



HOLLYWOOD STARS HONOURED
Gay rights group dishes awards to A-listers for their work **P11**

SHEER JOY: Black belt instructor Susan Sloan has a fabulous moment
Pictures: SUPPLIED



Nia is fun fusion fitness craze

Exercise blend uses 'pleasure principle', writes Alison Stent

I WAS never a sport or exercise fan, and when it comes to dancing, I've generally had four left feet, so it's no wonder the jaws of my loved ones hang open when they listen to me these days.

The thing is, I'm having such fun. It really doesn't matter how old you are or what size, shape or fitness level. The music is great, and you just find your own pace and use as much – or as little – energy as you want to. In a short year, my relationship with my body has changed completely – from the way I walk to the way I sleep, eat, dress, listen, sit ...

"Nia is a fitness art that builds strength, agility, flexibility and grace in the body and mind, bringing about transformation on many levels beyond the physical," black belt instructor Susan Sloan says on her Nia Gauteng website www.niapp.co.za.

Sloan is in Knysna and George this weekend running Nia workshops and classes for beginners.

"Nia is the most advanced form of fusion fitness, blending martial arts, healing arts, dance arts and self-healing to create a high-powered, synergistic workout that will not only keep you in fantastic shape, but will also help you to rediscover the joy of movement and being at home in your body," she says.

"Nia addresses the whole person through integration, play and sensory awareness. It uses the pleasure principle to seek comfort and ease to move, strengthen and heal the body in a natural, organic way."

The history of Nia is interesting.

Way back in the 80s, when the aerobics craze was at its height, California aerobics instructor Debbie met tennis professional Carlos Rosas. She was becoming appalled at the injury rate in aerobics, especially among long-term practitioners, and he was looking for a fun way to keep fit and supple.

They began exploring together – martial arts like



THE EASY WAY: Nia co-founder Carlos Rosas takes a class through a high energy number

aikido, tai chi and taekwondo; dance forms like jazz, Duncan and modern; body integration therapies like Alexander technique, yoga and Feldenkrais.

Gradually they developed a whole new way of thinking about health, fitness and fun – then they began teaching it, and so Nia grew, and grew, and grew.

Nowadays the concept of fusion fitness is everywhere but that, I'm told, is where it started.

It was brought to South Africa about 10 years ago by black belt trainer Kathy Wolstenholme from Colorado, who used Nia to work with abused young girls before she settled in this country.

A few months ago, my body was in a lot of trouble. I spend hours and hours in front of a computer every day and have done most of my adult life, but last year had a few really high-stress months in it.

My right shoulder seemed permanently locked under my ear. The muscles in my forearms had bunched up and frozen solid in a permanent, aching cramp.

This put the tendons, which fix the muscles to the bones, under strain and they slowly began to shear away from the bone. This condition is known as tennis elbow. I was in pain all the time, and every day I had to sit down at my desk and re-injure myself.

I had so little power in my arms, I needed both hands to lift the kettle when I made a cup of coffee.

I can't say Nia alone healed all that damage (it's not finished healing) – my chiropractor worked miracles and more recently I have discovered the gym – I know, snap those jaws shut again. (But it is an excellent antidote to the desk and the TV).

But I can say without a doubt that if it wasn't for Nia you wouldn't have caught me anywhere near a gym.

And it was Nia that brought me back to joy, gentleness, balance and fun, and put me on a steady path of self-healing.

And yes, there are classes in East London.

Ground-breaking exercise programme defies gravity – Nasa-style

By **DORENE INTERNICOLA**

MORE fitness fanatics are taking to the air these days, held aloft by tech-

nology borrowed from sources as far-flung as the space programme and the circus.

Experts say if you adhere to the

learning curve, going antigravity can be just the thing to relieve overused joints and revitalise an earthbound routine.

Stephen Csolak, fitness manager at a Manhattan branch of Equinox, the American chain of luxury fitness centres, uses an antigravity treadmill, called Alter-G, on a range of clients, from marathoners to the morbidly obese.

"You have this bubble around you and you're floating on top," he said, describing how the Alter-G, which was developed from Nasa technology, uses air pressure to gently lift the user.

"If we remove a percentage of someone's body weight by altering the effect of gravity, we come up with a lot of different benefits for a lot of different populations," he said.

So marathoners can train for speed and endurance with reduced risk of injury, older adults can exercise with reduced pressure on their joints and the obese can work out unencumbered by their extra pounds.

"Being on the anti-gravity treadmill allows the obese client to feel like if they were 20, 30 or 40 pounds [nine, 14 or 18kg] lighter," said Csolak.

First lessons on the Alter-G are supervised, he said, and clients get hooked easily because it's such fun.

"I don't believe there's anything like it, other than swimming," he said.

"Swimming's also a zero-to-minimal impact cardiovascular workout."

A spokesman for the American Council on Exercise, Jessica Matthews, said she's seeing more antigravity group fitness classes.

"I think of antigravity as anything where you're physically suspended," Matthews, a California-based exercise physiologist, said.

Offerings range from yoga classes, where participants hang from hammocks, to group instruction in executing Cirque du Soleil-style stunts.



NO PRESSURE: A student takes part in an 'antigravity' yoga class at the Om Factory in New York

Picture: REUTERS



HANGING TOGETHER: Students use aerial silk hammocks in an antigravity yoga class

Picture: REUTERS

"There can definitely be a place for this," she said. "But in a group setting, when you have 30 to 40 people hanging upside down in a room, safety is key."

Sabrina Merrill, a Kansas City, Missouri-based fitness expert, has developed a fitness programme that uses aerial silks suspended from the ceiling.

She said her goal was to bridge the gap between the performance and fitness worlds.

"Climbing silks, doing foot locks

and body wraps twice a week in lieu of resistance or weight training, definitely works the body hard," said Merrill.

The mechanics of being in the air forces your core to work differently, she explained, but the focus of her workout remains on the basic components of strength, flexibility and endurance.

"Most women can't imagine doing a pull up," she said, "but after this training, they will do a pull up. Upper body strength will change."

Merrill, who trains fitness professionals in the class, agrees that safety is crucial. Clients are screened for pregnancy, high blood pressure and medication.

"We just don't go very high off the ground, about one foot [30.48cm] off the ground for most. And there's a protective mat underneath," said Merrill.

She doesn't contend that the aerial silks workout is superior to resistance training, but it might be more fun. — Reuters