

# THE GUIDE TO DANCE FLOORS



THE WORLD DANCES ON HARLEOUIN FLOORS





PHOTOGRAPHY: Richard Dunkley

# TAKE TO THE DANCE FLOOR

This booklet traces the history and development of Harlequin dance floors, with special relevance to dancers and teachers whose careers depend on the choice of a floor on which they can perform safely and confidently.

In the summer of 1973 Pete Thomas, Technical Manager at the Marley Floors factory in Frome, Somerset (now closed down) was bemused by a phone call from a small UK dance company. The caller asked if it were possible to re-colour the underside of a particular retail sheet vinyl flooring from a patchy orange to a plain white, which Marley had recently rejected on grounds of cost-saving. Moreover, would Marley also replace the popular faux ceramic pattern of the top surface with a uniform black? With the equipment Marley possessed at the time the answer was a simple "Yes" – provided there was enough demand. Very quickly it was clear to Marley that not only was British and European demand there, but within a year or two the first container load had been shipped to the USA. Indeed, the dance floor they had stumbled upon became so popular that in America to this day all stage floors are generically referred to as "marleys".

The Frome production line was closed in 1977 and the story might have ended there if Bob Dagger – at that time Export Sales Manager for Marley — had not perceived the loss to the dance community and proceeded to set up what became British Harlequin plc, and commissioned the production on an obscure production line in Luxembourg of an identical product, which was branded Harlequin Reversible. Now Harlequin has production, stocks and offices across the world and is the unchallenged leader in dance floor development. Remarkably, the original double-sided product is still in healthy demand and equips dance studios and stages right across the world, from children's classes in village halls to opera houses

In the early 1980's a number of different challenges was placed before the company:

The London Festival Ballet (now English National Ballet) needed a "cushioned" dance floor to protect the ballroom floor at Jay Mews. Rudolf Nureyev had let it be known at the Paris Opéra Ballet that he insisted on a softer, yet "danceable" floor on the hard stage at the Opéra Garnier. London Contemporary Dance Theatre looked for a touring floor to shield the dancers from concrete floors on tour.

Further overseas, the Hamburg Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, and New York City Ballet wanted dance floors in a range of colours with "traction" (the dancer's word for adequate grip), yet tough enough to withstand the aggressive wear of rolling scenery. Add to this the demand of dance schools worldwide for multi-purpose floors for ballet, contemporary, jazz and tap and it becomes clear why several new floors joined the range, which by 1985 already numbered four products.

A different sort of challenge came from The Royal Ballet School at White Lodge, who had decided to install some form of sprung dance floor in the Fonteyn Studio. This decision was evidence of the accelerating trend of dance schools to consider the need to protect young dancers' limbs and led Harlequin into a new area of dance floor development.

For Jay Mews and Nureyev, Harlequin came up with Harlequin Studio, now a major seller worldwide to dance schools and major professional companies. This was a world first in dance floors, in that it is a "cushioned" floor reinforced with strong mineral fibre to resist damage and provide dimensional stability in varying temperatures on stage and in the dance studio.

London Contemporary Dance Theatre had faced Harlequin with a different problem: their tour schedule presented the dancers with a succession of hard, sometimes uneven surfaces so another new product, Harlequin Allegro, developed from the Studio concept into a 9mm thick roll-out floor, which is now usually installed semi-permanently in studios. Harlequin reluctantly concluded that Allegro barely rates as a touring product for a small dance company, since it needs a dedicated crew constantly to roll up a floor weighing more than 6 kilos per square metre!

Moving to the overseas requests, Harlequin developed Harlequin Cascade. Although a lino "look-alike", Harlequin Cascade has none of the problems of true linoleum. Soft to the touch, with highly-controlled traction it is deceptively tough and will lie flat under the rigours of scenery castors and is formulated to roll-up and unroll fast across the floor. To provide psychological reassurance to the New York City Ballet dancers at New York State Theater the original American version was produced in precisely the same colour, known as NYCB Grey, as the linoleum it replaced and continues to replace to this day. For dance studios harassed with the choice of a floor to stand up to the diversity of dance teaching, from ballet to tap dance, Cascade is an excellent choice, although it would require no less than bare granite to withstand the constant hammering of loose tap screws!

