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Prosthetics in Performance: Exploring the Relationship Between Ballet Dancers and Their Pointe Shoes

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PROSTHETICS IN PERFORMANCE:

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
BALLET DANCERS AND THEIR POINTE SHOES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from
The College of William and Mary

by

Georgia Ellett Dassler

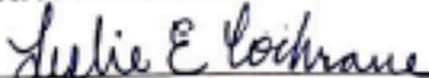
Accepted for HIGH HONORS
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Abstract: *Getting her first pair of pointe shoes is an important milestone for a young ballet dancer. From then on, throughout her ballet “career” (whether she becomes a professional or not), her pointe shoes will play an important role in shaping her dancing and her physical form. Ballet’s strict aesthetic requirements demand visually long body lines. Pointe shoes are uniquely able to meet those demands by augmenting and extending a dancer’s physical body. Through choosing, personalizing, training with, and eventually “killing” pointe shoes, dancers incorporate the footwear as prosthetic extensions of their own bodies and intentions. As a result, prosthetic pointe shoes play an integral role in the performative and objectifying realities of ballet dance.*

Introduction

It had been almost three months since I fell. It happened while coming out of a *grand jeté* leap at the end of class. Right as I hit the apex of the leap, I felt a tearing in both of my hips. I landed in a crumpled ball, but insisted that I was fine and finished the class. Weeks later, I was still left with a dry, empty feeling deep in my hip joints. No attempt to stretch or “crack” them could fix it. It felt like there was a pocket of air in each hip that resisted every move I tried to make. Staying turned out *en pointe* was virtually impossible because of that cruel bubble of air (which, I would soon learn, was actually a tear in my cartilage). Still, I would not see a doctor. I had not told anyone why my flexibility had suddenly declined, why I could not connect my movements fluidly in combinations. I was embarrassed and scared. I was [ashamed](#) that my body had failed me so spectacularly while doing something that it should have been able to do. I had done that leap hundreds of times. But perhaps I did not stretch enough that day, or maybe I pushed myself too hard. I was scared because, if something were really wrong, I knew I would likely have to stop dancing.

When I finally did visit the orthopedist, I was proven right. Continuing to dance for weeks after the injury had made it worse. Months of physical therapy helped, but there was no guarantee that I would ever regain a standard range of motion. I would definitely not regain the range of motion of a dancer. I could not dance on pointe because it was too risky, too likely that I might re-injure myself. Watching myself in the mirror in class, I looked awkward and strange. While my classmates were on pointe, I had to remain in my flat technique shoes. My restricted turnout and stunted extension made my body lines look heavy, clumsy, unimpressive. In short, I no longer looked like a ballet dancer.

...

Although few historians agree exactly on the origins of the classical dance form we now called “ballet,” it is widely recognized to have originated in Renaissance Italy as a performative reimagining of courtly dance. Much of its technique developed throughout the subsequent centuries in Italy, France, and Russia. Because ballet is a “classical” European art form, its definition of perfection is based largely on white femininity and raises important questions about race. Those questions, however, are not the focus of this paper and deserve their own in-depth discussion. Many authors have contributed meaningfully to that discussion, including Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2003) and Nyama McCarthy-Brown (2011).

Given ballet’s origins, Western European social requirements for women’s bodies help explain the discipline’s aesthetics. For example, where eighteenth century women were expected to be dainty and graceful, ballerinas were expected to look so graceful that they barely even needed to touch the ground. This led to the development of the pointe

shoe as a staple in the ballet discipline, as well as the most easily recognized symbol of ballet. Today, ballerinas spend countless hours preparing and training in pointe shoes. Each pair of shoes lasts for only a few hours of dancing and—due to the pressure exerted on dancers’ toes and joints while on pointe—can cause irreparable physical damage.

As a physical discipline, ballet is “structured by... perceptions and actions, that can be seen as inscribed into a dancer’s body” (Wulff 2008: 524). As material objects that interact intimately with human movement, pointe shoes “‘mix’ with human beings” (Olsen 2010: 2). In this process of mixing, pointe shoes appear to harbor a number of contradictions. They are perishable and they cause pain, yet they also help to create beauty and empowerment, and are cherished for it as the ultimate symbol of beauty in ballet. These inconsistencies seem to both exemplify and help shape the actions and thoughts of ballet dancers.

To embrace ballet’s aesthetic demands, built around ease and perfection, is to deny the human body’s imperfections. To get as close to ethereality as possible requires intense training and athleticism. It also requires wearing pointe shoes, a feat which itself involves training for countless hours to strengthen specific muscles in particular ways. However, it also requires a disguise of that training—audiences must be able to temporarily forget how physically demanding pointe can be. To create that illusion, pointe shoes must cease to exist as an external aide and become part of a dancer’s own body. To construct that interdependence, “the dancer intellectually and emotionally reacts to what may seem to be a purely functional artefact” (Harris Walsh 2011: 97).

Ballet is a discipline filled with wounded bodies, using an otherwise inanimate object (the pointe shoe) to help conceal their wounds and achieve what their bare bodies

cannot. In other words, pointe shoes operate like a prosthetic. Dancing on pointe, however, is also part of what creates wounds in the first place. It demands greater turnout (the ability to rotate the hips so that the insides of the legs face outward) and greater muscle control than dancing without pointe shoes. Those same demands are what built up overtime to strain the cartilage in my hips and set them up to tear. There are two kinds of “wounds” at play here: the literal ones created by pointe itself and the metaphorical ones (imperfections) that pointe aims to overcome.

This thesis stemmed from the question of how pointe-dancing bodies come to be productive—achieving incredible feats of strength and grace—when the process of dancing on pointe can sound so *destructive*. Trying to answer that question led me to what Nelson calls the “metaphoric and material prosthetic” (2001: 303). Prosthesis can serve as a metaphor to explain how all human bodies are wrapped up in relationships with objects that can extend and constrain them in different ways. Developing a concept of pointe shoes-as-prosthetics may therefore begin answering questions about ballet’s apparent contradictions and the decisions dancers make.

Even knowing how physically damaging and objectifying ballet can be does not stop dancers. Dance is an embodied practice, but where embodiment is typically described as involving constraint—the “permanent internalization of social order in the human body” (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 129)—ballet dancers’ experiences lead us to think about embodiment in a different way. Although dancing on pointe initially requires physical constraint and limiting expectations, it ends with the extension and expansion of the dancer’s body. In this way, pointe shoes come to represent a distillation of ballet’s many apparent contradictions.

