

Culture

A boon to ballerinas of color

Brown and bronze shoes are finally being offered by a major manufacturer

BY ALEX MARSHALL

For nearly her whole career, Cira Robinson has — like many ballet dancers of color — performed a ritual: painting her point shoes to match her skin.

She did it first in 2001, when she was 15, at a summer program with Dance Theater of Harlem. The company said her shoes needed to be brown, not the traditional pink, but she couldn't find any in stores, so she used spray paint. "It made them crunchy and just... ew," she said in a telephone interview.

When she joined Dance Theater a few years later, she started using makeup instead. "I'd go to the cheapest stores and get foundation," she said, the kind "you'd never put on your face as it'd break you out. Like, \$2.95 cheap."

She'd go through five tubes a week, sponging it onto 12 to 15 pairs of shoes — a process known in ballet circles as pancaking. It took 45 minutes to an hour to do a pair, she said, because she wanted to make sure the foundation got into every crevice and covered every bit of ribbon.

Did she find this ritual annoying? "I didn't know any different," Ms. Robinson, 32, said.

But now, Ms. Robinson — a senior artist at Ballet Black, a British dance company — is no longer obliged to do so. In October, Freed of London, which supplies her shoes, started selling two point shoes specifically for dancers of color: one brown, the other bronze.

Freed is not the first firm to make point shoes for dancers of color — Gaynor Minden has done so for more than a year — but because of Freed's prominent position in the ballet world, its new shoes highlight one of the stranger rituals that dancers of color have to perform.

It's also a reminder that black dancers — especially female ones — are still a rarity in ballet, barely represented at the top of the field, despite some signs of change and an increased awareness of the need for diversity at the schools feeding professional companies.

Shoes aren't the only costuming reminders of the lack of diversity in ballet. In September, Precious Adams, a first artist at English National Ballet, raised the issue of pink tights. "In ballet people have very strong ideas about tradition," she told the *Evening Standard* in London. "They think me wearing brown tights in a tutu is somehow 'incorrect!'"

"But I want to look my best on stage. I'm not colorblind, and I think it ruins the line of my body."

Dancers, though, cannot do whatever they like, Ms. Adams added. Directors decide on outfits. And often uniformity is a goal.

Dancers in the corps, particularly, have to blend in with the group. Ms. Robinson of Ballet Black said dancers of color can't always wear flesh-colored shoes or tights, if it would make them stand out.

She said she had seen a soloist at the English National Ballet wear brown tights and shoes, when everyone else was in pink — "but she was a soloist." (It works differently at Dance Theater of Harlem and Ballet Black, which are predominantly made up of people of color.)

"We want to shake up tradition a bit," Ms. Robinson said, "but some things you can't."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY AN RONG XU FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Above, Alexandra Hutchinson of Dance Theater of Harlem painting her point shoes to match her skin tone. From far left, Ingrid Silva of the company coloring her shoes; the result; and the feet of Ms. Hutchinson, left, and Ms. Silva.

Still, the new shoes have been welcomed. "This isn't about shoes, this is about who belongs in ballet and who doesn't," Virginia Johnson, the artistic director of the Dance Theater of Harlem, said in a phone interview. "It's a signal that the world is open to you."

Point shoes were invented around 1820, said Anna Meadmore, a dance historian and curator of the Royal Ballet School collections. They contain a rigid "block" made of glue and fabric at the front that allows the female dancer to dance on point — on the tips of her toes.

The shoes were originally white to help dancers appear ghostly — the romantic ideal in the early 1800s was for women to be ethereal — but pink came to dominate as a way to approximate European dancers' flesh. Shoes should blend in with the leg, Ms. Meadmore said, and not "break the line."

Point shoes are made individually for dancers by specialist makers, and dancers

always have favorite suppliers. Most dancers spend time customizing their shoes, whatever their skin color. Some who like them soft will bash them against walls repeatedly, or crush them. Others will add glue to keep them stiff. They also have to sew ribbons into every shoe so it can be tied to the foot, and sometimes add elastic for extra hold.

But the painting rituals are a step beyond. (Male dancers don't wear point shoes, but they, too, have to paint their shoes if they want them to match skin tone.)

