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TOOL OF THE TRADE

***ON POINTE* EXHIBITION REVEALS HOW THE POINTE SHOE PUSHED THE BOUNDARIES OF BALLET**

TORONTO, ON, April 15, 2008 – Opening to the public tomorrow, the exhibition *On Pointe: The Rise of the Ballet Shoe*, a collaborative effort between the Bata Shoe Museum and Canada's National Ballet School, explores how the pointe shoe transformed ballet, allowing dancers to perform greater feats of athleticism and inspiring choreographers to push the boundaries of dance.

Said Elizabeth Semmelhack, Curator of the Bata Shoe Museum, "With little more than their own strength and stamina, ballerinas rise *on pointe* and thrill their audiences with their skill and grace. The ability to rise *on pointe* is facilitated by the one tool used by dancers, the pointe shoe. However, the pointe shoe was not always an integral part of ballet. It has evolved tremendously over the past two hundred years."

For centuries, ballet dancers wore the fashionable footwear of their day even if it was a hindrance, rather than a help, to their movements. In the early part of the 19th century this changed. High heels went out of fashion and thin satin flats with ties became the style. Dancers, like other women, began to wear this style of footwear and found the new fashion to be conducive to dancing. In fact, these slippers worked so well that dancers kept on wearing flat-soled slippers even after the style went out of fashion. Male ballet dancers also adopted a leather version of this footwear and continue to wear it today. Most examples of women's footwear in both the 18th and early 19th centuries are straights, meaning that the shoes do not have lefts or rights. The symmetry of line created by straights continues to be of aesthetic importance in the making of ballet shoes.

By the end of the 18th century, ballet had transformed from an elegant court art to a discipline that required greater athleticism. Included among the new feats of *ballet d'action* was the ability to rise *on pointe*. The earliest reference to going up *on pointe* dates to 1721/1722 ballet season at Lincoln's Inn Fields when a Mr. Sandham thrilled audiences by going up on his toes. Later in the century, another male dancer named Pitrot also stunned audiences with his athletic prowess and ability to rise *on pointe*. Both of these dancers, however, performed their feats without the aid of specialized footwear.

It wasn't until the 19th century that dancing *on pointe* would become a standard part of ballet performed specifically by ballerinas. Marie Taglioni (1804-1884) is often credited with being the first ballerina to dance *on pointe* in 1832 in the ballet *La Sylphide*. In order to do the demanding pointe work that the choreography required, Marie darned the sides of her slippers so that her feet were better supported. These simple stitches mark the beginning of the pointe shoe.

As the 19th century progressed, innovations were made in the development of the pointe shoe. In many ways, the fashionable flat footwear of the early 19th century proved to be perfect for dance. It was lightweight, often made in luxurious satin and laced to the leg, securing the shoe to the foot. Unfortunately, simply darning the sides of fashionable footwear did not offer enough support. Over time, the toe of the ballet slipper was stiffened, or 'blocked', to allow dancers to stay *on pointe* for longer. However, it was not until the famous Italian ballerina Pierina Legnani (1863-1923) did an unprecedented 32 *fouettes en pointe* during a performance of *Cinderella* in 1893 that the sturdy pointe shoe was debuted, revolutionizing both ballet technique and choreography.

The ability to rise *on pointe* requires the support of a well designed and well fitted pointe shoe. The toe box and shank allow a dancer's weight to be comfortably transferred to the platform. A snugly fitting shoe with a strong, yet short shank and sturdy side wings also assists in keeping the foot in position while *on pointe*. In order to increase comfort, some ballet dancers pad the toe box of their pointe shoes or wear protective pads on their toes. Lamb's wool is the most traditional; pads of foam or gel are newer inventions.

Unlike many other forms of footwear today, pointe shoes require the time-honoured skills of a traditional shoemaker. The pointe shoe is made using turnshoe construction, which means that during the first steps of its creation, the shoe is inside out. While in this state, the block is constructed by applying multiple layers of burlap, paper and glue to the toe box. After this is done the block is pleated, the upper is stitched to the sole and then the entire shoe is turned right side in. Next, the block is smoothed with a special hammer and the platform is perfected. The shoe is then put in an oven to cure overnight. Once cured, the shoe's upper is cut down and receives its topline binding and drawstring. Because pointe shoes are straights they are not created in pairs. Instead, pairs are matched after the fact. Ballerinas have their own individual preferences and many prefer the shoes of specific shoemakers within an organization. After receiving a new pair of pointe shoes, ballerinas will often further customize their new shoes in a variety of ways from 'breaking' the shank to removing the satin from the platform.

In terms of fashion, footwear and ballet shoes have a long and intertwined history. The origins of the ballet slipper and the pointe shoe can be traced back to the fashionable footwear of the early 19th century while today it is ballet footwear that is influencing one of the most popular footwear trends: the 'ballet flat.' The ballet flat first became an icon of style in the 1950s when Audrey Hepburn wore a pair of flat Ferragamos. Today, the ballet flat elegantly signifies relaxed ease regardless of whether it is an investment piece or a deal. Today, high end designers such as Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel are reinterpreting the ballet flat and transforming it into a statement of chic elegance proving that shoes do not have to be high heels to be high fashion.

In *On Pointe*, visitors enter the gallery and are welcomed by a large image of Anna Pavlova, the great Russian ballerina, credited with dancing in the first modern pointe shoe. The exhibition itself is divided into several areas, including the Romantic Age, From Slipper to Pointe, Shoe Construction, Fashion and the Ballet Flat and a special celebrity area featuring some of the world's most famous ballet dancers, including Karen Kain, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Margot Fonteyn and Veronica Tennant, to name a few. A performance video showcasing the National Ballet of Canada plays on a large screen while another shows the construction of a pointe shoe and practice video from Canada's National Ballet School. An interactive dance area for visitors to try the five positions of ballet, as well as a dress up area, courtesy of The Shoe Room, rounds out the exhibit space.

Elizabeth Semmelhack adds, “I would like visitors to come away with a better understanding of the evolution of the pointe shoe, as well as appreciate how this object of beauty truly facilitates great athleticism and magical performance.”

On Pointe will be on view at the Bata Shoe Museum located at 327 Bloor Street West at St. George until September 28, 2008. Exciting programming activities have been developed and will run throughout the summer. For more information, please visit the Bata Shoe Museum and Canada’s National Ballet websites.

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About Canada’s National Ballet School

Canada’s National Ballet School is a world leader in the training of professional dancers and teachers. Dedicated to advancing the art of ballet, NBS develops dance professionals in a student-centred environment by weaving innovation and evolving practice with the finest teaching traditions. NBS graduates can be found as dancers, choreographers, artistic directors, teachers, and administrators in over 65 dance companies world-wide and even more schools around the globe. NBS will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2009/10. Further information is available at www.nbs-enb.ca.

About the Bata Shoe Museum

The Bata Shoe Museum is dedicated to uncovering the role of footwear in the social and cultural life of humanity. The Museum’s growing international collection of over 13,000 objects touches on 4,500 years of history. A varied programme of events and exhibitions lets visitors discover the stories behind footwear from many lands and cultures. Further information is available at www.batashoemuseum.ca.

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