Methodology

My research process was centered on the youth ballet community in Williamsburg that I was once a part of myself. Because of my own background in ballet, I was able to incorporate a considerable amount of autoethnography, as well as participant observation of other dancers' pointe shoe fittings, classes, and performances. I began by working at a dancewear store to train in fitting pointe and other dance shoes, and also participated in a professional fitting of my own. I then observed beginner and advanced pointe classes to strengthen my understanding of how pointe shoes operate in their most common context. Although I no longer dance on pointe, I do still take off-pointe ballet classes, which contribute to my understanding of how ballet as a discipline acts upon and constructs a dancer's body. Finally, I volunteered during rehearsals and performances for one local studio's presentation of *The Nutcracker*. *The Nutcracker* is an annual staple for many youth companies because of its popularity and the availability of roles for a range of skill levels and age groups. I helped with costume construction and backstage costume changes, as well as "running the music." (This a technical-sounding term for what is really just pushing the "pause" button on the CD player at appropriate times during studio rehearsals, before rehearsals in the theater with the orchestra.) Informal interviews contributed some of the dancers' own conceptualizations of their pointe work and general commitment to ballet.

Throughout my fieldwork, I got to know many ballet students, mostly young women ages ten to eighteen, whose experiences inform the bulk of this thesis. As a result, a main goal of this paper is to magnify their behind-the-scenes life in ballet to which the discipline itself does not often call attention. I have omitted these dancers' names or used

pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. I was able to rely especially on two relationships that were forged during my dance “career” and intensified throughout the course of my fieldwork. The first is with “Katherine,” a professional pointe shoe fitter and the owner of a popular dancewear shop. Katherine fit me for my first pointe shoes years ago, and holds a strong presence not only in my experience with ballet but also in her contributions to this project. The second is “Anna,” an adult dancer and ballet teacher who shared many important insights. Katherine and Anna’s names have also been changed to protect their identities.

The context for my fieldwork was the largely white, middle-class community in Williamsburg who can afford to enroll their daughters in dance and who consider ballet to be a worthwhile pursuit for young women. As a result, there are many perspectives that exist in ballet that I did not encounter. I focus on the experiences of the young women who I got to know and strive to represent them respectfully. Still, it is important to note that this work is not necessarily representative of all youth ballet, which has an international reach and includes dancers from many socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. My arguments in this thesis also specifically refer to classical ballet and not to other forms of dance, which all have their own aesthetic and physical repertoires that may differ wildly from ballet’s. The “dancers” to whom I refer here are therefore always *ballet* dancers.

Historical Background

Although the first performance officially named a “ballet” was in 1581, the earliest performances on pointe appeared in France between 1815 and 1830. The earliest ballerinas wore low-heeled shoes, fitting their simpler choreography of “gracefully extended sliding, walking, and running in intricate floor patterns” (Barringer 2012: 1-2). Appreciation for turned out legs and feet—that would eventually be taken to its extreme with pointe—also began in those early days. The evolution of turnout as a central ballet value is illustrated by the decline of cumbersome, long-skirted outfits in favor of simpler costumes with raised hemlines. Eventually, these too gave way to today’s most common dance attire: form-fitting leotards that do not obstruct the leg at all. Soft ballet slippers with pleats under the toes followed suit. The new shoes gave dancers the flexibility to perform more intricate footwork. Today’s soft technique ballet slippers—worn by men and boys of all levels, young girls, and advanced women during technique classes—are largely identical to this early design.

In 1796, choreographer Charles Didelot introduced a “flying machine” that hung above the stage and suspended dancers on wires. This gave them the appearance of balancing on the tips of their toes. These flying ballerinas pushed the boundary of what was possible for humans to accomplish with dance. Audiences were, understandably, awed. Ballet, as a discipline, never looked back.

By the 1800s, ballet training was becoming more and more difficult. “Dancers discovered that by rising higher and higher on half pointe, they were able to balance on the ends of their fully stretched toes” without any special footwear (Barringer 2012: 3). Such balances were short-lived, but training in this manner made ballerinas stronger than

ever. That same strength is still required to dance on pointe today, even with the aid of modern pointe shoes. Marie Taglioni is the first dancer recorded to have performed an entire ballet that incorporated pointe: *La Sylphide* in 1832. There were, however, “no extended pointe segments” in Taglioni’s performance, which included brief balances on both feet and *bouffées* (tiny steps taken with crossed legs) (4). For *La Sylphide*, Taglioni wore some of the first “pointe shoes.” Her shoes, and others from the time, were distinctly different from modern pointe technology:

Upon examination they appear to be nothing more than soft satin slippers, heavily darned at the tip. They had no box to protect the toe, and featured a flexible leather sole that supported the foot. Darning along the sides and over the toe kept the slippers in shape. They were essentially a one-sized tube of satin and leather that bound and squeezed the toes into a uniformly narrow pointe that had little relevance to the shape of the wearer’s foot. (Barringer 2012: 4).

Pointe shoes more similar to today’s cardboard-and-glue blocked design did not appear until the late nineteenth century. Complex Italian ballet technique was all the rage, and that called for Italian pointe shoes. These had a “blocked toe made of newspaper and floured paste, which was reinforced by a light cardboard insole” (Barringer 2012: 5). Anna Pavlova wore such shoes during her performance of *The Dying Swan* at the turn of the 20th century, in which she remained on pointe for almost the entire piece. Pavlova is also one of the first dancers to have a documented personalization process for her shoes. She supposedly “ripped out the cardboard and the fabric and leather liners and replaced them with a mysterious inner sole of her own design” (5).

After that, pointe dancing quickly took on the role that it has now, where it is considered to be a central, required component of any dancer’s training and the highest form of the classical ballet discipline. Later choreographers, such as George Balanchine

in the 1930s, included more difficult choreography that called attention to and pushed the boundaries of what could be done in pointe shoes. This evolution in technique required harder, more supportive shoes, but also the ability for dancers to “have a sense of contact with the floor” (7). It is difficult to produce quick, elaborate steps if your feet are rendered numb by heavy shoes. Pointe shoemakers experimented with a wide variety of designs. Shoe boxes became harder while shanks became more variable—with both very strong and more flexible options available depending on a dancer’s individual needs. Pointe shoes have therefore evolved along with ballet technique until the two became linked as they are today. Pointe shoes helped to create the technique just as the technique necessitated the creation of pointe shoes.

In Williamsburg’s youth studios, most ballet dancers “go on pointe” between the ages of ten and thirteen. After her teacher deems her strong enough to begin pointe training, a dancer will spend at least one year in pre-pointe classes, with exercises specifically geared toward strengthening her feet and ankles. She will then have her first pointe shoe fitting to find shoes that will best fit her unique needs.

