

# Peace and heaven, punch and kick

Judy Gerstel

First question about Nia: Is it pronounced knee-ah or nigh-ah?

Second question: Umm, what exactly is it?

Nia — that's knee-ah — stands for Neuromuscular Integrative Action. It's a fusion fitness workout developed almost 25 years ago by a couple in — where else? — Marin County, Calif.

But until Debbie and Carl Rosas came to Toronto a few weeks ago to host a couple of master classes and promote their just-published book, *The Nia Technique*, the workout was mostly a well-kept secret outside circles of exercise cognoscenti.

Those in the know, know Nia.

With 50 teachers in the Toronto area, classes are held all over the city: at the University of Toronto, at ballet and fitness studios, in church halls.

All the teachers have gone through rigorous training, explains Debbie “and have done a powerful job in transmitting the purity of the work.”

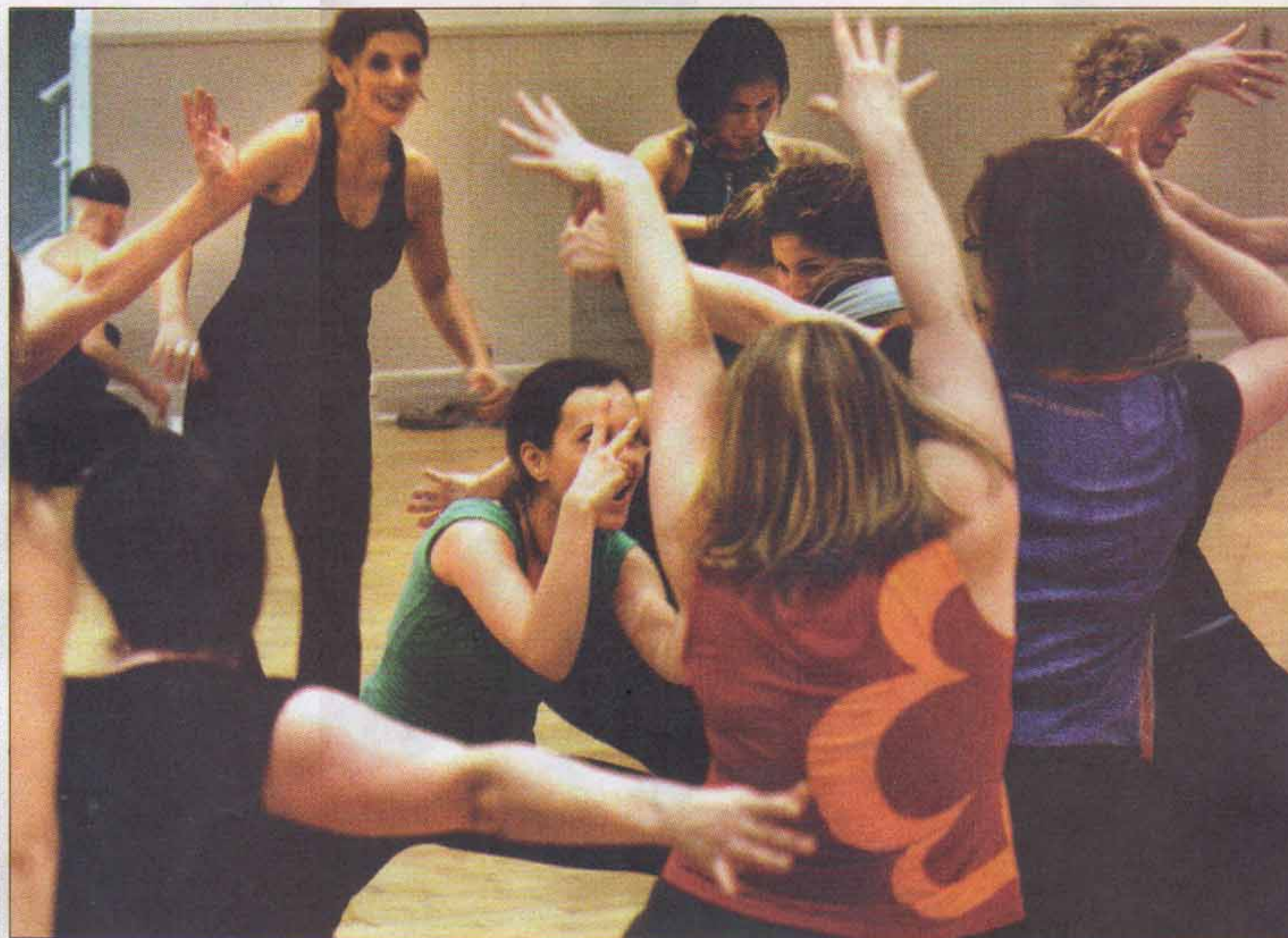
Words like purity, sensitivity, awareness and community pop up often in Nia-speak.

