

Bringing the
**Pleasure
Principle**
to the



by Marilena Paolucci



Montreal actress and fitness instructor, Felicia Shulman, teaches city's first Aqua Nia classes.

It was a scorching Tuesday morning in July just before noon. Over at the community outdoor pool in the city of Westmount, a woman wearing dark sunglasses, a sleeveless blue Superman T-shirt, and a pair of sneakers stood on the hard cement floor at edge of the pool.

With her hands over her head in prayer position, and her hips swaying to eclectic world beat music, Felicia Shulman was leading her water fitness class of 20 women—and one man in a cowboy hat—through their first full Aqua Nia class.

Nia is a holistic fitness program that blends movements from the martial arts, the dance arts and the body rehabilitation therapies such as yoga. Nia's "all gain, no pain" philosophy works with the natural wisdom and intelligence of the body, mind, spirit and emotions and supports the pleasure principle: If it feels good, keep doing it; if it hurts, stop.

Developed in the early 1980s by two ex-aerobic teachers from California —Debbie and Carlos Rosas—Nia first gained popularity in British Columbia in 1990. It took another 16 years for Nia to find its way to Montreal

Felicia's transformation from traditional aqua fitness instructor to Montreal's Aqua Nia Queen is a tale of hard work, a little luck...and a lot of *chutzpah*.

On a Wing and a Dare

"I started taking aquafit classes 20 years ago to recover from a serious injury," says Felicia. "I've always had an interest in fitness and in 2005 I certified in Individual Conditioning and Hi/Lo aerobics at the YMCA." Between acting gigs, Felicia worked as a private trainer and taught group fitness classes at the YMCA.

Shortly after she obtained her certifications, Felicia and a friend decided to sign up for an aquafit class only to be told by the woman at the registration desk that the class was cancelled. The teacher quit that very day and they couldn't find a replacement.

That was enough for Felicia's friend. "Speak to the woman right now," she insisted. "Tell her you're a fitness instructor and that you're perfectly qualified to teach the class."

And so Felicia did.

Doing What Feels Right

"I took over the class that I've always wanted to teach," she recalls. "At first, I taught barefoot, which is the way I used to work out in the water. I've always believed in moving in a way that brings pleasure to the body. That's the guiding principle behind my teaching."

In early 2006 Felicia decided to become a bona fide aquafit instructor. She added the Canadian Aquafitness Leaders Alliance (CALA) certification to her credentials. CALA coined the phrase "the liquid gym" to describe exercise in the water. "I learned a great deal about the properties of the water and how to use it for weight training," she says. "I put on my sneakers and started teaching traditional aquafit."

The switch had its drawbacks. "I was in pain after each class," says Felicia. "Even though you're taught to monitor your movements, I was still doing a lot of pounding on a cement floor. Modifying my movements didn't help. Aquafit teachers don't teach in the pool because the students have to see your every move." She started taking anti-inflammatory drugs for the pain.

One day Dawn Ford, a friend and acting colleague, came to one of her classes. After the class Dawn invited Felicia to try out a new fitness class she was taking called Nia.

Finding Her Future

"I took my first Nia class in March, 2006 and it was a revelation," Felicia says, relishing the memory. "Here was this fitness program that gave you a system for incorporating everything I believed

in. I was so excited! I knew right then and there I wanted to become a Nia Instructor.”

Felicia took a short break from teaching aquafit, dropped all her other fitness classes, and signed up for the Nia teacher training program. She became a certified Nia Instructor in March, 2007.

“When I resumed teaching aquafit in the summer of 2006, the pain started again,” she recalls. “My body would tighten and contract after each class. Then I would take a Nia class and the pain would disappear and my movements became juicy again. It showed me the awesome power of Nia.”

Felicia slowly began to incorporate some of the Nia movements into her aquafit classes. “I experimented with different, more interesting movements and with giving verbal cues from the mental realm such as ‘Imagine touching blades of grass,’” she says. “The students initially resisted exploring different ways of moving. I’d say ‘Just try it this way for a little while and then we’ll go back to the traditional water exercises like knee up, leg back or jumping jack.’”

Felicia’s old zest for teaching water fitness resurfaced. “My students picked up on my renewed enthusiasm,” she says. “When I introduced freedance, I would put on the music and ask everyone to move freely in the water. Everyone would resort to doing traditional jumping jacks or whatever else they knew. Then I’d say, ‘You’re not allowed to do any of the traditional aquafit moves. I want you to remember how you moved when you were a kid and you would just jump in the water and splash around. Sense the water. What does it feel like? What does it feel like when your feet touch the bottom of the pool? What does

it feel like when your feet are suspended? How about when your toes are webbed or curled?’”

She was slowly preparing herself and her students for the transition to a full Aqua Nia experience.

Going All the Way

After obtaining her Nia certification, Felicia worked hard to adapt the Nia routine she was learning to the water. On that hot Tuesday morning in July 2007, Felicia taught it to her students at the Westmount pool.

“They loved it,” she remembers with pride. “I modified the movements to suit the water drag and the floatability of each person’s body. Some people are really buoyant and others aren’t and sink easily. You have to take that into account. Also, some people like to train in deep water with a heavy belt around their waist so that they won’t tread water during the class. I try to adapt movements for both groups: those whose feet touch the water and those whose feet don’t. I think Nia is great for deep water. It’s like water ballet.”

She believes the biggest drawback to teaching effective fitness classes in the water is the physical barrier between student and teacher. “It’s tough to teach what you sense when you’re standing on a cement floor with your feet encased in sneakers while your students are floating barefoot in the water,” Felicia says. “You have to teach from the memory of what it feels like to be where they are and that’s not an “in the moment” experience.”

Felicia dreams of designing a transparent, water-filled pod for aquafit teachers. “Students would be able to watch my every move,” she explains. “When

I say ‘Everybody sense your ankles’ my students can watch me moving that part of my body in the water.”

She believes the combination of aquafit and Nia is magic. “I love the idea of combining the more linear, repetitive aquafit movements with the variety of movements Nia offers,” says Felicia. “I want to craft classes that please the aquafit traditionalist and, at the same time, opens their mind, heart, soul and body to new movement possibilities, creation and expression. I want people to be transformed spiritually, emotionally, physically and mentally by their fitness experience.”

Felicia Shulman is a Montreal actress and Nia Instructor. Visit Felicia’s website at www.billandfelicia.ca You can also reach her by phone at (514)932-6382 or by email at bfrow@sympatico.ca

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