

**Amanda:** [00:08:00] Don't mind my feet.

**Avery:** [00:08:01] Oh, my. God. They're so intense.

**Amanda:** [00:08:04] So intense. I know.

Amanda Smith's feet are just *different* from any feet I've ever seen.

[00:10:18] *Sometimes* I'm like, wow, these. Well, this is my foot.

Her calluses are so defined, her footprint would look like a puppy's paw

So these are like old blisters that callused over throughout the years. And then this is just my handy dandy bunion that's always there. [00:08:46] Some days I can feel my bunion, like, pulsating. And it's it's wild being a ballerina.

It is wild being a ballerina. The wild working hours. The wild amount of discipline. But the wildest part of Amanda's job is what she physically does with her body.

**Amanda:** [00:39:18] I know I talk to people and they're like, So you really dance on your toes, like all day long. They're like your tippy toes. I'm like. Yes, my tippy toes.

So cute! A tippy toes! But the first time Amanda started dancing on her tippy toes, she wasn't quite ready for what it would be like.

**Amanda:** [00:39:55] Yes. It was not a fun experience. I mean, it was I was super excited, like beyond excited. I would think I was 11 years old. But the blisters, man. Oh, my gosh. I bled through the satin. Yes. Like there was like it was pink and it was blood coming. Yeah, I'm sure a lot of ballerinas have similar stories.

I can verify- many different ballerinas have told me the same thing. That they were so excited to finally go up on their toes, and when the moment came, they were not quite ready for the shock of pain.

[00:43:25] My toes were still adjusting to the shoes. So I had remember I used to like this, like, numbing stuff. Like, I think that you're supposed to use in your teeth. [00:43:32][6.9]

**Avery:** [00:43:33] Oh, my God. [00:43:33][0.4]

**Amanda:** [00:43:36] And I use it on my toes, like around my toenails so that I wouldn't feel the pain.

Over time, Amanda quite simply got used to the pain. It's not that the pain went away.

**Amanda:** [01:00:02] a lot of people I talk to are like, Wait. What? You have to do that or your body has to do. You have to You go through that and like people have no idea.

**Alice:** [01:16:05] I really like going to the ballet with like non ballet people. It's always interesting what they notice

Alice Robb, as you might guess, is a ballet person. She's the author of the book Don't Think Dear: On loving and leaving Ballet.

I was at some ballet with someone and she was saying like she couldn't tell, from where we were sitting who is a kid and who is an adult? And I was like, oh, the the adults, the women who are on point. But it was like she hadn't even noticed that some people were on point and some people weren't.

On pointe is the name for being on your tippy toes. Which, according to Alice, is the equivalent pain of letting a piano fall on your toe.

**Alice:** [01:19:13] I think it's just like because it's not just that you're. Standing up and balancing. You're also then dancing and oh my God, the most painful thing was when we had to do like hops on point.[01:19:27] So when you were just like, instead of just like jumping and letting and, you know, going down on the foot and letting your whole body absorb the jump. But if you just had to, like, jump up and down on one leg on point, that was really brutal.

Avery: I can't even imagine how that's possible

I think I understood sort of nebulously that ballet was supposed to be painful and difficult. But so are a lot of sports. And a lot of arts. And a lot of things that are worth doing. Beauty is born of suffering. That's is just the way it goes

But ballet isn't like any other sport or any other art. Painters don't have to drench themselves in sweat when they work. Pianists don't split their fingers open on the keys. Ballet But even among extreme athletes, even football players have helmets. Runners have shock absorbing foam. Ballet dancers have nothing.

The iconic pink pointe shoe is basically made of leather, paper, satin and glue. And that's it. There is nothing to lessen the impact or the blow of dancing on your tippy toes. If dancers want any padding or protection, they have to macgyver it themselves.

**Amanda:** [00:10:34] So this is an ouch pouch It's something just to cover up the toes so that you're not, like in the craziest pain

Amanda uses a little pocket of fabric that feels like the material of a bathing suit.

some people use just like a paper towel around their toes.

A paper towel. To soak up the impact of the pianofall.

