

Nice Girls pole dance too

by Crystal Chui

Scorpio, Gemini, Fireman, Superman, Kate Moose, Flying Fairy and Butterfly. They are not superhero or heroine names but terms used in pole dancing.

Jady Chow, director of Pole Divas, a local dance school that was the first to introduce pole dancing to Hong Kong back in 2004 is explaining. "Fireman is one of the basic moves...but instead of sliding down the pole from the top like firemen do, we start from the bottom, all the way to the top. And from there, you can grip the pole between your thighs, and then stretch out your arms and legs. This is called the fairy trick."

Kate Moose, Chow continues, is derived from supermodel Kate Moss' dance technique, in which her legs are spread out wide on the pole.

As pole dancing involves sensual and erotic manoeuvres, people usually associate it with seductive and scantily clad women performing striptease and lap dances in nightclubs.

But times have changed; pole dancing now incorporates dance and even theatrical elements. More people now view it as another form of expressive art, an aesthetic hobby, or a fitness regime.

The combination of these three aspects pretty much sums up what pole dancing means to Denise Hou Yuen-chi, a recent Master of Philosophy graduate from the University of Hong Kong.

Hou was first gripped by the idea of performing endless twirls and spins after seeing pole dancers at a concert. "I've always wanted to learn this dance when I was a kid. I saw some girls doing it in a Kylie Minogue concert...the

sensual motion of sliding up and down the bar seemed to require no strength at all."

Some male circus performers also captured her heart. "It seemed like they were flying, and I wanted to learn that too." So in 2006, her love affair with pole dancing began. After her first spin on the pole, she experienced a "Wow!" moment and has been hooked ever since. She even ordered her own pole from Britain three years ago and had it installed at home.

At first, her parents were unhappy about her chosen hobby. "My dad associated it with shows he used to watch in the clubs when he was young. But I showed them pole dancing competition videos when we had dinner one night. They were stunned and said 'Wow!' Then I did some moves on the pole and from that moment, they thought it was indeed a healthy thing," recalls Hou, who refuses to disclose her exact age and profession.

She says her mum even helps to take pictures of her dancing and she has also given her a painting that combines all her favourite tricks. "My dad is totally fine with it, too. He even talks about it with his friends. They actually joined my Halloween Pole Party in 2008."

The solo performance and impromptu dance routines are some of the factors that drew Hou further into the world of pole dancing. She prefers the freedom pole dancing gives her to improvise her own routines, unconstrained by rigid dance rules and steps like in tango or the waltz.

Moreover, she describes herself as a "forgetful dancer", who is "partner-shy" and she is not a big fan of the physical contact with a dance partner.

Hou's addiction to the pole goes far beyond practising three times a week and a couple of hours a day. After having dinner with a friend in 2008, she started performing pole dance tricks on the street. This turned into a pole-dancing trek around the territory where she would take pictures of herself in different poses on the Hong Kong Tourism Commission's directional signs for visitors in all the 18 districts and outlying islands of Hong Kong.

Instead of taking "very boring pictures" to show "she had been there", she decided to add a twist by adopting her unique poses. And there was no better way to do that than to show-off the pole tricks she has mastered.

Although she finds this personal project interesting, it is not always fun since some of the signs are hard to find. They are also dirty and dusty with the paint chipping off. Plus, she has to figure out how to strike and hold her pose as the poles are thicker than the ones in the studio.

"I always think that to dance is to diversify. It should not restrict you in any sense...it's all about innovation or else you won't have any breakthroughs."

Nevertheless, the show must go on. So far, her collection of photographs boasts 39 different signs in Hong Kong,

and a number of others from overseas countries she has visited. Her goal now is to find her three remaining target street poles: Sham Shui Po, Lei Yu Mun in Chai Wan, and a country park she has yet to find.

While some treat pole dancing more as a hobby or recreational activity, others use the mystique of pole dancing as a gimmick to gain recognition and boost their career. Enya Tse Yi-wing, a local singer who released her debut album in 2009, combines singing and pole dancing.

"It is indeed a good thing for a new singer," says the 25-year-old Tse, who has been dancing for three years now. "Some people might not remember my name, but they remember I do pole dancing and then they'll recognise me."