The Royal Ballet School's stipulation at White Lodge was that any permanently-installed floor was to have no fixings or attachments to the building structure, which effectively ruled out conventional wood sprung floors. This led Harlequin's technical team into the creation of an innovative shock-absorbent sprung floor – Harlequin Activity – which is more fully discussed in the following pages, together with a review of the choice and installation of various dance floor surfaces including sprung floors.

These new floors cater for the needs, not only of major professional companies, but also of the modest budgets of thousands of regional dance schools, introducing a generation of youngsters to dance.

DANCERS - COVER: Paulin Huguet and Roland Cox





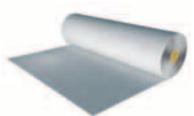






# HARLEQUIN'S SHEET VINYL DANCE FLOORS

All these floors are technically referred to as sheet vinyls, although confusingly the Americans call them "resilient floors", a term Europeans tend to use when referring to sprung floors. Depending on the product, some floors can be used in a roll-out portable way, and some both loose-laid or permanently laid.



All Harlequin vinyls shown opposite are supplied on rolls.

## Application Guide - Harlequin's Portable & Permanent Vinyl Floors

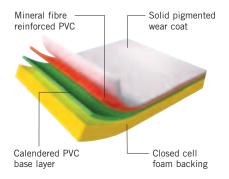
• The more dots, the more suitable the floor for the particular type of dance.

Standfast	••	••	•••	•••		•••	•••	•••	~	×
Fiesta	••	••	•••	••		•••			~	×
Тетро	••	•••	••		••	••		•••	~	~
Allegro	••	•••	••		•••				~	<b>v</b>
Cascade	•••	•••	•••	••		••	•••	•••	~	<b>V</b>
Studio	•••	•••	••		••	••	•••	•••	~	~
Reversible	•••	•••	•••	••			•	••	×	~
	BALLET	CONTEMPORARY	JAZZ/THEATRE	TAP / PERCUSSIVE	AEROBICS	MULTI-PURPOSE	STAGE/OPERA	ROCK	PERMANENT	TEMPORARY

This table is intended as a guide only and choice may depend on your priorities, budget and sub-floor.

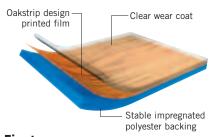






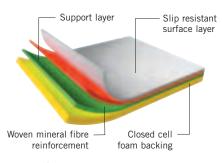
#### Tempo

Particularly suited to the requirements of contemporary or barefoot dance, but also works as a multi-purpose performance surface.



# **Fiesta**

Developed because we saw a clear need for a multi-purpose floor for dance and drama studios which looked exactly like wood, but without all the associated problems of cleaning and maintenance.



#### Studio

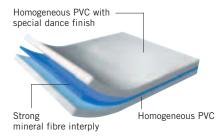
Studio gives some protection against hard sub-floors, but is still light enough to be portable for touring.



Slip resistant wear coat

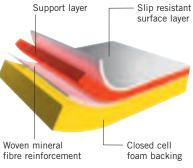
#### Reversible

Classic double-sided flooring for dance and stage. Quick to roll out and lay flat.



#### Cascade

The ideal surface for ballet, jazz and contemporary dance, Cascade is extremely resistant to wear.



#### **Allegro**

While not technically a sprung floor, Allegro can be laid onto a very hard surface, such as concrete, to provide a substantially "cushioned" floor, yet firm enough for dance.



A multi-purpose dance and stage flooring for heavy-duty use.

# ACTIVITY™, LIBERTY™ & WOODSPRING™

# A quick guide to sprung dance floors

In 1984 The Royal Ballet School at White Lodge asked Harlequin to design a sprung dance floor which would have no physical attachments to the building structure and – crucially – would be more suitable for young dancers than the floors with which they had hitherto experimented. The point here is that the concept of a sprung floor is still to this day dominated by the requirements either of gyms and indoor athletics or, to a diminishing extent, ballroom dancing.

