

Dancercise

Diane Fine



Courtesy of Diane Fine

The author

An East Indian woman recently confided the shock she felt when she first witnessed the awkward carriage and stride of North Americans. And she still finds their body movement almost offensive. They are constrained and stiff — the antithesis of what she was accustomed to in her homeland. When her countrywomen walk, there is a rhythmic, sensual movement to their bodies which is as liberating to experience as it is uplifting to behold.

We all know that our bodies don't just have to bend at the joints — that they are capable (especially the hands and feet because they contain so many bones and joints) of a much more extensive range of expression which we often associate with the so-called 'primitive' cultures. And we all agree that it is a tragedy to sentence our bodies to a life of silence — depriving them of the vocabulary with which to demonstrate their true nature.

How can we acquire that precious sense — the joy and facility of movement? How do we go about liberating our bodies' natural instincts — letting them speak for themselves without the interference of conditioning and convention? In my own quest towards this goal I have discovered that there are two essentials if I am to achieve this fluidity of movement. First, I must be fit in order to achieve both flexibility and heightened sensual awareness. And second, I need to free myself of encumbering inhibitions and conditioning. And the study of dance and improvisation is the method by which I reach my goal.

Dance, although it brings the individual in touch with one's body language, concentrates only on the expressive and technical elements and is not concerned with fitness *per se*. Even if one dances professionally as a means of livelihood it is questionable whether one is getting all the necessary ingredients for a well-balanced fitness program.

Dancercise, on the other hand is for the person who enjoys sensuous movement and who also wants to get fit. The dancercise class is about one hour of continuous exercises, choreographed to music, which flow into each other in a dance-like routine. Dancercise concentrates on the two accepted major facets of fitness — the cardiovascular aerobic workout and the conditioning of all the other muscle groups for increased endurance and flexibility. The most important component of the routine is the cardiovascular conditioning which improves the efficiency of the heart, lungs and entire circulatory system. This section lasts a minimum of 20 uninterrupted minutes. It consists of brisk walking, jogging and jumping exercises on the spot. The second half of the class focuses on the stretching of various muscle groups.

There are other methods of getting fit — jogging, walking, swimming, etc., but an expertly choreographed dancercise routine combines all the vital elements which promote total fitness and yield the best results in the shortest amount of time. And what is more important it gives exercise a good name



Illustration by Diane Fine

because it is fun. Its most redeeming quality is the emotional release students experience. The rhythms help the body explore new movements unfettered by traditional restraints.

When I first began giving these classes they were well received by the women, who obviously felt more comfortable with their bodies than their male counterparts who were stifled by the stigma of dance being emasculating.

Naturally, until then, we had all been fed the common diet of male-oriented fitness classes that concentrated on upper body strength and army-like drill movements. The singular accomplishment of

those classes seemed to be to prepare us for induction into the army in case of war. You come on feeling strong but who wants to be an 'Incredible Hulk'? But that was what men expected from these classes — muscle and brawn. What about the females — sensuality and grace, aren't these qualities as, or more, important? The male-oriented class has monopolized the fitness scene for too long.

Now, two years later, there are many men who gyrate their hips with abandon when they hear one of the dancercise tunes on the radio, but the challenge still remains for me as a dancerciser to get both men and women to enjoy the sensuality and physicality of their bodies 24-hours-a-day. ☉



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