



Upward Facing Dog

Yoga and Me/Yoga On Screen

THE REAL-LIFE EQUIVALENTS of the British colonial characters immortalized in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* would have dropped their gin and tonics onto their laps if they could have witnessed the thousands of Americans who on June 21 of this year brought the ancient Hindu practice of yoga to the epicentre of the western world, Times Square. Even if the teacher barked out posture cues like a drill instructor on speed, and the setting was the opposite of a tranquil mango grove or a shady Ashram, the 42nd Street yogis were synching their bodies to an ancient practice that is an intense workout for the body, mind and soul.

Yoga is powerful. In any sincerely taught class, even yoga bunnies in their Lululemon getups seem to connect with something beyond their quest for a divine butt when at the end of practice, they rise from the rest and meditation time called *Shavasana*, eyes closed, hands clasped over their hearts, chanting Om Shanti.

Like Peruvian-born, Montreal-based Carlos Ferrand, whose new feature doc *Planet Yoga* (2011) introduces viewers to yoga, I always thought I should look into a tradition that has fascinated people for thousands of years, but until about a year and a half ago, never did. Nothing enticed me into saying 'Okay, let's learn some asanas, find out how to meditate to my breathing and see what gives.' Definitely not *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga* by the legendary Swami Vishnudevananda,

which some far-out poet gave my wife, Viviane Elnécavé, way back when. The guidebook's opaque

text, illustrated by photos of the swami twisting himself into postures wearing what looks like a Speedo, seemed daunting and weird. Also on the bookshelf: a couple of instructional DVDs, one by Rodney Yee, the big-time yoga teacher that *Time* magazine called the "stud-muffin guru," were packages I never opened.

When friends told me about their bedazzling passages to India, the thought of taking off for holy hot spots like Varanasi or Rishikesh and sitting at the feet of some munificent baba briefly crossed my mind. Very briefly. I did not see myself partaking of North American yoga culture, which I perceived as self-righteous New Agers padding around expensive, lily-white spas, fantasizing about yoga super-

stars who are busy erecting financial empires and fucking everybody in sight. I agreed with Ferrand, who voice-overs at the top of *Planet Yoga*, "I never thought I would make a movie about yoga. Every time I tried to learn it, either I hurt myself, or the preaching and chanting turned me off."

Until late 2009, I couldn't have told you the difference between Child's Pose (*Balāsana*) and Pigeon (*Kapotasana*). But then, as my beautiful, talented wife and I struggled to deal with the advancing neurological disease that she was afflicted with, a yoga teacher called Lisa Shalom asked me if I'd like to take some lessons. I said yes immediately because I knew Shalom as a gifted masseuse who could knead away tensions within minutes, bringing on a sweet altered state. And probably because, as films like *Planet Yoga*, *Anusara Yoga: The Heart of Transformation* (2010) and the recently completed *Yogawoman* (2011) reveal, many people, including teachers, come to yoga reacting to shocks, traumas and emotional slumps.

There's nothing clinical, dogmatic or sanctimonious about Shalom. As a student who "shut down" when she encountered a know-it-all yoga teacher, she has been exposed to most of the currently popular styles: Anusara, Kripalu, Bikram, Ashtanga and so on. But she says that style is secondary to a teacher's "understanding of the principles and the postures," not to mention her ability to intuit where to lead a student at any given moment.

Petite, olive-skinned and longhaired, Montreal-based Shalom takes yoga seriously, but she can also joke about that part of herself. As someone who hates pigeonholes, I resonated with her eclecticism. Shalom has gone out to sea on two of Paul Watson's eco-piracy missions and got busted for filming seal hunters. A singer and drummer, she loves reggae and oud-driven Middle-Eastern music and performs with funk-afro beat Montreal band Max Bananaz, nomads around Israel and Egypt, has studied with babas in India, and learns Kabbalah with rabbis she hooked up with when she became drawn to a Jewish background that had lain dormant until she was in her twenties. Shalom is a paradoxical free spirit who admits that she has a soft spot for Justin Bieber. "No shame," she laughs. "That's part of what yoga is, being able to embrace all facets of yourself." My kind of guru.