**Amanda:** Some people don't wear anything I don't know how.

It's wild. It means dancers- with only a little help from a piece of wool, or a paper towel, or a pad of gel, are just bearing down their full bodyweight on the shoe itself. Which, again, is just leather, paper, satin and glue

**Alice:** [00:19:47] So, like, the more you're dancing, the faster they'll break down

And this makes pointe shoes perhaps some of the fastest most disposable clothing in history.

**Avery:** [00:50:27] May I ask how long your pointe shoes last?

**Amanda:** [00:50:31] That depends. This shoe could die in a day.

And yet point shoes don't cost what a disposable shoe ought to cost.

**Alice:** [00:33:07] They are up to \$102.

This, to me. Is the wildest design problem. This shoe does not seem to be helping the performer. It is in fact only hurting. And hurting the budgets of nonprofit dance companies, and dance students. There has to be a better way. There has to be. It's just that it's hard to see the problem, when the ballet dancer makes it all look so effortless. And shrugs off pain with a smile.

—THEME // BREAK—

**April:** [00:02:59] The collection is completely insane.

**Avery:** [00:03:03] This is. Where are we right now, by the way?

**April:** [00:03:06] Oh, we are at FIT library special collections and college archives. Usually these rooms are not browsable to our patrons, we're by appointment only. But you're here today so we're geeking out.

Fellow fashion podcaster April Callahan- and co host of the excellent podcast Dressed, let me into the archives of the fashion institute of technology. Which has every conceivable fashion magazine.

**April:** [00:14:21] Oh, I'll show you the 1830s. You want to see the actual 1830s Fashion magazine? Yeah

The fashion magazines from 1830s look like books. They're bound in leather, with a ton of text- but illustrated with spread of women in big confectionary dresses in various shades of sherbert and pastel... but in all the images, all these women, without fail, seem to be wearing the exact same pair of shoes.

**Avery:** [00:18:07] They're all in all these different styles are wearing little black flats with ribbons across them.

**April:** [00:18:17] So this style actually predates the 1830s. We start to see it right after the French Revolution. Right.

This is a huge moment in fashion history. French revolution happens, luxury is out. No one wants to be Marie Antoinette.

**April:** [00:20:15] So the high heeled shoes are associated with aristocracy right? But you can see they're not wearing like that 18th century style, right. These are completely flat. Little slippers on the ground. [00:20:25][9.5]

This is where that silhouette of the ballet slipper comes from. It started as fashion.

**April:** [00:16:48]...So what ballerinas are wearing on stage at the time were fashionable footwear, right? These little teeny delicate little slippers that attach with ribbons around the ankle...They started patting the toe right? when they were going on point

And the year that this fashion magazine came out, 1830, was about the time that ballerinas started to go on pointe. Specifically one ballerina. An Italian dancer named Marie Taglioni.

**Eliza:** [00:33:35] She gets the credit and the blame, but there were dancers before her who had risen onto the tips of their toes and done a few things.

According to former dancer and author of *The Ballet Companion*, Eliza Gaynor Minden, ballet used to be a social dance for high society, a dance of courtly manners. And getting up on your toes used to be a bit of a stunt. Something to spice up the dance that could only be done for a minute or two

But Taglioni danced the first full length ballet on pointe. Which was *La Sylphide* in 1832.

*La Sylphide* is an hour and a half long. That was an unfathomable amount of time to be up on your toes in little flimsy flats.. It was choreographed by Taglione's father, explicitly as a showcase for his daughter, because Marie was playing the titular role of the sylph. An air spirit.

The timing was perfect. This was the romantic era, right? So the poets and the artists, the musicians at the time were concerned with themes of love, nature, the supernatural, death.

And so all the plays and stories around this time went something like this:

**Eliza:** [00:34:53] *Mortal man meets supernatural woman and it ends badly. She's a sylph, she's a swan princess, she's a fairy.. . . But point dancing allowed the woman to communicate how otherworldly she is. [00:35:31][38.1]*

Up on her toes, Marie Taglioni was like an angel descended to earth. Only lightly touching the ground.

**Eliza:** [00:36:29] So audiences went crazy for pointe work, and Taglioni only became kind of a rock star. And there is a story about her fans being so smitten that after one of her performances, they cooked her shoes and ate them with a sauce. I'm not sure I buy it, But, you know, she was really hugely, hugely popular because of what she was able to do on pointe.