For social dance, sprung hardwood floors not infrequently incorporated an actual metal spring undercarriage without shock damping. This led to perceptible bounce or residual vibration. Whereas this minor "trampoline effect" is broadly unobjectionable on the ballroom floor, it can be a dangerous menace to ballet and contemporary dancers, where the increasing physicality of the choreography requires minimum shock transfer, to maintain



Harlequin Activity Floor at English National Ballet School. Photograph by Leslie E Spatt

dancers' balance and prevent leg and back injuries. Indoor sports floors on the other hand need to be appreciably stiffer, both to support athletic equipment and also to conform to predetermined levels of ball bounce. Moreover, sportsmen and women are protected by cushioned athletic footwear.

After considerable experimentation, Harlequin developed for the Royal Ballet School what became known as "Activity" floor: highly simplified, this comprises a layer of rubber-like foam upon which are placed two further layers of semiflexible panels, to spread the load and act as a shock absorber. On this "sandwich" is laid a Harlequin vinyl dance floor. So the students at White Lodge returned from their summer holidays in 1984 to find, in the Fonteyn Studio, not a wooden floor that had seen better days, but an unblemished grey sprung floor, which was still there to greet a new generation of dance students more than 20 years on.

An ideal sprung floor combines two elements: area elasticity and point elasticity. Area elasticity is provided by "give" or flexion over a whole section where the performer lands, and point elasticity is the compression of the actual floor at the point of contact. With an area-elastic floor it is important that the slight flexing of the floor is reasonably limited to the immediate vicinity of the performer to avoid disturbance to neighbours. Just as important is the elimination of excessive rebound, known as "trampoline effect". Activity Floor is a permanently installed floor with very consistent characteristics and good area and point elasticity. Activity can be installed with either a dance vinyl top surface or a hardwood surface, although with the latter, point elasticity is compromised.



Cellular polyurethane layer



Top semi-flexible panel layer with joints staggered

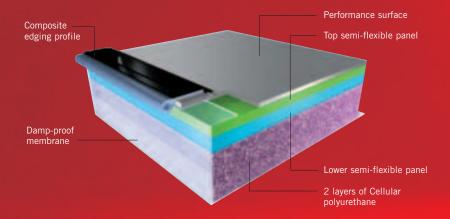


First layer of semi-flexible panels

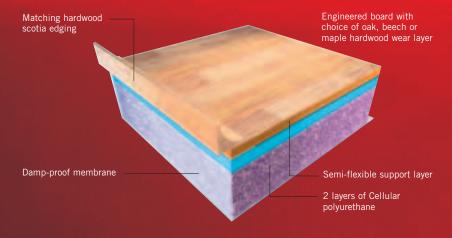


Harlequin vinyl performance surface

#### HARLEQUIN ACTIVITY™ WITH VINYL SURFACE



#### HARLEQUIN ACTIVITY™ WITH HARDWOOD SURFACE



At about the same time, Ballet Rambert in its Chiswick High Road studios was faced with the problem of the top studio floor, which was iron-hard and sloped away both sides where the building foundations had settled from the backbone of a central girder. A careful assessment of this told the Harlequin surveyor that the remedy was to compensate for the slope with the Activity foam layer. The work was carried out and today the unevenness in this active studio is imperceptible.

No roll-out dance floor, no matter how heavily cushioned, can fully fit the description of a "sprung floor": foam backing can give excellent protection, and this is described as "point elasticity" as opposed to "area elasticity". The Harlequin Activity structure gives area elasticity and with the appropriate dance surface provides an affordable sprung floor for most dance studios.

Shortly following the introduction of this product it became evident that a removable and portable sprung floor was needed by theatres and touring dance companies. Balanchine in the 1970s had already commissioned the design of an interlocking "basketweave" panel, and several US dance companies still support this system, notably New York City Ballet and Pacific Northwest Ballet. This excellent but heavy floor is however easily subject to damage and can require the regular attention of the stage carpenter. Urgently required was a lightweight system, which could readily and quickly be handled by two people. Harlequin's answer was "Liberty" – an 8ft x 4ft (2400mm x 1200mm) portable panel with special pads attached on the underside to provide the shock-absorbent spring. Only 42mm thick this touring sprung floor has been the choice of dance professionals worldwide, and permanently installed in major venues, including, *inter alia*, Florida State University, American Ballet Theatre and, by no means least, Laban at Creekside.