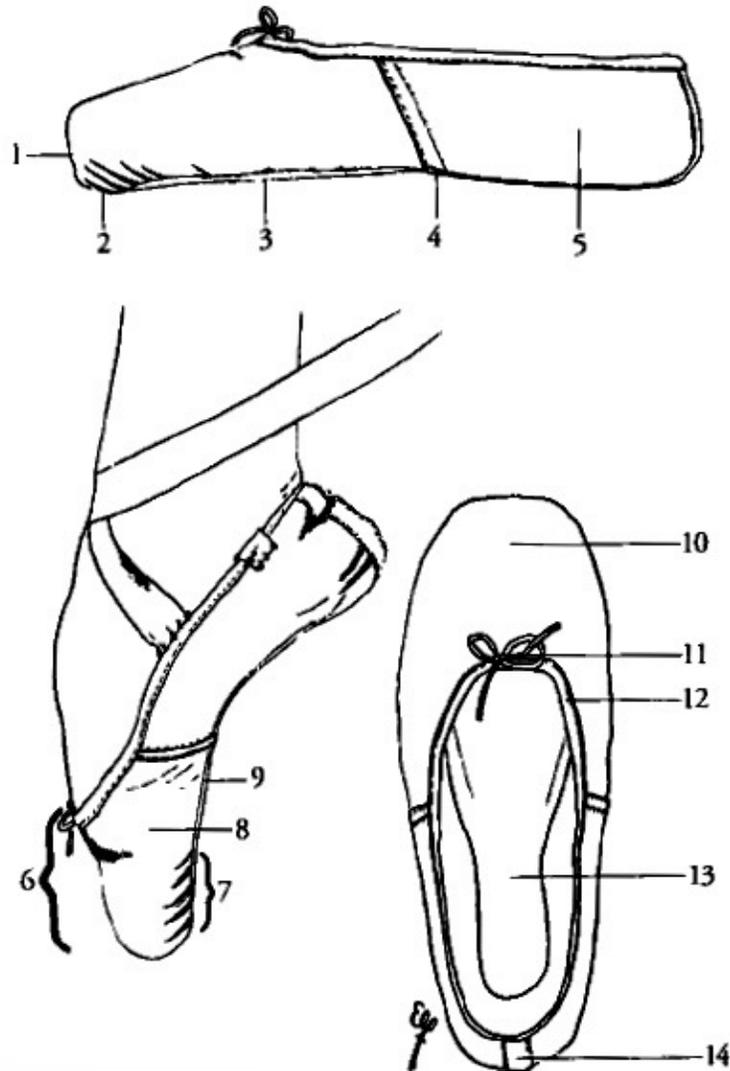
Pointe Shoe Construction

Pointe shoes operate as bodily extensions by being incorporated into a dancer’s body. But every body has different needs, requires slightly different assistance from shoes. To answer the question of what matters when adding a prosthetic to a dancer’s body, it is important to develop a basic knowledge of the construction of pointe shoes.

Pointe shoes are handmade by craftspeople, called “makers,” out of papier maché topped with satin. They have a stiff inner sole called a “shank” that supports the dancer’s

arch, and a hard, squared-off toe box that allows dancers to balance on the tips of their toes. Fig. 1 includes other basic components of pointe shoes:

Fig. 1



Anatomy of the pointe shoe:

(1) Platform or tip, (2) edge of the pleats or feathers, (3) outer sole, (4) waist seam, (5) quarter or heel section (6) vamp—the top of the box that covers the toes. (Vamp length is the distance between the drawstring knot and the top edge of the box [...]), (7) pleats or feathers—area underneath the box where the satin is pleated to fit under the sole, (8) wings or supports, (9) shank or narrow supporting spine, (10) stiffened box or block made of layers of glue and fabric and surrounding the toes and ball of the foot, (11) drawstring knot, (12) drawstring casing—bias tape stitched around the edge of the shoe to contain the drawstring, (13) insole, (14) back seam, which divides the quarters (Barringer 2012: 14).

Performativity and Objectification

We can think of ballet's aesthetics as a logical extreme of "the desirable, unattainable, beautiful themes" of Romantic-era European gender expectation (Harris Walsh 2012: 90). "Cultural determinants," such as gender norms, "affect how dancers perform and what their footwear will be" (86). For this reason, it is useful to think of "dancer-hood" by borrowing ideas about gender performativity. Scholars like Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir have explored how "gender is in no way a stable identity... rather it is an identity tenuously constructed in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 1988: 519, emphasis in the original). In other words, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman... woman itself is a term in process, a becoming" (Butler 2002: 33).

We can think of ballet as an extended version of this kind of performance. The reason dancers wear pointe shoes at all is to take to the extreme the balances, turns, and gracefully extended body lines that characterize all of ballet. Through these "stylized, repeated acts," dancers work to build a body that appears from stage to be hyper-human and, specifically, hyper-feminine. From the relationship between young-woman-who-dances and shoe emerges a Ballet Dancer: a being whose body *includes* pointe shoes. Through selecting, personalizing, and otherwise interacting with their shoes, young women develop a new body image featuring pointe shoes, as well as all of the other specific visual requirements and internal and physical feelings that ballet entails. The repetition that Butler emphasizes takes place not only in the repetition of choreography in classes and rehearsals, but also in the impermanence of pointe shoes and the fact that dancer's continuously "kill" old shoes and prepare new ones.

Nelson describes the prosthetic as “a site of both pleasure and pain,” and that is certainly true of the pointe shoe (2001: 320). Despite the physical pain from blisters, corns, and injuries, it is a super-human, apparently *unwounded* Dancer who the audience meets during a performance. “Ballet is designed to be a pleasure for its audience to see,” and therefore places dancers in an object position, subject to the “gaze” of spectators (Ness 1997: 35). The prosthetic relationship between shoes and dancers is part of what places dancers in that objectified position.

That objectification “is not just, or even primarily, restrictive,” however, but is “creative and carries positive... implications” by providing many dancers with a sense of empowerment (Lambek 1992: 249). “From a personal point of view, pointe dancing can be extremely liberating” (Harris Walsh 2012: 91). How do dancers derive empowerment from a practice that places on them strict aesthetic requirements and necessitates objectification, causing their bodies to be wounded and inferior? The answer to this question lies in pointe shoes’ role as metaphorical prosthetics and the ways in which they can, through their prosthetic relationship, amplify a dancer’s being.