So more and more dancers started to copy Taglioni. And the shoes followed suit.

**Eliza:** [00:37:01] Genius Italian shoemakers figured out how to reinforce the toe box.

Usually just using glue to make the toe of the shoe very very hard

**Eliza:** [00:21:07] The glue in the in the toebox, when it when it dries, it hardens, it's stiff. And that's what provides stiffness in the toe box. [00:37:43] And when the Italian ballerinas showed up in St Petersburg with their tricked out shoes, at first, this was considered vulgar. Oh, those turns are just a circus trick.

It took time for pointework to be accepted into the tradition of ballet.

**Eliza:** [00:38:08] But pretty soon the russian ballerinas had to start getting their shoes beefed up and the things that we take for granted today that ballerinas do, we're not always there, you know? So people think about the ballet as being centuries old. No, the kind of dancing we see today is really more like 120 years old.

And really, the pointe shoe is about that old. It has stayed pretty much intact since its invention .

**Eliza:** [00:20:31] Yeah. It's a paper product, a toe box made of canvas cloth and basically put together like papier maché.

And the unchanging shoe has lead to a longstanding unchanging tradition... of what the dancers have to do to the pointe shoes to prepare them.

**Alice:** [00:02:49] The pointe shoes come out of the box like pretty stiff

Alice Robb brought me some extremely stiff new pointe shoes

The shank, which is this leather bit at the back of the shoe, is like pretty stiff and hard.

The shank is like the sole of the pointe shoe. It's just a flat flat piece of thick hard leather.

**Avery:** [00:03:10] Oh, my God. It's actually so hard.

**Alice:** [00:03:12] Yeah. Yeah.

But in ballet, you don't want your foot to look like a big flat brick. So you don't want the shank to stay stiff and straight. Because you want to accentuate the *arch* of the foot.

**Alice:** [00:03:24] In ballet, you're trying to make the Arch of your foot look very like pronounced.

So you get this beautiful curve from heel to toe

And so ... your arch will look Quote unquote, better if the shank of your shoe is softer. But ... if the shank is too soft, like you'll get injured or you'll fall down.

So there's a sweet spot that every dancer has to find for themselves.

[00:03:46] you have to find the point where it's like Broken down enough that your feet look good, but also that it can still give you enough support. [00:03:53][7.6]

And so. Dancers have very elaborate rituals of breaking in their pointe shoes *just* the right amount. So that foot will look good, but the shoe is still stiff enough so that it's safe to dance in

**Alice:** [00:17:39] Yeah. Well, I've also I read about people like. Like heating up their shoes. Just like microwaving their shoes.

Other dancers will use hammers on the shanks. Amanda will actually cut the sole, so that it doesn't cover her heel

**Amanda:** [00:15:47] I cut the inside the shank so that it's three quarters.

And they are also breaking the shoes in to try to get the sound out of them.

**Amanda:** [00:14:32] because they can be very like. Very loud.

**Alice:** [00:16:12] You don't want to hear like, a thump. So you would bang kind of bang the shoe against the wall,

**Amanda:** [00:14:10] I'll just bang them against like the wall. Like the we have brick walls upstairs, so I'll be like ga! ga! ga!

**Alice:** I think it softens it a bit. Which was supposed to take the noise out.

**Avery:** [00:16:46] Wait, that's not real, though.

**Alice:** [00:16:47] Does that you mean does that work? Probably not. But that is what we did. I think where superstition and science intersect here is probably a big intersection.

And again, at a professional level pointe shoes are functionally single-use. So dancers are constantly breaking in their new pairs

**Amanda:** [00:18:11] There's something about breaking the shoe in, too that is like a ritual as a ballerina. I don't know. I think. Yes., it would be nice to have it broken in

already. But also there is something to like. You have to like. Mm hmm. Like, I don't know, you have to go to work! it's like, it's your shoes.

And it's sort of beautiful. Totally. These dancers prepare their shoes like how a painter preps their canvas, you know? They imbues the shoes with such intention and care. I do love all that. I swear, I am not the kind of person who is like "everything needs to be optimized." I do believe in tradition. It's just that the tradition of the pointe shoe seems to be causing active harm.

