



# Tradition & Chic

Russian Pointe's style and inventory make it a choice destination for dancers in Chicago. **BY THOMAS CONNORS**

**O**utfitted with traditional European-style glass cases and fixtures and dominated by large plate glass windows overlooking North Michigan Avenue, Chicago's Champs-Élysées, Russian Pointe is arguably one of the Midwest's most stylish dance apparel venues. With sunlight streaming over marble-topped tables and bouncing off the mirror of the fitting stage, the space celebrates the romance of dance while offering customers some of the best-known labels on the market, including the Russian Pointe line of slippers and pointe shoes.

Founded by St. Petersburg-born Aleksandra Efimova in 1998 while she was an undergraduate business major at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Russian Pointe has grown from an importer of handcrafted Russian-made shoes to a full-service dancewear retailer. The store opened four years ago. It provides a full range of high-quality dancewear, some of it not easily found elsewhere, such as the coveted Yumiko line of leotards (Russian Pointe is one of only four retailers licensed to sell them in the U.S.).

"I was a 20-year-old junior at Ann Arbor when I started the company," says Efimova. "I had danced

as a child, and I was fascinated by business, fascinated by international import/export opportunities. The Soviet Union had just fallen, but at that time, the only things Russia exported were vodka, oil, mail-order brides and some computer software. I was lucky enough to meet some cobblers in Moscow who were making shoes for the Kirov and Bolshoi, and since I didn't want to waitress or work retail, I said, 'I'll sell pointe shoes.'"

Armed with a few boxes from her Moscow suppliers, Efimova visited local dance schools and ballet companies, offering little more of a sales pitch than: "These are good shoes, and I think you will like them." Luckily, as she admits, enough people were willing to listen. Now, 13 years later, Russian Pointe shoes are sold through almost 300 retailers throughout the U.S. and Canada.

The company's flagship boutique in Chicago—just a few blocks from the headquarters of the Joffrey Ballet—is a chic but comfortable environment that telegraphs both the quality of the inventory at hand and a seriousness of purpose when it comes to customer service. The store's clientele includes serious students heading off to elite dance schools like the

School of American Ballet, local teachers and professional artists and even older adults who have taken up ballet as recreation. Tourists, too, pop in, to purchase a Russian Pointe T-shirt or a pair of the company's diminutive souvenir pointe shoes.

The boutique's lilac walls are adorned with pen-and-ink drawings by Jason Fricke, a Midwest artist who frequently draws dancers. Handsome vitrines are interspersed among the racks of garments. "I try to keep the space fresh," says boutique manager Tiffany Lawson. "Every couple of months I go through and see what needs to be moved around. I try to look at the shop through our customers' eyes. Our Wear Moi collection used to be in the back, but it's selling more, so I moved it out front where you can see it. Yumikos are front and center because that's what people are looking for."

The Yumiko collection represents the company's determination to offer the best product available. And that product line has certainly added to Russian Pointe's appeal. When the store was granted selections from the Yumiko designs created for the recent hit movie *Black Swan*, the pieces sold out two weeks before the film even premiered. But as with any good

## Just the Facts

### Russian Pointe

333 N Michigan Ave, Suite #222  
Chicago, IL 60601  
312-332-7200  
[www.russianpointe.com](http://www.russianpointe.com)

**Hours:** Monday-Saturday 10 am-6 pm; Sunday 10 am-5 pm

**Number of Employees:** 6

**Busiest Time of Day:** 10 am-noon and 2 pm-5 pm

**Busiest Times of Year:**  
June-August and  
October-December

**Featured Brands:** Russian Pointe, Yumiko, Repetto, Wear Moi

**Average Purchase:** \$80-\$100



Plate glass windows with Russian Pointe's elegant signature logo announce its second-floor location. Chandeliers and plush seating give the interior an old-world air.

retail business, breadth of stock is crucial. "We carry unique brands," says Lawson, "but even with basic, everyday needs, it's all about quality."

Russian Pointe's benchmark of quality is its own line of pointe shoes and slippers. Handcrafted in Moscow of all-natural materials (no synthetics or plastic), the company's various collections offer customers thousands of options. And key to the Russian Pointe experience is the attention of its fitters. "They spend a significant amount of time training," says Lawson. "We talk about how the shoe is made, we talk about our factory, we delve into each different collection and each of the models. We discuss things like the vamp and shank that can help shape and tailor the shoe for the customer." When it comes to staffing the boutique, Lawson looks for individuals with solid dance training, people who have not only performed, but have some teaching experience. "That way," she says, "they not only know how a shoe should look and feel, but how it should perform for a student."

Russian Pointe maintains contact with its customers via a monthly newsletter and periodic e-mail updates on new product and special events. The latter includes pointe shoe decorating parties, generally around Valentine's Day, July 4, Halloween, Thanksgiving or Christmas. Damaged or returned shoes are laid out with an array of materials for young customers to decorate. "It's all for fun," says

# Dance (212)

summer intensives

## Practice makes perfect.



Get ready for summer with

ABT

AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE  
Summer Intensive

BAE

M  
YB  
MANHATTAN YOUTH BALLET



Professional Training  
for the Serious Ballet Student

ELLISON  
Ballet

The School of  
American Ballet  
AT LINCOLN CENTER

Daily episodes begin January 24th  
[www.dance212.com](http://www.dance212.com)

# Your education starts here.

## DANCEU101.COM

Search for information on more than 600 college dance programs – whether you're looking to major in dance or continue dancing while you earn a different degree

Hear from dancers about how college fits into their career plans

Read articles about college life from the editors of *Magazine, Dance Spirit, Pointe* and *Dance Teacher*

Get insider advice on admissions strategies and financial aid

Plus – Videos! Discussion forums, and more!

## Retailer Spotlight



Aleksandra Efimova often hosts store events, this one for a group of visiting marketing students. She also has created several outreach programs, like The Nutcracker Experience, that bring students from all over the city into the store.

When Yumiko gave Russian Pointe permission to sell designs created for the recent hit movie *Black Swan*, they sold out before the film even premiered.

Lawson, “a way to say, yes, we’re a prestigious boutique on Chicago’s Magnificent Mile, but we’re also friendly, and the number-one thing we care about is our customer.” Sales, she adds, usually triple on such occasions.

“We are constantly thinking about new ways of gathering our customers,” Lawson says. “This past December, Aleksandra had what she called The Nutcracker Experience.’ She invited students from all over the area to submit essays about what dance means to them in their personal lives. She picked the top 10, they came here, got a tour of Russian Pointe, had lunch with Aleksandra and went to see the Joffrey’s *Nutcracker* with her.”

Lawson reports that so far this year, the company is meeting its sales goals, which were set a hefty 10 percent above last year’s. She’s fostering a relationship with Canada’s AinslieWear, founded by former National Ballet of Canada dancer Ainslie Cyopik.

Ever the entrepreneur, Aleksandra will debut a series of books in May, each volume devoted to educating young children about the arts, a concept she developed while attending the Owner/President Management Program at Harvard Business School. “It’s called Growing through Arts,” she explains. “It provides exercises to develop a child’s reading, writing and problem-solving skills, and we also integrate moral lessons in the text, asking, for example, Was it good that Cinderella’s stepsisters didn’t take her to the ball?’ Ballet is not about first position and pirouettes. It’s about learning skills that help kids succeed in life – leadership, determination, confidence whether they become doctors, attorneys or engineers. That’s the bigger mission I hope to carry out.”

*Thomas Connors, the Chicago editor of Playbill, writes regularly about the performing arts.*