

# The London Ballet Circle

## Freed of London

Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> September 2013



On 5<sup>th</sup> September 2013 approximately 20 LBC members came to visit the Freed of London Factory in Hackney. It was a pleasant and sunny morning and we were warmly welcomed by Daniel, the Brand Manager and Sophie, the Pointe Shoe Fitter.

Prior to the tour there was time for tea and coffee and we were given a great introductory talk about how Mr Freed and his wife transformed the dance shoe industry by tailoring shoes to the dancer's individual needs when they founded Freed of London from a basement in Covent Garden in 1929. Today the main factory in Hackney also shares their production with two smaller production sites based in Leicester and Norwich. The factory in Hackney is divided into two production areas: pointe shoe and theatrical. And so we were divided into two groups to be given a guided tour of each half of the factory.

Gary, the Ballet Manager, guided the pointe shoe side of the factory and Gerry, responsible for the theatrical site, led us through his area. Both groups visited the pointe shoe and theatrical sides. During the tour of the theatrical side we were given interesting information about the use and choices of materials with most of the leather coming from South America but also from goats' kid skin from Scotland! We were shown the array of colours and patterns for the range of different shoes: from ballroom dance, jazz, tap and musical theatre to medieval and costume drama tv and film production. One highlight in that particular tour was the amusing story of a pair of silver-heeled shoes commissioned by Michael Flatley, used for the first time in his Irish Dance show of Feet of Flames (1998). We were told that Freed of London had been requested to make a pair of gold-heeled shoes but as gold is a soft metal for heels, silver was a better choice and used instead of gold.

On the pointe shoe side it was simply fascinating to see how the shoes were made with so much care and pride by each pointe shoe maker. They have their individual 'mark' on the sole of each pair of shoes as their identity and recognition of their craftsmanship. We were told some point shoes are preferred to be softer, others more rigid and that really depends on the hands that make it, on how they handle the making of the block for the dancer's pointe work. It was mesmerising to see the block being made of layers of materials similar to the process of making papier-mâché and the maker shaping the block and the platform using a 'glass faced' smooth hammer. The shoes are then taken to the oven to be baked and hardened before they are cut down, bound and drawstring sewn on. It was clear that from beginning to end every detail is taken into consideration to give the dancer a perfect fit. We were told most principal dancers thank their pointe shoe makers by sending them cards and, at some time in their careers, they come to the factory to meet their particular artisan.



Based on all we saw and heard during our tours we understand why Freed of London has been faithful to their philosophy for almost a century and their shoes continue to be made by hand in the UK and proudly danced in all over the world.