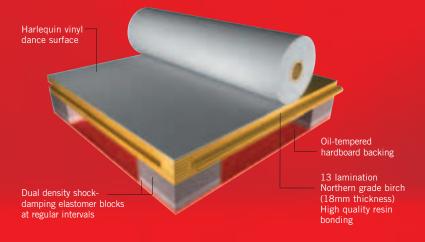




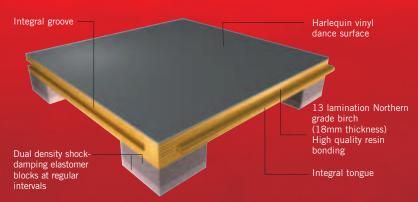
# **Point & Area Elasticity**

A point-elastic floor shows deflection or "give" only at the point of contact and an area-elastic floor flexes over a wider area. These terms are defined in the German standard DIN 18032 Part II, relating to sports surfaces. The specification limits the spread of this deflection to avoid disturbance to neighbouring sports performers. It has, of course, been noted by dancers that other of the criteria of this sports standard DIN 18032 are somewhat irrelevant to them.

#### HARLEQUIN LIBERTY™ PORTABLE SPRUNG FLOOR PANELS



#### HARLEQUIN LIBERTY™ PERMANENT SPRUNG FLOOR PANELS



Liberty Panel Floor. This is a modular floor manufactured from engineered panels with cellular foam blocks located at regular intervals on the underside. Panels are laid brickwork on the sub-floor so that cross-joins do not coincide. They are linked to each other by a radiussed tongue and groove pivot joint and secured by means of patented recessed metal clips, which removes the need to fix the panels mechanically to the sub-floor. The foam blocks compress progressively under light and heavy loads, giving uniform and consistent shock damping and providing the same "feel" and energy return to one or several dancers on the same panel.

Liberty is a relatively "springy" floor, with good area elasticity. Two versions are available: **portable panels**, which can be laid down to create a sprung floor and then taken up and moved to another venue or stored for future use; **permanent panels**, which, although fixed mechanically to the sub-floor at the perimeter, have the advantage that they can be taken up and re-installed at another location or used in a different configuration if required.



Panels are placed in position and edge panels cut to fit room contours.



Fitting at perimeter.

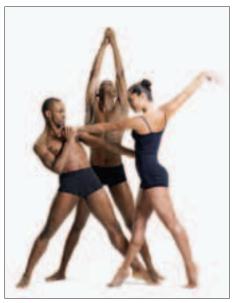


Rolling out the dance vinyl.









As we have seen, a handful of traditionalists in the North American dance community has remained loyal to the basketweave construction, and Harlequin's US subsidiary has been extensively involved in the design and permanent installation of basketweave floors named by Harlequin, WoodSpring, for example at the magnificent Boston Ballet studios and recently in the Royal Ballet studios at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Extreme care is required with WoodSpring, not only in the selection of the correct springy, knot-free wood but also in the correct spacing and fastening to avoid hard spots and irritating creaking from the joints. Basketweave is, in fact, a misnomer, as no weaving is involved. At least three layers of flexible wood battens are laid in rows on top of each other: the top layer is placed exactly halfway between the bottom row of battens and parallel to it, and the spring comes from the flexing of the middle layer which forms a "bridge". Adding extra layers improves the spring, but at the expense of increasing the floor thickness – unacceptable in most studios where ceiling height is compromised.

Clearly, the choice of a dance floor can be a headache to the uninitiated, and in the following pages we hope to avoid the pain by simplifying the task into a few key considerations.

#### HARLEQUIN WOODSPRING™

The construction of this is known familiarly as "basketweave". In reality, it is a counterbatten configuration comprising at least three layers of highly flexible softwood battens, arranged at right angles.

