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THE PLEASURE PRINCIPAL

NIA, a new movement in mind-body-spirit connection

By Elaine Gast



It's a Wednesday morning at the Studio Maui. Under the flush of golden light and a wall-sized mirror, 12 women and one man stand in a circle so loose it could have been drawn by a kindergartner. Together a mosaic of jog bras, floral prints and flowing pants, they shuffle barefoot on the caramel-colored floor, softly swaying their limbs to music called Tribe Vibe.

Erin Graue stands poised before them as their Nia instructor. She looks at each of them mindfully, as if holding some mystery she's about to reveal, and then exhales—loudly—into the mic.

“What *stuff* do you want to shift today?” she asks, talking with the tempo of a slam poet: rhythmic, deliberate but without edges or lines. “Imagine that right now, in this moment, it's ready. *You're* ready. Go on a personal journey in the same way the music flows...”

Graue closes her eyes, shaking her shoulders slack. “Uhh-uhh-uhh...,” she breathes out again. The group follows, grunting softly as they scatter from the circle and begin to move.

As the drumbeat grows louder and faster, Graue stomps from one leg to the next, shaking her hips wildly, with attitude. Giving instructions she calls “tightly loose,” she demonstrates the simple choreography of Nia. “Cross front, *cha cha cha* .” Creating contrasts, Graue moves between gentle and flowing movements (“walking on clouds”) to tense and edgy blocks and kicks.

After a sequence of stepping and pulsing, she raises her arms as if in celebration: “FREE DANCE!”

Suddenly, bodies jump and swoosh, punch and kick, spin and gyrate. Soles slide and slap against the wooden floor, and the scene moves in a stream of consciousness. One girl in blue breaks into a playful skip. A woman in leopard print licks her lips and punches, fanatically. Some concentrate on their feet as they spin in wide-armed circles. Others undulate, rolling their necks and smiling, euphoric.

“Yes! Say it with me. Yes!” Graue hollers orgasmic from the microphone. The group shouts a collective YES, looking like they are going to jump out from the inside of their chests.

On first glance, Nia (pronounced nee-uh) is a hard one to figure out. One moment, it looks like a rave; the next, a child's slumber party. Is it dance, aerobics? Yoga or karate? The best answer is all of the above.

In Swahili, Nia means with purpose. It also stands for Neuromuscular Integrative Action, but according to Graue, "We're doing away with the acronym. It's just Nia."

With the help of Graue, it has joyfully joined the ranks among Maui's popular fitness crazes. It integrates both Eastern and Western movement forms to create a unique balance of simple choreography (form) and freedom of movement (free dance).

Nia synthesizes the best possible movements from many genres. Take the conscious movement of Tai Chi and blend it with the spirals of Aikido and the kicks of Tae Kwon Do. Juice it with the shimmy of jazz, the funk of modern and the primal of ethnic dance. Toss it lightly with yoga and alignment techniques. Serve hot and sweaty like a nightclub.

"Nia is all over the map," said Graue. "It's easy to learn the basic movements—no fancy footwork here. And there's a lot of room for interpretation."

Unlike traditional exercise programs based on the "no pain, no gain" philosophy, Nia works from something basic: the pleasure principle. Could it really be that when it comes to fitness, pleasure and joy are more effective than pain and guilt?

"As a teacher, we help people seek pleasure in their bodies," said Graue. "Traditional fitness teaches from here," she pointed to her head, "while Nia is a body-centered approach that starts from a joy of movement."

What keeps it fun, she said, is that you never get the same class twice. Every class has a different focus, and follows a different routine with new music. Themes may focus on a part of the body ("joints" or "core"), a specific emotion ("joy") or an abstract or deliberate idea ("dynamic ease"). The class prompts students to move between a solitary and a group experience, focusing on their own bodies while connecting to others—all the while, getting a kick-ass workout.

"Nia is a great place to get people moving," said Kira Jones, dance trapeze teacher and life coach. "If we could re-do the basic food groups, one of them should be movement. We should all ask ourselves: How much movement can we ingest?"

Panther Wilde of Kauai agreed. "What I love about Nia is the exploration, the invitation to move or not move." It also doesn't hurt, he said, to be the only man in a room full of gorgeous women.

To prepare for each class, Graue spends hours in her small studio at home, working with music and moving her body. "Most of my time is spent listening, researching and practicing to music. The healing potential of music is huge—it stimulates, relaxes, evokes and challenges our nervous system," she said.

Growing up in a musical family, Graue discovered Nia back in 1996. She was managing a wellness center in Boulder, Colorado, and was looking for a way to relieve stress. When she found Nia, she thought: “This is it!”

When she walked into her first class, she said she could feel something different in the mood and the music. People were stretching, tuning into themselves and into the music surrounding them. “When the class began, it sent me spinning and laughing and sweating and playing. I felt like a kid, like my spirit came alive in a way it never had,” she laughed. “It was a blast. I knew right away it had to be my path.”

Five years later, she trained with Nia creators Debbie and Carlos Rosas, who founded Nia in 1983. Teachers attend four weeks of training total, each one week long, to move through a belt system similar to martial arts—white, blue, brown and black belt. Graue has her brown belt. As she explained, the levels of training focus on physiology, body/mind, music appreciation, choreography, anatomy, meditation and **soulmatics—how to connect with the body.**

At the present time, Nia has more than 1000 certified teachers in nearly every state in the U.S. and in many foreign countries. On the mainland, Nia classes can now be found in health clubs, universities, dance schools, spas, hospitals, even prisons.

Although Graue was the first Nia teacher in Hawaii, there are now teachers on every island. A second teacher, Esther Haeusler, has since joined Graue here on Maui.

According to Graue, anyone can do Nia—all ages, all fitness levels. “I’m 58 years old and Nia is my youth pill,” said Maria Gardner of Haiku. “I feel more alive, I participate in life more. I’m not limited—I feel free.”

Near the end of class, Graue closes the curtains over the mirror and encourages students to move onto the floor, in what she calls “floor play.” The fast-paced free-spirited trance-dance evolves into a reclined meditation.

“Settle your joints down,” she speaks slowly. “Calm your body down, feel the movements, restore your energy, go within.” Some cover their face, most everyone closes their eyes. Graue whispers now, barely audible above the buzz of whirring fans.

Bodies begin to twist and turn in, rolling like kittens on the floor. Some shape their bodies into bridge pose, others do push ups, stretching their limbs, pulsing and moaning. The music fades—the drums cease—the class, for today, ends.

As bodies emerge from the floor, faces shine with sweat and big grins. One blonde woman stops and sighs. “Nia is so complete,” said Antje Rassloff of Germany. “You can let go of everything! It makes me feel strong and light, together.”

Find Nia classes at the Studio Maui and Ocean Yoga. Visit www.niamaui.com for more information. MTW