks . . . planned by Stravinsky and myself for twelve of our ablest technicians . . . a measured construction in space, demonstrated by moving bodies set to certain patterns or sequence in rhythm and melody with multiple ingenuities.”<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, Balanchine frequently characterized his dancers as technological implements, arguing in one interview that “it is not the woman who is onstage. It is a tool, really, an instrument, that has to perform a certain amount of gesture that is not just fast or slow or powerful, but somehow impressive”<sup>59</sup> (fig. 5). Similarly, in an article published in the *New York Review of Books* shortly after Balanchine’s death, Lincoln Kirstein remarked that “Ballerinas are kin to those mythic Amazons who sliced off a breast to

53. Schorer, *Balanchine Pointework*, 6.

54. Interview with Jean-Pierre Bonnefous in Sorine and Sorine, *Dancershoes*, 64.

55. Terry, *On Pointe!* 100.

56. George Balanchine as quoted in Arlene Croce, *Afterimages*.

57. George Balanchine, “A Word from George Balanchine.”

58. *Ibid.*

59. Interview with Barbara Walczak. Conducted by Peter Conway on 16 and 19 April 1979 for the New York Public Library Dance Collection Oral History Project. “Interview with Barbara Walczak [sound recording],” New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Collection.



FIG. 5 Andy Warhol, Illustration from “A Word with George Balanchine,” *Dance Magazine*, January 1958, 35. (Source: © 2014 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.)

shoot arrows the more efficiently. The criterion of professional owes not only to a particular psychic tempering, but also to peculiar anatomical configuration. Balanchine’s standard controlled his company.”<sup>60</sup> Subtly uniting a romanticized vision of the Amazons with the modern, industrial lexicon of standardization and efficiency, Kirstein’s statement is a telling encapsulation of how, while the pointe shoe may have maintained its aura of nostalgic romance, it was actively altering those who wore it in a new, and very modern, way. Balanchine may have had much in common with William Carlos Williams or Ezra Pound, but the “components” he sought to mold were neither words nor canvases but the bones and sinews of his dancers’ bodies.

But dancers could respond to these changes in ways that gears, girders,

60. Lincoln Kirstein, “Beliefs of a Master.”

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and grammatical structures could not. In 1959 Marian Horosko, a member of the NYCB corps de ballet, wrote to *Dance Magazine*, complaining that Balanchine dancers were “designed” to “look alike, dance alike, and to have no precedence or seniority.” She bemoaned the way in which she and her colleagues were “used like machines or skilled robots and have become interchangeable, almost like little atoms, endlessly changing places, making no mark of our own.”<sup>61</sup> Horosko’s complaints were common—other dancers and critics found similar fault with Balanchine—but the explanation for this widespread dissent has usually been confined to Balanchine’s overall management style. More material causes, however, cannot be discounted: the new pointe shoe regime also participated in producing dancers who felt like artistic pawns—mere tools to be manipulated, alienated from their labor, and anxious about their status. Coupled with other bodily regimens, the omnipresent pointe shoe ensured a certain degree of technical and corporeal uniformity within the company dancers, allowing more frictionless replacements and substitutions. It also blurred the lines between principal dancer and corps de ballet member. No longer the sole province of stars, the romance and mystique the pointe shoe once held began to fade, replaced by the universal mundanities of ribbon sewing, shoe hammering, and the application of industrial glues.

Evocatively, the pointe shoe—like other canonical workplace technologies—eventually became a source of contention in labor disputes.<sup>62</sup> In 1980 Toni Bentley reported that dancers engaged in a rare stand against company management, circulating a petition that asked “not for better hours or longer lunch breaks but for better toe shoes. The standard has wavered significantly in the past year.”<sup>63</sup> They also increasingly complained about the amount of time shoe maintenance occupied, a task described by one reporter as the City Ballet dancers’ reluctant “national pastime.” This world—of workers’ uneasy relationship with a fundamental tool of their trade—is a far cry from the rarefied Romantic vision of sylphs and satin. In *Dance Is a Contact Sport*, Joseph Mazo relates an anecdote about an irate Balanchine berating the corps de ballet for their irresponsible shoe use, storming into the room “like a man who has decided in advance exactly what he will say, and is not pleased at having to say it.” Concerned about rising expenditures, Balanchine exhorted the dancers to refurbish their shoes whenever possible. Even if the shoes were completely unsalvageable for dancing, “the girls” were to detach the ribbons, wash and iron them, and sew them on to a new pair of shoes. Urging the corps to emulate the “real professionals” like Patty McBride and Violette Verdy, Balanchine threatened to cut down the size of

61. Marian Horosko, “A Matter of Values.”

62. See Merritt Roe Smith, *Harpers Ferry Armory*; Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*; Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain*; Stephen Meyer, *The Five-Dollar Day*.

63. Bentley, *Winter Season*, 115.

the company—or worse, move them to New Jersey!—if they did not begin to care for their shoes properly. And although Mazo doubted that Balanchine would ever follow through, toe shoes were among the director’s favorite “kickable dogs,” making them both a major part of the dancer’s daily life and a central point of professional contention.<sup>64</sup>

The pointe shoe also came to be employed as a money-making tool. Beginning in the 1950s, dancers were asked to donate their used shoes to be autographed and sold for the benefit of the company. In a departure from tradition, which dancer autographed which shoe was entirely inconsequential. Reported one volunteer given the task of obtaining signatures: “It was astonishing. The girls stood there, stark naked, signing shoes,” one after another.<sup>65</sup> The conscious creation of a fungible consumer good by City Ballet administrators contrasts markedly with Taglioni’s fanatical admirers fighting over and consuming *her* shoe. It is a small moment but nonetheless enormously telling of the changes the pointe shoe had undergone over the course of a century—materially, in use, and in purpose—and how a new, modern, commercial sensibility had become enmeshed with the old romanticism.

