Zoom In, Zumba Away

By HENRY ALFORD

WHENEVER I read about people who are in thrall to a dance craze, my world suddenly seems too small. Oh, to dance the mazurka until my footmen are forced to carry me home on a makeshift gurney at dawn; oh, to spurn a dinner invitation to Scott and Zelda’s because I literally cannot stop doing the Charleston.

More recent offerings like the achy-breaky and the lambada held no appeal for me: one brought to mind the phrase “ratty mullet”; the other, “pelvic wallop.” For all I know, Macarena is Portuguese for “a large room in which women apply makeup.”

But I recently started doing Zumba, the dance and fitness phenomenon that, in 125 countries, has been whipping some 12 million people into a lather for the last decade, including everyone from Wyclef Jean to the writer Susan Orlean.

I can safely say that dance-wise it’s the closest I have ever come to losing my mind. To wit: when I went to an elegant stand-up cocktail party in the San Remo building some weeks ago, I was moved to enact for a fellow swiller of white wine a bit of Zumba choreography.

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JOINING THE PARTY Members of a Zumba class stretching and stepping at the Chinatown Y.M.C.A.
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that I think of as the disco party. Dancing a lot with my right hand and then raising it over my head, I rotated it while standing on my feet and rapidly spinning 360 degrees. Which caused an onattending visitor to question me with an "Exeume me, sir?"

My Zumba origins are humble. I was initially drawn to the Zumba Europe, because I wanted to be more limber and flexible. Yes, I was impressed with this combination of Latin dance and cardio workout can cause you to lose 90 to 1,000 calories per sweat-stained, hour-long session. But my stronger motivator was a desire to remedy my somewhat Frankenstein-like corporeal instability. There are parts of my body that have not moved since 1995.

I started, as many do, on the Zumba stage with a small group. I learned there how, one day in the mid-1990s, the Columbian fitness instructor Alberto Perez, also called Bebe, forgot to take his aerobics music to a class he was teaching. USB instead spent sales and expense taxes he had in his backpack. Mr. Perez started improvising what would eventually become Zumba.

He moved to Miami in 2001, soon spawning DVDs and an infomercial. In 2005 Mr. Perez and his business partners created an academy to train instructors, of which there are now more than 50,000.

Taking my ZED code into the 2.0 world, I was told that 548 classes were within five miles. At the Hollywood fitness center, you could die from the encouragement.

I have now composed with the Z for two months. Most of my friend grating and quick-stopping has taken place at New York University and at three Y.M.C.A.'s in Manhattan.

Though there are specialty classes like Aqua Zumba and Zumba Gold (a slower-paced variety), for seniors, the great majority of Zumba classes are open to people of all ages, and follow this format: an instructor arrives wearing stretchy black clothing and a facial expression of militant excitement: she turns on some music (acts of Ricky Martin and Jennifer Lopez, with a variation of the Latin-American hybrid known as reggaeton) and wendily starts dancing.

We 15 or 20 (primarily female) students, all in workout clothes, except for my B-Flat-Basque cast of flailing choreography.

Zumba's corporate slogan is "Ditch the workout, join the party." At the Z-fest, no one is going to count out the song's beat for you, or demonstrate the choreography before the song starts:

You're here to party, my friend, not to take a graduate seminar at the Dance Notation Bureau. Instead, one of my Chasen's Y instructors told a group of us, three of whom had to be crouching on the floor. You don't go to a nightclub and look at all the time.

Imagine Pops's great-looking girl at the club.

This is the most physically exhausting party you will ever at once tragic and urgent: you've been shot in the stomach, but are late for an appointment.

I operate at 50 or 60 percent memory of the choreography, which is above average. Certain stuttering Latin beats, and the fancy formations they foster, whole raps. But my Achilles heel is my overly literal approach: any time an instructor telegraphs a coming move by telling me, I look a

You'll bend parts of your body previously unentertained.

FLAIR AND PIVOT Too, Ben, Bryd leads Zumba at Alvin Alley.

Above, a Chelsea Piers class. Below, Zumba-themed bracelets.

class one Sunday morning at Alvin Alley, where I heard the crowd was younger, the choreography florid. At the registration desk, thinking of the Alvin company's spectacular athletic production, "Revelations," I asked the bubbly 20-something registrant, "Is this going to be "Revelations" Zumba?" Outstretching both her arms to her sides and raising them up over her head to describe a giant zebra or camel, she insisted, "No. I changed her and that's all.

Fifteen minutes later, my instructor, Ben, Bryd, a cuddly redhead in his 20s wearing a navy do-rag, was complimenting my speed walking in our durbar line song, which led me to think, I'm in.

But some five minutes later, my chillsness about touching the floor with my hands while crouching in a frog stance caused him to yell at me, "Get lower! I did, whereupon he smiled, grabbed one of my own buttocks and said encouragingly and gave me a sign of encouragement. I don't know how this translates in the dance world, but in the recreation world it means: Ben is so concerned about my knees, I am.

The dancing ramped up in fury intensity, which was thrilling. I overreacted, I overdid. At hour's end, Ben led us through 30 additional minutes, 75 jumping jacks, 75 push-ups, 75 British, of which I completed one-fourth. The next day my body felt. The next day my body felt.

When, post-Alley, I returned to the relative cool of the Chelsea Piers Sports Center, I paged Miss Zucchini at first sight: a warm hosted Carol Bennett type in blue and white cargo pants and black sequined ankle-ties, I tried myself to Chelsea Piers to take her class.

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