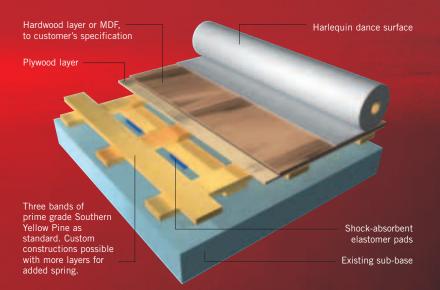
The intermediate layer acts as a spring to the top layer, which is laid at the centre of the span formed by the intermediate layer over the bottom layer (see diagram).

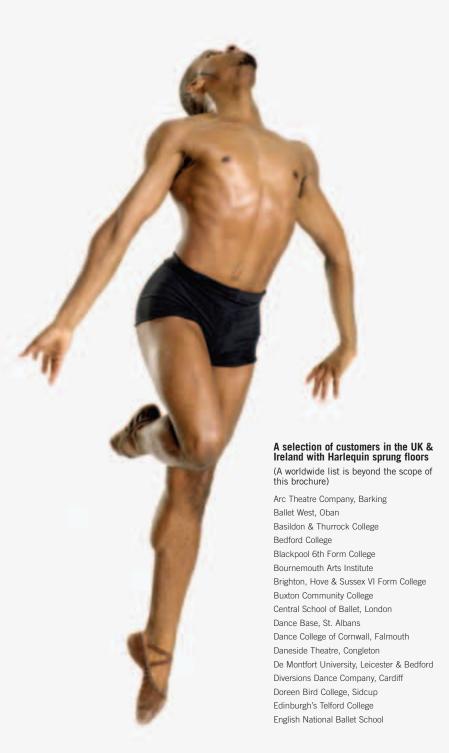
Theoretically the more intermediate layers incorporated in a basketweave floor the more flexible it becomes, but the principle of diminishing returns applies and in reality the extra expense and thickness outweigh the practicality. In the Harlequin WoodSpring system shock absorption and energy return are enhanced by elastomer pads attached to the underside of the bottom layer.

Onto this structure are installed two layers of flexible panels (typically plywood and MDF), which support the Harlequin dance floor. Harlequin has designed and installed a number of variations of WoodSpring. For example, a modification was designed with sliding captive brackets and was installed in 2005 on rail-guided stage wagons at the Bolshoi Ballet for vertical hanging and storage backstage.



Installation of Harlequin WoodSpring at the Royal Ballet Studios, Covent Garden





**Application Guide** 

Suitability of Harlequin vinyls with Harlequin sprung floor systems

WoodSpring				~	~	~	~
Activity		•	•	•	~	~	~
Liberty Portable	~	~	~		~		
Liberty Permanent		~	~		~	•	~
	REVERSIBLE	STUDIO	CASCADE	ALLEGRO	TEMPO	FIESTA	STANDFAST

This is intended as a guide only. Please contact us before making a final decision.

Furness College, Barrow in Furness Garter Lane Arts Centre, Waterford, Eire Haberdashers' Monmouth School for Girls Hautlieu School, Jersey, Channel Islands Hemel Hempstead School Hextable Dance, Swanley Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, London Jerwood Space, London Kidkast Theatre School, Dublin Kilmarnock College Kingston University Laban, London Lambeth College, London Lewisham College, London Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts London Academy of Music & Dramatic Art (LAMDA) London Metropolitan University Manchester Metropolitan University, Alsager Campus Martin's Heron Community Centre, Bracknell Merton Adult Community Centre, London National Folk Theatre of Ireland, Tralee, Eire Newport theatre & Arts Centre, Wales North West Kent College, Dartford Poynton High School Project Arts Centre, Dublin, Eire Royal Ballet studios, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden Royal National Theatre, London Scottish Ballet, Glasgow Scottish Youth Theatre, Glasgow Siobhan Davies Dance Company, London Sir Henry Floyd Grammar School, Aylesbury South East Derbyshire College, Ilkeston St. Martin's College, Lancaster St. Vincent's College, Gosport Treorchy Comprehensive School, Wales University of Birmingham, Selly Oak Campus University College Chichester Urdang Academy, London







