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Expect the World

Twisting Body and Mind

By Gia Kourlas
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Guy Calaf for The New York Times
An outdoor Gaga event in Manhattan in July, which attracted Aaron Hooper, center left, and others.

Long before the pop star came on the scene, Gaga was a movement language developed by the Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin. Lady Gaga named herself after a Queen song, but Mr. Naharin, whose dances conjure a soulful blur of humor, sensuality and grit, chose the word for its playfulness.

It makes sense. While Gaga is a serious new way of training the body, it is also about connecting to pleasure and, hardest of all perhaps, realizing that there's nothing wrong with being silly. Danielle Agami, executive producer of [Gaga USA](#) who has recently organized a wave of classes in New York, told me, "Come on, enjoy making a fool out of you."

While there is sweat involved, Gaga is more than exercise. In a way it's a philosophy that works to take you back to a time when the mind, eager to lord over an uptight body, wasn't such a tense, superficial pilot. To practice Gaga you can't be too far removed from your sense of humor. It's not for children — those 15 and under aren't permitted — simply because children don't need Gaga. They already possess it.

Gaga — in name — has been around about 10 years, but Mr. Naharin, the artistic director at the Tel Aviv-based [Batsheva Dance Company](#), says that he can trace its beginnings to early childhood memories. Initially he developed the [movement form](#) for himself — he was dealing with a back injury — and for nondancers, mostly his company's behind-the-scene staff. They wanted to move too. Fittingly there are two versions of the class, Gaga/dancers and Gaga/people. At Batsheva the training is mainly Gaga. (One day a week is still reserved for ballet.)

In Israel, Gaga is hugely popular. Last spring, at an event benefiting Japanese tsunami relief, Ms. Agami, who danced with Batsheva from 2005 to 2010, said that attendance reached 900. Over the last few months classes or workshops in both have been offered in New York City at Peridance Capezio Center, Mark Morris Dance Center, Steps on Broadway and the Ailey Extension. In July Ms. Agami even organized an outdoor Gaga event in Manhattan.

“The class is a playground, and you know you're going to morph,” Ms. Agami said, explaining its appeal. “You know when you leave that you're probably going to forget about the thoughts you had 50 minutes before. They will come back, but I took your brain away from work, from problems, and then you have some strength and positive energy to deal with your issues.” She flashed a knowing smile and added, “So many people talked about it that they left their job because of Gaga, they left their husband because of Gaga.”

Gaga movement transforms the body into a wiggling, twisting mass, in which the joints stretch so far that limbs are placed in seemingly awkward positions as the ribs lift up, away from the “sit bones.” There is a flow to it, which feels somewhat therapeutic — for professionals and nondancers alike — because the body never stops moving. But when I decided to try Gaga a couple of months ago, I was only vaguely curious about its physical benefits. My job — it's a personal rule — means that I don't belong in dance class anymore; that is a dancer's sacred space. (Dance critics must join gyms.) In the case of Gaga, though, I needed to understand its mechanics.

In the end I was partly right and partly wrong. Gaga isn't meant to be watched — and certainly, Mr. Naharin doesn't present it as such — because it's not choreography. But studying it is addictive, and, refreshingly, it has nothing to do with burning a million calories in a brutal gym class or the pseudo-spirituality of yoga.

No one, by the way, is allowed simply to observe a Gaga class. (And bless Mr. Naharin for covering the mirrors.) Gaga/dancers seems more structured and includes ballet terminology and jumps, but each class has a similar effect; it teaches you how to be available. Part of the point of Gaga is to become reacquainted with your body, and if you aren't open to it, you fail. It's both simple and unattainable, and it doesn't take too long to forget about everyone else in the room. Gaga is about being alone in a crowd.

Generally class begins with the teacher standing in the center of a studio directing a group through fanciful instructions that urge the torso, the arms, the shoulders and the back into circular shapes. Playing with speed, balance and texture, you might imagine that your skin is sticky or that you are walking through honey. Stretching your arms to either side, the spine stays soft while you attempt, as Ms. Agami once put it, to “see if you can swim with your bones inside of your skin.”

It’s sort of like catching a cloud. While the structure of a class changes according to the whim of the teacher — and so does the music, which in my experience included Madonna and De La Soul — there are some consistencies. You start standing, make your way to the floor and end upright. The teacher leads the way; the path is your own.

But it’s not a case of anything goes. Once when we were creating circles with our fingers, and not very well, Ms. Agami stopped the class with a simple “Forget your hands for a second. Instead of thinking that we need to do it, look at them and imagine that it happens to you.” This is a typical Gaga correction.

At the start of one class Ms. Agami told us to change the distance between our arms and rib cage, between our chin and chest, between our toes, between the small bones in our feet, and from the heel to the floor. “Now,” she said, “see if you can know them all at the same time.”

Gaga is multitasking and, like dancing, it’s impossible to get right. How, for instance, do you really connect your tongue to your spine? How do you open the path between the inside of your hands to your wrists? Gradually you start to understand how the spine becomes naturally supple when you imagine that it is made of seaweed, and that there is a difference between skin, which holds the body together like an envelope, and flesh. How do you freeze the body and not freeze the seaweed? Baffling, yes. Boring, no.

The images the instructor tries to conjure guide you to use your body in a way that strengthens and stretches. As Ms. Agami explained: “We show some things you can decide to do and some things you can decide to just let go and they will happen to you. That is so important.” And one thing certainly happens in terms of experiencing parts of my body that I’ve never noticed before. At first, the constant crackling was a little alarming; now I think it’s a sign that I’m emerging from cubicle inertia.

Clearly I’m at rock bottom in terms of understanding the complexities of Gaga, but I know that it’s not about getting stuck in a shape. Actually I’m pretty sure that yoga is dead to me. With Gaga I don’t have to wrestle my body into rigid poses or endure a yoga teacher’s pious opening monologue. And because of Gaga I don’t have to hear a yoga instructor say, “Namaste” at the end of class without wondering if she knows how to spell it. I’m free.

Or, as a Gaga teacher usually says near the end of each class, “Find your groove.”