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STEPPING IN STYLE - ELEGANT RUSSIAN POINTE DANCE BOUTIQUE HAS BOLSHOI APPEAL

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THEATER CRITIC

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Enter Russian Pointe -- Aleksandra Efimova's elegantly designed boutique for all things dance-related on the second floor of the 333 N. Michigan building -- and you might well believe you have been airlifted to the fabled Maryinsky Theatre, home of the Kirov Ballet in St. Petersburg, Russia. Or to a gilded hall in the Hermitage Museum, repository of Russia's imperial treasures.

The shop's wood floors are a burnished mahogany, with small Aubusson carpets scattered about. Antique furniture and glass display cases sit beneath delicate crystal chandeliers. Exquisitely hued tutus are piled like floral wreaths in one corner, while the latest in stretchy, ultra-stylish dancewear for men, women and children (from Europe, Brazil, Montreal and the United States) hangs from neatly arranged racks.

A well-stocked selection of legwarmers, stage makeup, books and DVDs all feed the fantasies of dancers and dance aficionados alike. And of course shoe fetishists of every variety can feast their eyes on an unusually wide variety of pointe shoes (engineered to combine the best of traditional style and contemporary innovation), ballet slippers, character shoes (for the theater) and ballroom dance shoes. The latter are fit for "Dancing with the Stars" contestants, or for living room wannabes who could easily request the shoes be made with hard soles, ideal for parties and street wear. A rack of glittery ballroom dance costumes, on consignment, also can be found here.

To get the full effect of the Russian Pointe shop, you must try on your shoes while sitting on the rosy, antique velvet theater seats from an English opera house that Efimova bought at auction. Or you can gauge the full dramatic effect by stepping up onto the little "stage" she had constructed, complete with mirrors, a ballet barre and lush cranberry-hued velvet drapes. "This Chicago shop, which I opened nine months ago, is the flagship for my company," said Efimova, who also supplies 220 other privately owned dancewear outlets in Boston, Colorado, Oklahoma, Florida, California, Canada and beyond, with her brand of pointe shoes imported from St. Petersburg. Though there are a number of other dancewear outlets in the city and suburbs, she wanted hers "to be very much the luxury boutique."

A former competitor on the international ballroom dance circuit, the trim, meticulously manicured Efimova, 30, grew up in St. Petersburg and graduated from the art school of the Hermitage State Art Museum. As a teenager, she moved to Ann Arbor, Mich., because her mother had met and married an American.

"After completing high school, I studied international business at East Michigan University," said Efimova. "And by 19, I'd begun working for a Russian company that was trying to distribute pointe shoes here. The company fell apart, leaving the shoe factory without a U.S. distributor. Before long, I had 300 pairs of pointe shoes stacked in my bedroom and was selling them from home." Efimova moved to Chicago a few years ago, drawn by the beauty of the city ("It reminds me of St. Petersburg," she said) and the burgeoning dance scene here. She started out with a little office-showroom on Wabash Avenue, but quickly felt embarrassed when she had barely enough space for buyers who stopped by to try on shoes.

She now travels widely in this country, introducing retailers to her shoes, and training them in the proper way of selecting and fitting the various styles. She also is trying to make inroads with local ballet companies and theaters, while shipping her shoes nationwide on a wholesale level.

"We are still in the growth stage, though we grossed \$30,000 last month," said Efimova. "But it's more than a business; it's about art. I see the boutique as an event, a sort of salon, not just a place to shop."