

QUICKSTEP

to fitness

BY BETINA LOUW

YOU DON'T NEED TO BE SUPER-SLICK OR ULTRA-TRIM TO BE ABLE TO DANCE. YOU JUST NEED TO BE READY AND WILLING. AFTER A FEW SESSIONS THE STEPS WILL START COMING AUTOMATICALLY – AND SO WILL THE REWARDS



MORE and more people are finding their dancing feet and fitness. All over SA classes are being offered in every dance style you can imagine – from ballet, tap and folk to Latin and acrobatics. It's a relaxing way to work out for both men and women of any age. And international celebs like Richard Gere and Kate Moss have long been in on the act (Richard does ballroom, Kate prefers pole dancing).

South Africa's famous handyman and former winner of the TV dance show *Strictly Come Dancing*, Riaan Garforth-Venter aka 'Die Nutsman', says he learnt to dance in the corridors of his school hostel – with the help of a good old broom. Then, in 2006, he got the call inviting him

to take part in *Strictly*, which meant he had to learn to do everything from a Viennese waltz to a salsa in just three months. With the entire country watching his every move . . .

"I was 41, unfit and overweight," says Garforth-Venter. "But then I started dancing and lost 25 kg in 14 weeks. It changed my entire lifestyle." Today he weighs a neat 89 kg.

Every day, Durban salsa instructor Mike Moss watches his students trade their workwear for a sense of childlike spontaneity.

"It's a way of winding down that puts your body and soul back in touch with each other," he says.

South African ballroom champion Andrew de Freitas says dance is the body's natural response to the rhythms it hears. "That's why you

often don't notice you're sweating even when you've been dancing for an hour," he says.

But sometimes we simply forget how to use this natural rhythm. Or we're afraid of looking silly.

"I'm really thankful I got the chance to rediscover my rhythm," says Garforth-Venter. He's also thankful that he's kept off 20 of the kilos he lost – he was so motivated to stay slim that he began to eat healthier. Riaan and his wife Michelle (also a former *Strictly* dancer) still try to attend a dance class every second week.

They're not the only ones who've become dance freaks. Soapie star Freedom Hadebe, or Mandla Khumalo from *7de Laan*, and former Miss SA Cindy Nell say *Strictly* got them dancing too. >

'It's a way of winding down that puts your body and soul back in touch with each other'

PICTURE: AUBREY JOHNSON; CREATIVE DIRECTION: PETRO DUTOIT; STYLING: LORETTA KUNZ

BEST FOOT FORWARD. Cindy Nell has the slender, supple build of a dancer – you could look like this too.

Pick one of these popular styles and join a class today!

CENTRE STAGE. Before his TV appearance, Freedom only danced at home.

Had you danced before?

Cindy I could *sokkie* and two-step like most Afrikaans girls but nothing more than what I'd learnt at school and from my mother.

Freedom Maybe in the shower or in front of the mirror in my room but other than that, never!

Has dancing changed your body?

Cindy Absolutely! I danced up to eight hours a day and became much fitter, stronger and slimmer, even if the long hours did take their toll on my back, ankles and feet. But the exercise is wonderful. My butt is still firmer from all the dancing. I always say you have to do exercise that's fun, not just repetitive gym work. By the end of the series I had dropped two dress sizes.

Freedom Suddenly I had butt muscles! I'm naturally thin so I didn't lose much weight but my body became much firmer and suppler. I also had more energy and felt fitter.

Do you still dance?

Cindy Definitely. Jonathan Broadway, my *Strictly* partner, and I are working on a video called *Dancing Made Easy* that teaches people to dance at home.

