

## **The agony and the ecstasy**

*Valerie Lawson. Valerie Lawson is a Herald journalist.*

Beloved of fetishists and admired for its fantastic engineering, the foot and its intimate friend, the shoe, have a mighty story to tell, writes Valerie Lawson

What a piece of work is the foot. In its lifetime, it plays many roles. You're lucky in life if you never put a foot wrong. It's more likely you will put your foot in it, be caught on the back foot or get off on the wrong foot.

In our teens, we're footloose and fancy free. Then we fall in love, head over heels in love. It nearly sweeps us off our feet. Then come the ankle biters.

In the long march through middle age, we try to put our best foot forward. We tiptoe around the boss, trying to toe the line, frightened of getting the boot if our enemies put the slipper in. By the time we have one foot in the grave, ready to turn up our toes and pop our clogs, we've been humble foot soldiers, placed our footprints in the sands of time and tried hard not to be a heel.

Of course you can also point the finger, thumb your nose, palm it off or wash your hands of the whole affair. One could go on, to the back, the breast, the head, the eyes, the ears. After all, the body is a fertile field for metaphor. But in terms of vivid imagery, few parts yield more than the foot, and its intimate friend, the shoe.

You might not like your feet. but consider the beauty of their intricate internal architecture 26 bones connected by a maze of tendons and ligaments.

Ken Crichton, sports physician, consultant to the athletes at the Sydney Olympics and the Australian Ballet's consultant doctor, sees the foot as "a fantastic piece of engineering, the way it functions. In one way it's a shock absorber, and in one way a rigid lever to drive the body forward. Most people wouldn't think their feet are their best part but they can be aesthetic, sexual."

Feet are also "our surest connection with terra firma", writes Janice West in *Footnotes: On Shoes*, a new collection of essays, "and this connection has become a metaphor for objective reality hence the saying 's/he's got two feet on the ground'".

These planted feet are usually shod, so, in our imagination, the foot goes with the shoe much more than the hand fits that outdated accessory, the glove. Babies still wear booties, even though they kick them off, but these days they seldom wear mittens.

The bootie is merely a stage in a series of feet rituals beginning on day one. When a baby is born, the first thing the parents do, after checking the face, is to count the toes and fingers. Next, a nurse makes a pin prick in the baby's heel, the most vascular part of the body, with a lancet. It draws blood which is checked for

problems such as thyroid abnormalities and cystic fibrosis. At the intensive care ward at the Royal Hospital for Women in Randwick, babies as small as kittens are wired to monitoring equipment attached to their heels, which are pricked to test for blood sugar levels. [If a baby dies, the parents are given a card from the hospital with a photo of their infant, some of his or her hair, and their palm- and footprints.]

As soon as a baby begins to walk, their smooth little feet are encased in copies of adult shoes, even Reeboks or Nikes. That simple act represents more than a wish for the child to grow up just like Mum and Dad. The choice of tiny sports shoes indicates how far feet, and shoes, have journeyed in just one century.

Footwear was once an intimate affair, in which thousands of men made shoes and boots for millions of others. The business of shoes is now a perfect example of globalisation and brand marketing. The world spends about \$US15 billion annually on sports shoes alone; in Australia, it's about \$800 million a year. Nike's share of the market is \$US5.5 billion. Its CEO, Phil Knight, recently told Harvard Business Review: "For years we put all our emphasis on designing and manufacturing the product, but now we understand the most important thing we do is market the product."

The swoosh and the "Just Do It" slogan are as familiar as McDonald's golden arches, and sometimes just as much a target for protesters. Nike has stitched up many of the world's top athletes, although Ian Thorpe, whose foot size is 16, does not need them to compete. Michael Johnson showed us his gold ones last year, those with 24-carat droplets around the outside. Tiger Woods wears Nikes, as do Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi and Cathy Freeman.

Steve Moneghetti has been wearing Nikes for 15 years, though he gets them free, of course. He still runs 150 kilometres a week, in semi-retirement after a career in which he estimates he ran 150,000 kilometres. When Moneghetti runs a marathon, the toenail on his second toe, longer than the big toe, turns black and falls off. Kerryn McCann, the 47-kilogram marathon runner from Coledale, also sheds toenails. Her naked nails are like tenderised steak, pulpy from the pounding they get in training. She began running at 10, developed stress fractures of her metatarsals at 12, and once, after a marathon in Europe, discovered her third metatarsals on both feet had dropped after the race.

"I was in so much pain I could barely walk. Six weeks later, I had two big bruises." Now she cuts two holes in the inner soles, just in case. "After a marathon, I lose five nails but I've got one which comes off all the time."

