

Let's Go Old School

By Jamie Isaac

Is Joe's original work simply outdated? Has science based movement truly taken us to a level where reverence to his work is misplaced nostalgia, or at best a fun look back to see how far we've all come?

Or... Is there merit when we look deeper into the intention behind each exercise? Is there detail and planning that transcends the generations and is still poignant and relevant today?

As a classical teacher I hear a lot of comments that argue the first point and blow off the genius of Joe as over hyped reverence for a guy who may have been ahead of his time, but that time has long since run its course... This view I would argue is severely missing the point, and is more often than not from the perspective of an instructor who has willingly bought into the 'Classical is outdated' myth without really trying to see what the magic might be all about.

As I mentioned, I classify myself as a classical teacher, but that doesn't mean I've always colored within the lines. My background was as a clinical practitioner, then followed by a few contemporary trainings before I realized that my personal journey was asking me to turn 180 and head back towards Mr Pilates.

That doesn't mean that I'm all born again Contrologist and preaching the uber classical scripture. I believe that there's multiple paths on the Pilates highway and each with the power to truly change bodies, and lives for the better. My pathway just happens to be along a more traditional road.

However, whatever pathway you prefer, I would argue that diving a little into Joe's original work can greatly expand

our understanding of the method. Comprehending the intention behind an OG Joe exercise can act as a key unlocking a variety of shapes and movements across the studio. Maybe even into how we move through life too.

In fact, looking backwards can be a great way to speed up our progress in going forward.

Besides, most importantly, it can be a whole lot of fun.

So ,what if we took a few moments to dive into some of Mr Pilates' exercises and consider executing them exactly as prescribed. Could our practice, possibly even our lives, be positively impacted?

“The benefits of Contrology depend solely upon your performing the exercises exactly according to instructions – and not otherwise.”

Joe repeats this similar notion numerous times throughout his book, Return To Life and yet, even with Pilates more popular than it has ever been, few practitioners would ever have followed his instructions or experienced some of the original mat exercises as taught in this book.

Of course, since RTL was published, some of the exercises have even been changed and revised by Joe himself. Not to mention that each of the elders will have practiced and shared their own variations, that no doubt had been adapted for their specific needs, or perhaps been tweaked over time. So, the truth is things change.

As with all practices of technique or ritual, even when things are written down, there is still the wonderful element of interpretation. Each person extracting a different meaning from the words, pictures or dialogue and so on the age old game of telephone continues, culminating in the multitude of Pilates variations and approaches that we can see and experience across the globe today.

As mentioned before, I want to be clear that this is a judgement free zone. If it's safe and mindful, then you do you. I'm pretty sure that whether you think Mr Pilates would approve of the changes and contemporary approaches or not, we can all agree that he would certainly prefer that we did some sort of movement rather than none at all. Anything to give, as Joe said, our bodies "the care that our wellbeing deserves".

But wouldn't it be fun just for a moment to go back in time and experience the work being taught by its creator himself? Even if that meant an overly zealous hands on assist from a guy in tight white swim trunks and gym shoes!

I've found that it can be really interesting to explore and practice each exercise as prescribed in RTL. Once we begin to get a feel for the intention behind each movement, or the connections and effect it can then have on the mind and body, it can unlock new elements and relationships with the modern variations, or even with other exercises in the repertoire.

There's something in the order of the exercises too. In my opinion there's truly nothing that is by chance within Mr Pilates' incredible work. Each exercise builds on the next, adding complexity, or challenge, or an opportunity for a counter stretch or movement. Everything in place yet not overly calculated. Instead the process feels like it was created through a sense of balance between understanding, intention and a genius-like following of his intuition.

In my experience, beyond the fun and well deserved reverence of going back in time to review and practice as Mr Pilates intended (to our best efforts at least), my own practice as well as my teaching felt a little more connected, a touch more stable and I certainly felt like it made a touch more sense. By looking back in time, I had begun to see more clearly of what might lie ahead of me...

And yes, maybe I am perhaps being a little nostalgic. But once

again I think we might all agree that in a world where the overuse of the word Pilates runs the risk of diluting itself completely, giving at least a momentary nod to the man himself and all who have followed in his footsteps might be the only way to prevent the entire method from jumping the shark completely.

So, let's make a pact to every once in a while, give a tip of our Contrology caps to Mr Pilates and thank him for his incredible contribution to movement practices.

Who knows, if we follow his words and "faithfully perform our Contrology exercises" we'll unlock the Mr Pilates' sincere wish of "everlasting happiness".