**Avery:** [00:45:43] If you see it like a design problem, right? Like, they're expensive, they're uncomfortable. They don't actually support the foot. I was like, surely there must be designers out there trying to make something that's like cheaper, more affordable. right?

**Alice:** [00:46:00] Yeah, it's so crazy because I actually was just so, uh,...in the nineties. It's this ex dancer called Eliza Gaynor Minden tried to kind of reinvent the pointe shoe and she made something that looks almost indistinguishable from a traditional pointe shoe but it has somewhat different materials. But basically it's just a little bit more comfortable and it last longer, it's a little bit sturdier. Um. And these became extremely controversial.

**Avery:** [00:09:50] Why are your shoes so controversial?

**Eliza:** [00:09:53] I think there's a Ph.D. thesis in this.

Eliza Gaynor Minden again. *She* made the reinvented pointe shoe, back in the 90s.

**Eliza:** [00:15:23] I'd known for years about all these problems with pointe shoes. And at the same time I'd grown up in this family that was very sporty, that loved outdoor sports, sailing and skiing. And all of these activities had equipment and footwear that was dramatically improved by modernized materials.

Eliza remembers when ski boots used to be leather, and you had to lace them up. And new fangled plastic ski boots used to be ridiculed

[00:16:43] Oh, a plastic ski boot, can you imagine what an idea? Well, racers began to win races in plastic ski boots, and things changed very, very quickly. [00:17:08][24.3] I mean night and day and the comfort, the safety, the enjoyment, the ease of mastering the sport was just it was a game changer to use modern materials. [00:16:05][42.3]

So after she decided to stop pursuing ballet professionally, she decided to take on the challenge of fixing the pointe shoe. She would be the one to do it.

**Eliza:** [00:17:43] Well, I was really born into just the right family for this.

Her father ran a manufacturing business making fluorescent wiring devices

And so I was I grew up, you know, hearing about this. And on one side of the of the dinner table, the conversation would be, oh, the number for molding machines down again. But the other side of the table was my mother, who took up ballet a little late in life, but she had all the passion of a convert. And she started a ballet school. ...So while, you know, on one side of the table was the molding machine, the other side was how great Baryshnikov had been last night. [00:18:45][61.2]

So to combine the two worlds, Eliza found someone who could make this ladle-shaped mold of plastic that would be the sort of spine of the pointe shoe.

**Eliza:** [00:28:34] *I had to experiment with putting the shock absorbing foams in different places with the satin in different configurations, you know, many tons of trial and error.*

With tons of help from dancers Eliza recruited as test subjects.

**Eliza:** [00:58:33] *So I put this little notice up at a great ballet school on the Upper West Side. And it was like wanted dancers who wear street shoes size seven and these very brave dancers would come to my walk up apartment on 70th Street. And that was the feedback that enabled me to refine each prototype over and over again.*

It took 8 years of research, but in 1993 Eliza Gaynor Minden created the modern, shock absorbing ballet shoe for the new era. And really, to me, they look identical to traditional pointe shoes. I cannot see a difference.

**Eliza:** [00:29:51] *A trained eye can tell the difference in some other ways*

Ok, yes, gaynor mindens have their little bow drawstring on the side rather than the center, because Eliza says that's less irritating.

Eliza: why is it there? Just put it on the side where it can get tucked in.

And when gaynor mindens are worn in, at the bottom you can see two faint parallel lines that are the mark of the plastic insert. But Eliza assumed everyone would forgive that, because these shoes were supposed to do for ballet what plastic ski boots did for skiing.

**Eliza:** [00:17:15] *And I assumed the dancers would be equally excited over a pointe shoe that improved performance and that that was it was a surprise that that was was a surprise that it took a while for that to sort of sink in. [00:17:27][12.3]*

Eliza's being diplomatic. People hated them.

**Eliza:** [00:46:42] *There was some drama. Someone posted my picture on Facebook and put to put the word Satan underneath it. [00:46:49][6.9]*

Gaynor Mindens were derided as the econo shoe



Amanda: [00:56:59] Because gainers last longer. [00:57:14] And so my mom was like, Yeah... we're going to do Gaynor Mindens and so we're not buying a new pair every 5 seconds. Because that- it adds up.