Material Metaphorical Prosthesis

In order to address how pointe shoes operate as metaphorical material prosthetics, it is first important to understand some criteria that contemporary scholars have developed. Although we may think of prosthetic objects simply as tools, King argues that they are “not to be regarded as an ‘external’ mediator between the person and the environment but rather as a bodily extension in quite a literal sense” (2007: 546). This requires a high degree of “corporeal interdependence” wherein a material object acts as a

body part (538). Incorporating a prosthetic object into their body then allows someone “to reach further, higher, and for longer than they could on their own” (King 2007: 550). A person can therefore imbue a prosthetic with their intention to accomplish something, using the prosthetic to extend that intention beyond their bodies and succeed.

A prosthetic relationship also “assumes wounded bodies, intimate connections, and dependency” (Nelson 2001: 304). It is initially important to note the privilege, even the irony, of using a word like “prosthetic”—primarily associated with disability—to discuss a discipline like ballet that depends upon an extreme version of bodily “wholeness.” Indeed, ballet demands a degree of bodily perfection that renders even the so-called “average” human body insufficient. When dancers first put on their pointe shoes, they are not putting them on bodies that are “wounded” in the conventional sense. Dancers’ literal wounds are instead often brought on from ballet training itself, and continuing to dance on pointe tends to only worsen them. The assumption of wounded bodies in a metaphorical sense, however, refers to the feeling that there is something damaged or missing which the prosthetic overcomes. In other words, material prosthetics address a perceived shortcoming of the human body and extends human capabilities to overcome that lack of presence.

Any object does not immediately operate as a prosthetic. The cup of tea sitting on my desk does not become a part of my body every time I pick it up to take a sip. Prosthetic objects become “animated by congealed human labor and emotional investments” (Nelson 2001: 305). A person can develop a prosthetic relationship with an object by spending “quality time” with that object—by giving it physical and emotional attention. Grosz explains that “anything that comes into contact with the surface of the

body and remains there long enough will be incorporated into the body image,” underscoring the importance of repeated quality time (1994: 80). Other examples of objects that could be interacted with as prosthetics include “cars, surgeons’ scalpels, [and] laptop computers” (Nelson 2001: 306).

It is lastly important to note that “an active willful body does not simply seize a passive instrument” (Nelson 2001: 306). The connection between person and prosthetic changes the human as much as the object. In fact, because of what they are able to accomplish together, a prosthetic relationship is *emergent*, resulting in something greater than either the human or the object is alone. Emergence creates, in other words, a “whole that is greater than the sum of its parts” (Ahearn 2012: 25). To borrow a metaphor from Ingold’s examination of phenomenology, “The butterfly’s flight is made possible, thanks to air currents and vortices partly set up in the movement of the wings” (Ingold 2008: 212). The butterfly pushes on the air and the air pushes back on the butterfly, and the two together allow the insect to fly.

To identify pointe shoes as prosthetics therefore calls for a discussion of five main criteria: 1) that they extend dancer’s intentionality; 2) that they do so through bodily incorporation; 3) that they are imbued with that ability through dancers spending quality time with them, investing in them; 4) that the prosthetic shoes, beyond simply extending a dancer’s work, are mutually transformative to overcome “a lack of presence” that would otherwise hinder the dancer’s success; and 5) that the dancer-shoe relationship is emergent.

I. Extending Intentionality

In terms of “connection” and “dependency,” an object is a prosthetic because it extends the actions and intentionality of its person. The body accomplishes something only through employing the prosthetic. But prosthetics are not simply used externally like tools. They are instead *incorporated* into the body to operate as extensions of the body itself and its body image. Body image is a combination of how we conceptualize ourselves and how others conceptualize us (Nelson 2001: 305). When we employ a prosthetic, our body image “extends to include” that external object, which then becomes a part of the body image (306). In other words, to incorporate an object prosthetically is to make it a part of how we see ourselves and how others see us. As Grosz describes, through this process “the object ceases to remain an object and becomes a medium, a vehicle for impressions and expressions” (1994: 80). A dancer’s “corporeal movements,” facilitated by wearing pointe shoes, can then “move outward... with increasing acumen” to create the ethereal look of ballet performance (Ness 2011: 84).

There are many ways in which the prosthetic qualities of pointe shoes manifest: in actual performances as well as in the ways that ballerinas talk about their dance and their shoes. For example, one of the main aesthetic principles in classical ballet is “line.” Visually long body lines contribute to the look of weightlessness and grace that is highly valued and capitalized on in ballet choreography. Pointe shoes became a staple in ballet because of their ability to extend dancers’ lines through a sort of optical illusion. “There is a distinct visual difference between a dancer on demi-pointe in a soft shoe [standing on the ball of her foot] and full pointe” (Harris Walsh 2011: 89). Dancing in a soft shoe breaks the foot slightly at the toes. Although this may seem like a negligible difference,

extended lines are so valued in ballet that any distraction from their continuity is unacceptable.

In soft shoe and pointe classes alike, teachers often tell dancers to think of their body growing longer beyond the top of their head, their legs pushing into the floor or out into space. It is important to teach young dancers how to visualize their bodies extending even before they go on pointe. Imagining that ballet bodies can extend past their physical form and into space is actually an essential part of executing ballet choreography. It helps when sustaining multiple turns or balancing on pointe for long periods of time. Pointe shoes increase the technical level of ballet choreography and performance and therefore assist in an extension of the dancer's intentionality beyond her body. They also, however demand that extension in order to work properly. Throughout their training, dancers even learn to explicitly engage their shoes as extensions of their feet, and of their entire bodies. An example of that connection is the phrase "feeling the floor." This common mantra reminds the dancer to connect her movements to the stage as if she were not wearing shoes at all.

In addition, once a shoe's glue breaks down and it stops being supportive, dancers speak of it as being "dead." Dancers tend to take responsibility for these deaths, lamenting how quickly they "killed" a new pair of shoes. Clearly, dancers ascribe some quality of "living" to pointe shoes, emphasizing their connection to a living body. In my own pointe classes growing up, we often joked about how much easier pointe would be if we could chop off our toes and forgo the easily-wounded appendages entirely. I heard this same sentiment echoed in another studio last year, including stories of a mythical dancer who actually did have her toes removed! The anatomical reality of needing toes

notwithstanding, there is evidence that dancers think of pointe shoes as prosthetics explicitly in their own conceptualizations.