Such detail might repel, but it also fascinates. As Ernest Becker wrote in *The Denial of Death*, "The foot is its own horror; what is more, it is accompanied by its own striking and transcending denial and contrast the shoe ... it is the closest thing to the body and yet is not the body." He compared this close relationship between a body part and its covering with female genitals and their "clothing". Rather than being tightly clad, except in tights they are veiled in lacy or silky lingerie.

Of course, women can't see their genitals in the same way as they can see their feet. That visibility is another reason for our obsessive interest in their covering. In *Footnotes*, Janice West writes: "Without a mirror we can only have a restricted view of our body: the only areas we can see all of are the lower arms and hands, calves and feet. So it is not surprising that shoes are such a source of visual and sensual pleasure and that this fascination remains when they are taken off."

We all know about Imelda Marcos's obsession with shoes she had more than 1,200 pairs but she was not the first shoe obsessive. Marie Antoinette collected more than 500 gem-encrusted pairs.

Shoe shopping, some women believe, is the highest form of shopping. At the pinnacle of shoe-making is Manolo Blahnik. A citizen of the world, born in the Canary Islands, Blahnik is simply "mad for extremities ... the rest of the body seems dull to me". His shoes aren't meant for walking. They're erotica on stilts, shoes for

the limousine or bedroom, no matter how much he says he is fed up with sex.

"The people want high heels," he sighs. "The people want sex. They want danger. That's the disease. I'm incredibly bored with sex."

Actually, says Madonna, Blahnik shoes are as good as sex. Better, in fact. They last longer.

Jimmy Choo shoes or red-soled Christian Louboutin's are equally sexy, equally dangerous. The best maker of the shoe as an erotic pedestal, however, was Salvatore Ferragamo. More an architect than a shoemaker, he contrived a way to make the arches pop up, as if they were yearning to be stroked.

The high heel, as Valerie Steele points out in *Fetish* (1996), places the lower body in a state of tension. "The movement of the hips and buttocks is emphasised, the back is arched, thrusting the breasts forward. High heels change the apparent contour of the legs, increasing the curve of the calf, and tilting the ankle and foot forward, thus creating an alluring long-legged look."

In *The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe*, William A. Rossi says the high heel can raise the buttocks by 25 per cent and feminise the gait by shortening the stride to cause a mincing step that suggests a certain amount of helpless bondage.

Bondage shoes have come out of the fetish closet this year, with *Vogue* featuring spreads of shoes with spike heels, chains, studs, buckles and ankle cuffs. At least you can't fall out of these shoes, unlike another form of extreme footwear, the platform. In 16th-century Venice, women needed help to walk around on chopines platforms level at the front and back, and up to 30cm from the ground.

High heels, tilting the foot down from heel to toe, became the rage when Catherine de'Medici wore them in Paris for her wedding to the Duc d'Orleans in the 1530s. High heels peeped from beneath long skirts for hundreds of years until the 1920s, when skirts rose to the knee.

After the Great War, and before the Great Depression, shoes came into their own. And not only fashion shoes, but sports shoes, with the first Keds introduced in 1917 and the Converse All Star making its debut in 1919. (Both evolved from the 1860 croquet sandal, with a rubber sole and canvas upper.)

Joggers, or sneakers, or runners, as they are now called, entered the fashion wardrobe of women in 1980, during a transport strike in New York. The women strode through Manhattan in their runners, then swapped them for heels in the office. Those shoes would be the equivalent of the little black dress, a plain or two-toned court shoe, seldom a sling-backed or peep-toed affair, or with a low-cut front and toe cleavage.

Taken to extremes, the high heel becomes a useless appendage in fetish shoes and disappears altogether in a dancer's pointe shoe which places the foot on its toes, as if on an invisible stilt heel.

Ken Crichton understands that, to most observers, "a dancer's foot is seen as a sexual thing, vulnerable, delicately balanced, extending the line of the lower leg". Ballet dancers, he says, thicken their bones as they work their feet.

Dancers spend their lives working on their feet. Little girls in their first pink ballet shoes sit on the floor and point and flex their feet. "Good feet", says the teacher as they stretch their toes, and "naughty feet" as they turn them up.

A rite of passage comes at 12, when the girls try their first pair of shiny pink satin pointe shoes and hobble around with pride and pain.

"The pointe shoe," according to another Footnotes essayist, Gerri Reaves, "unifies pain, restrained beauty and control, and it clothes in glossy satin the wounded feet that make ballet beautiful." Most dance movies contain the obligatory shoe shot. As the dancer removes her pointe shoes, the camera lingers on the knobby, aching, misshapen, even bloody feet beneath. This is vicarious masochism. Look how she suffers for her art, for our pleasure!

Lucinda Dunn is a senior artist with the Australian Ballet. Her feet are not ugly at all. A little bumpy, maybe. She has beautiful feet in pointe shoes, highly arched, as delicate as a calligrapher's pen and just as precise. She wears specially made shoes for her size 31/2 feet, "a Sonata mix" by Bloch. Other types of Bloch pointe shoe are called Sylphide, Serenade, and Suprima, the S words of "shhhhh!" Dancers don't like their pointe shoes to be heard. They bash them with hammers, bend the soles, squeeze them in door frames.