Although Amanda didn't stick with gaynors at the professional level.. Especially now that her company buys her shoes for her. She can be choosy. And you'd think companies would be excited by a long lasting shoe. And yet!

**Alice:** [00:46:32] A lot of the like ballet establishment banned them and just would say that like these shoes would prevent you from developing the right muscles or they would make you lazy.

Because they were also called the cheater shoe.

**Eliza:** [00:46:12] *Any shoe that is too stiff can let you, quote unquote, cheat.*

Because a shoe that's too stiff can bolster you up.

[00:45:56] *if a shoe is encouraging you to just park up there and hang out, it's the teachers would say it's making you lazy. It's allowing you to cheat.*

But Eliza says her shoes got this reputation because they couldn't be broken in like traditional pointe shoes.

**Eliza:** *and the gaynor minden wont break in, it won't soften.*

The dancer shouldn't have to bang it out or hammer it or cut it up. Because Gaynor Mindens come in different levels of stiffness.

[00:44:06] *If a dancer expects that the shoe is going to break in, she will buy a shoe that is stiffer than what she really needs and her teacher sees that she's having trouble working through her foot and says those are cheater shoes. They're just holding you up there. You're not doing the work yourself.*

Alice Robb wasn't allowed to wear Gaynor Mindens at her ballet school

**Alice:** [00:47:14]. You know, I could have worn them in other classes or summer programs and then but yeah, I mean, I bought into it and I was afraid of getting softer, like getting lazy. And then I finally did try them, and I think I thought they were more comfortable but that my foot didn't look didn't look as good.

**Avery:** [00:47:47] Oh, really? Because it has more padding?

**Alice:** [00:47:49] It's not exactly more padding. I mean, they they look the same. I'm sure it was just in my head.

Well it was in a lot of people's heads.

**Eliza:** [00:10:13] Because it has to do with ballet and the psychology of dancers? that overemphasizes the athletic kind of threatens the artistic sometimes. And dancers don't want to be judged by how high they jump or how many pirouettes they can do. It's it's about artistry. And so when my pointe shoe came out and offered to make it more comfortable and maybe more protective and certainly quieter. Those are athletic attributes, and I think that's what made dancers a little wary.

**Eliza:** [00:52:02] *And there may also be sometimes a certain element of, you know, I had to suffer. So should you. Artists have to suffer. This is going to hurt. And anything that offers to make dancing easier is a little bit taking away from that achievement. You know, somebody climbs Mount Everest without oxygen and then the next guy comes up sort of, you know, swiftly and cheerfully with an oxygen canister. It's like, well, no, this is not exactly the same accomplishment.*

**Avery:** [00:11:50] But are your shoes really an oxygen canister? [00:11:52][2.1]

**Eliza:** [00:11:54] Some might say so. They don't wear out.

**Avery:** [00:54:18] But they do still hurt, right? Like, it's not like these are a pain free experience.

**Eliza:** [00:54:22] Well, ballet is hard. Yeah, it's hard. And your muscles, you know, your muscles hurt. Everything hurts. And these should hurt less because of all the cushioning and foam.

**Eliza:** [00:55:14] *I think today's dancers are much less interested in pain. They are much more health conscious that they do things and they take care of their bodies in ways that my generation did not. [00:55:45] So there's a much increased awareness of taking care of your body through nutrition and cross-training and exercise and less tolerance for unnecessary pain.*

Now Gaynor Mindens are certainly less divisive than they initially were

**Avery:** I don't know if they still are controversial...

**Eliza:** [00:31:36] Much less. Yeah, we've been around 30 years now.

But in those 30 years... much of the change in the ballet world has actually happened in the very very very recent past.

**Avery:** [01:22:14] *Are there still companies who Don't allow gaynor mindens?*

**Eliza:** [01:22:21] *I'm not sure. And if you'd asked me that just before the pandemic, I would have said, yes, there are a couple. But I think that the pandemic has changed things and loosened things up and accelerated changes that were already kind of in the works.*

And these changes impact some of *the* most fundamental elements of ballet. Because they change even more of the fundamental elements... of the pointe shoe. After the break.