Her first Canto-pop song "Enya's Party" portrayed the joy of dancing without partners. The music video featured her various pole dance tricks.

"I want to continue fusing this with singing as I am still new to people. Pole dancing makes the audience hyper and they see this as an innovative move as they seldom see singers doing it while performing."

"Besides, I always think that to dance is to diversify. It should not restrict you in any sense...it's all about innovation or else you won't have any breakthroughs."

Even though she inevitably picks up bruises and injuries practising, pole dancing has now become Tse's philosophy in life, one that she practises every day. It has brought more changes to her life than any other activity she has engaged in. She has slimmed down from 68 kg to 44 kg, increased her pain tolerance level and built up her persistence and ambition.

"Pole dancing is my constant companion. It changed my life completely. If there was no pole dance, I would not be singing to people and



Denise Hou Yuen-chi couldn't resist jumping onto a pole while in Australia.



Hou strikes different poses at directional signs in Shau Kei Wan (above) and Sai Kung.

COURTESY OF DENISE HOU YUEN-CHI

not many would get to know me,” adds Tse.

The positive change in people's attitude towards pole dancing has helped spread the idea that it does not necessarily entail stripping or sexual innuendo.

As a testament to this, other countries have been promoting it as a fitness and sports programme. Vertical Dance, a prominent pole fitness school in Britain, has launched a petition to include pole dancing in the 2012 Olympics.

In 2008, the first worldwide pole dancing competition, International Pole Dance Fitness Championship

(IPDFC) was held in Manila. Last year, Tokyo hosted the event.

The championship has two competing categories: Pole Art, which combines dancing steps and pole tricks, and Pole Fit, which emphasises the tricks.

“When I dance on the pole, I feel the right combination of energy, acrobatics and the artistic side to it.”

Marsha Yuan Hu-ma, widely known in Hong Kong as the first runner-up in Miss Hong Kong 1999, was the champion of Pole Art in IPDFC 2008. She is now a part-time pole dance instructor in PURE Fitness and Aerial Arts Academy, a fitness school that incorporates hoops, silk and rope into pole dancing.

“I notice that girls in the gym are seeking psychological improvement or empowerment. They want to build confidence towards their body and gestures and I really did see them improving gradually.”

And it is not just the women. Some men have also caught the pole dancing bug, although Yuan says most of the first-timers quit and never bother to come back.

Loic Lebret, one of the few male professional pole dancers, however, decided to return to Hong Kong and offer a one-day workshop. Lebret was crowned the Best Amateur Pole Dancer of the Hong Kong International Pole Dance

Competition 2009.

Prior to pole dancing, he had learnt Latin dance.

“When I dance on the pole, I feel the right combination of energy, acrobatics and the artistic side to it. This is really a particular dance technique because it unifies all dances such as Rock and Roll and Latino dance,” said the Frenchman, who was in town to promote a new technique called Duo Pole Dance Skills.

He observed that during dance shows, women dance in a more artistic manner, while men exhibit the strength needed to pull the tricks.


“It's a perfect combination,” he said, “women dance artistically and men provide the force and energy.”

He admitted, though, that he was surprised to find pole dancing requires so much energy, even from a man.

“I was enthralled, attracted and surprised all at once...but flying in

the air was simply sensational. Spinning combined with acrobatics is kind of hard and dangerous. But then again, I love living life dangerously,” he laughed.

On a more serious note, he added that it is about time people erased the narrow and negative perception and stereotypical image attached to pole dancing. “Men can do different techniques in various ways which have absolutely nothing to do with striptease,” Lebret said before he gracefully climbed onto the pole and demonstrated an inverted split. A few women and one man in his class watched intently before following his lead.

Indeed, whether it is considered an art form, a gymnastic activity or a serious workout regime, pole dancing can accentuate men's masculinity as much as it explores femininity in women. 



Students at Aerial Arts Academy learn basic pole dancing moves.



Lebret helps a student during the workshop at the Pole Divas studio.



A new dance technique called Duo Pole Dance Skills.



Pole dancing unifies all dances such as Rock and Roll and Latino, says Lebret.