

Dance like nobody's watching

Nicola Rayner dips her toe into the world of therapeutic dance

An episode of British sitcom

"Peep Show", called Dance Class, follows flatmates Mark and Jez to Rainbow Rhythms. They are both there for cynical reasons – to get girls – and the uptight Mark struggles with the "anything goes" atmosphere. In the end he decides to fake it. When his hippy dance teacher

intones: "As we move into red, let it all go, my superluminaries; open the box." Mark, still in his suit, quietly instructs himself: "Appear to be opening the box, while in fact the lid stays very firmly on."

Accustomed to the structure and formality of traditional dance classes, a part of me is worried that as I explore therapeutic dance my "Mark side" – my British uptightness – will get in the way, make me self-conscious and judgmental. I am very happy, then, to hear Cathy Ryan's story of how she discovered 5Rhythms in Findhorn: "Someone suggested that I went to a session and I thought, 'Hmmm.' I looked in the room and saw these people in leotards and they were hugging each other and I said: 'This is not my scene,' but I liked the woman



Cate Mackenzie (left) at her Open Your Heart dance workshop

who had recommended it to me, so I gave it a go – and I loved it!"

Like Cathy, I was persuaded to try out therapeutic dance – which I would term as dance performed for its beneficial and restorative effects (rather than with the aim of learning steps and honing technique) – by a friend, love coach Cate Mackenzie, who asked me along to one of her workshops in Bromley-by-Bow, London, in late July.

Cate, a warm, vivacious soul, spent her formative years in the 1970s in a dance-obsessed household. Picking dance, then, as one of her key tools as a coach, after she'd trained in community arts at Manchester Met University,

was a no-brainer. But how does it work? "If you can feel it, you can be it," she says.

"What's amazing about dance, which is different from an intellectual or a mental workshop, is that it literally shifts you. It's difficult to explain to people before they come to a [therapeutic] dance workshop, but it's like Alice In Wonderland

when she goes down the rabbit hole: you go down something and end up somewhere different, even in a day."

There's a good mix of people at Cate's workshop, of all sorts of backgrounds and ages. She leads us through different coaching exercises, from something as simple as introducing yourself to the room to as challenging as dancing solo to Etta James's "I Just Wanna Make Love To You".

While the dance is informal – there are no fixed steps – the exercises she leads us through and the songs to which we dance all have a point to them. "I use the power of words and the power of dance and I combine them," says Cate, who uses music by everyone from Celine Dion to Led Zeppelin. "You get aware of what you

want, of what might be blocking you, so that when you dance you will literally move whatever it is that needed to move."

By the end of the day we all look completely different from when we arrived; there is colour in our cheeks, and I feel calmer, happier and more connected to my body.

Many of the participants at Cate's workshop recommend that I also try 5Rhythms for the purposes of my article, which is how I find myself having a cup of tea with teacher Cathy Ryan before taking her regular Monday class in London's Old Finsbury Town Hall. Small and softly spoken, she emanates a rare sort of calm. I confide that I feel a little nervous, which she tells me is "so completely normal".

Defined as a movement mediation practice, 5Rhythms was devised by Gabrielle Roth in the 1960s. "She's an extraordinary person," says Cathy, who has worked with Gabrielle. "She's very curious to see how we in the west can come to a place of stillness, of being awake and aware." It sounds like Buddhism, I note. "In a way it's a western version because we find sitting meditation difficult: it's not in our culture. We are in a really busy world – we've got so much coming at us so fast. She believes – and thousands and thousands of people are agreeing – that first you've got to address that: you can't ignore it." Gabrielle's solution was a moving, as opposed to a sitting-

still, meditation. The cycle of 5Rhythms, as the name would suggest, takes the dancer through five different stages.

"Each of the rhythms is associated with a life cycle, an element, an emotion," says Cathy. "Each of the five is a particular archetype, and by practising all five you begin to come into balance."

"Flowing is the first rhythm and that's associated with the element of earth," explains Cathy, "staccato is the second rhythm and that's



associated with fire. Chaos is water, lyrical is air and stillness is ether. The whole practice is about getting closer to stillness."

She continues: "One of the things you might notice tonight is that you like three of the rhythms no problem, and hate two, and that's also normal. You begin to find out: why don't I like that one? Or why do I like this one? So you can use it as a psychological map or a healing map."

It sounds intriguing and the time has come for me to experience the class, which takes place in the building's main hall. For the first half hour Cathy gives us the

space to lie down, stretch and slowly warm up. I am daunted, initially, by the enormity of the room and the newness of the practice, but towards the end of the 30 minutes I find the pull of the music irresistible and get up to join my fellow participants in some gentle movement.

Cathy then gathers us in a circle, asks us all to say our names, and talks a little bit about the practice. She dedicates the session to a 5Rhythms friend who has recently passed on, and then we begin.

For me, what follows is strange and rather wonderful, and a difficult thing to summarise because I experience so many different sensations and emotions – from grief to elation – as thoughts and memories drift through. Sometimes we dance alone, sometimes with partners or in small groups; sometimes I am very aware of the other dancers, at

other times less so. The music – everything from Amy Winehouse to instrumental numbers – plays a part, but I know that ceaseless movement is, as Cathy puts it, "moving things through" too.

On the way home in the train – scribbling reams and reams in my notebook – I feel as though something has been "unblocked". One thing is for certain, though: the lid did not stay very firmly on. ●

For more on Cate Mackenzie and her upcoming workshops, see www.catemackenzie.com. For more on Cathy Ryan and future classes and workshops, see www.humansbeing.ws.