Here we draw together the themes of dance floor development and hope to take away some of the mystery of choosing a floor for dance

# What Type of Dance?

Most professional studios cover the range of dance through ballet, contemporary, jazz, tap and some social dancing. The classic, budget-priced all-rounder for these activities is Harlequin Reversible, the double-sided floor. As Reversible was originally intended for the touring dancer, and to offer the versatility of a different colour either side, you might reflect carefully before laying it permanently. Where percussive dance is not offered, a cushioned "point elastic" floor like Harlequin Studio or Allegro would be a preferred choice. If the dance floor has to have the slightly enhanced traction demanded by international soloist dancers, yet at the same time survive tap dance or perhaps the battering of heavy stage scenery castors, Harlequin Cascade or Standfast would be the answer. As an aside, nothing short of steel or granite will resist the determined tap dancer, but Reversible, Standfast and Cascade which is specified by Riverdance – put up a very good fight! Where a roll-out floor is shared by tap dancers, Harlequin heartily recommends the dancers to repair worn taps and attend to loose

# HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR FLOOR - THE KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

fasteners which become razor sharp. Newcomers to the range like Harlequin Tempo and Fiesta bridge the gap between dance floors dedicated to artistic dance and that challenging compromise where the dance floor is shared by other activities.

Sometimes, of course, the final choice of floor comes down to a compromise depending on your main type of dance and your budget. A phone call to Harlequin's technical people will identify your principal dance interests to find the correct floor and prevent costly mistakes.

### Who Owns the Studio?

Put another way, what this question really means to you as a studio operator, is that if the building is not your own obviously you should think carefully before laying a dance floor permanently, because you are effectively bequeathing it to the landlord at the end of the lease, and not only do you lose it, but he may charge you to have it removed. In these circumstances you should loose-lay or semi-permanently lay (see text box on facing page) the floor for repositioning later. This applies equally to the education system, where the nature of curriculum priorities can often reallocate the dance classroom to history or hairdressing.

### Do I Need a Sprung Floor?

A generation ago sprung floors were very much the exception rather than the rule. A luxury purchase for the majority of dance studios, they were prohibitively expensive and more applicable to sport. Harlequin Liberty panels and the Activity Sprung Floor System made sprung floors a practical proposition and there are now thousands of installations. If you dance several hours a day, the short answer to the question is therefore "yes", but if your initial budget is too fragile to afford one, you may loose-lay your dance surface so that it can subsequently be pulled up with minimal disruption to accommodate an appropriate sprung floor. Always give removable panel floors careful consideration if relocation is ever a likelihood or threat.



DANCER LEFT TO RIGHT: Paulin Huguet and Roland Cot, Margarita Zafrilla Olayo, Ana Lucia Alves, Paulin Huguet and Roland Cot.

# ACCESSORIES

# Ballet Barres – Wall-mounted Single & Double

Harlequin's wall mounted barres feature a choice of bracket designs, colours and finishes and a choice of woods for the barres. All are professional studio quality with strong fixings to the wall.



# Freestanding Professional Studio Barres

Professional studio quality freestanding ballet barres, which are lightweight yet extremely stable. Available with either aluminium or wooden barres.



### Rolls Straps, Bags

Roll straps are manufactured from heavy-duty webbing and with strong Velcro® closures to ensure Harlequin floors stay tightly wound on their cardboard cores when stacked away or in transit. Available in a range of sizes to suit our range of dance surfaces.

Roll storage bags are ideal for touring and are made in durable polyester vinyl fabric with waterproof backing. Recommended for the protection of vinyl floors during transit and for ease of handling in touring situations.



#### Do I Consult a Flooring Contractor?

It's a racing certainty that if you ask your local flooring contractor about dance floors, you will get either a) a blank stare (if you're lucky) or b) profound untutored advice (if you're not!) because it's extremely rare to find a contractor who has ever laid one or who understands artistic dance. The first rule is to contact the specialists at Harlequin to find the floor you need. At that stage, and when you are clear what you want, certainly contact a contractor for their expertise on laying the floor. Encourage the contractor to call Harlequin for advice about the more esoteric aspects – structural strength of the existing floor; subfloor preparation; door heights; dampproof membranes; adhesives; disabled access ramps; seam welding *et al.* These are the things you pay contractors to know about, and by talking to them Harlequin's staff are able to a large extent to judge their competence to carry out the work. However, this is not to say that the job will be guaranteed by Harlequin: for this, you can entrust Harlequin's Contracts Division with the installation.