A major element of this phenomenon that I encountered in my fieldwork was the idea that pointe shoes are designed to blend into their dancer's tights. Pointe shoes that blend in help eliminate any reminder that there is apparatus involved in how dancers float on the tips of their toes. Traditionally, pointe shoes are covered in a light pink satin. They are meant to blend in as much as possible with the pale pink opaque tights that dancers typically wear. There is, however, slight variation in the pinks of different brands' tights and shoes. Different brands carry tights in a range of colors from a dull, almost white pink to light salmon. There is typically less variation for pointe shoes, but no brand's standard color is exactly the same. Anna, for example, does not like her dancers to wear Bloch shoes. There are a variety of reasons why she dislikes Blochs, not the least of which is that she believes it is harder to match their color to the tights that her dancers wear. Although the color difference may seem barely perceptible, a shift in color from the leg to the foot can break the line of the dancer's leg and call attention to the presence of pointe shoes.

The shine of satin on pointe shoes can also break the line and, depending on how particular a studio director is, might need to be remedied. I remember several years ago when, to prepare for the Nutcracker, dancers in my studio coated our pointe shoes with a light layer of pink calamine lotion. Once dry, the calamine gives the shoes a matte texture that can help them blend in with matte tights. Anna and I discussed how "calamine-ing" shoes was, in her words "sort of trendy" a few years ago and has now fallen out of favor, at least in the local area. Rubbing the liquid lotion into the shoes breaks down their glue

and kills them more quickly. As a result, dancers went through more pairs of shoes (and more money) in one Nutcracker season than usual. The added burden of having to pay for and prepare extra shoes contributed to Anna's studio choosing not to require calamine. Still, Anna admits that she likes the look of them.

Pointe shoes are therefore meant to seem invisible to help maintain the illusion that maybe, just maybe, dancers' feet are designed, inherently and on their own, to balance on the tips of their toes for extended periods of time. Of course it is important not to discount the fact that the dancer *is* executing the choreography. ("The real pointe is the foot itself and not the shoe" [Barringer 2012: 9].) No matter how important pointe shoes may be to a streamlined ballet performance, the success of a dance is most dependent on the dancer's skill in controlling their shoes. Rather than being the exclusive key to a dancer's success, pointe shoes "set up, through their material presence, [the] conditions" for the dancer to achieve beautiful feats of strength and coordination (Ingold 2008: 211). All this business of disguising the shoes is therefore not just about disguising the *shoes*. The shoes represent the hours of training, the blisters, the exhaustion—indeed the whole experience of ballet from the dancer's perspective—that must also be disguised in favor of presenting a weightless, effortless ideal.

II. Bodily Incorporation

The first step a dancer must take in building a prosthetic pointe relationship is to choose a shoe. Most often, that choice comes out of a professional pointe shoe fitting. A pointe shoe fitting begins with an analysis of the dancer's feet. Foot characteristics guide where to begin in the process of selecting shoes. This is especially true when a dancer has

not had much training on pointe and does not yet have a strong understanding of how her shoes impact her dancing. Long toes necessitate a longer vamp; square toes may need a wider box; while a developing bunion could require the use of a toe spacer, a small piece of silicone gel or foam placed between the toes to realign the bones and redirect pressure off of the second toe.

From there, the fitter delves into her extensive knowledge on shoe styles. Pointe shoe sizing relies on a variety of characteristics, most importantly width and length. In addition, the fitter must keep track of other characteristics for which certain styles or brands are known. These include vamp length, heel “height” (the depth of fabric on the heel), and length of the wings. Most young dancers wear mass-produced pointe shoes, as opposed to custom shoes that are more common among professionals. Mass-produced shoes tend to have only one option for vamp, heel, and wing characteristics. Problems with one pair may necessitate trying a new style entirely.

As the dancer tries on shoes, she and the fitter work together to evaluate fit and predict how they may affect her dancing. Some of the factors considered in that evaluation include: Do the shoes push the dancer over on pointe (a sign of good support) or pull her back (indicating the shank is probably too strong)? Do the shoes encourage the dancer to sickle—to dangerously balance on her outer toes, rather than the ideal of balancing primarily on the big toe? Does the dancer sink in the shoes because the box is too wide? All of these considerations come together in the pointe shoe fitting, regardless of a dancer’s level.

“Megan,” a young dancer who has been on pointe for four years walks into a dancewear shop in Williamsburg. The small space is dominated by clothing racks stuffed

with leotards and flanked by floor-to-ceiling shelves of shoes in shades of pink and brown. Megan has come here for a fitting because her current pointe shoes are dead. Specifically, she complains that she is “killing the shank faster than the box” and requests a stronger shoe. The fitter, Katherine, explains that simply trying the same shoe with a stronger shank will not fix Megan’s problems. A stronger shanked version, for example, may pull her back off of pointe and fail to conform properly to her arch. Megan also explains that the shortness of her current shoes’ vamps are pushing her over too far. She wants to try shoes with a longer vamp that may give her more support. Given all of Megan’s concerns, she will need to find an entirely new style of shoe.

Katherine pulls a few different pairs from her high, densely-packed shelves of pointe boxes. Megan slides each pair on one by one and first stands in them “on flat” (standing “normally” or not on pointe). At this point, the shoes have no ribbons or elastic straps, and their drawstrings are loose. One of Megan’s feet is slightly larger than the other, which is common. Luckily, every pair of pointe shoes also features one slightly larger shoe due to the way they are stored, one inside the other, during shipping. While jostling around in transit, the inner shoe pushes up against the outer shoe and stretches it slightly.

Megan places each foot up on pointe independently to assess how the shoes may fit when she goes fully up. Katherine looks for errors such as sinking in the box or twisting at the heel. She first tries on a pair that is too short, causing Megan’s toes to curl slightly within the shoe. (The ideal length for a pointe shoe lets a dancer’s toes lie straight when she stands up on flat, with her toes just touching the end of the shoe.) This prompts Katherine to reach for a longer pair in the same style. When that shoe is then too long—

causing Megan's foot to sink down when she places it on pointe—they try the same shoe with a narrower width. Katherine's assessments may not always match up with Megan's, so they must communicate continuously to evaluate each new shoe. One pair of $\frac{3}{4}$ shank shoes, for example, feature a shank that stops in the middle of the foot, rather than extending all the way up the heel. Megan likes the way the shank fits with the arch of her foot, but Katherine notices that the fabric twists around the heel in a way that may cause sickling.

