



IT'S ALL GENTRY

stephanie herman

Stephanie Herman has always approached fitness as art. An internationally renowned principal ballerina for the Zurich Ballet, she has traveled and danced with Nureyev and Baryshnikov and was a prodigy of the legendary George Balanchine. A New Yorker by birth, Herman now lives in Menlo Park with husband, Richard Singer, and their Tibetan Terrier, Bogart. Elsie Floriani spent some time recently with the multi-talented Herman to find out if there is life after dance. Stephanie Herman is the kind of girl they write songs about. Tall and toned and lean and lovely, her years as a prima ballerina have honed an aura of elegance that commands attention. Visualize Mel Gibson walking into a female locker room—that kind of attention.

But for someone who has long been used to spotlights and center stage, Herman is as down to earth and friendly as a babbling brook to thirsty fauna. Not only is she accomplished and successful in her chosen field, her list of accomplishments off stage is equally astonishing. She runs her own business, *Esprit de Danse*, where she teaches and trains individuals and groups in Muscle Ballet and Fitness Through Conscious Movement. She was the first to develop and use the term, "Dance Aerobics." She has been featured on national

television talk shows and in national publications and has produced a series of videos combining her knowledge of exercise physiology with her background and love of dance. And she invented a solution to shoulder bag strain by designing, producing and marketing Side-Packers, a pair of saddlebag-like pouches with adjustable straps that help distribute weight evenly across your hips. This is a woman who understands the nuances of muscle management and combines this with the intricacies of mind and spirit. And while she is a guru of mental and physical connectedness, she is easy, and fun, and caring and has an ability to take even the most infirm, inflexible, arthritic body and awaken it with joyful, liberated movement.

FIRST, I'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW YOU ENDED UP IN SWITZERLAND. Well, my dream was to be with the New York City Ballet, but Balanchine had enough tall dancers for New York, so he suggested I go to Switzerland and help him start a company there. Nureyev and Baryshnikov came to work with us, and we worked with the Ballet Russe di Monte Carlo. All the great dancers of the world came there, and we did road shows in Zurich, Geneva, London, Paris, Spain, Italy and Greece. It was a wonderful experience for a 19 year old.

WHY DID YOU COME BACK HOME? Fifteen years is a long time to be away I just went through a kind of transition, and I wanted to spend more time with my family. But I had a hard time



getting into a company back in New York because I was a prima ballerina, and I was tall. Some men dancers are not very tall, and then it makes it hard to have a prima ballerina who is too tall for most of the company dancers. So, I started developing different avenues. Then one day I substituted for a friend of mine who was teaching aerobics. The thought occurred to me that I could start aerobic dance, where long and short muscles come into play, and that was the start of my company.

THE ESPRIT DE DANSE? Yes. The aerobic dance is a part of it. Also, in my last stage performance, I had a back and knee injury and was frustrated in not being able to find anyone who could help me. It drove me to find out how to rehabilitate myself and then to teach others. Three years later, I could dance again. Over the next ten years or so, I have been teaching people how to *feel* their body, not just follow directions.

I KNOW YOU HAVE A REHABILITATION AND EXERCISE SCIENCE BACKGROUND AND ARE ACSM CERTIFIED. I ALSO KNOW YOU HAVE A VIDEO TAPE SERIES AND A NATIONAL FOLLOWING. ARE YOU THINKING FRANCHISE? Well, I *am* working on setting up national reps to teach my techniques—doing workshops in New York and Chicago, for example. There is a lot of joy in what I do. But I can't be everywhere at once and I won't be able to go on forever. I'd like to know that the process and the techniques can survive without me—be lasting.

HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN THIS PASSIONATE ABOUT DANCE AND THE HUMAN BODY? I am the youngest of four children. My mom was a concert pianist and wanted me to study piano. I wasn't any good at piano and always wanted to do ballet. My parents tried to discourage me, of course, knowing how difficult the arts are, but I really felt destined. I felt I was born to be a dancer. I had to do it.

WHAT WORDS OF ADVICE WOULD YOU HAVE FOR OUR READERS? Understand what your fitness program is really doing for you. I've developed a unique style that teaches the correct way to move your body while also improving fitness, whether you're a dancer or not. Regardless of your age, you get the results of ballet principles in a longer, leaner muscle line while also awakening your spirit, increasing your awareness and increasing your resistance to injury. Don't obsess about your weight. How a woman relates to her body is more important than being bone-thin. And learn how to breathe correctly. Everything works better that way. ▢