BY MAURIE ALIOFF

Planet Yoga,
dir. Carlos Ferrand
(2011)



After a year and a half of Shalom's fine-tuned private lessons, I'm not quite reaching for big-ticket items like enlightenment. At this point, yoga offers me physical and emotional release with glimpses of spiritual dimensions beyond. And when you've done a really good practice, you feel charged up, full of limitless energy. "It's like a crack addiction," an actress with a newly developed yoga jones once twinkled to me. Moreover, yoga connects you to a sense of ritual and the pleasure of at least trying to work your body gracefully, artfully.

As I tuned into yoga and could do asanas like the Bow pose (*Dhanurasana*) with relative ease, I heard that Ferrand's *Planet Yoga* was in post, and got curious about the movie. Scheduled to air on Radio-Canada (RC) and ARTV after a probable theatrical release in the fall, *Planet Yoga* is also a website, hosted by RC, for yogis to exchange links and information while, elsewhere in cyberspace, a platform will host six webdocs on related subjects.

Apart from the glut of learning videos made by everyone from Rodney Yee to Sting's wife, Trudie Styler, the inventory of yoga-related films is constantly expanding. *Yoga Inc.* (2007), perhaps the only movie pointing to the dark side of the movement, focuses on how yogapreneurs have created a multibillion-dollar industry out of an activity associated with plumbing spiritual depths. Other angles are covered in docs ranging from the legendary Oscar-nominated *Naked Yoga* (1974) to *Anusara Yoga: The Heart of Transformation*, a portrait of Anusara yoga, and *Yogawoman*, which argues that women have taken over a discipline once reserved strictly for men.

As for the vast storehouse of web-driven material, you can click on everything from Berlin Bell's Street Yoga films to Ogden, the Inappropriate Yoga Guy, an SNL-like parody about an obnoxious, know-it-all narcissist who thinks he's God's gift to good-looking yoginis.

When Ferrand began easing into his yoga project, he met plenty of Ogdens. "I encountered a wall of narcissism," the filmmaker

told me, "and it put me totally off. I had to find another direction, which is how yoga helps people. I sincerely believe that it is a symbol of what the capitalist world needs, which is cool it, breathe, get in touch with yourself. At the same time, I don't think yoga is for everybody."

In contrast with *Yoga Inc.*, *Planet Yoga* surveys yoga culture with an entirely benevolent eye. "I don't like to put my energy into attacking and accusing and denouncing," Ferrand explains. A multiple-character-driven film that zeroes in on practitioners who "are open to others, who approach others," it launched as a commissioned project and then, during four years of production (seven months of editing), the movie got personal. Ferrand now "yogas" every day, although he's "not interested in enlightening myself to where I hover above everyday reality."

Wanting to "offer the general public as generous a view of yoga in the Western world as possible," Ferrand avoided assembling "a catalogue of the different types of yoga. There's a new flavour every week." Instead, his gallery of characters, their stories and philosophies project various facets of that overview. Throughout, scenes and interviews are peppered with definitions of terms like *pranayama* (breathing) that appear in supered titles, and asanas (poses) illustrated by a young woman, Ida Ripley, green-screened over vibrant backgrounds. *Planet Yoga* also uses animation, mainly bursts of vividly coloured flower petals to jokingly reference the naiveté of hippies heading east for enlightenment.

The movie opens on Baba Ramdev, the charismatic and controversial guru who has reigned yoga in India after years of indifference, whipping up fervour in a huge seated crowd. Then Ferrand segues from this spectacle to people like San Franciscan Richelle Donigan, one of the doc's more intriguing characters. In sea-swept locations, this tattooed black woman, who is a yoga teacher, dancer and drummer, talks about mixing races in her classes. For Ferrand, Donigan

counteracts "the image of yoga in the West as lily-white. People have made an equation between the little yoga mats and the city; it's an urban activity for young, up-and-coming people." Donigan embraced yoga in the aftermath of tragedies that befell close friends and deals with her own trauma: a childhood with a glamorous mother who happened to be a successful professional thief.

