

LIFE & ARTS

WHAT'S YOUR WORKOUT? | JEN MURPHY

She Strikes a Pose to Break a Sweat

The dance made popular by Madonna provides a fun fitness break and a confidence boost for an insurance claims agent

WHEN BRENNA CROWLEY gears up for her workout, she slips into four-inch peep-toe stilettos instead of sneakers. "I thought I knew how to wear heels," she says. "Then I tried dancing in them." Since 2017, Ms. Crowley has been strutting an imaginary catwalk and striking a pose at vogue dance classes.

Madonna's 1990 music video "Vogue" cast an international spotlight on the dance form, which emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s in the underground Harlem ballroom scene from the African-American and Latino LGBTQ community.

"Old-school vogue incorporated gymnastics, popping, martial arts and freeze-frame movements from Egyptian hieroglyphics to tell a story much like pantomime," says Cesar Valentino, a vogue pioneer featured in the 1990 documentary "Paris is Burning."

It's made a comeback thanks in part to the FX TV series "Pose," which chronicles this underground ballroom culture where chosen families, known as houses, would compete against one another in competitions, known as balls.

Ms. Crowley, who works as a claims agent for a New York City insurance company, says classes aren't competitions, but celebrations of self-expression. "People leave class with their head held higher and a smile on their face," she says.

Ms. Crowley, 37, started belly dancing 12 years ago. That dance form uses small isolations of the hips and abdominals to create flowy movements. "It's a very soft, feminine dance style," she says. "Vogue is the opposite. You want to be rigid and staccato, like you're striking a pose in a magazine."

A lover of all dance forms, she tries new styles when her schedule allows. "I tried vogue thinking it would be fun," she says. "I never expected it would give me genuine confidence in all aspects of my life. It's incredibly empowering and once a week I can live out my supermodel fantasies strutting the catwalk."

The Workout

Ms. Crowley takes vogue classes with Mr. Valentino every Saturday at the Ailey Extension, part of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Each 90-minute session begins with a jazz dance technique warm-up (heels optional) that moves through isolations of the head, shoulders, torso and hips, yoga-inspired stretching and core work like crunches and planks. To get the heart rate up, he has students do high-energy marching and high knee skips. They finish by performing dance moves such as pirouettes (one-legged turns) and battements (leg kicks). "I'm dripping sweat before we even start dancing," Ms. Crowley says.



Brenna Crowley makes moves at her New York vogue class. Cesar Valentino, far right, is a vogue pioneer who teaches the class.

After the warm-ups, students practice runway walks that mimic high-fashion models. Ms. Crowley will strut, pose and practice pivot-turns while focusing on her posture and body language. "There is a real technique to walking in heels," she says. "You want to lead with the ball of your foot, not your heel, to lengthen your stride, while keeping your hips forward, legs straight and shoulders back. It's quite strenuous."

Class culminates with a choreography combination that incorporates runway walks with classic vogue movements: popping, spinning and dipping the body. Hand and arm movements might be angular or flowy. While the catwalk has a notable side-to-side hip sway, the duck walk mimics Russian folk dancing and involves walking in a squatted position.

Ms. Crowley belly dances three to four days a week and occasionally performs. She also tries new dance classes when she has time, like beginner's hip-hop.

The Diet

"My diet could be better," Ms. Crowley says. She doesn't drink soda or eat sweets, but loves carbs. "I don't feel guilty having spaghetti for lunch," she says. She often skips breakfast in the rush to get to work. She is adamant about drinking three to four liters of water a day. Her fiancé suffers from ulcerative colitis. As a result, she's learned to cook anti-inflammatory



recipes like baked salmon with garlic, lemon and olive oil and vegetables such as spinach or roasted Brussels sprouts. Once a week she treats herself after dance to a chicken burrito from Chipotle.

The Gear and Cost

Ms. Crowley pays \$22 per vogue class. She buys dancewear (\$40-\$120) from D. Webb Designs, Melodia Designs, Athleta and Victoria's Secret. A pair of stilettos cost between \$40 and \$110. "I've bought four pairs and counting just for class," she says.

The Playlist

House music usually rules vogue class. Her favorite songs include, "Inkredible" by Mike Dunn, "The Ha Dance" by Masters at Work, "Deep Inside" by Hardrive, "Straight & Arrow" by FatyDL, and "Pump it Up" by Jay Blahnik.



Pick a Dance To Get Fit With

If you're looking for a more expressive workout than CrossFit or spin, try dance. "Studying dance in any form can yield many physical benefits, including improved posture, balance, coordination, flexibility, muscular strength and endurance," says Shannon Dooling-Cain, special projects coordinator for the National Dance Education Organization in Silver Spring, Md. A 2015 study by the American Journal of Dance Therapy also found that learning and memorizing movement patterns in dance training can potentially improve memory. Here's a look at the physical benefits of various styles:

Vogue is often done in heels, which adds an extra element of balance, lower-body and core strength," says Lisa Johnson-Williamingham, director of Ailey Extension. Executing precise movements requires agility and body control, she says.

Ballet training tends to focus most on the dancer's posture and placement," Ms. Dooling-Cain says. "Significant time is spent on balance training, as the ability to balance on the ball of the foot is critical to successful ballet technique."

Hip hop was initially practiced in dance battles," Ms. Dooling-Cain says. "The spirit of this practice continues, leading to a class that is high-energy, aerobic and endurance-building."

The fluid movement of the torso while **belly dancing** can lead to increased mobility and flexibility of the spine, while the percussive movements and vibration of the hips can improve core strength, Ms. Dooling-Cain says.

PHOTOS BY BESS ANDER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL