



PETER J. THOMPSON / NATIONAL POST

The trendiness of yoga is "a little scary," admits instructor Lisa Goveia. "On the surface it appears to be all about selling products and making money."

Form follows fashion

YOGA

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On a higher level, *Yoga Journal*, a humble newsletter launched 30 years ago to knit together the small yoga community in California (the initial issue was only 300 copies), is today the fastest-growing magazine in North America, with more than a million readers, and boasting such high-end advertisers as Nissan and GE. For better or worse, the Yoga Show, the

first event of its kind in the world, confirms the arrival of yoga in mass culture.

"Timing is everything," Shauna Levy, the show's founder and director, says. "Yoga has been all over the entertainment magazines for a little while now. I remember reading about Madonna and Sting and their yoga routines. The best-seller lists have been lined with books about yoga. Even in music, recordings like the *Buddha Bar* series, which are about connecting with Eastern spirituality, have become all the rage."

Of course, it doesn't hurt that her father, Steven Levy, who began practising yoga a few years ago and believes it has changed his life, is the reigning guru of consumer shows in Canada. One of his creations, the groundbreaking One of a Kind Craft Show, is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year and has spawned similar shows in Montreal and Chicago.

Levy borrowed her father's concept and applied it yoga, which she believes is at the tipping point of today's trends. Timing may indeed be everything. And if, to the purists, it appears like opportunism, Levy makes no apologies for her enthusiasm in marketing yoga to a broader group of people. "It's all about healthy living," she says. "People are at a point where they want more balance in their lives, and I'm happy to offer them some of the many choices available today under one roof."

Her opinion is shared by other yoga devotees. Cynthia Funk, who with her sister operates the popular Yoga Sanctuary studios on the Danforth and on College Street, and will be well-represented at the Yoga Show, sees both the positive and cynical aspects of a consumer show based on a discipline that has traditionally renounced mass consumption.

"Yes, yoga has become fashionable," she says. "But if becoming fashionable means more people will gain knowledge about it, I'm all for it."

When Funk opened the Yoga Sanctuary seven years ago, there were few studios in the city. Today, there are approximately 90 busy independent studios, not including the hundreds of gyms and health clubs that offer yoga classes.

"I'll be the first to say one of the main reasons more people have found their way to yoga has little to do with spiritualism," Funk says, "and everything to do with the fact it is an excellent physical workout. But unlike the other trends in workouts — the abs classes, the boxing craze, Buns of Steel, Tae Bo — I think yoga has staying power because it is infinitely more fascinating. It's hard to get bored; there are literally thousands of positions and new levels to aspire to. Plus, at its core it has a spiritual component that no other form of exercise can equal. Fashionable or not, yoga works."

Lisa Goveia, another independent yoga-studio owner, knows first-hand about fashion, having spent more than a decade as a model in Europe and New York. She began practising yoga as a

means of dealing with the stress of the fashion industry. Four years ago, she decided to change direction in her life and invested \$10,000 in 500 hours of strenuous classes to become a certified Bikram yoga instructor in California. (Bikram is a form of yoga practised in a sweltering room.) Two years later, back home in Toronto, she took out a bank loan and transformed a dilapidated garage on Queen Street East into a spacious, beautiful studio that has become a popular destination for Beaches residents.

"It's a little scary when you see everyone capitalizing on the popularity of yoga," Goveia says. "The tapes, the videos, the

accessories — on the surface it appears to be all about selling products and making money."

The redeeming element for her is that the essence of yoga cannot be compromised. "It offers balance, clarity and relaxation despite anything else. They can try to sell you whatever else they want. In the end, yoga is a moving meditation that may be the best preventive health care there is."

■ The Yoga Show is on today from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and tomorrow from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, visit theyogashow.com.

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