

Salsa sensation



A mirrored teaching room in central London, and a group of wannabe salseros are listening intently to a diminutive Latina with a high ponytail and relaxed, no-pressure attitude. "Dancing salsa isn't just about movement," she says in accented English. "It is about culture, passion and a positive attitude to life. By the end of my course you will be dancing as if you'd been born in Latin America. Now," she adds, eyes twinkling, "lie down on the floor."

Pardon? Aren't we supposed to partner up and do the whole awkward forward-backward-forward thing? Not in the classes of Irene Miguel (pictured left). If we want to dance salsa – *really* dance salsa – we have to start with the basics. With my back on a mat I tilt my pelvis up, down and sideways. I stretch: there are downward-facing dogs, cobra

Jane Cornwell meets Irene Miguel, whose holistic approach to salsa, fusing Pilates, yoga and dance, has been a global success

poses, the occasional salute to the sun. It all feels a bit like, well, Pilates and yoga. "It is," says Irene, flashing a smile.

"I can't teach dance without looking at all its different aspects," says the London-based Argentinean, whose internationally-recognised Danzalifestyle systems offer a radical yet holistic approach to Latin dance training. "I have to take care of posture, health and inner life. I have to make sure that my students are feeling the music, interpreting the different instruments and rhythms in salsa with their bodies, as well as with a partner. I want people to access their unlimited potential as dancers."

With the increase in popularity of salsa as a social activity – every second pub in London now seems to offer an evening class or two – has come an influx of teachers who lack real understanding of the dance, culture and music, who simply aren't very good. The salsa world is yet to demand the sort of rigorous teacher training inherent in ballet and Pilates. "The duty of any teacher is to be professional, to keep investing in their training and be the best they can be. It's just not fair on the students otherwise," says Irene.

The mother-of-one (five-year-old Liam, here playing happily in a corner) launched Danzalifestyle in 2003, having spent several years fine-tuning the programme with her Nuyorican former dance partner, Edgard del Rosario, a former dancer with salsa king Eddie Torres. Their fusion of Pilates, yoga and dance – as embraced by their Salsalifestyle and Mambolifestyle systems – was an immediate sensation. They have since deployed Danzalifestyle ➤

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“Danzalifestyle doesn't only free the body. It frees the mind”



everywhere from the UK to the US, France to Argentina, Turkey to Spain and beyond.

“The systems show that everybody can dance and feel free,” says Irene. They let people progress rapidly, but at their own pace. After one class people will tell me, ‘Wow, I have never felt like this! Their faces are shining.’”

Miguel's programme unfolds in six, easy-to-assimilate “pillars”:

- 1) Spirit, or music interpretation and timing.
- 2) LEAP (that's Lifestyle Enhancement Achievement Programme), with its focus on alignment and breathing.
- 3) Freedom, which focuses on body isolations and self-expression.
- 4) Tornado, which develops scope for multiple spins.
- 5) Jam, and its “shines” or dance improvisation.
- 6) Union, a partner-dancing program that emphasises harmony and respect and, says Miguel, “leads to better relationships off the dancefloor as well”.

Woven throughout are five “elements” – space, earth, air, water, fire – which relate to characteristics including compassion, wisdom and determination. If this all sounds a bit New Age, a bit Gabrielle Roth (the creator of Five Rhythms), it isn't. Sure, Irene happens to be a practising Buddhist given to chanting for the happiness of her students. But she's all the more pragmatic for it. “Buddhism

is about everyday life, about becoming the best you can be,” she says. “It helps keep my teaching meaningful and real.”

Irene has come a long way from the girl who formed her own little dance group in Argentina, aged seven. A qualified yoga teacher and fitness instructor with a degree in sports science, she studied classical ballet and jazz dance at the National School of Dance in Buenos Aires and worked with companies at Sadler's Wells after arriving in London in 1991.

Her idols were Martha Graham, Alicia Alonso and Mikhail Baryshnikov. After discovering salsa through a friend's Latin band and some accommodating Cubans, she learned to appreciate the greats – including her eventual teacher, Eddie Torres – of that genre, too.

A series of serendipitous events soon saw her teaching salsa and mambo, dancing

in professional shows, forming her own dance companies and ultimately, the Danzalifestyle systems. Her sharp business sense and mission to get people dancing like real salseros has led to the development of an online Digital Dance Academy and – having just finished filming in Crete, where she spends a few months of each year teaching – the definitive Salsalifestyle and Mambolifestyle DVDs, to be released early this year.

“My mission is to help people feel better and dance better, whether they want to dance socially or become professional dancers or teachers,” says Irene. It's been a long road: “When I started teaching 20 years ago people were not even talking about musical interpretation, let alone a holistic approach to salsa.

Not many people believed I could do it, and now look.”

She gestures metaphorically around the salsa dancefloors of the world. “The systems have helped all sorts of people in all sorts of ways,” she says. “Danzalifestyle doesn't only free the body. It frees the mind.” ●



Irene Miguel and Mimo La Rock

For details of DVDs, the Digital Dance Academy and classes, see www.irenemiguel.com