Once Megan has accrued three to five potential pairs, she puts them back on and approaches a small practice barre in front of a mirror. While Katherine watches, Megan pliés in first position and returns to parallel position to step up on pointe, one foot at a time. These motions provide an idea of how the shoe may behave during classes and performances. Megan and Katherine work together to eventually choose one pair of shoes that are likely to work best: a pair of Russian Pointes with a flattering V-shaped vamp. Katherine encourages Megan to take home two pairs of shoes, but her store unfortunately only has one pair of the chosen shoe in stock. If Megan alternates different shoes on different days of class, one pair will have time to dry out completely before she uses it next, and both pairs will last longer. After trying on a few more pairs, Megan decides to get a set of her Russians' "sister size"—the same style but one size shorter and wider.

Katherine also sends Megan home with several new strategies for preserving the life of her shoes. Plastic spade-shaped shank supports, for example, can be secured under the shoe's main shank with jet glue (a thin, clear, fast-drying glue that can itself be used to strengthen dying shoes). Stuffing Megan's shoes with cedar sachets on their days off will also help absorb excess moisture.

If Megan is happy with the way her new shoes support her, she may continue to wear that same style in the future. Once one pair dies, she will replace them with a new pair of the same kind. Most dancers have decided on one style by the time they have been on pointe for a few years. When Megan decides, that style will then become “her” shoe. She will take ownership over the style in a way that adds to its incorporation into her body. Once she finds her style, other styles will not feel right—they will not join with her body as well as her shoe. This attachment to one shoe style may seem contradictory, considering that pointe shoes always die and have to be replaced. Because the shoes are handmade, there are often slight differences between pairs, even of the same style. A pointe shoe straight out of the box, however, is only at the beginning of its “life.” Continuing interaction between dancer and shoe helps keep a dancer’s shoes more uniform, and more tailored to her unique needs.

III. Quality Time

Once a dancer picks her shoes, that does not mean that she is ready to dance in them right away. She has to sew ribbons and elastic to the shoes to help keep them on and increase their support of her ankle. There are also a number of ways she can personalize her shoes. This process is similar to breaking in a new street shoe. “Personalization,” however, provides a more comprehensive connotation than “breaking in.” Preparing pointe shoes involves much more than just wearing them around until they are more comfortable. An un-personalized shoe is still more shoe than foot. Through personalization techniques, a dancer works to convert her shoes to better match her own unique needs. Personalization represents the first of that “congealed labor and emotional

investment” that begins the process of turning pointe shoes from lifeless footwear into bodily extensions (Nelson 2001: 305).

Different forms of personalization are appropriate at different stages in a dancer’s pointe career. Young dancers tend to learn about new techniques through a kind of socialization process—either directly from their teachers and older dancers, or indirectly from professionals in magazines and advertisements.

Katherine, the pointe shoe fitter, is often the first line of defense for personalization lessons in Williamsburg. It is common for dancers to bend the arch of new pointe shoes to make them more flexible by folding the shoes in half with their hands. Using this method, however, dancers must guess where to bend the shoe. It is harder to achieve a bend that perfectly conforms to the arch of the foot. To eliminate some of this uncertainty, Katherine teaches her own method for perfectly bent shanks. When eleven-year-old “Liza” comes into Katherine’s store for her first pair of pointe shoes, Katherine concludes the fitting by modeling her method. Katherine slides just her toes into one of her old pairs of shoes, soft and grey—very much dead—with the satin peeling away from the toes. Liza does the same with her new shoes, shiny and pink. Katherine then demonstrates how she can set her foot on pointe while sitting down and bends the heel of the shoe backwards, pressing the shank directly into her arch. That way, Liza can be sure to bend her shoes in exactly the right place. This tip was especially helpful to me as well when I was personalizing pointe shoes. My arch bends lower than most people’s, so it was difficult for me to find shoes whose shank “broke” (bent) in the right place. Being able to control the location of my shoes’ break during personalization fixed the problem.

Another source of personalization inspiration are the techniques used by professional dancers. For her comprehensive book, *The Pointe Book: Shoes, Training, Technique*, Janice Barringer interviewed dozens of professional dancers about their own pointe stories, including this one from Royal Ballet Principal Dancer Tamara Rojo:

Tamara wears Freed of London size 4½ XX... She likes to wear them in at least one class prior to performing since she never wears new shoes on stage. To protect her skin, she wraps each toe with tape, but wears nothing inside the box allowing her to better feel the shoe and the floor. She prepares them by sewing elastic in the back in the shape of a loop about one centimeter from the middle seam. The ribbons are sewn about one centimeter back from the side seams. The inside ribbon is longer than the outside... To make the shoes last longer, Tamara sews with thick cotton thread to encircle the platform for more stability, and shellacs the inside of the vamp. She then cuts out the material inside the sides of the platform and scrapes out the glue up to where the big toe bends, which gives a better quality of movement when she goes up and down through the half pointe (Barringer 2012: 324-5).

Rojo's process exemplifies how complex and specific many professional's pointe shoe processes are. Several pointe shoe brands and professional companies even capitalize on the uniqueness of personalization in their advertising campaigns. In this video produced by the [Royal Ballet](#), First Soloist Claire Calvert mentions how she darns the toes of her pointe shoes not only because it helps them feel better, but also because it "extends the line of the foot."¹ This video appears on Facebook, where young dancers can easily see it and get new ideas for their own personalization. Professional dancers perform on stage more often, go through more shoes, and have a heightened sense of what their bodies need from a shoe. As a result, their personalization techniques tend to be more extreme than those of Williamsburg's young ballet dancers. Ideas nonetheless percolate down to youth studios.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/balletbabble/videos/10157956716955105/>

Thirteen-year-old “Amelia” went on pointe when she was nine years old—young for her studio. Her first shoes were Grishko’s Ulanova style, although she now wears Grishko Novas. She stopped wearing Ulanovas because their leather inner soles “squeak” loudly and distracted from her dance. When she gets a new pair of Novas, she bends the shanks in her hands and slams the boxes in her studio’s doorframe to soften them. She then hand sews pink stain ribbons and wide elastic in the manner used by most of the dancers in her studio: a loop of elastic at the back of the shoe to encircle her ankle, and one long ribbon sewn along the entire bottom of each inner sole, at the bend of her arch, and up the sides. Sewing the ribbon this way means that when her shoe bends, the entire ribbon will come with it and create connected support from her arch to her ankle, where she ties the ribbons in the standard crisscross fashion. Although she loves the way her medium-strength shank Novas break in, they have the curious habit of “bubbling” at the tip—becoming too round for her to balance effectively. To mitigate this, Amelia darns around the outside of the box. She got the idea after seeing a video on YouTube of Russian ballet students darning their shoes. Darning helps Amelia “keep her shoes alive” and also creates a more defined platform on which to balance. She then bangs the box on the floor to make them quieter. Finally, Amelia stretches her shoes by pointing her feet in the space between her studio’s piano and the floor. This will make it easier to roll through demi-pointe in class. When dancing, she wears thin gel “toe pads:” pockets of gel covered in brightly colored fabric into which she slides her toes before putting on her shoes.

