When we're watching dancers, how often do we think of their feet? Not what the feet look like, but how dancers work them, year after year, to do the impressive work we expect to see on stage. Dancers' feet are the foundation for their dancing – the feet are constantly weight-bearing, yet need to be kept strong, flexible, and able to launch the dancer off the floor. They also are critical to the aesthetic of many movements: the final visual point of the leg when it is in the air. How do dancers work with their feet to keep them healthy and responsive? Recovering from injury is particularly challenging.

Women typically have more flexible ankles and high arches. The high arch in ballet is prized for its ephemeral aesthetic (a relatively small point of contact momentarily supporting a 50 or 60 kg body), but it comes with a cost. High arches are also rigid and less shock absorbing; injuries can result. Dancers on pointe need strong ankles and toes, enabling a smooth rise onto pointe.

Men, on the other hand, typically need to work more on articulation. The less flexible foot, coupled with stiff toe joints, makes achieving and maintaining a high demi-pointe very challenging. All dancers also must keep their ankle joints loose so that they can achieve a deep plié in order to cushion their landings from big jumps. That same deep plié is needed for those preparing to be lifted, mainly women.

Many dancers just happen to be born with naturally high arches and flexible feet. Others are not – as dancers from Ballet British Columba, Montréal Danse, and Pacific Northwest Ballet, and their artistic directors, interviewed for this article – can attest to.

For PNB principal Laura Tisserand, “Many dancers just happen to be born with naturally high arches and flexible feet. Unfortunately if you're born with rather flat feet there is not a lot that can be done to change this. But again, learning how to use them in the most beautiful way possible can help disguise a less flexible foot.”

Tisserand finds that her feet are more on the flexible side, and, in the past, she has suffered ankle sprains – the foot and the ankle work together. While removing a bone spur, a doctor noticed that her ligaments were stretched out from the sprains, so he tightened some of the ligaments in her ankle. She has spent the last several years strengthening her feet and ankles and now rarely has an injury.

PNB principal Lesley Rausch always has had a lot of differentiation in her foot, as well as a high arch with a break higher in the foot, towards the heel. This gives her foot a long, tapered look. Her arch and foot flexibility come from her ankle joint rather than from the mid foot.

“It’s a blessing and a curse,” says Rausch. “I need stability and strength to manage my flexibility – finding that stability is a challenge. Yet it’s essential for receiving the feedback I need to maintain balance.” What Rausch is describing is the phenomenon of proprioception, literally, an awareness of one's own position in space, and therefore an ability to balance. Strong tendons and ligaments are an important part of this system of feedback; these often are compromised in the hyperflexible dancer.

Rausch’s challenges include stabilizing the ankle’s lateral, side-to-side movement. Key to achieving stability is strengthening exercises and the use of balance boards, to build a strong, receptive core to counterbalance the mobility of her ankle. She also uses yarn to darn her pointe shoe tips – so as to slant the front of her shoe to make it easier for her foot to pull back, thus restricting the mobility of her foot. It gives her more tactile feedback so as not to go too far over her foot in a balance.
“It’s important to me to work to get my body into better alignment, and I approach class and rehearsal with this goal,” says Rausch. “Finding balance has to be second nature so that I am able to find the freedom in expressing what I want. It’s a constant struggle for better alignment and control, but, really, the most important thing is the artistic integrity of what you’re doing.”

Pacific Northwest Ballet artistic director Peter Boal acknowledges that although a high-arched foot is more or less a standard in ballet, the strength that Rausch is trying to develop is as important as the look. Boal sees that it is important for dancers not to throw their weight over their foot – otherwise, balancing is difficult. “Sometimes the hyperextension in the knee doesn’t match the hyperflexibility of the foot,” says Boal, “this can be a challenge.”

Boal is quick to point out the particular challenges typically facing men. “The line of the foot really needs to extend the line of the shin, but it requires control, and not just powering through an extension.”

Contemporary dance may have a somewhat different perspective on feet than classical ballet, perhaps contact and connection more than articulation around the lower leg. Montréal Danse’s artistic director Kathy Casey imagines ballet “as an art form in which dancers first touch the ground with their toes, whereas in contemporary works, we tend to like the heel or full foot to touch the floor first and ground the body.”

Casey wonders if the curve of the foot is somewhat fetishized in ballet, especially in pointe shoes. Is the beautifully arched foot in a pointe shoe a perfect emblem of a type of femininity - ethereal, sensual, both strong and fragile? Casey is interested in a more pedestrian foot. In the works of Montréal Danse, a non-pointed, semi-pointed, internally rotated, or twisted foot is probably more used than the pointed or flexed foot.

