Why We’ve All Got BALLET FEVER

From fashion to fitness, ballet is this year’s hottest trend. Jan Masters slips on her tutu.

Muscle-stretching pliés, precise pirouettes, an immense feeling of freedom as you jeté across the floor. The elation of finishing a class, wet with sweat, having given your body a fierce 90-minute workout that has lifted you out of the mundane into delicious, gravity-defying lightness. This is how I feel after my ballet classes each week. Even the range of attendees is intriguing and inspiring in itself: I may find myself next to an ad exec in her late twenties who started ballet in a bid to get fit, or a woman in her sixties participating for the sheer enjoyment. You don’t have to conform to a certain age or size, or be of sparkling stage-worthy standard.

It seems I’m not alone in my obsession. Even if you’re not tripping the light fantastic yourself in 2011, you are likely to be dipping your toe into the art form, because ballet has never been hotter. Hollywood has already fuelled interest with Natalie Portman’s twisted turn in Black Swan. In fashion, the S/S 11 curtain has (continued)
BEGI N N E R S' GUIDE TO BALLET

° Ordinary fitness clothing is fine - but you will need ballet shoes (not pointe shoes).
° Check how much experience is required. If you have very little knowledge, try a syllabus-based course that repeats exercises each week so you grow familiar with steps.
° Shop around until you find a teacher who feels right for you.
° For a class in your area, visit Royal Opera House's website.
° For further ticket information for Royal Ballet, visit roh.org.uk.

The youth club would press their noses to the window and laugh. But although I didn't pick it up again until my thirties, there are aspects of ballet that never left me: that slightly turned-out stance; memories of the hymn-bookish scent of floor dust on ballet-slipper soles; and the joy of being swept away by the pointe, poised and passion of a performance at the Royal Opera House.

Ballet can also help keep joints supple and bones strong, as well as devoicing 500 to 600 calories an hour. There are positive psychological benefits, too. "Dancing is a great way to forget stress," confirms Dr Peter Lovatt, aka Dr Dance, who founded the Dance Psychology Lab at the University of Hertfordshire. This is because we experience an endorphin release - ballet is particularly good as it raises the heart rate through a steady progression of exercises, starting gently then moving on to faster steps.

It's good for your brain, too. "We know structured dance can help you become faster at problem-solving," adds Lovatt. "It's a creative improvisation that can help with creative problem-solving, too." 

Lovatt says, I can wholeheartedly confirm it improves mood. I'm currently taking some private classes with Stefano Rosato, who has danced with Rambert Dance Company and is helping to give my ballet a contemporary twist. I always leave on a high.

To get your kicks vicariously? Then go and see a show. For compelling intensity, check out work by Wayne McGregor, artistic director of Random Dance and resident choreographer of The Royal Ballet. One of his most exhilarating pieces is Chroma, full of sharp, staccato movements, set to music including re-scores of songs by The White Stripes. His new piece for The Royal Ballet premieres in May.

What's more, not all classical ballets focus on fairy tales. My favourite - Sir Kenneth MacMillan's Mayerling - is a torrid tale of crazed affairs, hypodermics, syphilis and suicide pacts. Plot lines more riveting than EastEnders.

In June, The Royal Ballet's The 02 arena, with 5,000 tickets on sale for every performance. An elite cast - including three awe-inspiring pin-up principals: Carlos Acosta, Johan Kobborg and Edward Watson - will perform Romeo And Juliet. When I was lucky enough to slip behind the scenes to watch the company's morning class, there was a moment when this "holy trinity" was spinning towards me at speed. I nearly spontaneously combusted with excitement.

What was even more striking is that their class is similar to anything we can take. OK, the pros can jump way higher and pirouette a million times more. But ballet is a universal discipline, so even if you're dancing in a draughty church hall in Clee thorpe, you're following in the steps of these stars at Covent Garden. How cool is that? Oh, if only those boys in the youth club could see me now...