



A Bianca shoe designed for British dancer Hanna Cresswell-Melstrom.
CREDIT: INTERNATIONAL DANCE SHOES

Dancing shoes back in the swing

Creating a size 17 dance shoe for heavyweight boxer Audley Harrison is all in a day's work for UK-based footwear manufacturer International Dance Shoes, which has been involved with the hit TV programme *Strictly Come Dancing* since it started 11 years ago. It credits the show with boosting demand across the UK, as social dance schools report an increase in attendance when the series airs. "The numbers of competitive dancers appear to have dropped recently within certain age groups, however they're growing within other age groups so it's difficult to gauge things overall," explains IDS head of e-commerce Justin Patel. The company is among a select few UK-based manufacturers in the sector which are credited among the best in the world.

The south of England is home to a number of the world's most successful dance shoe manufacturers, including *Strictly Come Dancing* supplier International Dance Shoes and world-renowned pointe shoe maker Freed of London.

UK production

In its heyday in the 1960s, the UK produced 198 million pairs of shoes annually. By 2000, this had fallen to 13 million pairs and by 2010, to 4.2 million. However, 5.7 million pairs worth £560 million rolled off production lines in 2014 and exports from the UK have grown from 12% to 45%.

At IDS, exports make up 80% of sales and, since its launch in 1980, the family-run company has outgrown two facilities. Now based in Milton Keynes, 70km north of London, it employs around 30 in a factory and office. Its styles run the gamut of the dance spectrum, among them ballroom, tango, Latin American, smooth and brogues. Leathers come from Italy and Spain, and many of the other materials and components are sourced from other family run businesses around central England.

"A dance shoe differs from a fashion product as it's got to be lightweight but, at the same time, really supportive," explains Mr Patel. "In many designs, the shoe has to be very flexible yet well balanced. Because of this, we build our own insoles, where we use a mix of materials to create something that is going to give the dancer the ability to fully extend the foot and give them a level of support that means they have comfort and confidence in their shoes as soon as they put them on. Also, dance shoes feature a suede sole, something not found on a typical fashion shoe."

Overseas competition

Mr Patel cites UK production as huge plus for the company. While many competitors moved production to Asia in 2000s, IDS made the decision to remain in the UK and realised it could be a differentiating factor. "Firstly, we've got such a talented group of people working in our factory it did not cross our mind to lose that. Secondly, dancers learned that goods made overseas were not offering the same quality as British made goods due to the materials used. We've had so many people come to us saying that they'd bought a Chinese made shoe for £20 and either the heel broke, a strap came out, the buckle

The Bianca ballroom shoe is part of IDS's crystal collection, with Swarovski crystals. Each rhinestone is applied by hand.

CREDIT: INTERNATIONAL DANCE SHOES



Richard Lifshitz and Korina Travis, a British couple sponsored by IDS, who promote the shoes at tournaments around the world.

CREDIT: INTERNATIONAL DANCE SHOES

busted or the shoes got very smelly! Some dance teachers would say that a dancer in a cheap and low quality shoe would buy five pairs of shoes while a high quality shoe such as ours would last way beyond that. We have some customers coming back to us asking if they could repeat their order from 10 years ago as they finally think they need a new pair!"

Because of the set-up, bespoke is a big part of the offering. Dancers can select different materials of heel sizes, and have been known to send in dress fabric so the colour can be matched. "It's also a big strength in terms of service because we can turn an order into a finished product really quickly. So when an importing competitor has run out of stock and there's a two-week wait, we'll just make it within a day or two if need be."

Endorsements

Sponsoring couples is an important way to grow the brand profile as well as develop the shoes. Many of the top dancers have huge social media followings and this helps to increase awareness of the brand offers greater credibility. "Their feedback really helps us maintain our reputation. Using their feedback we've added many new features to our shoes that make them look better, feel better and last longer."

Design-wise, inspiration can be drawn from anywhere – the high street, fashion shows and television. "Working with Strictly Come Dancing has also meant that we've forged friendships with many of the professional couples, which is put to good use on Twitter and other social media platforms, especially during the series," adds Mr Patel.