**BREAK**

I told you about how dancers will hit and pound their shoes to break them in and get the sound out. But really, that's just the tip of the ice berg. I didn't even mention some of the other things they do. Ballet dancers also have to sew on their own ribbons and elastics onto the pointe shoe. Those never come pre-attached, because every dancer needs to find the angle they like.

Amanda: [00:16:47] There is something nice and therapeutic about sewing the ribbons on. And it is a part of the career, it is a part of the job like you sew your pointe shoes together, you know.

All ballerinas know how to sew a little bit. All ballerinas do that. But there's another part of preparing pointe shoes that only some ballerinas do. And Amanda Smith is one of them.

Amanda: [00:25:08] Like I would always sew my shoe the same night and paint the shoe.

Paint the shoe. So that it is no longer pink.

Amanda: [00:21:51] You can look beautiful in... pink shoes. But when your skin is this color, like something seems strange to be wearing pink and and, you know, your your skin color is a little darker than that.

I didn't realize. That the pink of the ballet shoe was supposed to be... flesh toned. The pointe shoe is supposed to be an extension of the leg.

**Amanda:** [00:19:44] Because wearing the same color as your skin to match your tights, I mean, it extends the line of your leg.

So a white dancer can wear light pink tights and light pink shoes and pull off this leg extension illusion. Not so if your skin is not so pale.

[00:25:27] I don't like to look at myself in class honestly. And the pink shoes, like it throws off my day in a strange way. I like to have the shoe painted.

And growing up learning ballet, Amanda had to practice this way. Wearing pink shoes. Feeling off, with an artificially pink lower body.

Amanda: [00:20:03] *And so I didn't learn how to really paint my shoes until I got to dance. Theater of Harlem, where it all started.*

[transition]

When Arthur Michell wanted to start a ballet company. Everyone dissuaded him.

**Vernon:** [00:09:42] a lot of people said, You know, Arthur, while we would love to see you do something, why don't you, you know, do jazz, Modern tap,

And many establishment figures told Arthur Mitchell wouldn't be able to make a whole ballet company with black dancers.

**Avery:** [00:18:27] Why not modern or jazz? Why ballet?

**Vernon:** [00:18:30] Because he knew that classical ballet was considered the epitome of dance.

And if you're saying black dancers aren't capable of doing classical ballet, I'm going to prove you wrong. [00:18:46][16.2]

So in 1969 Arthur Mitchell started Dance Theater of Harlem.

Whenever you think of Flesh toned shoes and tights, you have to think of Dance Theater of Harlem

Vernon Ross is the wardrobe assistant supervisor at American Ballet Theater. But he got his start at Dance Theater of Harlem.

**Vernon:** [00:04:05] My time at DTH first of all, I started off as a dancer.

And then Mr. Ross started working behind the scenes at Dance Theater of Harlem. Helping out a true legend. Zelda Wynn Valdez.

**Vernon:** I don't know if you've heard her name, but she was one of the first black haute couture dress makers

**Avery:** [00:07:12] She designed the Playboy bunny outfit, right?

**Vernon:** [00:07:14] Correct. Go ahead!

**Avery:** [00:07:15] That is so cool.

**Vernon:** [00:07:16] Isn't that cool? Very good, Avery. I was going to share that with you, but that was the whole introduction element that made Mr. Mitchell really want to bring her on board. Was that Playboy bunny costume.

Avery: REALLY?

Vernon: and you know why? Because it had to fit the body so perfectly.

Mr. Mitchell figured if Zelda Wynn Valdez could make those tight playboy bunny costumes with all those darts and seams and bones, then she could make ballet costumes. So in 1970, Mr. Mitchell invited her on at the Dance Theater of Harlem. And as talented as Zelda Wynn Valdez

was at making corsetry. Dying is a different art. It was so hard to find a way out of the pink ballet tights.

**Vernon:** *[00:11:59] So for a long time they continue to wear these ashy tones that were browns and grays, and they just weren't pink. He didn't have the gumph to say Zelda these aren't really good but thank you.*

But Zelda Wynn Valdez had a hand from Vernon Ross. And also recruited a student who had just graduated from Pratt. And together the three of them would work out the right shade to dye tights that would better match the skin tones of ballet dancers.