Moreover, as the century wore on, Balanchine’s pointe shoe regime spread across the country. City Ballet alumni founded their own companies in San Francisco and Miami, and the Ford Foundation undertook a concerted effort to further disseminate Balanchine’s approach. In 1960 the newly formed foundation made some of its first major arts grants to Balanchine-affiliate organizations: \$100,000 for scholarships for students at the School of America Ballet and \$50,000 for students at the San Francisco Ballet School. The foundation also awarded a grant of \$25,000 to Ballet Society, the nonprofit organ headed by Balanchine, for the purposes of undertaking a nationwide study of the current situation in ballet instruction and producing a new “blueprint for optimal achievement.”<sup>66</sup> Because Ford was particularly interested in supporting regional ballet, foundation executives funded a series of NYCB-led workshops for regional teachers, further propagating Balanchine-based techniques, technologies, and disciplined bodies across the nation.

64. Suki Schorer further attests to the increasing significance of the pointe shoe as a marker of professional identity, remarking in her text on Balanchine pointework that “mastery of dancing on the tips of the toes is for girls the key difference between the beginning dancer and the potential ballet professional.” Schorer, *Balanchine Pointework*, 1.

65. Mazo, *Dance Is a Contact Sport*, 140.

66. Marcia B. Marks, “The Tutu and the Model T.”

## Conclusion

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When the Ford Foundation grants were announced, *Dance Magazine* reported that “The car of the workingman is wooing the art of kings.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, these two realms had more in common than a casual observer might suppose. Like Ford, Balanchine was captivated by visions of modern, efficient machines, and these visions shaped not just his choreographic philosophy but the technologies he chose to employ. “If no pointes existed,” Balanchine remarked in 1962, “I would not be a choreographer. I would not be anything, probably. Perhaps a musician. The pointe made me.”<sup>68</sup> The pointe may have “made Balanchine,” but Balanchine also “made the pointe” and, in doing so, produced both new kinds of dancing bodies and new artistic experiences. With glue and satin, pedagogy and petitions, Balanchine drew ballet into the world of the streamlined, the efficient, and the interchangeable. Dancers still used their stores of craft knowledge to customize the shoes they received, but the larger processes of manufacture, design, and consumption were increasingly out of their hands. Frequently, these changes left dancers anxious and dissatisfied, uncertain of their professional status, and in conflict with NYCB management structures. Their new bodies could be a source of delight, but they simultaneously produced complaints of aching feet and reduced autonomy.

Still, New York City Ballet dancers continued to dazzle on stage, enchanting audiences, and helping secure Balanchine’s place within the canon of twentieth-century dance. Select dancers even maintained distinct artistic identities, capturing the attention of both Balanchine and of mid-century balletomanes. Their shoes continued to sell wildly. Some have seen these facts as contradictory, unable to resolve how such stirring displays could be built upon an edifice of cold-blooded technological standardization. Even dancers themselves were occasionally confounded by the seeming incongruities. Said NYCB principal Merrill Ashley:

It always amazes me that people can think we’re all the same and that we fit into this little tiny box and that we are all mechanical dolls who move exactly the same way. Nothing is further from the truth. That was what intrigued [Balanchine]. . . . He wanted that individuality. Then you add the whole body moving and the personality behind it. There’s no way that we can be anything but different from one another. And there was, on the other hand, the greater outline that we had to fit into. That is a paradox.<sup>69</sup>

When considered in the light of material practices, however, this puzzle becomes considerably less bewildering. By paying attention to the tech-

67. *Ibid.*

68. Interview with George Balanchine in Terry, *On Pointe!* 99.

69. Merrill Ashley, “Merrill Ashley,” in Francis Mason, ed., *I Remember Balanchine*, 575.

nologies of artistic production—rather than focusing solely on the writings of critics, the declarations of choreographers, or the on-stage spectacle—we can begin to understand how the individual and the interchangeable, the romantic and the regimented, and the dancer and the machine were able to coexist. In fact, this synthesis should not be entirely surprising. David Nye has illuminated the wonder that large-scale technologies held for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans.<sup>70</sup> In his discussion of nineteenth-century theater, John Tresch has come to similar conclusions, noting that “With the aid of technology, sublime effects could be produced with regularity. . . . Technical repetition and the spectacular projection of sublime, clock-like order were the basis of new experiences of wonder.”<sup>71</sup> A similar set of practices seems to have been in operation at the New York City Ballet. Kirstein’s Amazons and Greskovic’s elephantine herds evoked order and discipline, but they were simultaneously imaginative flights of fancy, suggesting that modern pointe continued to evoke powerful—albeit historically particular—audience responses.

Fundamentally, it is this historical specificity that is most important to the story. Neither historians of technology nor historians of dance gain much by engaging with the pointe shoe as an atemporal symbol. Like any technology, it exists only within broader cultural, economic, social, and artistic landscapes, and it has both shaped and been shaped by those histories. Moreover, as both a workplace tool and a cultural icon, a technology of bodily control and a medium of art, the pointe shoe is poised at a particularly fascinating intersection of disciplines and discourses. Thus, this seemingly small and modest tool can reveal a great deal—not only about Balanchine, but about work, craft, modernism, and the aesthetic fabric of mid-century American life.

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70. David Nye, *American Technological Sublime*.

71. John Tresch, “The Prophet and the Pendulum,” 36.

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