

FITNESS AND HEALTH

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AFRO WORKOUT



Afro-Workout participants feel the beat in one of Bergh's classes held in the studio of her Edina home.

When Maria Bergh teaches her Aerobics With Soul classes, Minnesota inhibitions melt away



By Nancy Livingston
Staff Writer

Maria Bergh's spirit smolders like the sun in her native Tanzania.

She moves like an animal roaming the Serengeti plains.

She dances with the earthy abandon of a bushwoman.

To find such an exotic creature leading an aerobics class in the land of the ski hat and parka is something of a shock. As she gyrates to the rhythm of an African drum beat, sweating class participants strain to overcome their cool Minnesota reserve.

This is Aerobics With Soul: the Afro-Workout. And anyone who takes part makes a quick discovery: This is no Jane Fonda workout.

Bergh has combined her love for native African dancing with the swift movements of the giraffe, gazelle, ostrich and monkey. Participants bounce together as they do monkey jumping jacks and stretch together as they do the "patta patta" (touch, touch). The workout studio swirls with color as class members use heavy khanga scarves instead of weights to tone their upper bodies.

For four years, Bergh has taught classes in a studio in her Edina home, at the Marsh fitness center in Minnetonka, the uptown YWCA in Minneapolis and Pilgrim Baptist Church in St. Paul. So far, she has inspired a small, but loyal following.

But that may change with the release of her 60-minute video that last week astounded the more established fitness gurus by tying for first place in the "aerobics-combination" category of a national fitness video competition sponsored by City Sports Magazine of New York.



Staff Photos by Joe Rossi

"In the aerobics classes I used to take, you could plan your trip to Iowa, decide what to put in your meat loaf and never miss a beat," says Maria Bergh, developer of the Afro-Workout. "But here you have to concentrate on your body."

Co-winner was Judi Sheppard Misset, the founder of Jazzercise. Jane Fonda was tops in two other of the six categories.

Today, Bergh is riding the crest of a wave of success, buoyed by hope that her Afro-Workout will catch on nationally. But there have been times when she was nearly swamped by life's harshness.

As an abandoned child raised in a mission orphanage in Tanzania, Bergh drew strength from

experiences that might have shredded a weaker person. With the boldness of an animal determined to stare down its prey, she faced her fears and learned the art of survival.

Today, by any measurement, Bergh has not only survived, she has arrived.

Her spacious Edina home is filled with African tapestries, batiks, carved wooden chairs and

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sculpture, comforting reminders of her Tanzanian heritage. She is a partner with her Norwegian husband of nearly 20 years, Kjell Bergh, in Borton Volvo, Borton Leasing, Borton Limousine, Borton Overseas, Vanstrum Travel and Tarangire Safari Lodge in Tanzania. Her two children, Katarina, 17, and Karl, 10, proudly acknowledge their Afro-Norwegian heritage.

"In the aerobics classes I used to take, you could plan your trip to Iowa, decide what to put in your meat loaf and never miss a beat," said Bergh, after a recent class in her home. "But here you have to concentrate on your body."

Self-consciousness evaporates as class members follow Bergh's lead. When she leaps up and down with a huge khangas scarf tied to her rear end, her followers do the same. When she shimmies her lithe hips, her followers shimmy their more substantial ones.

No matter what his or her proficiency level, everyone gets a workout in her 70-minute classes. A favorite part of every session follows the warm-up, when participants take several minutes to just dance and greet each other.

"It doesn't matter what mood you are in when you come to class," says Carlotta Smith, a Minneapolis public school counselor, longtime friend of Bergh's and class regular. "The music starts, and everything seems to disappear. You hear those drums and see the energy Maria has, and you draw energy from her... Everybody I have taken to class has stuck with it. I have one friend 65 years old who loves it."

Fitness experts say the routine has merit. "This is not just one more way to beat your body," says Judy Lutter, head of Melpomene Institute for Women's Health Research. Lutter's husband, Dr. Lowell Lutter, an orthopedic surgeon, served as a consultant for Bergh's video. "She was very scientific in putting her program together. She is a beautiful dancer with talents most people don't have, but she has modified what she does for a general audience."

