

# Los Angeles

*'Pilates is for everyone who's Homo sapiens.'*

Romana Kryzanowska, 80-year-old Pilates instructor



RICARDO DEARATANHA Los Angeles Times

PASSING IT ON: Romana Kryzanowska, 80, leads a class for Pilates instructors at a Sherman Oaks studio.

## Instructor Passes On a Body of Work

Romana Kryzanowska, 80, learned Pilates from its creator.

By PATRICIA WARD BIEDERMAN  
Times Staff Writer

Eighty-year-old Romana Kryzanowska hangs from an apparatus that looks as if it might have been invented by the grand inquisitor, flips and does a split.

The supple senior is equal-ly at ease leaning backward over what appears to be a gym horse to touch the floor behind her. In Pilates, the key to suppleness and strength is the "powerhouse" — the properly wielded combination of stomach, buttocks and lower back — and the octogenarian has a powerhouse that would make a gymnast envious.

Kryzanowska is the Jack La Lanne of Pilates, a woman whose best argument for the exercise technique she touts is

her own age-defying strength and flexibility. On Saturday, she finished teaching a two-day master class for Pilates instructors at the Sherman Oaks studio of her protege, former dancer Trish Garland.

Unlike other contemporary devotees, Kryzanowska learned the technique from its founder, Joseph Pilates, as a young ballerina in the 1940s.

She had chipped a bone in her ankle, and choreographer George Balanchine took her to see "Uncle Joe," as his students called him, at his New York studio.

"Mr. Pilates said to me, 'Well, little girl, I'll give you five lessons. If, at the end of five lessons, you're not better, I'll give you your money back.'"

Pilates got to keep his \$15 and made a convert.

Kryzanowska said that Pilates and his wife, Clara, prepared her to continue their legacy by training her in the original version of the technique.

A purist who once ran the Pilates' studio, Kryzanowska

explains that the exercise guru based his technique on a study of yoga, martial arts and methods used by the ancient Greeks to train Olympians.

Asked if she had changed the technique, she snapped: "Why should I? It's perfect." And added: "When I see people doing something that isn't Pilates and calling it Pilates, I know Joe is churning in his urn."

Classic Pilates includes about 500 exercises, most done on equipment developed by Pilates. Among them are devices with such terrifying names as the Guillotine, the Electric Chair and the Reformer. Asked to define the technique, Kryzanowska said: "It's a system of control — how to use your body correctly, in line, to give you stretch and strength."

She dismissed the idea that the technique's popularity has soared in the last decade because a graying American wants an exercise regime that is kind to its knees. Age has nothing to do with it, she

insisted. "Pilates is for everyone who's Homo sapiens."

Like her mentor, Trish Garland discovered Pilates after an injury. She tore the ligaments in her knee while in the original production of "A Chorus Line." Garland has the sense that Kryzanowska is eager to keep the legacy alive. Kryzanowska's daughter and granddaughter are among those who now teach the way Pilates taught her.

A Pilates instructor in Santa Monica, Nela Fry took Kryzanowska's class, she said, because "sometimes I slip into a bad habit, and I don't even know it until I come here."

Uncle Joe's pupil is tough on bad habits. As the students performed an exercise stretched out on their Reformers, she cautioned them to keep their legs together. "No light between your thighs!"

"Make it look like beautiful movements," she urged.

"I'm a workaholic because I love it," she said, with a laugh as young as her powerhouse.