

# *Let's Talk: Pointe Shoes*

*A seminar with JDT Executive Director Julie Diana*

Ballet is hard enough without having shoe problems and severe discomfort! Whether it's your first year en pointe, or you've been on your toes for years, it's always a good time to assess your shoes and try new ways to make them fit and feel better. Below are some guidelines to help you navigate the long road to getting your shoes "just right".

## **1) Make sure the shoes fit properly**

- Plié in second position—the position in which the foot is longest—to determine if the shoe's length is correct. Your toes should just touch the tip of the box.
- The pointe shoe should mold to the foot. Your shoes should feel tight, but your toes shouldn't curl under and you shouldn't feel pinching in your metatarsal.

## **2) Common Fit Problems and How to Solve Them**

### **• Pressure on the big toe**

Too much pressure on the big toe can mean you're sinking into the box, a problem that can be solved with a more tapered shoe. But it also may depend on your foot shape. If you have a long big toe, it'll always bear more weight on pointe. As you train, you'll gain strength and learn to lift up out of your shoes, which will alleviate that feeling.

### **• Pinching in the metatarsal**

You need a wider box. The width is correct when your feet are nice and flat on the floor, without being able to wiggle inside the shoe. Some dancers need a more triangular box—one that's wide at the metatarsal but tapered at the toe—to keep them from sinking into the shoe.

### **• Sickling**

Sickling en pointe may be a sign that you are struggling to get up over your box and pushing over your pinky toe to compensate. A softer shank can help you stand fully and correctly on pointe. The downside is that softer shoes wear out faster.

### **• Shank Issues**

Your shank should bend to the shape of your foot. If the shank tends to break too low, try cutting it  $\frac{3}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{2}$  to ensure that it matches the line of your instep. Pop the nail out of the heel, and use large scissors to cut the shank – a little at a time. Go slowly, since you can always cut more. (Sometimes you might just need to peel a layer off the shank towards the heel.) Smooth the rough edge and/or cover with duct tape to prevent getting blisters.

- 3) **Padding:** Try one of these methods or a combination of them to see what works best
- Wrap each toe with self-adhesive tape, Band-Aids or masking tape.
  - Fold a paper towel around your toes. (Change it frequently to prevent shredding.)
  - Use a pre-shaped lamb's wool or gel pad.
  - Cut the toes off thick socks and wear them under your tights.
  - Use a chamois (shammy). This soft cleaning fabric absorbs sweat without falling apart or feeling bulky.
- 4) **Ribbons and Elastic**
- Fold the heel down and sew the ribbons where the fold meets the shoe, one on each side. The elastic should be sewn just below the ribbons and stretch across the arch. To tie, cross the ribbons over the front of the ankle and continue to wrap them around in opposite directions. Tie them in a knot at the inside of the ankle and tuck them in along the groove between the Achilles tendon and the anklebone. Do not tie them directly behind or in front of the ankle, or wrap them up the calf.
- 5) **Tricks of the Trade**
- To keep shoes from making too much noise, soften them by wetting the boxes with a little water. Then bang the box on any hard surface that won't leave marks on the satin.
  - To make room for the metatarsals, crush the boxes of their shoes with your heels or gently squish them in a doorjamb.
  - To accentuate your arches, bend the shanks of your shoes or use a strong pair of scissors to cut the shanks at the instep.
  - For extra support, drip a bit of glue into the tips of the shoes or paint shellac on the shanks.
  - To prevent slipping, cut the satin off the flat platforms of the shoes and scrape grooves into the soles.
- 6) **Exercises to strengthen feet for pointe**
- Do Theraband exercises to strengthen intrinsic muscles under your feet and around your ankles.
  - Pick up marbles with your toes and drop them in a bowl or box. 10 times per foot; 10 times per day.

\* Don't be discouraged if you don't think your current pair is "the one". It's important to remember that this is a process. Many dancers continue to change their pointe shoes periodically throughout their careers as their abilities and preferences change.