Developing Nia, says Rosas, was all about “learning how to treat our bodies lovingly, how to self-heal and how to trust that love and pleasure and joy really could deliver the kind of fitness results that we wanted.”

In a way, Nia is like a highly aerobic form of yoga, combining sometimes-strenuous physical activity choreographed to music — salsa, blues, reggae, sounds of nature — with New Age spirituality.

It's for people, suggests the website of the Nia Instructors Association of Canada ([www.niac.ca](http://www.niac.ca)), who want not only to get fit and de-stress but who also want to “unleash their inner optimist.”

At the Rosas' master class at the University of Toronto, 120



Some of the fun of Nia is doing your own thing. Nia uses different styles of music, dance, martial arts and incorporates self-healing.

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inner optimists were unleashed and 240 feet were bared, along with various other body parts. Understandably.

You really work up a sweat doing Nia, especially when charismatic Carl Rosas, a former assistant tennis pro, is leading the class.

He's the kick-ass one; Debbie, who used to teach aerobics in her pre-Nia days, does the gentle, sensitive stuff.

Carl, 53 and looking 40, is also the one with the long dark curly hair. Debbie sports a platinum

buzz cut. She's 54 and looks 35 with nary a line on her face. Both are buff beyond belief.

And they're very, very successful. Nia is big business, with more than 1,000 instructors in 29 countries.

Toronto Nia instructor Martha Randall, who's been teaching the technique here for about 10 years, thinks she knows why it's becoming so popular.

“It comes down to it being fun,” she says. “It's creatively challenging, so it's not just mindless exercise.” (Randall's website:

[www.niadancer.com](http://www.niadancer.com).)

With the music and choreography constantly changing, a Nia class really does keep you on your toes, sometimes literally.

You're also on the floor, in the air and in your face.

Martial arts figure prominently in the Nia technique. So even while engaging in self-nurturing, self-healing and self-loving, you're encouraged to make a fist and pretend to punch out the other guy — no doubt an integral part of “the self-esteem piece,” as they say in the jargon.

vascular and we don't stay in one spot.”

Nia also encourages “vocalizations.” You get to yell in a Nia class. “Yes!” “No!” “Go f--- yourself, a-----.”

Oops, scratch the latter. You don't really get to yell that out loud.

But visualizations and “tapping into emotions” are encouraged.

“It enables people to really look at the personal choices they make,” says Debbie, “so there's a lot of personal growth that happens.”

Sore muscles happen, too, after the first class, but you can work at your own comfort level.

“Nia is adaptable,” says Debbie. “Anybody can do it regardless of their fitness level.”

“It allows everybody in a room, whether somebody with arthritis or fibromyalgia or eating disorders or an athlete to stand next to each other, do the same workout, and walk out and say, ‘That class is exactly for me.’”

What's really impressive about Nia is that everybody seems to be having a good time and smiling in spite of the hard work and effort — unlike my spinning classes where there's a whole lot of grimacing going on.

“I think the face of Nia is the thing that's so different,” agrees Debbie.

It's not just the face.

At the end of a gruelling spinning class, we're instructed in no uncertain terms to stretch: way up, bring arms around to the back, reach down, reach back, stretch hard.

At the end of the Nia class, Debbie murmurs, “Heaven.” Arms go up. “Earth.” Hands graze the floor. “Wings.” Arms flutter to the side. “Self.” Hands meet prayerfully at the chest.

Serenity. It's a good thing. Punching and kicking, it's even better.

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