

Romana Kryzanowska: Pilates Living Legend

Inner IDEA: An interview with the world-renowned protégé of Joseph Pilates.

by Rosalind Gray Davis

“What is the balance of body and mind? It is the conscious control of all muscular movements of the body. It is the correct utilization and application of the leverage principles afforded by the bones comprising the skeletal framework of the body. It is a complete knowledge of the mechanism of the body and a full understanding of the principles of equilibrium and gravity as applied to the movements of the body in motion, at rest and in sleep.”

—Joseph H. Pilates, *Your Health*, 1934

When she is teaching, Pilates doyenne Romana Kryzanowska still quotes the words she heard 67 years ago from renowned dance choreographer George Balanchine: “Joseph Pilates is a genius of the body.”

It was while she was studying at Balanchine’s School of American Ballet that 17-year-old Romana first encountered Pilates himself. “I had a delicate ankle that was bothering me, and I had been going to doctors who wanted to operate. Mr. Balanchine took me by the hand and said, ‘I will take you to a good friend.’ I arrived at the studio [of Joseph Pilates], a small room looking out at 8th Avenue in New York, filled with people doing exercises. I was told to sit in a chair and watch. So I did. I was just a kid.”

She says Mr. Pilates looked at her ankle, led her to one of his apparatuses, taught her some exercises and told her to return to his studio three times a week or, if she wanted to heal faster, to come every day. There was also homework for her foot and ankle muscles using a 6-inch piece of wood that he instructed her to practice with three times a day. “I took five lessons and I said to him, may I work in Balanchine’s class now?” He said, ‘Of course. What did you stop for?’”

From that day forward she was hooked. It was the beginning of a lifelong dedication to the work of Joseph Pilates. It was a perfect match, Romana and “Uncle Joe” as she reverentially called him.

The Early Years

Eighty-four-year-old Kryzanowska, who was born in Detroit, the only child of artist parents, is candid about herself and her history. “I know how to move, and I love it. I’m a natural. I was ahead of everyone as a child in terms of movement. If you have a mother that’s picky, you have to have good alignment. She’d say, ‘Why aren’t you pointing your toes properly!’ She didn’t do ballet—she was a painter—but she did a mean tango.”

Kryzanowska credits her mother with encouraging her second visit to Joseph Pilates' studio. "I hadn't seen men with bare chests and a lot of hair sweating all over the place. I got home and told my mother, this is an awful place—I don't like it. She said, 'Mr. Balanchine knows what he is doing, so you just pay attention.'" The young dancer, a member of the New York City Ballet, therefore returned regularly to the dark, cramped Manhattan studio before going on to the ballet practice, acknowledging "Uncle Joe" for her improved performance. In her interview with *IDEA Fitness Journal*, she effervesced that after working with her mentor, she was able to jump higher and move faster on stage.

"On the whole," she reminisced, "the studio was a wonderful place to go, always crowded, with one helper. Before I knew it, I was named a helper, which meant I didn't have to pay anymore. I was a good teacher by nature and had a good knowledge of the body because of my dance study."

Joe and his wife, Clara, a sensitive, innovative teacher in her own right, recognized Kryzanowska's special gift and soon she became their chosen protégée, training students under their tutelage until the mid-1940s, when she married Peruvian Alpaca King, Pablo Mejia, and moved to South America for 14 years. She raised two children there, Paul and Sari, and continued teaching Pilates to her family and friends in a home studio. "They loved it," she said.

During this period, Kryzanowska stayed in touch with Joseph Pilates by mail, and when she returned to the United States, a single mother, she headed straight for 8th Avenue and began working again with Uncle Joe and Aunt Clara. She also taught ballet in order to support her children and her mother. "All the best people in New York and Europe had found Joe, [including] the Vanderbilt family. Everything was positive with him, everything was up, nothing was down, and he remained the same kind of teacher until his death," she recalls.

After he died in 1967 at age 87, Romana joined forces with Clara to keep the studio operational. "Clara and I worked together after he passed away. I never got home before 10:00 [at night] and was up at 5:00 in the morning. I did that for years. Fortunately, I'm strong as an ox," she said.

The Pilates Spirit

Master teacher Jay Grimes, a first-generation educator who trained with Joe, Clara and Romana in New York, explains Kryzanowska's enduring commitment to the Pilates Method: "One of the things Romana doesn't talk about is that throughout all those years [after Joe's death], she is the one who kept Pilates alive. Clara continued to work, but she was in her 80s and there was a limit to how much she could do. It was Romana who kept the whole thing going."

Technically, says Grimes, nobody knows Joseph Pilates' work better than Kryzanowska, and he believes she embodies the true Pilates spirit. "Joe was like a missionary, a revival

preacher; he was so adamant that he had found the secret to good health and longevity. Clara knew it too, but she was very quiet about it. They gave so much, each in their own way. It was their reward when they could take a broken-down body and turn it into a healthy, vital body. It permeated everything they did. Romana has this same spirit,” exclaimed Grimes.

