

# **Fitness Bound; Like a Ballerina, but With a Shimmy; Add yoga and pop, and a dance is routine no longer**

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In my earliest memory of ballet class, I am sprinting out of a dance studio and into my mother's arms. I am 5 years old, and the clingy tights, constricting leotard and competitive brunette with a perfect bun are too much for me to handle. Nestled in my mother's arms, I decide I've had enough of ballet.

Then one recent day I was cruising the Internet and stumbled onto a description for a class called "yoga booty ballet." My childhood experience aside, this sounded like something too intriguing to pass up.

Co-taught at Swerve in Los Angeles by friends Gillian Marloth and Teigh McDonough, the class mixes plies, pop music and yoga--without the tutus or Tchaikovsky. Instead, Marloth and McDonough, who co-founded Swerve a year ago, focus the 90-minute class on cardiovascular endurance using dance steps and yoga positions that increase flexibility.

At the class I attended, about 30 sweaty women thrust out their backsides, as if imitating a kind of hyperactive hokeypokey step. At first, I was a bit self-conscious, but soon I joined the others. "Let your butt blossom out," Marloth said into a headset. "Shimmy, shimmy, shimmy!" Packed together on a hardwood floor, we went barefoot and stared into a wall of mirrors at our contorted bodies. Colorful Chinese paper lanterns swayed above us as traffic hummed by on 3rd Street. When the music switched from Dirty Vegas to India.Arie, we formed ovals with our arms and cast our right legs skyward into arabesques.

The ballet moves made every muscle in my body work. My calves screamed as we hoisted our bodies up on the balls of our feet for a series of relevés. My inner thighs grew taut as I molded my legs into wide diamonds for grand plies. Even my thumbs got a workout as I adjusted them during a passe.

"Feel like a ballerina," said Marloth, who sported pigtails. "Feel like a swan."

With my wobbly, rectangular-shaped body, I felt more like a lame duck. But it didn't matter. There were no teachers glaring at your feet to see if you were in perfect first position. Now 36, Marloth began studying classical ballet at age 9 in hopes of adding grace to her figure-skating routines. McDonough, also 36, started ballet lessons at age 5--like me--only she stuck with it until her early 20s. The two met as fine arts students at UC Santa Barbara. After graduation, both left L.A. to pursue acting--Marloth in New York and McDonough in Chicago. They

returned in the mid-'90s.

Five years ago, as an instructor teaching body sculpting, step aerobics and other classes at Crunch Los Angeles, Marloth dreamed up what would become yoga booty ballet. "I woke up one morning and said, 'Class, we're going to do something different.'" Marloth says the name of the class is to get across the idea of a ballet-yoga hybrid that emphasizes the "reshaping of the rear end."

"I was trying to evolve athletics into something more of a spiritual pursuit and a creative relief," Marloth says. "The goal was to make movement into art for people."

The class became a hit at Crunch, and McDonough eventually joined Marloth as a teacher. They took the concept with them when they opened Swerve. Both still do occasional acting--McDonough also works part-time as a personal trainer--but they focus their energies on teaching at Swerve.

Their efforts have pushed some participants toward a further exploration of dance. Felicia de Jesus, 35, of Hollywood Hills returned to formal ballet classes after just one month of taking yoga booty ballet. But she keeps coming back to the class because, compared to classical ballet, "this is just more fun and multiracial with music like hip-hop," de Jesus said. "I grew up with Zoot suits and low riders. I can't relate to Tchaikovsky."

Though the class won't train people for the Kirov Ballet, it does incorporate genuine ballet movements, even while eschewing the barre. And it does highlight the breathing movements and body poses of kundalini and hatha yoga.

Not surprisingly, some ballet purists frown upon the idea of injecting ballet into the fitness mainstream. Nadezhda Koscuik, a longtime instructor of Russian classical ballet who is co-artistic director of the Westwood Dance Studio, says that if people really want to get fit, they should stick to the traditional methods of practice and technique-building. "Don't make a goulash out of movement," she says. "There's zero benefit."

Others, however, welcome the fusion of the modern and classical. "Ballet is at the core of every movement system," says Yuri Smaltzoff, 64, a former professional dancer with the Stuttgart Opera House in Germany and various international dance companies. "It's only now consciously being brought to the attention of people that we have some points in common," said Smaltzoff, who runs Ballet & Dance Art in Hollywood.

When I returned to yoga booty ballet for a second class, musician Lucius Oliver provided a motivational accompaniment by pounding away on a Middle Eastern drum called a doumbek.

Three days a week, Oliver participates in the class, changing his beat as students alter their steps. His high-energy drumming kept us synchronized.

After an hour of shaking and flexing our bodies, we unrolled teal and purple mats yoga mats. Oliver soothed us with gentle clangs on a Tibetan singing bowl as we eased into the relaxation and breathing.

I felt so relaxed during the yoga portion that my heart rate dropped to 55 beats per minute, down from a high of 147 while we danced. For most of class, my heart rate stayed slightly below my target zone. But as I rolled up from the yoga mat, I got a nice surprise when I glanced at my heart rate monitor. All that movement had burned off 590 calories. And it actually had helped me enjoy ballet.

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Snapshot:

Yoga Booty Ballet

Where to find it: Swerve,

8250 W. 3rd Street, Suite 206, Los Angeles.

For information: [www.yogaboobyballet.com](http://www.yogaboobyballet.com).

Duration of activity: 1 hour,

30 minutes

Calories burned: 590

Heart rate\*: Average of 120

beats per minute; high, 147.

Target zone: 136 to 156

Time in zone: 9 minutes

\* This information was obtained using a heart-rate monitor. Time in the target heart-rate zone is a measure of the intensity of the workout. Target zone varies based on age and individual rate.

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### **[Illustration]**

Caption: PHOTO: Musician Lucius Oliver keeps the beat at a class.; PHOTOGRAPHER: RICK LOOMIS / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: Simple ballet moves are part of the 90-minute "yoga booty ballet" class at Swerve in Los

Angeles. The integrated workout ends with yoga poses.; PHOTOGRAPHER:  
RICK LOOMIS / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: Susan Priver of Santa Monica and  
other participants move to the rhythm in "yoga booty ballet," a fusion of classical  
dance and pop music. About an hour is spent on dance and half an hour on yoga  
and breathing.; PHOTOGRAPHER: RICK LOOMIS / Los Angeles Times