Despite the differences—Amelia uses more padding than Rojo and keeps the original structure of her shoes comparatively intact—Amelia’s process is no less specific

or complex than the professional's. It simply conforms to Amelia's unique needs. It is therefore through the process of personalization that a pointe shoe starts to become a living thing, a prosthetic body part specific to its dancer.

Of course, if a pointe shoe lives, it also must die. Each pair of shoes only lasts for about 8 hours of dancing. Depending on a dancer's level this can mean they last up to six months or less than one week. Dancers are therefore continually personalizing and preparing new pairs of shoes. King describes prosthetics as "vital—though replaceable—limbs" (2007: 555). Each pair of pointe shoes has a lifecycle, beginning with its assembly by hand in a factory in England, Australia, or North Carolina. This lifecycle extends until the pointe shoes' death at the hands (or, rather, the feet) of the dancer who wears them, having broken down their structure with use. The overall lifecycle of shoes also intersects, however, with an arguably more important lifecycle—that of the prosthetic relationship between dancer and shoe. This relationship begins with a pointe shoe fitting and ends, once again, with the shoes' death.

There are often competing ideas about what is most important about the proper fit of a pointe shoe. Different voices throughout the prosthetic lifecycle provide different opinions about what is most important to building a successful prosthetic relationship. The primary considerations that vie for prominence are feeling and appearance. During a pointe shoe fitting, for example, Katherine is most likely to emphasize how a shoe *feels* to determine its success. Importantly, "how it feels" does not mean whether or not a shoe is *comfortable*, but rather whether it is supportive enough to help a dancer execute her steps (to function as a prosthetic). If a dancer ever says a shoe feels "comfortable" during one of her fittings, Katherine jokingly responds with some variant of "well then that can't

be the right one!” Still, throughout the fitting she asks each dancer a variety of questions to encourage them to think about and prioritize fit: “Where are your toes? Do you feel your foot sliding when you go up on pointe?” Although Katherine still considers appearance if choosing between two pairs, she will encourage choosing the one that feels most supportive.

Many dancers, however, leave Katherine’s store with three or four pairs of shoes. They will take these shoes to show their teachers and, hopefully, earn their approval for at least one pair. Teachers tend to prioritize appearance—whether the shoes elongate the dancer’s foot, make her arch look elegant, or blend into her tights. It is not unusual for a dancer to return to Katherine’s shop looking for a new pair after one she loved was vetoed by her teacher for making her feet look too boxy or too heavy. As a result of these competing opinions, each dancer must find a balance.

Different teachers and pointe shoe fitters often even disagree about the best personalization methods. Some (like my own teacher) are in favor of doing very little to a first pair of shoes. Allowing them to break in slowly and naturally over time can increase their longevity and maintain their structure, which many beginners depend on for support. Still others, like Anna, teach students specific methods for personalization. In their first day of class, Anna showed her beginning students how to transfer moisture onto the box of their new shoes using wet paper towels. Wetting the box begins to break down the layers of glue and makes it softer. This is intended to make it easier for beginner dancers to push through the shoe and land squarely on pointe.

Finding the right prosthetic therefore involves a continuous reconciliation of feeling and appearance that can be extended to ballet as a whole. Aesthetic components

such as line are high priorities, as is the stamina to execute choreography during a long class or rehearsal. Although how a dancer feels is connected to how long she can continue dancing well, studio directors and teachers often encourage their dancers to push beyond their physical limits, criticizing them when they fail to do so. At the center of this reconciliation are pointe shoes, given their prosthetic role in supporting dancers and extending their lines. If a shoe is too dead, a dancer may not be able to execute choreography properly. Still, it is the dancer's responsibility to know when she needs new shoes and to stay prepared. During a rehearsal for the Nutcracker's "Waltz of the Flowers," one dancer—whose shoes were obviously dead, their arches bending heavily—kept falling off of pointe. When Anna asked if there was something wrong, the dancer replied that her feet hurt (probably because of the dead shoes). To this, Anna scolded "we don't care about that. You need to be on pointe the whole time." Anna's response may seem insensitive, but this interaction exemplifies the tension between feeling and appearance that is central to successfully executing ballet, as well as pointe shoes' important role in that tension.

IV. Mutual Transformation to Overcome Lack of Presence

Dancing ballet at all, but on pointe especially, physically changes dancers in irreversible ways. Pointe shoes are hard and restrictive, even with padding. Wearing them can be painful because of the pressure they put on a dancer's bones, joints, and muscles. The bodies of many retired dancers bear scars, bunions, and creaky joints signifying a career of performing on pointe. In fact, those kinds of injuries are expected for a dancer, a symbol of dedication and training. "Beatrice," a retired professional and current studio

director, had to end her professional career because of persistent damage to the bones in her foot. Today, despite the fact that she can still, in her seventies, reach an almost full split stretch, her severe bunions make wearing even soft technique ballet slippers painful.

Beyond injuries, however, the process of dancing on pointe can also cause less overtly negative changes in a dancer. When dancers personalize and wear their pointe shoes, they create a form of “affective field where human and nonhuman elements of experience [are] interlaced” (Ness 2011: 81). In other words, through personalization habits and dancing on pointe, human dancers act upon pointe shoes while the shoes act on the humans in return. The pointe shoes are “adapted to the user’s characteristics, and so bear [the] imprint” of the dancer that wore them (Gell 1999: 200). The dancer’s body then “preserves in its very bones the understanding of a certain tradition of intelligent, methodical practice” (Ness 2008: 22). Ness calls that preservation “inscription,” and likens it to a written language—the technique a dancer learns “carved into” her musculature, callouses, scars, and bones long after she stops dancing (2008). In this way, pointe shoes fit the prosthetic criteria of inciting change in both of its halves: the person and the object.

Regardless of whether the change is a single acute injury or a chronic build up over time, it is the inherent imperfection of the human body that is the ultimate “impairment” according to ballet’s strict aesthetic expectations. Ballet itself creates a “gap” between the fallible, breakable human body that is actually dancing and the ethereal, perfect super-human that the audience must be able to see on stage. Ballet dancers use pointe shoes to bridge that gap, therefore satisfying the prosthetic requirement of overcoming some perceived impairment. By elevating and extending a

dancer beyond what they could do with only their feet, pointe shoes work to fill the gap that ballet itself opens through its aesthetics.

