



DANCING INTO 50

by THELMA FAYLE

“Are you a dancer or here for the leadership program?” someone asks at the communal breakfast on the first morning of the five-day Hollyhock Dancing from the Inside Out workshop.

“I’m not really a dancer,” I stammer. “I’m turning 50 and decided to celebrate by dancing my way into it.” I considered taking the leadership program but, after 25 years of working for the government, I decided I couldn’t bear another go at facing the latest buzzwords on “leadership.” I signed up for Dancing from the Inside Out, offered at the remote “lifelong learning institute” on Cortes Island off the west coast.

I arrive at the rustic dance studio and am embarrassed (again) when I meet professional dancers, mostly half my age, who have come from England and Australia and the US. One is on a break from dancing with *Cats* in London. *CATS!* I take note. This adventure may have been a mistake.

The expansive windows and skylights reveal sunshine, lush green forest and tall fir trees – even taller than our instructor, a giant in the international world of dance. Margie Gillis doesn’t bother with introductions that normally take up the first hour of a workshop. She has five days to introduce 30 participants to their own bodies. She seems un-interested in who we are on the outside. She puts on some non-intimidating, even-tempoed music and encourages us to “just start moving around.”

As we begin to shyly move around the hall with stiff little introductory smiles for each other, Margie slowly walks around the large space and observes. She abruptly discourages eye contact. “Look inside,” she says. “Never mind anyone else. Just keep walking. Forwards. Backwards. Not too fast.”

She shifts our focus to our own internal landscape. “How do the bottom of your feet feel?” she asks, swaying back and forth on her own thick, muscular feet. “Shift your weight. Can you move back and forth on the heel and ball of your feet? From side to side? Can you feel them? Come on now. Stay with me. Don’t write the book ‘til you’ve had the experience. How do your feet feel?”

The mentoring monologue accompanies a diverse selection of music – or sometimes silence – accompanied by the slapping sounds of feet hitting the wooden floor. Walking. Bending. Stretching. Skipping. She skillfully pulls us away from the self-consciousness we all well know. She leans over and places a hand where my instep has fallen. “Let go of your knees a little. You can lift this part of your foot a bit, if you like.” Her eyes keep moving over bodies and she matches commentary to the needs of individuals and the group.

And so begins the leadership program, er, I mean dance class. I expect to be the lone crone among professional dancers, but it turns out there are others. I don’t know anybody’s name, so I privately name them. Grand Gal is 70. She started dancing at 58. I am encouraged. She’s lithe. Pro Boy doesn’t look like he has anything to learn but he says Margie is teaching him a level of internal awareness that he is humbled by. Pretzel Girl is technically the best in the class. She positions herself to show off agility. Her hair is tied back, ballerina-style. She has the saddest eyes.

I have no context for these strangers, but I learn about them from observing their dancing responses to Margie’s guidance. Giant Man, an American from “Down South” is 6’3” and 63 years old. He sports a potbelly, missing front teeth and a mild stutter. He moves with shocking grace. He gets the “dancing from within” part. I learn later this is not his first class with Margie; he is one of the most beautiful dancers at Hollyhock.

After each class, twice a day, a dozen of us race in and swim naked in the ocean. The cold water acts as a comforting compress to our awakened muscles. We even swim at night to witness the bio-luminescent shimmering colours in the black water. One classmate sits ashore singing the Beatles’ “When I’m 64” to give us a shore reference to come back to.

At bedtime, when I get into my sleeping bag, I imagine Palestinians and Israelis dancing together. Better yet, members of parliament. Yikes, maybe even my whole family. I am hilariously happy. Dancing into my 50s was a brainy idea.

On the final evening, Margie offers to dance to a reading of James Joyce for the local community. Can you imagine? Most people can barely read Joyce, let alone dance to it! The dense writing seems light when accompanied with her captivating skill. Everyone is transfixed by the stunning solo performance.

On Day Five, I dance for three hours in the morning, swim in the sea and eat lunch in the dining room. As I carry my tray back to the kitchen, a breeze blows the napkin off my plate. Two men from the leadership program stand nearby, deep in discussion. They don’t offer to pick it up.

Not wanting to leave my used napkin on the floor, I hold my food tray with both hands and reach my bare foot out and pick up the napkin with my toes and place it on my tray. My 50-year-old body utterly surprises me with the graceful response. I didn’t know I could do that.

The two men stare. “Wow, you must be a dancer,” one says. I smile. “Yes, I am.”

So far, I like being 50. This bright beginning bodes well. |

ABOVE | The author soothes sore muscles with a swim. TOC PAGE | View of Hollyhock learning centre from the water. Photos: Daryl Jones

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