**Vernon:** *[00:13:14] The process took years. It was not easy. But I would stay until sometimes 11, 12, midnight. Coming up with these formulas for these flesh tone tights. Mr. Mitchell was not an easy person to please. Excellence was his motto. So you couldn't send a girl that I'm saying was Cicely Tyson's color. Onstage with the pair ashy brown tights for someone who might be in Halle Berry's color. We had to spend days, months, years bringing all of these shades to a real formula*

*But then after we did, it was like golden. It was magic. I mean, the colors really were beautiful on stage. Mr. Mitchell loved it. And then he started getting very demanding. We had to start painting shoes.*

And Dance Theater of Harlem invented a method.

**Amanda:** *[00:22:37] You find your technique. Like I found that the toothbrush works. Some people that use a paint brush. Some people use like a little sponge,*

Amanda squirted some paint onto a toothbrush, and began to lather it all over her pointe shoes

**Amanda:** *[00:00:25] So my paint is personally made for my skin tone. So. [00:00:29][4.2]*

**Avery:** *[00:00:30] by whom?*

**Amanda:** *[00:00:31] Katy Freeman, she's our wardrobe queen.*

**Katy:** My name is Katy Freeman and I'm the wardrobe supervisor of the dance theater of Harlem.

**Amanda:** She individually makes everyone's paint *[00:00:40][8.9]*

**Katy:** *[00:04:42] I use leather acrylic paint, and when a new dancer comes in, I just look at their look at them and kind of just freehand it*

Katy will mix a shade, test it on some shoes, tweak it. And she will also continue to tweak the dancer's personal paint colors. Especially after a tour.

**Katy:** [00:05:42 we're about to head to Florida on Wednesday, and I know by the end of Florida that I'm going to have to darken some paint because that's just what happens, you know?

Getting the shoes to match skin tones is a ton of work. For Katy, and for all the dancers.

**Katy:** [00:08:21] I don't think the dancers enjoy paying their shoes. [00:08:28] I mean, you know, aside from, like, you know, breaking the shank and sewing on the ribbons and the elastic and all that stuff. It is another 30, 45 minutes to make the shoe perfect. That's a lot of time. If they could eliminate the painting that would help with that. I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon.

The painting is a point of pride for Dance Theater of Harlem. Because for many decades, this was the only company where this was done.

*Vernon*[00:17:50] A dancer of color could not go to New York City Ballet ABT, Pacific Northwest, San Francisco Ballet and say, can I wear flesh toned tights and shoes? The answer was no. They think now, if you put a black girl on stage with 30 white girls and this black girl has on flesh toned tights and shoes, she breaks the line of the group.

**Avery:** [00:27:08] And what do you say to that? [00:27:09][0.8]

**Vernon:** [00:27:09] I say, No, she doesn't. She breaks the line with her face. Let her body go from her tip of the toe to the tip of her fingertips.

So Dance Theater of Harlem was carrying this torch. And that's how Eliza Gaynor Minden learned about this painting system, when she was testing her new pointe shoe.

*Eliza:* [00:58:17] *Oh yeah, one of my best test pilots was from DTH. She told me about what the dancers at DTH did. And I thought, Oh, well, they really should be available in Brown. I mean, at that point I couldn't even make one in pink, but I was it was in my mind for the future.*

And it would turn out to be the far future. Pointe shoes were only mass produced in pink until 2017. And get this. Gaynor Minden was the first to do it. They have three shades called espresso, mocha, and cappuccino, And a bunch of other companies, especially after the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, have followed suit and made pointe shoes in different colors.

**Vernon:** [00:22:42] However, a lot of the companies, they haven't perfected these colors.

Mr. Ross does *not* think these mass produced colors would have measured up to Arthur Mitchell's standards.

[00:23:34] I think girls who are really professional, who really want to match their skin tones are going to have to doctor up the shoes.

Although, for Amanda Smith, the shoes in premade shades totally work for her. To the point where she was out of practice with shoe painting.