V. Emergence

Getting her first pair of pointe shoes, or “going on pointe,” is a significant milestone for a young dancer. On the first day of beginner pointe lessons in the fall, it is clear how excited and proud the dancers are. Before class, they twirl giddily around the studio, their shoes not quite tied on correctly, balancing recklessly in poses that Anna would not sanction for months. Throughout the class, the dancers catch glimpses of themselves in the mirror and smile. Even in simple exercises—like when Anna demonstrates the proper way to walk in pointe shoes: turned-out on demi-pointe, like a graceful duck—the dancers stare at their own feet in the mirror, in awe of how beautiful they are. They may still look a bit ungainly, but seeing themselves in the mirror, their legs terminating in satin pointe shoes, they see themselves as *dancers* more than ever before.

When a woman takes her pointe shoes into her body image and uses them to extend her intentions prosthetically, both cease to exist alone. From their combination emerges the performative Dancer who is uniquely capable of accomplishing ballet’s aesthetics and choreography. She is greater than a ballet dancer on flat, and she is certainly greater than a pair of unworn inanimate shoes.

Importantly, most ballet dancers do not see going on pointe in class as a final goal. The classes prepare dancers for the truly emergent experience of ballet: the performance. Every stage of a ballet dancer’s training and every stage of a pointe shoe’s

life cycle—fitting, personalization, classes, rehearsals—combine to create the Dancer and her performance on stage. The prosthetic role of pointe shoes means that a ballet performance is not only “performance” in the more literal sense involving “accountability to the audience... for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer’s display of competence” (Bauman 1977: 11). Ballet also involves performance in the Butlerian sense of repeated identity-constructing actions. Repeated acts of personalizing, training with, and “killing” prosthetic shoes maintain this performance from which emerges the Dancer.

Performing on pointe is seen as an essential component of the performative Ballet Dancer. That component may be worth problematizing, however. If Dancer-hood is performed and construed in one specific way (through the integration and deployment of pointe shoes as prosthetics) what does that mean for female ballet dancers who do not dance on pointe? In the *Nutcracker* performance at which I volunteered, there were few soloist or principal roles available for women that did not require pointe shoes. The notable exceptions were the teddy bear party gift character and the “Russian” dancers. The bear performs in a movement-restricting, face-covering suit and could easily be danced by someone of any gender. The Russian dancers wear black heeled dance shoes as part of their costume and characterization, and most also had other roles where they did perform on pointe. This sets up a clear hierarchy between women who dance on pointe and those who do not. If we consider the use of pointe shoes as prosthetic, helping women to achieve the role of ballet Dancer, does that mean that women “require” the prosthetic to be “real” ballet dancers? Are they not “real” women in ballet? There are certainly no such requirements for male dancers, who can reach the highest levels of

professional achievement without ever wearing pointe shoes and are considered especially, unnecessarily, impressive if they do train on pointe. Despite the exclusionary nature of the pointe-dependent Dancer, she remains the emergent product of the prosthetic relationship between a ballerina and her pointe shoes.

Conclusion

Thinking of ballet as built around a prosthetic relationship can provide another way of thinking about performance and performativity. The role that pointe shoes play in ballet exemplifies how performativity does not operate only through discourse and social relationships, but also through relationships with *things*. The taking in of objects (pointe shoes) into a dancer's body then contributes to her own objectification that she chooses to engage in while performing on stage.

To understand how dancers embrace the objectifying reality of ballet, it may be helpful to look at those for whose benefit they are objectified: their audience. The choreography, extended as it is through the use of pointe shoes, is the way that dancers connect to and communicate with the audience. It could even be said that “through the shoes themselves, the dancer communicates to the audience” (Harris Walsh 2011: 89). But how? What are they communicating?

In exploring the relationship between the dancers and their audience, Alfred Gell's examination of art as traps may be helpful. According to Gell, when a hunter deploys a trap to catch their prey, “the hunter's skill and knowledge” are “located in the trap” (Gell 1999: 201). Gell then uses these criteria of being imbued with skill and knowledge to craft a definition of “art” as “any object or performance [that] embodies

intentionalities that are complex, demanding of attention and perhaps difficult to reconstruct fully” (211). A hunter crafts their trap to take their place in hunting, as well as to suit their specific prey, to best catch it. The trap “is therefore both a model of its creator, the hunter, and a model of its victim, the prey” (202). Art possesses the same ability to wrap up its audience in the skill of its creator.

Thinking of pointe shoes as “traps” and dancers as “hunters” may explain some of the empowerment dancers derive from putting themselves in such an objectifying position. Dancers fill their performance with the movements of their own physical form. They derive empowerment from being able to convince (trap) the audience that they really *do* possess that ethereal power independent of pointe shoes, at least for the duration of their time on stage. It is empowering to effectively communicate their Ballet Dancerhood. The fact that pointe shoes are designed to blend into the dancer’s tights and appear as an extension of their own legs assists with that illusion. The “trap” of dancing on pointe therefore extends the prosthetic role of pointe shoes beyond one dancer, or even a group of dancers, and into the audience.

Although, during my fieldwork, I did spend time as an audience member during several rehearsals and two full productions, I may be at a disadvantage in understanding the “average” audience experience. “Each audience member will understand the shoe in various ways, depending on her own personal history and experience with pointe shoes” (Harris Walsh 2011: 89). Therefore a dancer like myself may be much harder to trap. My familiarity with the construction and experience of dancing in pointe shoes always contributes to my understanding of a performance. I rarely ever find myself ignoring the technical reality of ballet to simply enjoy its ethereality. Acknowledging these

shortcomings of my insider perspective, a future study focused on the ballet audience experience may be helpful. Future work could therefore focus more on audience members and their relationship to dancers on stage.

Still, a discussion of pointe shoes as prosthetics takes us closer to an understanding of what makes ballet meaningful for ballerinas. Allucquère Rosanne Stone describes her first experience using short wave radio (which, she argues, is also a prosthetic) as transformative: “I was hooked... I could take a couple of coils of wire and a hunk of galena and send a whole part of myself out into the ether” (1995: 3, as cited in Nelson 2001: 308). Being able to reach beyond your body to accomplish something that few people can do is a unique and intoxicating feeling. “You have a sense of every muscle in your body, ” and dancing on pointe intensifies that feeling even more than performing without pointe shoes (Harris Walsh 2012: 91). In the words of one young woman, dancing on pointe “makes me feel pretty. Prettier than anything else does!”

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