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THE ALTERNATIVES



'THE DANCE IS DANCING YOU': Tripping the light fantastic — by candlelight — at Sacred Spaces in Santa Monica. Photographs by ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

No-judgment zone

Barefoot, free-form dance is the latest in mind-body grooving.

By LAURA SHIN
Special to The Times

IF you dance alone in your living room, you can come out now.

Far from the subwoofers and disco balls of nightclubs, without the aid of alcohol, people are dancing like no one's watching. Dozens of events around L.A. are drawing yuppies and hippies alike, from DJ-driven dances Sunday mornings in a sunlit studio to teacher-led evening sessions on guided movement. But they all share the philosophy of the living room: anything goes.

Part fitness, part meditation, these barefoot dances are a feel-good, free-flowing extension of the yoga boom — though some of them existed long before everyone became downward-dog die-hards.

Mariane Karou, who founded Dance Alive 34 years ago, is astounded by how many dances exist now. "Yoga really paved the way," she says, "because it opened people up to the idea that there's more to going inside than just closing your eyes."

At Karou's class, there's less posing, more shaking. Students perform pelvic thrusts and gyrations in a quest to get their hips to move in ways they've never moved before. The dance event called Fumbling Towards Ecstasy can resemble the frenzy of a techno club, with music to match. But it's Sunday mornings, and there are no miniskirts or Manolo Blahniks. In fact, there are no shoes at all.

Unlike the scope-and-be-scoped landscape of dance clubs, these are judgment-free spaces. That's because these dances aren't so much about the body as much as they are about the mind.

Kara Masters, who runs a monthly dance class called Pulse, wants people to get beyond rote actions and find movements that are true for their bodies in that moment, not what will firm their abs, be the right step or look sexy. It's the anti-aerobics, the anti-ballet.

"There are certain grooves that people get into — they move their hips this way and their shoulders that way. When you get into the groove, you stop paying attention to yourself," Masters says. "You turn your consciousness off."

Fumbling Towards Ecstasy teacher Jo Cobbett sees dance as way of creating an internal dialogue — where your brain shuts up and listens to your body.

"You're not doing steps in a specific pattern or learning how to dance or imposing order over the body," Cobbett explains. "You try to get to the place where the dance is dancing you, instead of you dancing the dance."

Because your inner self is meant to be your guide, the amount of instruction at these events can vary. Masters says hardly anything when she teaches, but uses the music and maybe a poem to inspire people's internal exploration. Monica Favand, the teacher of a weekly candle-light class, Sacred Spaces, gives people specific exercises, like visualization. One example: "I had people imagine that they had hundreds of layers of clothing on. It could be anything they wanted — robes of feathers, sparkling diamonds, rags — but they had to begin to move as if they had a certain layer on. Then, when they felt ready to let that go, they would reveal the one beneath it and continue till they imagined they were a skeleton and moved like they were all bone."

THE students are certainly getting the mind-body meld their teachers are aiming for. Anndrea Taylor, a 53-year-old writer who got a master's degree in dance at UCLA 30 years ago, had given up dancing until she started going to Dance Alive three years ago.

"It was the answer to everything I'd been looking for because it comes from the inside out," Taylor says. "I've been a meditation teacher and done yoga, and this is like getting what I've embraced in meditation — that connectedness — in a moving form."

In fact, because these barefoot dancing sessions are a form of moving meditation, they're not just a workout, but an unspoken form of group therapy. One woman, who started coming to Fumbling Towards Ecstasy on the recommendation of a psychiatrist, sweated out her anxieties three times a week and found it alleviated her depression. "It's much more than a dance," she says. "It's a spiritual community — a safe space for people to be."

The growth in the number of these de facto movement therapy events, some teachers say, is directly related to the high levels of stress in today's world — and how many people need relief. "People are getting more stressed, because of the war, terrorism, the economy, climate change and pollution," says Emilie Conrad, the founder of Continuum Movement.

All the events draw widely diverse participants — with a heavy sprinkling of yogis and massage therapists. "There are men and women of all ages, people as young as 13 and as old as 88," Dance Alive's Karou says. "I have students, moms, people in the creative arts, people who work in corporate America. It's a little microcosm of the world."

No matter where the dancers come from, they manage to find common ground. Cobbett's students have told her: "This is my therapy, my exercise, my church and my community. That's why I come here — I get all four of these needs met here."

Pharmaceutical companies could only hope to bottle that up.



Sacred Spaces' Monica Favand, center, talks with vocalist Arlys Alford.

Sacred Spaces
Monica Favand's class uses visualization, partner exercises and live music to put people in touch with their bodies.
www.tripdance.org or (323) 468-9938

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