*Amanda: [00:24:43] I haven't done this in a while. ..Um, so I'm like, oh, my God, I'm rusty with, like, getting it done. [00:24:50][6.5]*

*Avery: [00:23:04] I mean, do you think that this is a ritual that will die out with the ready made colors? [00:23:07][3.8]*

*Amanda: [00:23:09] Possibly, but. I think it is I think it is good to have a pair of. Painted shoes no matter what. [00:23:18][8.9]*

Katy Freeman, after all, continues to mix custom paint for each dancer.

**Katy:** *[00:07:24] We continue to paint, I think. Well, the mass produced the mass produced colors don't match perfectly. And it is part of the tradition that we are carrying on.*

This tradition that was made. Because of exclusion from tradition. And has since gone on to subvert the tradition itself. Because truly- *no one* has skin that is pink.

**Vernon:** *[00:25:59] Exactly. And that is true. And so, you know, you have a few girls, white girls that are proactive now and they're asking to not wear pink. They are saying they have hundreds of shades of tights now and they'll put a little color on their pointe shoe. Is it Houston Ballet or Nashville Ballet? They are totally, totally embracing flesh toned tights and pointe shoes. They're no longer wearing pink.*

A ballet without pink. As unthinkable as it once was to dance on your tippy toes for an entire performance. As unthinkable as it was to put shock absorbing foam in your pointe shoes.

**Vernon:** *[00:29:09] I mean. And I know its hard. This is a big pill to swallow for the real Balletomaine or the classic ballet person.*

But these hard pills are not just for the classic ballet person. In fact they're not even for the super tiny percentage of people who dance ballet professionally. The symbol of the pink pointe shoe is potent. Even- and maybe especially- for people who have never worn them.

**Alice:** *[00:28:52] I think the whole culture and values of ballet are so. Related to the culture of like stereotypical femininity.*

When Alice was little, before she ever got up on her toes, she had a diary with a pointe shoe on it.

**Alice:** *[00:07:37] like, everything- pointe shoes or. I also had, like, a little necklace with a point shoe charm.*

I actually think I had a pointe shoe charm necklace. Even though I never did ballet. And I was read children's books like Angelina Ballerina and the Silver Slippers. And even now, I sometimes wear a ballet leotard that I got at a dance store. Look at Carrie Bradshaw's tutu in the opening of Sex and the City. Or heaven knows- ballet flats, which have been popular with non ballerinas ever since WWII.... because of clothing rations.

**April:** [00:02:25] Things like leather and rubber were restricted in the United States under the L 85 article.

Fashion historian April Callahan again.

**April:** [00:02:51] one of the things that was exempt to the L 85 restrictions were ballet shoes.

And so non ballerinas started wearing ballet flats around, because they were some of the only shoes you could get. Isn't that interesting? They went from fashion shoe to working shoe back to fashion shoe. But that's all to say. Ballet is everywhere. In fashion. In culture. Even though, of the 300,000 ballet students that train at the professional level every year- only 2% will make it into a company.

**Alice:** [00:00:27] *And we're all out there in the world just kind of. You know. Grappling with these scars or or with our residual love for ballet*

And it is real love. But real love is complicated.

**Alice:** while I experienced a lot of pain doing ballet, I also experienced joy. But like, literally my favorite memory, my happiest memories of ballet are of turning on pointe. Because when it works, it's really fun! Maybe the most clear metaphor or whatever is that the thing that makes you feel the most successful and the most beautiful and in certain ways, the most free, is also the most dangerous and the most painful.

And it really comes down to whether or not you believe that beauty must always come from suffering. And whether the amount of suffering directly correlates to the amount of beauty. I truly don't know. I think there's something to be said for rituals and traditions. And there's something to be said for breaking them. But the least I can do is at least *notice* when dancers are going on pointe now. My god.

-----

Articles of Interest is a proud member of radiotopia. I made this one with help from Charles McFarlane. To see images of Amanda Smith's painted pointe shoes and the shoe locker at the Dance Theater of Harlem- check out [articlesofinterest.substack.com](http://articlesofinterest.substack.com)

Thanks to Sarah Archer for telling me about this idea! None of this would happen without her!



And I have to say, looking into the world of ballet shoes made me see the art in a whole new way- and if you're also curious and wanna see some ballet. Dance Theater of Harlem is going on tour and doing a run in New York this month that I'm totally going to- check to see if they're coming to your town.