“I notice that most of the dancers we work with have quite articulate feet,” says Casey, “the articulation is not necessarily about how pointed the foot is but how the foot can correspond to the rest of the body’s actions and intentions. The research is more in how weight is transferred through the foot, how tactile and sensitive it can be with the floor.”

For Montreal Danse’s Rachel Harris, “I do enjoy the aesthetic of a nicely pointed foot, especially if I feel that the point is an extension of the energy of the leg.” Harris argues that a certain amount of arch in the foot as opposed to a flat foot allows more adaptability in it’s contact with the floor.

When Harris finished her training and began to work professionally in the 1990s in Montréal, most choreographers were working with shoes – army boots, runners, street shoes. Now, she is dancing barefooted much of the time.

“My interest in my own training, and also for many of the choreographers that I work with, is in finding deep pathways inside the body,” says Harris. “I use somatic tools to get there: Body Mind Centering, Qi Gong, Continuum, to name a few. In this world the feet become an energetic pathway, a channel between the body and the ground.”

Adds Harris: “I love to move barefoot outside and I try to carry that feeling into the studio and on to the stage, as if the floor were a different texture than smooth wood or Marley. It seems that once my feet are nimble and open, then I am pretty much ready to go; and, conversely, if the bones in my feet are not moving smoothly I can be as warm as can be and I still feel stuck in my body.”

For Ballet BC artistic director Emily Molnar, irrespective of the dance form, “The feet are a reference point for the maturity of an artist, how experienced the dancer is, how nuanced are his or her moves.”
Molnar notes that a lot of training in dance tends to be devoted to the arms, the port de bras. Rarely, however, do people think of feet as separate from the whole aesthetic of the visual picture.

Ballet BC’s Andrew Bartee also looks for ways in which to work that confers some freedom in movement, while strengthening his feet. “I especially focus on how I use my feet on the floor – I always wear socks for barre because it allows my metatarsals to spread and I can articulate through my feet. This kind of focus has helped me to be more aware of my feet as part of my whole body, and I would even say heightened my body awareness as a whole. Feet can be as expressive as hands.

Dancers rarely have a “perfectly” flexible foot. But they learn to adjust. Says Bartee, “I used to be really self conscious about having small feet but I think I have learned to create the illusion of length, for instance, with a higher sock height – so that it’s less noticeable. Before I really learned how to control my plié I had terribly painful talar impingement. I’ve also had several sprains in both ankles and in my toe joints, which has changed how I work on demi-pointe.”

Bartee conditions his body daily. “The different strengthening exercises and stretches I do for my feet are specific to the history of my feet,” says Bartee, “and so is the work that I need to do with them from day to day. The exploration never stops!”

Pacific Northwest Ballet soloist Benjamin Griffiths also thinks of exploring how his feet work as necessary in expressing himself as an artist. “When I’m dancing,” says Griffiths, “I’m constantly thinking about how I’m shaping and placing my feet. Not only are the feet one of the main choreographic focal points (we refer to choreographic phrases as ‘steps’ for a reason), but the feet can also be very expressive, particularly in how they relate to the floor. For example, when dancing something like Oberon, I try to have my feet point and leave the floor really rapidly, whereas, while performing the male solo in Agon I try to use my feet to get into and massage the floor. In one role they are lightning bolts and in the other they are like suction cups.” Griffiths’ has a high arch, and his challenges stem from tight muscles and tendons in the bottom of his feet. Consequently, he conditions with stretching exercises.

Emily Molnar feels strongly that conditioning is important to dancer health, and exercising feet is an important part of that. “They are everything,” says Molnar, “we bear weight on the feet, we use them all the time.” But Molnar rarely thinks about the feet apart from the whole dance aesthetic. The groundedness of the feet is a direct link to confidence, to stability. Molnar believes that, “if one is not constantly examining the relationship to the floor, a dancer cannot be coordinated.”

Molnar acknowledges that it is wonderful to see a beautiful body with a beautiful arch, “but the strength of the body, its power, nuance, musicality is suggested by the feet. If you are not using your feet well, you do not have dance. You can’t express yourself.”

Molnar admits that, as a dancer, when she stopped being concerned less with what her feet looked like and more with what she was saying with them, she was much happier. Laura Tisserand has the same sentiment.

“For me,” says Tisserand, “the most beautiful foot does not have to be the one that points like a dagger and has a huge arch. The foot that usually has the most impact is the one that is so finely articulated you find it hard to take your eyes off of it. I believe feet can be as expressive and tell a story as much as the upper body, and when a dancer uses their feet in this expressive way the dancing really shines.”