

## Taking Steps

# Making moves on the dance

Neophytes of all ages and sizes discover the thrill of classical movement  
Connecting body with spirit is a new allure of dance, writes *Susan Walker*

In a church hall near St. Clair Ave. W. and Bathurst St., nearly 30 women of varying ages, shapes and sizes (and one lone man) are following Martha Randall's choreographed routines.

They are barefoot and happy, kicking out, breathing rhythmically and moving like real dancers under the tutelage of Randall, who teaches six such sessions each week.

Professional dancers attend a dance class every day to keep themselves in shape. They go because they have to. But a growing group of professional dance teachers like Randall are training ordinary stiffers in the rigours of modern dance, ballet and jazz for the pure satisfaction and self-improvement afforded by the art form.

Randall teaches a technique called Nia. Offered in classes throughout the GTA, it's designed to enhance both mental and physical fitness. Nia reveals the way that dance helps mend broken connections between mind and body.

"I was absolutely hooked after the first class. I always come out feeling better, happier, feeling more optimistic about the day and myself," says Nia enthusiast Jan Marriott, 65.

"Nia is to exercise what holistic medicine is to health care. Nia is movement as medicine," says the official website for this increasingly popular activity.

Proponents of this dance/martial arts/healing practice swear by it. Developed nearly 25 years ago by Debbie and Carlos Rosas, fitness instructors in Portland, Ore., Nia is an acronym for Neuromuscular Integrative Action. It's also a Swahili word meaning "with purpose." The technique is a fusion of Aikido, Tae Kwon Do, T'ai Chi, jazz and modern dance, Isadora Duncan dance technique, yoga, the Feldenkrais Method and Alexander Technique.

"Nia is teaching that kind of mindful movement," says Randall, an independent dancer who trained at York University. "There's a balance between form and freedom. Always the invitation is to do it your way, the way your body wants to adapt to the movements. I call it cross-training.

"There are yin and yang elements in each class, moments of stillness, and then it gets wild and crazy. The martial arts give you a chance to be fierce. The non-linear movement develops your body awareness and emotional awareness. But it's not too warm and fuzzy. Nia classes really focus the mind, so people can develop some skills."

Marriott discovered Nia after an ankle injury. "I was looking for an exercise class I enjoyed because I love to dance, but Nia has given me a lot more than that."

A dealer in vintage textiles, Marriott says Nia keeps her creative side alive. "You become a lot less self-conscious. Martha's classes have a lot of people from the theatre and the arts."

Randall has even had professional dancers in her classes. "They are older dancers who can't bear to go to a technique class, but need to keep moving." Others new to dance come, she says, "out of a deep longing to feel more grace and connection with their bodies. They discover something of what drives dancers to stay in a poorly paid, punishing art form. Once we've opened our hearts to music, it's hard to stop."