

A dancer's search for pointes of perfection

Quest led Chan Hon Goh to start her own ballet shoe company

Paola Loriggio

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Decades of ballet have taken their toll on Chan Hon Goh's feet.

It was a slew of stress fractures early in her career that led the National Ballet of Canada's principal dancer – now on the cusp of retirement – to launch her own shoecompany, Principal by Chan Hon Goh Inc., in 1996.

“I was really trying to find better shoes for myself,” she says, referring to pointe shoes, commonly called toe shoes, in ballet.

The shoes allow ballerinas to balance on their toes, making them appear weightless. The design has evolved little since the first pointe shoes appeared in the 1800s, partly because of ballet's love of tradition.

Even the best-made shoes fade fast. Goh goes through two pairs of pointe shoes in a single performance of Giselle, she says, sometimes three pairs in longer ballets such as Swan Lake.

Thus, finding the perfect pair of shoes – the kind that make standing en pointe feel easy – is bittersweet. “You can't put them away and use them another time.”

HERE'S WHAT'S INVOLVED:

- Pointe shoes are almost entirely made by hand, a time-consuming process. Just sewing on the ribbons can take more than 1 1/2 hours, Goh says.
- The hard box in the toe of the shoe is called the block; it helps the dancer balance on her toes. “People ask if it's aluminum or steel,” Goh laughs. Rather, it's a mix of burlap and glue, sometimes even paper. “We really are dancing on our toes.”
- The shank, a piece of stiff material that reinforces the thin leather sole, helps support the arch of the foot en pointe. It is usually made of leather or layers of burlap glued together. The upper is traditionally pink satin.
- The patterned linings – from ladybugs to hearts and daisies – were added to Principal shoes about three years ago, Goh says. The embellishment adds a playful touch to the shoes without flouting ballet's traditions, she says. Once assembled, the shoes must be aged – “like wine” – so the glue dries without any bumps in the material, which “would be really noticed when you jump, land or turn.” Aging time depends on the manufacturer, but hovers around 10 days.



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

The design of ballet slippers has evolved little since the first pointes appeared in the 1800s. But dancer Chan Hon Goh's trimmings add a whimsical touch to the shoes without flouting ballet's traditions.