

Balance the mind and body



CORE VALUE: Members of 2Faced Dance Company using Pilates. Left: The discipline's founder Joseph Pilates



Picture: CHRIS NASH

Pilates is used in many ways to improve both health and fitness, finds **ANDREA WATSON**

WITH names like the Reformer, Spine Corrector, Guillotine Tower and Foot Corrector, it's a wonder that the exercise machines used by the first Pilates instructors caught on. However, the machines invented by the German PE trainer Joseph Pilates are still referred to by these tortuous names and his fans refuse to change them.

Why should they? The routines and equipment he devised in the 1930s are today an essential part of many exercise cultures, highly valued by sportsmen, dancers and GPs. Joseph believed his system would benefit the mind as well as the body, drawing on older "medical gym" techniques popular in the late 19th century. He eventually published a book with the snappy title: *Your Health: A Corrective System Of Exercising That Revolutionizes The Entire Field Of Physical Education*.

As a child he had been sickly but by dint of skiing, bodybuilding, gym and yoga he was later able to earn a living from innumerable physical jobs including diving, boxing and training in self-defence. With his wife Clara he established a devout following in the dance community of New York where he emigrated in 1925 after refusing a job to train the German army.

Joseph's first students were known as the Elders and their teachings form part of all modern-day Pilates styles.

The methods they taught were practised in special studios equipped with the above-mentioned scary-sounding devices but today some practitioners use little or no equipment at all. Portable items such as balls and rubber resistance bands are better suited to today's generation where Pilates is no longer confined to a rather elite few but has become a regular feature on the timetables of community centres and gyms as well as in physiotherapy centres.

It has also evolved from the strict, classic routines detailed in *Your Health*. One offshoot is yogilates, a combination of yoga and Pilates. There are also new forms such as the Menezes Method.

The essential base of Joseph's theory is the need for humans to control their movements using the body's 'core' strength. Dancers are particularly at risk from injuries sustained in the demanding routines. In ballet and dance, core strength is vital to maintain the balance, co-ordination and grace required.

To this day Pilates is used by innumerable

'Pilates helps us release tension and recuperate for the next training session'

dance companies to improve strength, fitness and health. One of the best-equipped Pilates gyms in the country is that of the Birmingham Royal Ballet.

"Birmingham have a massive specialist gym and they have spread the word about Pilates," said Dan Lowenstein, a teacher and dancer with the all-male 2Faced Dance Company based in Hereford.

"The troupe regularly uses Pilates as a warm-up and cool-down technique and also promotes it to newcomers."

Mr Lowenstein added: "It's very useful for increasing core strength and stability. We tend to do about 45 minutes before starting our routines, which will be 2-3 hours minimum a day. But we don't use any

specialist equipment as we are often on tour.

"Our company specialises in a fusion of breakdancing and contemporary, so our bodies are under constant physical bombardment. Pilates helps us release tension and recuperate for the next training session, rehearsal or touring performance."

Medical claims are always difficult territory but researchers at the Parkinson Center, part of Oregon University in the US, are looking at the use of Pilates in the treatment of disease.

Suffolk-based herbalist and Pilates instructor Kat Hesse, 44, started doing Pilates after a dance-related knee injury. She says the precise and controlled nature of the movements corrected a scoliosis that had caused the problem. Now she offers weekly classes designed for the cancer charity Breast Foot Forward in Ipswich, Suffolk.

She works mainly with breast cancer survivors and members of her group, which includes women aged 30-70.

They have varying degrees of post-mastectomy stiffness and scarring. She says the flowing stretches and breathing in a Pilates routine can help improve their health and wellbeing.

She said: "A study in 2008 suggested 10 minutes of stretching twice a day can help to reduce post-surgical scarring. That in turn can prevent lymphoedema, the long-term swelling of parts of the body, usually the upper arm in the case of breast cancer surgery, when your lymphatic system isn't working properly.

"GPs and physiotherapists now often recommend Pilates for patients with back problems as it helps to rebuild core strength of the whole torso.

"It is known to be excellent for the pelvic floor, helping many women getting back into shape after pregnancy or those who suffer from prolapse and incontinence.

"A recent article in the *British Medical Journal* also suggests pelvic floor exercises can help to rectify erectile dysfunctions. Perhaps the findings will help make Pilates a little more popular with men..."



EXPERT:
Kat Hesse

The six pillars of Joseph's wisdom

1 Focus Concentrate on your entire body and what you are doing all the time so you can be in control of every aspect of every moment.

2 Control The Pilates Method teaches you to be in control of your body and not at its mercy.

3 Centring The group of muscles in the centre of the body – the abdomen, lower and upper back, hips, buttocks and inner thighs – are the body's powerhouse from which all movement should begin and flow outward to the limbs.

4 Flow Pilates aims for elegant movement. Energy exerted from the centre should co-ordinate movements of the extremities: Pilates is flowing movement outward from a strong core.

5 Precision Pilates teaches you to keep your focus on doing one precise and perfect movement, rather than many half-hearted ones.

6 Breathing Joseph likened breathing to house-cleaning the body with the blood circulation. "Above all, learn to breathe correctly," he said.