

# Good girls do

Pole dance, that is, **MARILISA RACCO** gives the bump and grind on the latest craze to hit the fitness world

**O**prah did it, Teri Hatcher swears by it and the University of British Columbia even offers a course in it. No, we're not talking about knitting. As the art of pole dancing goes mainstream, women everywhere are pondering the benefits of the bump and grind.

"I was hooked after the first class," says Jessica Throong, 28, who works for CBC and took a course called the Art of Teasing at Toronto's Flirty Girl Fitness.

"I'm a very shy person," she says. "The only time I can really express myself is when I'm dancing. The instructors are so energetic and they keep telling us that we're beautiful and sexy. So for an hour once a day, I really feel sexy."

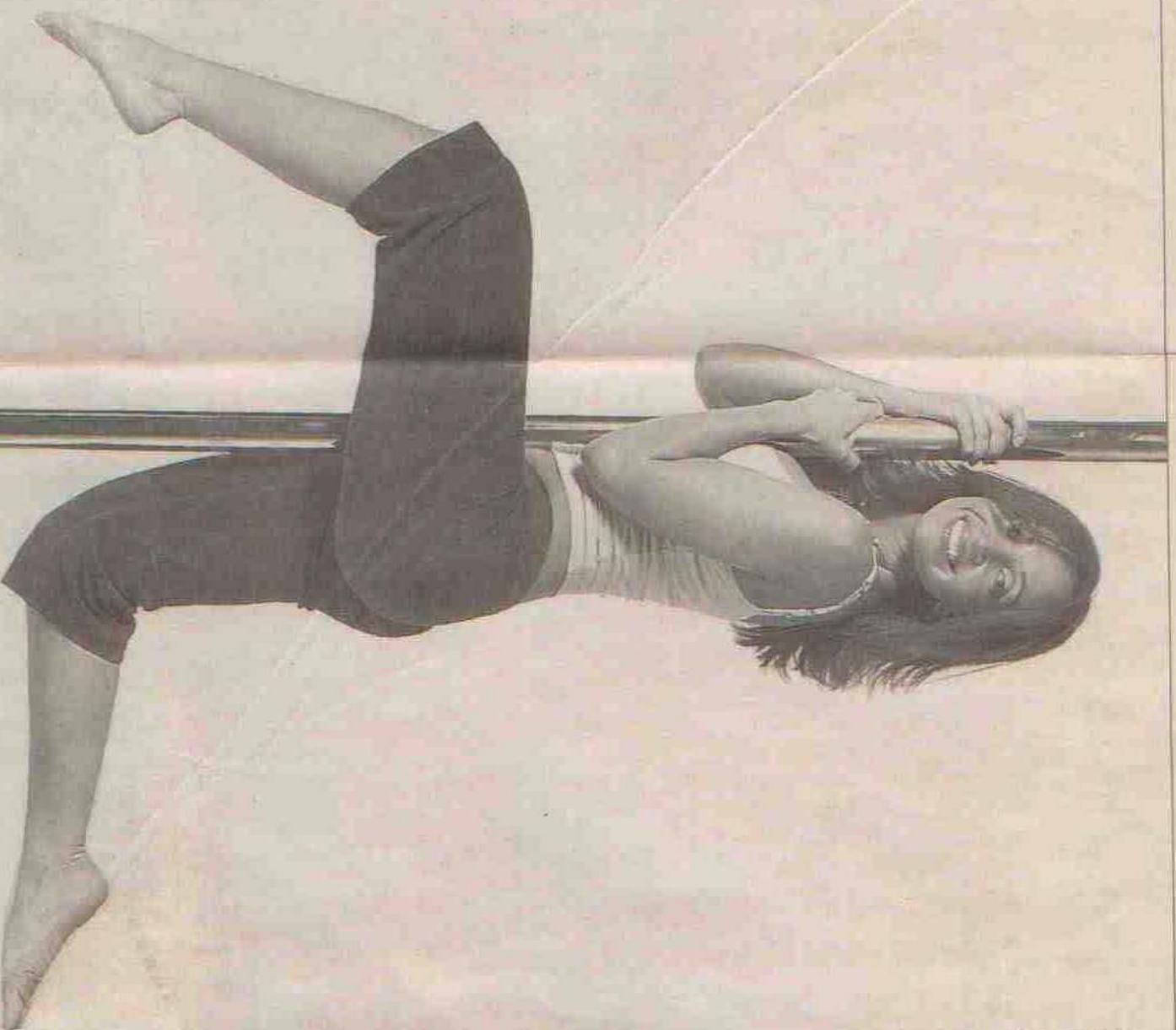
She's not alone in the quest to find her inner sex goddess. Gyms across the country are offering pole-dancing classes, with some, such as Aradia Fitness, specializing in the bump-and-grind moves normally associated with hangers-on like Tony Soprano's Bada Bing club. Aradia, which has opened 11 Canadian locations in three years and will open in three U.S. cities next month, not only teaches pole dancing, but also "sexy sweat," sensual stretch and lap dancing. Even Toronto's upscale Verity women's club offers highly popular "strip aerobics" classes.

For Jammy Morris, UBC's pole-dancing instructor and a former exotic dancer, seeing a roomful of future doctors and lawyers letting loose is rewarding. "I see shy students just literally come out of their shell in these classes," she says. "It's not just about swinging on a pole; it's about confidence. I see women who hold their head higher and walk straighter because they've done a class."

She recently defended herself on CBC Radio against the criticism that the classes feed a stereotype that demeans women. "I pointed out that the pole was originally used in the circus and is still used today by troupes like Cirque du Soleil," says Morris, whose next session of classes starts in July. "If you watch an exotic dancer on a pole who isn't taking her clothes off, you see such similarities to belly dancing and Latin dance. And the fitness benefits are amazing."

Ariel Levy, author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, is not convinced. "I think it's funny," she said in an interview from New York. "The idea that we're going to get in touch with our own innate sexuality by going to classes to learn how to imitate strippers, who are women whose job it is to fake lust."

But Becket Ross, an associate pro-





fessor of sociology and women's studies at UBC, sees this reaction as the classic Madonna/whore cliché.

"We're seeing a reincarnation of the vamp and the vixen, but this time it's on female terms," she says. "This is solely about the sexual emancipation of women. In the past, vamps and vixens like Mae West and Josephine Baker were working against cultural constraints, so their repertoires were very restrictive. Today, in this era of post-feminism, lots of women want to throw off the shackles of restraint and experience and explore sexuality in many different ways."

Then there is sisterhood. Kerry Knee, co-owner of Flirty Girl Fitness, never ceases to be amazed by the encouragement that floods a class. "It's the only class I've ever been in where women are clapping and cheering for each other," she says. "It's an absolute high after leaving a class; they just feel great about themselves."

"It's something you're sharing with other women," Ross echoes. "I've never experienced that in an aerobics class, which resembles more a paramilitaristic regime."

And she can appreciate the safety that these all-female environments provide. "It gives women the opportunity to learn sexualized moves in a supportive milieu, especially in the face of centuries of gender humiliation."

Winnie Lai, 23, is a Lululemon staffer and Flirty Girl devotee. "Women are told that sexuality should be hidden and that we should be ashamed of our curves," she says. "Striptease allows me to reclaim [my sexuality] and be proud of my body and love it as it is."

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*For information on pole-dancing classes, visit [flirtygirlfitness.com](http://flirtygirlfitness.com) or [www.aradiafitness.com](http://www.aradiafitness.com).*