

Dance Like No One's Watching

Whether you've been buried in self-consciousness for too long or you love yourself on the dance floor, 5Rhythms is a liberation. There are no right or wrong moves. There's music from deep house to dharma and prompting with words both poetic and practical. It's undeniably fun, yet this two-hour practice has the power to unlock frozen bodies or rekindle a person's creative spark.

People who do the 5rhythms learn to know their body, heart and mind well. Though many – like me – may have started out awkward in their own skin, they soon dance charismatically, alive to the music and visibly themselves.

On this Friday night, in Waiheke's Palm Beach Hall, Sacha Paddy, 36, is our teacher. Both fluid and focused, she will DJ us through a "wave" of five different movement styles – Flowing, Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical and Stillness – devised by American Gabrielle Roth. We start with a rolling Latin fusion track and an innocuous invitation to move any part of our body that wants release. I have no idea what the next two hours will unfold.



Before we know it, a funky bass-note has us shaking out the week. Sacha turns it down slightly to demonstrate the first rhythm – Flowing. Her movements seem to rise directly from her words, and are continuous without breaks or edges.

Inspired to follow the whim of my feet, I trial an unfamiliar twist at my hips and suddenly I'm dancing with, not against, the weight of my thighs. They actually give me swing. But wait – in this experimental space, my rigid 80s side-step has resurfaced as something more fluid. It's a new movement that's definitely mine, and it's fun.

Everyone's dancing their own way – some immersed in one spot, others curling wildly through the hall. Anything goes. On this dancefloor the point is to dance for its own sake, not to hook a mate. You're free to engage with one another, and free to move away when you want. It's a relief after the loaded codes of the nightclub floor. An easy thread of movement ripples up from heel to fingertips. Flowing. Where once I battled shame, I feel elegant – uncommonly so.

As Staccato kicks in, a rock beat evokes the angst of a million puberties. We move in percussive, short sharp moves, thrusting shapes which give pent-up emotions a form. Everyone's busy finding the gesture that feels, in that moment, like their mother tongue.

It's strange to be following one's innermost whisperings among others doing the same. Though the crowd changes each class, a sense of community forms. Momentarily, three of us mirror each other in a hilarious elbow-dance. You're seen, enjoyed, accepted, without words.

The music carries us into Chaos – the creative, unpredictable, trancey state. I'm going fast, but there's no question of stopping now. I know I'm flushed, but I feel the funkier kid, loving my unique moves. I weave an incredibly complex dance with a man I barely know. It's thrilling to find myself playing with another, free and light as a bird.

When Sacha first discovered 5Rhythms 13 years ago, she was "stiff as a log and clumsy. I saw a fluid comfort in others bodies which I wanted for myself." She soon found changes at many levels. "The dance changes how we relate to ourselves, others and groups, how we handle blockages, and move through life."

Certainly, in my two years of sporadic classes, deep shifts have occurred. One dance, I shed a thick crust of protectiveness around my heart. I actually believe this practice has not just made me a confident dancer – it has also opened me emotionally for a passionate relationship, after a period of being single and shut-down.

As befits a powerful process of creative release, all 5Rhythm teachers have rigorous training. Despite 10 years' experience, Sacha had to practise for eight months in Europe to qualify for the course; then followed a year's workshops overseas with Gabrielle Roth. Her manner is understated, her interventions sparse, yet her deft use of language prompts extraordinary self-exploration and insight as you move.

In Lyrical, a lightness pervades the still-vibrant beats. In this rhythm I have danced out grief for my father, and experienced explosions of lightness. Whatever's topical that day will be aired and moved through in an abstract way.

Stillness, the final rhythm, is peaceful, but not still. "If you're giving voice to your body" asks Sacha, "what still wants to move?" Some Gregorian chants invoke a dreamlike state of grace. Physically spent, emotionally grounded, awake to our essential nature, we come, very gradually, to rest.

– *Rosie Walford*

** Sacha Paddy teaches regularly (Sunday mid-morning, Auckland; Friday evening, Waiheke) and at residential workshops. Email: sacha@5rhythms.co.nz.*

Other qualified teachers in NZ: 5rhythms.co.nz.

Gabrielle Roth, founder of 5Rhythms: gabrielleroth.com.

Classes are drop-in.