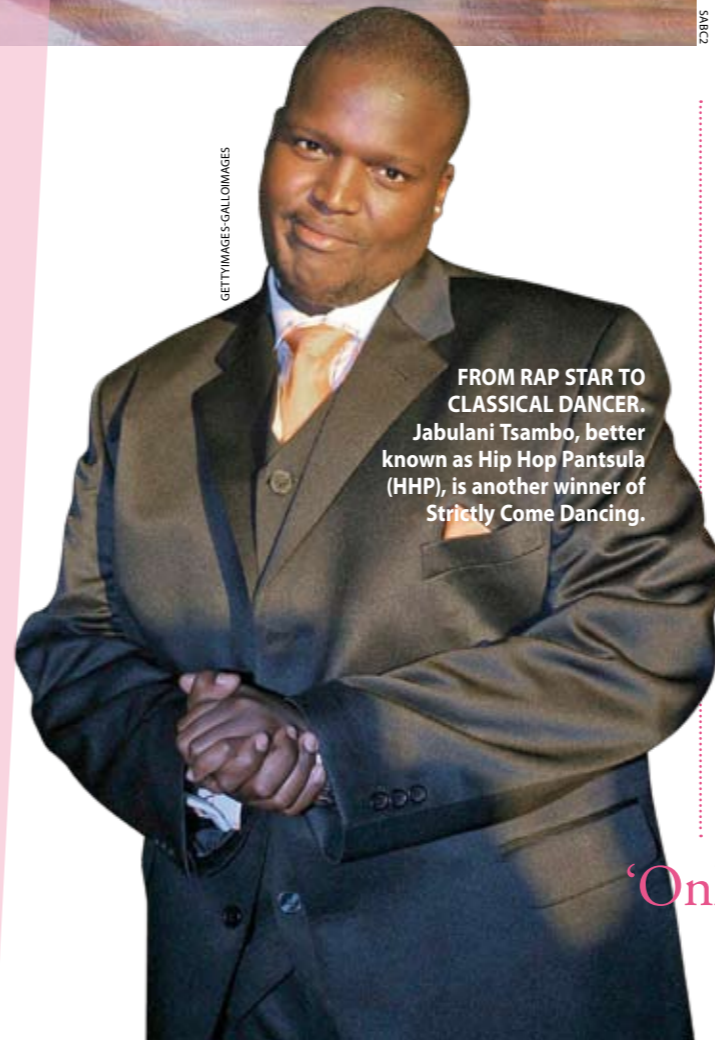
It's also for all those shy guys who'd prefer to just dance with their wives in the lounge. I mean really, if I can do it, anyone can!

Freedom I still dance. It's an excellent way of clearing your head because it's just you and the dancefloor. I go to lessons once a week.

Could you feel it getting easier after every session?

Freedom It's like riding a bike. The more often you do it the better you get.

Cindy It took me weeks to learn the first dance but by the end I could learn a completely new dance style in just three days.



FROM RAP STAR TO CLASSICAL DANCER. Jabulani Tsambo, better known as Hip Hop Pantsula (HHP), is another winner of *Strictly Come Dancing*.

Salsa

The style Your reddest lipstick is appropriate here – salsa is endlessly sexy and sensual! It's an energetic dance style but also relaxed and informal – the emphasis is definitely more on fun than technique. "The audience doesn't matter," says Stephanie Speets, a salsa coach at Durban Salsa. "When you salsa you're dancing to dance, not to perform."

This fiery dance with its seductive undertones originated in Cuba. The moves are smouldering and even though your body might struggle to get used to its rhythms at first, your heart will be beating in time from the start.

The challenge factor The steps are easy to learn and the relaxed style doesn't depend on perfect technique.

Plus points Many of us spend most of our time hunched over a computer, which means our core muscles – the abs and lower back – get weaker and weaker.

Salsa is good exercise for these muscles, which are responsible for keeping the upper body upright and balanced. It also improves your posture and reduces the risk of back and muscle pain.

The bonus? You don't need a regular dance partner – most classes are offered in a group format.

Celebrities who salsa Jennifer Lopez and her husband, Marc Anthony

'The audience doesn't matter. When you salsa, you're dancing to dance, not perform'



Ballroom dancing

The style Think graceful – but only once you've learnt the steps, says Andrew de Freitas of Johannesburg's Dance for Life Academy. Ballroom dancing includes the Viennese waltz, tango, foxtrot, cha-cha, samba, jive, paso doble and quickstep.

The waltz dates from as early as the 1700s, while most of the others, with the exception of the tango, were developed in the 1900s as elegant diversions for aristocrats – folk-dancing, on the other hand, was the realm of the working class.

The challenge factor It's quite tricky initially because there's just so much technical detail. Don't expect to be instantly gliding over the dance floor like a swan. But with enough practice you'll move confidently past the ugly-duckling phase within six weeks. Just make sure your partner is as enthusiastic as you are because you have to work closely together.

Plus points Ballroom dancing improves co-ordination and your sense of rhythm because the steps have to be performed at a fast pace. You'll burn up to 1 380 kJ an hour even when you're dancing slowly.

Ballroom is especially good for your back muscles, says De Freitas. (He was diagnosed with mild scoliosis while still at school but today, at the age of 43, he has no complications from the condition.)

It's also good for your self-image. "Men, especially, experience an enormous feeling of achievement when they've perfected the technique as well as the speed," says De Freitas. "I always say only real men can dance this style," he jokes.

Celebrity ballroom-blitzers

Hip Hop Pantsula, Renée Zellweger, Toni Braxton, Richard Gere, Jane Seymour, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Denise Richards and Belinda Carlisle

'Only real men can dance this style'

PERFECT POSTURE. Cindy's proof that dancing is good for your body.

Exercise



FANCY FOOTWORK. Usher is known for his hip-hop moves.