Kryzanowska believes that Pilates is more than an exercise program—it is a way of life: “You apply Pilates in everyday life, like how you sit, how you walk. You’ve heard a lot of people complain about back problems; it is because these people walk incorrectly with the last vertebra of their tailbone. They stick it out instead of pulling it in and down.” She says doing Pilates changes one’s body. She likens it to building a house: you build the foundation and work up from that point until you have a strong, solid structure that should be maintained regularly.

Grimes shares Kryzanowska’s point of view: “There comes a point where you become Pilates and Pilates becomes you. Joe’s goal was not to have people working out in the gym for hours every day. He wanted to train your body so that every move you made was a constructive exercise. When your whole body is involved and working correctly, [even if] you’re just getting up and walking across the room and sitting down in another chair, that’s exercise; and if you use your body correctly, you’ve just done a constructive exercise.” He adds, “All [Pilates] exercises, as strange as some of them seem, are based on everyday movement; they are just exaggerated.”

Intense About Teaching

Kryzanowska remains passionate about the work and still travels the world teaching Pilates to clients and instructors of all ages. Her business is called “Romana’s Pilates,” and she runs it along with her daughter, Sari Mejia Santo, and her granddaughter, Daria Pace, who are both accomplished instructors. Sari, who also trained with Joe and Clara Pilates, has been teaching at her mother’s side for more than 30 years. The main studio, located on West Fifty-Seventh Street in New York, is still known in the Pilates world as the famous Drago’s Gym, named after gymnast and studio owner Drago Mehandzic, who invited Romana to share his space more than two decades ago. Some of the original equipment designed by Joseph Pilates is still being put to good use by current clients.

Pace says she finds it inspirational to work with her grandmother. “She makes people feel better; she is very encouraging. She motivates people to do things that they don’t think they can do. It’s a gift.”

Kryzanowska uses her gift to motivate the next generation of teachers. She believes that the prerequisites for being a good instructor are excellent training, a comprehensive background and substantive experience, but she feels it is also vital for a top-notch teacher to be intuitive and instinctive within the framework that Joseph Pilates created. “You just do the work. You do what you think is good for the person. You have developed your eyesight; you’ve developed your own presence, how to push somebody,

how to talk to them. I learned it all from Mr. Pilates, and I also have a natural knowledge of the body,” she says.

Instinct and Intuition

Grimes, who also learned his skill from the master, describes his own thoughts about “the best” instructor: “The first requirement is that nobody gets hurt and you get something out of it, some kind of results. The best teachers are the ones who have that instinct, that intuition. I work with a lot of instructors. I can look at a teacher for the first time and know if they are good, how they approach the work, how they use their own body. You can see what kind of understanding they have, what kind of relationship they have with their own body, because if you don’t have a relationship with your own body, you aren’t going to be able to have a relationship with someone else’s body.”

Grimes adamantly believes that it takes the best instructors a minimum of 3–5 years to develop that special, refined form of perception and personal experience. “To go through a 6-month or a 1-year [Pilates] certification program doesn’t mean you’ve arrived,” he says. “I tell people that your certification, that piece of paper, is your learner’s permit. Ultimately, your clients are your teachers.”

Form and Function

Throughout the decades Kryzanowska has trained numerous outstanding instructors, and most are open about expressing their thankfulness that she has so stoically, and with such grit and determination, passed the Pilates Method on to them the way it was taught to her decades ago. Moses Urbano, a student of Kryzanowska’s since 1998 and owner of StudioMo in San Diego, says, “Romana has such a presence. She’s 150% aware of you. I see how she is able to transform, to assess and evaluate a person or a group. I’ve seen people walk out of the studio standing taller. She says, ‘Here’s your bottom—use it and bring it with you,’ and then taps the person on their seat, legs and under their hips after a session. One tap puts it all together, a reminder of how to carry yourself throughout the day.”

A 23-year veteran of Kryzanowska’s teaching, Kathryn Ross-Nash, owner of American Body Tech in New Jersey, remarks, “When you think of Romana, you think of visuals, not words. The best thing is watching her imitate someone walk. She puts on their skin in order to show them how to do it correctly. If the form is not correct, then the function cannot happen. Romana is not about ego; she’s about teaching.”

J Davis, owner of Studio J in Carmel, California, and a “Romana’s Pilates” aficionado, echoes the sentiments of both Urbano and Ross-Nash: “She has an intensity that makes you want to work harder because of the manner in which she teaches. It is a two-way street, a give and take. During a lesson from Romana, she expects nothing less than perfection, but she is never hypercritical. She says, “You can do this—not today, but you

can do this.' You feel you never stop learning from her."

As Kryzanowska said herself at the end of our *IDEA Fitness Journal* interview, "No one will ever be as expert, and as great, as Joe Pilates could be"—she paused a moment and went on—"but I do pretty well." ■

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