## What Can I Afford?

The adage about the length of a piece of string comes to mind. If forced to give an answer, we will only say that an average dance studio of about 10 metres square (33ft x 33ft) will range from £1,500 to £10,000. The exact amount will depend on your particular requirements and conditions: the choice of dance surface; whether the floor is to be loose or permanently laid; whether or not you require a sprung floor; access; preparation required; room shape and a dozen other details. Evidently, a prudent measure is to plan for change and expansion, so that unnecessary expense is avoided later.

### Harlequin's Investment in Dance

Certain manufacturers of leading brands, like Harley Davidson Motorcycles, have developed an odd synergy with their clientèle which goes beyond a purely commercial relationship. Similarly, Harlequin is well aware that the worldwide dance community is closely-knit with its common interests, almost like a club without membership, and for over a quarter of a century the company has won the trust of dancers through careful and ongoing attention to their needs.

# Loose Lay, Semi-Permanent and Permanent Lay

A *loose-laid floor* is rolled out with the seams either covered with adhesive tape, normally 2" (50mm) wide, or temporarily secured to the floor on the underside with double-sided tape. The second method is less obtrusive but leaves a lingering problem that the seam may come unstuck and cause a trip hazard. Both types of tape are known as "gaffer tape" to stage managers.

Clearly a floor laid *permanently* is stuck down completely with adhesive and cannot be removed without risking damage. Adhesive manufacturers are now offering "pressure sensitive" products, which in many circumstances are peelable like Post-It Notes™.

Ask Harlequin about these. The seams of a permanent floor are sealed by hot or cold welding. The hot method melts a flexible plastic welding rod into the seam and the cold weld works by using a solvent similar to lighter fluid to fuse the two sides together. Both welds are unobtrusive and waterproof.

A *semi-permanent floor* is loose-laid onto double-sided tape with the seams welded. This is semi-permanent in the sense that the seams can be cut through and the flooring removed from the tape, if required.

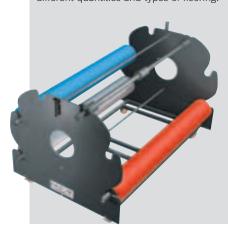
PHOTOGRAPHY: Richard Dunkley



DANCER LEFT TO RIGHT: Femi Oyewole, Paulin Huguet and Roland Cot, Dancers Courtesy of the Debra Bradnum Ballet school, Margarita Zafrilla Olayo

#### **Roll Carts**

For safe storage and easy handling of rolls of Harlequin vinyl floors. Available in a range of sizes to accommodate different quantities and types of flooring.



# **Cleaning Materials**

Range includes Floor Dressing, Floor Maintainer and Dressing Remover, all in 5 litre containers. We also offer a complete cleaning and maintenance

Starter Kit containing cleaning fluids, mops and floor tool.



Our comprehensive range of single and double-sided tapes for use with Harlequin floors in all portable and semipermanent situations.

# **Home Sprung Dance Studio Pack**



Turn almost any location into a dance studio to practise safely, secure in the knowledge that this sprung floor system is not only the choice of professionals but vigorously endorsed by specialists in dance medicine who have pinpointed the importance of the right floor to avoid long term tissue damage and injury. Delivered pre-packaged to your door, it is child's play to set up and be dancing within 10 or 20 minutes – a professional sprung dance floor for the home environment.





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Harlequin also produces a comprehensive range of literature including datasheets and a publication entitled "Specifying Dance Floors: A Guide for Architects", which was launched at the Theatre Engineering & Architecture Conference in London in June 2006.

The guide details the differences between the sprung floors in our range and includes test results, specifications and case studies of a variety of installations worldwide. Contact British Harlequin for a copy.

Produced in association with



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