Mr and Mrs Freed
outside St Martins
Lane, London, store.
CREDIT: FREED OF LONDON



Freed of London

At the other end of the spectrum and also formerly a supplier to Strictly is Freed of London, one of the world's best-known ballet shoe manufacturers. Its pointe shoes have been made in the UK capital since 1929 and were worn by actress Moira Shearer in the classic 1940s film *The Red Shoes*.

Founder Frederick Freed appealed to the dance community by offering various widths; before that, they only varied in length. His wife, Dora, formerly a milliner, altered the way they were cut and bound for greater precision, and her system is still in use today.

Outgrowing its central London premises, Freed moved to in Hackney in the 1970s and this remains the main production centre and home to 30 highly skilled 'makers'. Here, 1,000 pointes are produced each day, which equates to 75,000 standard and 175,000 bespoke shoes annually. It supplies to 90% of professional ballet companies as well as a growing number of fledgling outfits, and exports to 50 countries.

"Everything in our shoes is biodegradable, there's nothing plastic or man-made, so when the dancer heats up, the shoes do, too, and that's what makes them mobile and our shoes silent," explains senior fitter Sophie Simpson.

With a strong focus on the bespoke side of the business, many professional dancers request a certain maker for their whole career; each has an individual style and uses a unique stamp on the sole. It is not uncommon for dancers to visit the factory to meet 'their maker', who can tailor the fit by altering the amount of material or the sole to suit the dancers' needs.

Misa Kuranaga, a principal dancer at Boston Ballet, who some months uses up to 25 pairs of shoes, has a real affinity to the company. "What if I could no longer wear this brand? My world would be turned upside down!" she says. "That is how much I

rely on Freed of London in my career."

As they are on their feet for up to eight hours a day and change for each performance and most rehearsals, professional dancers use a surprising number: the equivalent of one shoe per day. According to the shoe supervisor at New York City Ballet, the company spends around \$500,000 per year on shoes. Similarly, the UK-based Royal Ballet uses about 11,000 pointe shoes each year and 2,000 men's flats, costing a total £250,000.

"Today, dancers are far more athletic so we have to make sure the shoes will work with every type of choreography," adds Ms Simpson. "You want to make sure that the shoe and the foot work as one. We see it as the only tool that the dancer has."

Diversifying

Like many other footwear companies, Freed has diversified to bring in extra revenue streams. It expanded into Latin, ballroom, jazz and tap shoes, which are made in smaller factories in Norfolk and Leicester. They are designed in-house with input from sponsored dancers, and have featured in a number of West End and Broadway productions as well as in the *Harry Potter* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* films.

The company also now offers branded dance apparel, having been bought by Japan-based Onward Holdings, an apparel sector-focused conglomerate that also owns dancewear maker Japanese Dancewear.

Both the ballet and non-ballet segments have been boosted in recent years by the number of adults using ballroom or ballet as an alternative for keeping fit, said a spokesperson. Gym chains including Virgin Active are offering Barrecore classes to increase flexibility and strength, with a growing army of celebrity

fans that reportedly includes Sarah Jessica Parker and Kylie.

In the last few years, the company has also begun to produce mainstream collections of bridal and vintage shoes, as well as ballet flats; a "natural progression", according to sales director Sharon Redhead. "We have listened to customers and are expanding to meet what has been a very high demand," she explains.

Right direction

John Saunders, CEO of the British Footwear Association, is encouraged by the recent growth in UK production, with the footwear sector as a whole making £7.6 billion in 2014 (2015 totals are not yet available). "It's a long way to go to get back to the 1960s figures, but at least it's going in the right direction," he says. "Overseas, our industry is seen as going through a renaissance, and there is more and more interest and demand for British made and designed footwear."

He points to the need for better succession planning, as the workforce is skilled but getting older, so companies need to think about attracting and training new talent. "We also need to embrace new marketing opportunities to market direct to consumers, through social media for instance, and we need to increase skills, the use of technology and to grow productivity with the use of new machinery and techniques such as 3D, CAD and CAM."

Changes to duties and removal of fiscal barriers can be taken advantage of to drive sales and encourage reshoring.

"There's a massive opportunity for us to do more here," he concludes. "Other new markets lack the skills, the heritage, the technology to make premium shoes, but we can do that." ■

Pointe shoes are built to withstand an immense amount of pressure.

CREDIT: FREED OF LONDON



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