

## Zumba rouses warrior princess

By Cathy Hamilton

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I am standing in a large room with mirrored walls, waiting for my introductory Zumba class to begin.

Last Sunday, I read an article in the paper about the latest, hippest exercise craze taking the continent by storm. Today, I took leave of my senses and decided to give it a try.

My daughter, a veteran after two classes, convinced me that Zumba and I were made for each other.

“You’ll love it, Mom!” she said. “It’s so tribal!”

Of course, I said to myself, because “tribal” is certainly the word that describes me to a “T.” Oh, I’m TOTALLY tribal.

Zumba, which combines Latin and other world dances with exercises reminiscent of aerobics classes of the 1970s, was born when a fitness instructor forgot to bring his music to class and was forced to improvise with CDs he had in his car. As a forgetful person myself, I think it’s cool that a million-dollar fitness empire grew out of a flaky moment in a resourceful guy’s life. Besides, they say you can burn 700 calories in one session. What’s not to love?

The room is filling up with people of all shapes, sizes and ages. There are two brave men; the rest are women. They look excited, as if an adventure is about to begin.

I spy a neighbor who, like me, is over 50 and new to the Zumba experience. We gravitate to each other, giggling nervously, like best friends on the first day of gym class.

The teacher takes her place at the front of the room. I have a clear shot of her in the mirror. She’s 20-something, fresh-faced and fit, with long blond hair, wearing a tank top and camouflage fatigues. Thankfully, there’s not an ounce of Spandex on her body, but I can tell she has — and I say this in the most objective, disinterested and heterosexual way — the best rear end I’ve ever seen.

OK, I think. Something to shoot for.

The music starts. It is loud and pulsating with a Middle Eastern disco feel. The teacher’s hips start gyrating, and I mimic her, feeling sexy and stupid at the same time. Then, she swoops her arms around like in the hula. Or is it belly dancing? I don’t have time to figure it out. I’m too busy concentrating on getting my feet and arms to move in concert to the strange rhythms.

It’s been two minutes, and I’m already starting to sweat.

Next thing I know, it’s a new song — faster, with a frantic Latin beat. Our teacher starts with a salsa step. I try to catch up, but she is onto the next move — a shoulder shimmy that’s so fast she is, literally, a blur.

(There are two kinds of people in this world: the ones who can shimmy like Vegas showgirls and the folks who look like they're being electrocuted. Put me in Group B.)

The next song is slower, kind of Bob Marley-like. Oh good, I think! Time for some laid-back, slouchy, reggae moves. I can handle this.

But no! The teacher springs into an arm-flailing, knee-lifting, hip-hop routine that leaves my T-shirt completely drenched when the song finally, mercifully, comes to an end.

I look at the clock. Forty-five minutes to go! I should've staked out a spot closer to the door.

Suddenly, drum beats blast from the speakers. The instructor launches into a move I've seen only on National Geographic specials, one that could technically be described as "rapid pelvic thrusts with stomping." Refusing to be outdone, I give it a try.

Hey, I can do this! I'm actually pretty good! I am Zumbabwe, proud princess warrior!

I have rhythm ... I have music ... I have Zumba, who could ask for anything more! I'm lost in the heat of the moment, hypnotized by the primitive jungle beat.

Then, for a split second, I take my eyes off the teacher and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

No, that can't be me! That's some white-haired, spectacle-wearing woman in too-tight stretch capris having some kind of attack.

Wait! That IS me. What was I thinking?! I look like a freak!

I'm about to slink out of the room when I realize, nobody cares. No one's even looking. They're all too absorbed in their own wild tribal fantasy.

And I think, maybe I'll give Zumba another go. As soon as I find someone who teaches it in a dark, mirror-less cave.