Ms. Johnson said she wore pink shoes when she started dancing in the 1950s and thought nothing of it until the '70s when Arthur Mitchell, a founder of Dance Theater of Harlem, decided his dancers should wear shoes and tights to match their skin. Ms. Johnson then started using makeup to paint their shoes. "It was quite wonderful to be onstage and just to be myself, 100 percent

the color I was," she said, "one line, one shape, a color that has integrity."

Capezio briefly made brown shoes for the Dance Theater in the '70s, Ms. Johnson said. But the supply lasted only a year, and Capezio stopped making them because of a lack of demand.

At one point, Dance Theater's dancers dyed their shoes with a product meant for bridal pumps. "Evangeline Shoe Dye," Ms. Johnson said. "I haven't thought about that name in years." But since 2012, most members paint their shoes with acrylic paint, she said. Dance Theater's wardrobe master mixes paint to match each dancer's skin tone.

Some dancers in the company still use makeup. Ingrid Silva has posted videos on YouTube showing how she pancakes her shoes to aid young dancers.

"A lot of people complain: It's a long process, and it's expensive," Ms. Silva said. "The brand I use — Black Opal's ebony brown — is \$11 a bottle, and with

that I can do three shoes." She goes through an average of two pairs of shoes a week, meaning she used to spend \$770 a year on makeup for shoes, a significant sum given dancers' low pay. (Black Opal recently started supplying her free of charge.)

Ms. Silva, who is from Brazil, said the new shoes for dancers of color were a positive development, but more tones were needed. She can't use the Freed shoes because they are not her color, she said.

This echoes calls in the beauty world for wider ranges of foundation to reflect skin tones (Rihanna's Fenty Beauty line offers 40 foundation colors).

Shoes are also just one issue, Ms. Silva said. "There's so much more the dance world has to learn," she added, "starting from companies hiring more dancers of color."

Olivia Boisson, a corps dancer at New York City Ballet, agreed that shoes are a

small issue. She normally wears pink ones, she said, and is too focused on her dancing to worry about whether they affect how she looks onstage.

But, Ms. Boisson said, ballet is in a period of "checking itself," especially following #MeToo revelations, and so diversity issues are being discussed far more openly than even a year ago. "We've talked about, 'Are you feeling uncomfortable in these pink tights and pink shoes?' Before we didn't talk about things like that at all," she said.

Freed could not estimate how many of its new shoes it expects to sell. "We have to be realistic," said Sophie Simpson, its ballet company sales manager. "If you look at most companies, the number of black or mixed-race dancers is small. We hope that'll change."

Ms. Robinson of Ballet Black was involved in the shoes' development, testing them for wear and their shades. "This is the first time in my career I haven't had to do something to my shoes," she said.

"I can just put them on and dance. I know that many people will be like, 'O.K., it's just a shoe.' But a ballet dancer loves their shoes like a basketball player loves their basketball. They're mine. They're a piece of me."

Politics follow performers abroad

OPERA REVIEW

Hungary's state companies for opera and ballet assert their national identity

BY ANTHONY TOMMASINI

It is commendable that the Hungarian State Opera and the Hungarian National Ballet, to make their American debuts, brought some 350 artists and technical crew members to New York to present six productions. Inevitably, they carried some political baggage as well.

Their arrival at Lincoln Center has drawn new attention to the right-wing government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary. At a time when Mr. Orbán's increasingly autocratic policies are perceived as fomenting anti-immigrant fervor and cracking down on dissent, his government has been providing enormous support to the opera and ballet companies. He sees culture as a means to achieve prestige and assert national identity.

You might have expected everyone involved with this two-week stint at the David H. Koch Theater (it ends Sunday) to steer clear of politics and allow the achievements of these artists from Budapest to take center stage. But in a greeting to the audience to open the series, Katalin Bogay, Hungary's ambassador to the United Nations,

dived right into the political thickets of her homeland.

Among the many distinguished guests, she singled out Hungary's president, Janos Ader, and the tenor Plácido Domingo, the patron of the opera company's New York appearances, who were seated together. She spoke of the 1861 work the audience was about to hear — Ferenc Erkel's "Bank Ban," considered the Hungarian national opera — as espousing Hungarian values of freedom and patriotism. And she gave special thanks to the government ministries of Hungary. Without their support, she emphasized, "We couldn't do anything." That statement seemed all too true.

But artistically, "Bank Ban" ("The Viceroy Bank") was not a great introduction.