GETTY IMAGES/GALLO IMAGES

Hip-hop

The style Hip-hop music originated in The Bronx in 1970s New York. But you don't have to be draped in bling or be a big rap fan to try hip-hop. It's a style of street dance that doesn't have to be done to the beat of hip-hop music. In fact, dance studios offer hip-hop classes in a variety of modes, from break-dancing to more choreographed versions you see in music videos.

The challenge factor It's actually astonishingly easy. "The basic movements are easy to learn and the style follows naturally," says Johannesburg hip-hop and ballroom dance coach Elise Krog. The nicest thing about it is the scope you have for improvisation and interpretation.

Plus points You exercise all the muscles in your body, particularly the legs, and the exercise you get is intensive because the pace is so fast. One hour of hip-hop amounts to about the same as an hour's high-intensity cardiovascular exercise like a spinning class, says Ilse Louw, a dance instructor at Constantiaberg Dance Academy in Cape Town.

If you're a fan of hip-hop music you'll also be swept away – the beat is relaxing and the physical exertion releases feel-good endorphins in the brain, which help to relieve stress.

Celebrity hip-hoppers Usher, Jessica Alba, Missy Elliot, Justin Timberlake and Julia Stiles.

Pole dancing

The style Pole dancing originated in strip clubs, but its scandalous stigma is disappearing fast, according to pole-dancing instructor Natasha Williams of BodyMind Studios in Johannesburg.

"Women are looking for ways to exercise that are more exciting than gym," she explains. And pole dancing isn't just about being sexy, it's about combining gymnastics, suppleness and grace. That's why the range of possible moves is endless.

The challenge factor Pole dancing is challenging and the exercise sessions vary. After just one hour you should have mastered a few moves, says Williams, but it takes three to six months for a beginner to feel comfortable and a year to get to an advanced stage.

Plus points If you practise three times a week for an hour you'll be slimmer and suppler after only a month. Pole dancing works all the stubborn, flabby bits where fat accumulates first: tummy, arms, hips, thighs and butt. "And because it makes you feel sensual and graceful it helps to build self-confidence, not to mention giving you some tips for the bedroom!" says Williams.

Celebrity pole dancers Kate Moss, Britney Spears, Kate Hudson and Lindsay Lohan. Oprah Winfrey helped make pole dancing popular in 2003 when she devoted an episode to it.

Belly dancing

The style It comes from Egypt, has been influenced by various Eastern cultures and is one of the oldest social dance forms in the world. Belly dancers sway their upper bodies and hips in sensual circles, using flowing arm movements as emphasis.

"It leaves lots of room for creativity," says Cape Town belly-dance teacher Marissa Cuenoud. "What makes it so much fun is the combination of the traditional styles with modern knowledge of anatomy, movement and muscle conditioning.

The dance is still linked to the traditional trimmed bra top and swinging skirt, although lots of men now do belly dancing too."

The challenge factor A beginner needs to practise for at least an hour a week. And you don't need a supple waist to be able to belly dance; it comes with practice, says Marissa.

Plus points It's especially good for your upper body because your torso and abdomen have to work intensively. It improves your posture and reduces or relieves back pain while keeping the muscles flexible. The movement of the torso can also aid digestion and improve your balance.

Celebrity belly dancers Shakira, Hilary Duff and Beyoncé. +

Dance! It's good for your health

Here's how dance helps

Posture Dancing helps you to stand tall and it spontaneously pulls your spine up straight. Walking upright eventually becomes a habit.

Balance Balance is essential when you're performing dance moves.

Heart A good hour-long dance session can push your heart rate up to 120 beats per minute – the same as aerobic exercise. You'll burn more or less the same amount of kilojoules when you walk briskly for 5 km.

Muscles The exertion dance demands of your muscles helps to tone your arms and legs. Over time you'll see your upper arms, calves and thighs firm up.

Bones Graceful dance moves keep bones strong without putting unnecessary strain on the joints. Dance promotes bone density and therefore helps to prevent osteoporosis.

Confidence Dancing for or with people boosts self-confidence. Few of us wouldn't be proud of performing a faultless tango!

Body and soul Many studies have investigated the therapeutic and meditative effects of dance on the body. "The combination of music and movement brings your body and soul together in a world that often puts too much emphasis on the external world," says Cape Town clinical psychologist Dr Melléta Louw.

All forms of dance are good for your body and health but it's important to check your dance teacher's qualifications. Also, make sure you tell him or her if you have any injuries or health problems so your dance moves can be adapted appropriately. And listen to your body – take a break when you're tired and don't try to force yourself into positions you're not used to. Visit www.dancedirectory.co.za and click on "Search our Directory" on the top of the page. Choose from a comprehensive list of dance styles and fill in your address for info about classes near you. Virgin Active gyms also offer hour-long fitness sessions that combine various styles of dance.