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Carlotta Smith

Minneapolis friend and student

Ruth Stricker, the founder of the Marsh, describes Bergh's movements as "animal-like and right for the body. She moves in ways the body was intended to move, naturally. She also does a beautiful job of weaving in her heritage and broadening our experience."

Stricker says it was fun to bring Bergh and her program to the "golden ghetto" in Minnetonka, where it has been enthusiastically accepted by Marsh members. Last December, Stricker hosted a champagne premiere for Bergh's video that turned into a glittering cross-cultural event attended by 250 people.

"She puts joy in her class," says Stricker. "Happy bodies respond, angry bodies get hurt. Hers is a class of celebration."

When Maria Bergh was born 44 years ago in Tanga, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), champagne premieres seemed the furthest thing from her future.

Raised in a German orphanage in the Usambara Mountains, Bergh sometimes felt she was last on the list of God's favored ones.

"My childhood was very hard and lonely," she says, hunching her slight shoulders as though protecting some inner hurt. "I felt unloved. But I am lucky I had some brains."

After leaving the orphanage, Bergh attended a boarding school run by American Maryknoll nuns in Morogoro, Tanzania.

"Education for women was rare in those days," says Katherine Mamer, a retired teacher who taught in Morogoro 26 years ago and eventually brought Bergh to Minnesota. "There were three girls' high schools in the whole country, and only a very select group of very bright women went on to high school."

"I got to know Maria because I tutored a group of four girls we were grooming to take the Cambridge oral English exam."

Only five years older than Bergh, Mamer developed a warm friendship with her that has spanned two decades. Determined to help her African friend achieve her potential, Mamer decided to do whatever she could to bring Bergh to the United States.

"Getting students out of the country was difficult," Mamer recalls. "The government preferred not to let bright students leave the country because they had trouble with them not returning."

Mamer managed to persuade authorities that Bergh should leave to pursue an interest in music. She promised to support Bergh until she could support herself, and even managed to pull some strings so that Bergh could attend Mamer's alma mater, the College of St. Catherine, on a scholarship.

"When I think about what she did, I am amazed," Bergh says. "She adopted me and brought me here, and she was only 23 years old at the time."

After graduating from college, Bergh met her husband, Kjell, at a now-defunct singles club in Minneapolis. They were married eight months later.

A former journalist for an Oslo weekly, Kjell took a job as a salesman in a Volvo dealership. Ninety days later, he bought the business.

"When they first got married, they lived in an efficiency apartment in the same building as I did," Carlotta Smith recalls. "Maria taught French at Washburn and then Kiswahili at Central. (Prince was one of her students.) Then, she got into dance and performed all over with the Young Audiences program."

"She is like a magnet that draws people to her. Children,

especially, pick up her movements really well, and she puts on children's classes at the Uptown YWCA. She makes them feel good about themselves and what they are doing. They do it for themselves and for Maria."

Bergh's classes don't cater to bystanders. Even the strongest Minnesota reserve melts when the seductive tape recordings of African drums and stirring chants fill the studio.

"You've got to be liberated, open-minded and willing to try different things," Bergh says. "I have found Minnesotans to be tolerant, but they are reserved in participating. I tell them I have three rules: relax, relax and relax."

The workout has received some criticism. The March issue of *Essence* magazine rates it No. 5 in the 10 best exercise videos of 1987, but also says there is not enough instruction, not enough abdominal, hip and thigh work, and no directive to take your own heart rate.

Bergh deflects the criticism by saying the review tape was only half complete, and, since then, she has added more instruction and included a poster with diagrams of the basic moves. Looking at the poster, you can see where all the abdominal work comes in, she says.

Because she believes taking heart rates disrupts the flow of the dancing, and many people either count wrong or misinterpret the numbers, Bergh instead advises listening to your body and going at your own pace.

After class in Bergh's home studio, the flushed and smiling participants gather for spiced tea in her family room. This is "caring and sharing" time.

"Maria is truly bicultural," says her friend Margaret Wong, a teacher of Chinese at Breck School. "She has experienced everything from starvation and abandonment to luxuries, and this has given her a compassion for people and an enormous generosity."

"Who would be prejudiced against Maria? Who would dare? If you are an OK, together person, you can't help learn from her."