You can understand why the work has become associated with Hungarian identity. It takes place during the reign of a 13th-century king, Endre II, who is off at war when the action starts. Left behind is his queen, Gertrud, whose Meranian descent makes her suspiciously foreign in the eyes of Hungarian noblemen allied with the king. In the opening scene, Gertrud is seen blithely entertaining a roster of Meranian revelers at court.

Bank, the viceroy, the opera's tormented hero, learns that Melinda, his beloved wife, has been pursued by the queen's younger brother Otto, an overture Gertrud has encouraged. Melinda is repelled by Otto, who forces himself upon her, driving her to madness.

There are hints of Donizetti and Verdi in Erkel's score, passages of plaintive harmonic writing, and hymn-like choruses. Still, the opera is run through with arias that sound like four-square songs. And after the third or fourth (I lost count) stirring choral anthem in praise of the homeland I had had enough. Despite some compelling singing from several cast members, the performance, conducted by Balazs Kocsar, lacked energy and focus.

Things were vastly better for the second production, a double bill of one-act: the composer Janos Vajda's "Mario and the Magician," first performed in 1988; and Bartók's masterpiece "Bluebeard's Castle," which had its premiere a century ago when this company performed it in Budapest.

Mr. Vajda's opera is adapted from Thomas Mann's 1929 novella, "Mario and the Magician," a veiled critique of emerging fascism. (Was this Hungarian company sending a message to its own government by presenting this opera on tour?)

Set in a resort town of Italy on a stormy night, the opera tells of Cipolla, a magician who has come to entertain the residents and visitors. Cipolla proceeds to induce selected attendees into doing things seemingly against their will. The magician is presented as someone who simply draws out of people desires, fears and prejudices that are already lurking within. Finally, Mario, a waiter from a cafe who is suffering from lovesickness, is entranced into thinking the magician is



ATILLA NAGY/HUNGARIAN STATE OPERA

Erika Gal in the lead of Karl Goldmark's "The Queen of Sheba" in New York.

the woman he pines for. He kisses Cipolla. When returned to his senses, Mario shoots the magician to death.

In this restless score, Mr. Vajda reveals an ear for tart harmonies and unusual instrumental colors. Curiously, whole stretches of the music have a darkly comedic cast, in the manner of Fellini film scores.

It was hard to assess the updated production of "Bluebeard's Castle" because of obvious glitches in the video projections the staging relied upon. But the musical performance of this two-character opera was engrossing. Andras Palerdi (who also sang

Cipolla) brought an earthy bass voice and subtly menacing presence to Bluebeard, a mysterious duke who leads his new wife (his fourth) to his gloomy castle with its seven locked doors protecting the secrets of his life. The powerful mezzo-soprano Ildiko Komlosi made an uncommonly formidable Judith, who is convinced she can rescue her new husband from whatever demons plague him, but whose curiosity to know all leads to the opera's harrowing conclusion. The orchestra, under Mr. Kocsar, played Bartók's dark, weighty and seething score as if they owned the piece.

The production that followed, Karl Goldmark's "The Queen of Sheba," brought out the best from an impressive cast, a large chorus and the tireless orchestra. The Austro-Hungarian Goldmark had his greatest success with this four-act opera, first presented in Vienna in 1875 and now a rarity.

With a German libretto, Goldmark's absorbing, if unabashedly melodramatic, opera tells of a love triangle at the palace of King Solomon between Sulamith, the daughter of a high priest; her fiancé, Assad; and the Queen of Sheba, under whose spell Assad falls while on a mission for Solomon. Though there are long-winded stretches to Goldmark's score, the music over all is textured, glittery and captivating. You hear influences of French grand opera as well German Romantic styles, including Weber and early Wagner. (As a young critic, Goldmark was a champion of Wagner.) The temple scenes beautifully echo Goldmark's memories of music from childhood synagogues.

The company had three exceptional singers for the punishing lead roles: Boldizsar Laszlo, a feisty tenor with youthful sound and Wagnerian power, as Assad; the silvery soprano Eszter Sumegi as Sulamith; and the bright-voiced, penetrating mezzo-soprano Erika Gal as the seductive Sheba. Janos Kovacs led the orchestra in a rhapsodic performance. And though this touring production was old-fashioned and basic, it looked colorful and exotic. And nothing malfunctioned.