Dunn has had foot surgery to shorten her heel bones. "They cut off some of the calcaneus bone. Every time I was flexing and pointing it was catching on the tendons and giving me bursas. I had quite a few cortisone injections over the years but the bone just kept rubbing." She wears two, or maybe three pairs of pointe shoes every performance. That's the entire lifetime of the shoe.

Inside the end of the shoe, or the box, are densely packed layers of fabric and paper which are shaped and dipped in glue. They weren't always this way. Marie Taglioni and, before her, Genevieve Gosselin, danced in soft slippers, heavily darned at the toe which gave some support when they rose on tiptoe. Nineteenth-century lithographs show the dancers balanced on pointe whereas, in reality, they would have posed very briefly, giving an illusion of weightlessness. That was the fantasy and fashion in ballet from 1810 to the 1850s. By the 1890s, pointe shoes were stronger, blocked with bits of newspaper and floured paste.

The feminist contributors to Footnotes compare pointe shoes with illusory amputation, as if the long line of the leg ends in a pointed stump. The book features x-rays of feet on pointe in comparison to x-rays of bound feet. The difference of course, is choice. A dancer chooses to be a dancer. In China, a girl of three to eight years had no choice when her mother decided the time was right. She gave her a pedicure, bent the four smaller toes under the arch, bandaged them in place, pressed the forefoot and heel together. This formed a deep cleft in the sole of the foot. Sometimes bones were also broken. The aim was to create a "Golden Lotus" foot no more than eight centimetres long. Later, during sexual foreplay, her husband could unwrap the bandages and use his wife's foot as a pseudo vagina. The little stump feet were covered in elaborately embroidered booties which looked like hooves.

Feminist writers draw parallels between dancers' feet, bound feet and Hans Christian Andersen's tale *The Red Shoes*, in which Karen, a poor orphan, progresses through a series of red shoes. She can't stop dancing until her feet are cut off. The story inspired the 1948 movie *The Red Shoes* in which Moira Shearer could not chose between a life of dance and a husband.

Cinderella, in contrast, triumphed when the glass slipper won her a husband. Her stepsisters, though, were not so lucky. In the unexpurgated versions, they cut off their toes to try to fit into the slipper. At least Dorothy, in *The Wizard of Oz*, did not suffer through her magic ruby slippers.

Sydney artist Julie Rrap is fascinated by these allegories and fantasies. "I shot [film of] a friend trying to stand on his toes, wobbling." This footage was looped, so that the film showed him constantly trying to stand. Near the screen was a series of disembodied, mechanical pointe shoes, programmed to rise and fall as they

made a drumming sound.

When Rrap digitally manipulated her own feet to look as though they were growing stilettos, the picture framer said "to some people, this will be a big turn on". Rrap just saw it as "playful. That's what art can do, take something from your imagination and bring it into existence."

The resulting image, called *Overstepping*, won this year's Hermanns Art Award. The judges found it "disturbing, uncomfortable and witty", touching on "current issues of genetic engineering, the body and pain".

Rrap thinks Magritte would use digital manipulation if he was working today. She mentions his painting *The Red Model* (1935), in which feet and shoes blend together, and *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (1947), in which we see a woman's breasts growing from a dress and her feet merging into her shoes.

Rrap has printed footprints on the top of a marble stand, like the marks of a fallen angel, and taken impressions of people's feet and stuck the false feet on a series of door mats.

Paul Galy takes moulds of feet, too, placing his customers' feet into a tray of foam, a special casting material from Germany that feels like wet sand. His walls are stacked with wooden lasts, representing the extremities of about a 10th of his 1,000 or so customers.

For four generations, the Galy family has cared for problem feet. From a little room at North Bondi, Paul Galy makes extraordinary shoes, almost like magical props, for people with diabetes, arthritis and disabilities you've never even considered.

From the recesses of his workroom, Paul brings out a giant, clown-like shoe, made for "an extreme diabetic" with little sensitivity in his feet. Its inner sole is made of a slow-release poron, "it slows the cushioning and stops any form of blistering. If this "high risk foot" gets a blister, it could lead to an ulcer which could mean amputation.

In their lifetime, shoes play many roles. They tell us "where a person has been and where she wants to go", writes Erin Mackie in *Footnotes*. "Worn and tattered, shoes, like faces, are drawn into signatures, inscribed through time and experience with identity. New, sumptuous and smart, shoes tell the story of desires, of aspirations written, not only in the heart and soul, but, just as intimately, on the body. Shoes tell us the stories of who people are, and who they would be."

*Footnotes: On Shoes* edited by Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss (Rutgers University Press).