Another of the film's yoginis, Kery Lawson, also takes yoga in a surprising direction: teaching it to wayward Inuit kids in Nunavut. In the movie's climax, Lawson offers a class to inmates of a Punjab prison, accompanied by her boyfriend, who plays flute during *Shavasana*, that moment of surrendering to total relaxation.

Other *Planet Yoga* characters include British Columbian Jeffrey Armstrong, a quintessential WASP who has translated the Bhagavad-Gita and is known in India as the "White Hindu"; and Paul McQuillan, a hunky actor-musician-yoga teacher who embodies what Ferrand calls the "typical North American person," using yoga to tone his body, not elevate his soul. Maryjo Fetterly, paralyzed from the waist down, teaches yoga from her wheelchair, and in Paris, religious historian Ysé Tardan-Masquelier runs a yoga school that seems to have many older students while her colleague Patrick Tomatis works with an immobilized man suffering from locked-in syndrome. Sri Venu (Stephane Boisjoly), who originally pitched the idea for this movie to Radio-Canada, practises Nada yoga, which uses sound vibrations, particularly music, as the core of yoga practice.

Well into *Planet Yoga*, Ferrand flashes back to Swami Vishnu-devananda, who in the early 1960s founded one of the first North American yoga schools in Montreal, created an ashram in Val Morin, Que., and eventually opened a centre in the Bahamas, where his students included The Beatles. (He put together the still available *Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga* that I sloughed off.) Way back when, Vishnu-devananda performed wedding rites

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(From left) *Anusara Yoga: The Heart of Transformation*, dirs. Saraswati Clere and Kate Clere (2010); *Yogawoman*, dirs. Saraswati Clere and Kate Clere (2011)
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The author's own yoga teacher, Lisa Shalom.
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for the teacher known as Dr. Bali, a legend on Montreal's yoga scene and one of the key characters in the film.

Yoga instructor to the Montreal Canadiens and a healing theoretician who works with breast cancer patients, Dr. Bali is an extraordinarily energetic and youthful-looking 86. "He takes you beyond identity associations," says Shalom. "Through his words, wisdom and demeanour, he allows you to meet yourself again." It was Dr. Bali, one of the key inhabitants of *Planet Yoga*, who transformed Ferrand from an observer to a participant who says, "I don't want to kill my ego. It's the only thing I have, and I don't even really want to become a realized person. I just want to feel good, understand and learn."

Unlike *Planet Yoga*, *Anusara Yoga: The Heart of Transformation* (2010) zooms in on one specific approach to yoga practice and advocates it. Saraswati Clere, whose YogaKula Productions is the filmmaking arm of the yoga studios she owns in San Francisco and Berkeley, produced the doc. Co-directed by Clere and her sister Kate, *Anusara Yoga: The Heart of Transformation* is a crisply edited film probably best appreciated by those who can slip into a Downward-Facing Dog (*Adho Mukha Shvnanasana*) at the drop of a mat.

Narrated by Minnie Driver (*Barney's Version*, *Good Will Hunting*) and shot in India, Australia and across the U.S., the film traces the history and development of Anusara yoga, one of the most influential styles in the world. Through talking-head interviews with people who feel transformed by Anusara and footage of its creator, John Friend, in action, the film celebrates this wildly popular figure and his philosophy. With his down-to-earth Americanism, fit body and curly hair, Friend is the Gene Kelly of yoga teachers, the opposite of a cadaverous ascetic meditating in a cave. He is as wholesome as he seems to be, say his admirers.

Friend is no Johnny-come-lately, no martial-arts guy who thought he'd get in on yoga. As a child, his mother enthralled him with

tales of magical swamis, and he read the Gita at age 13. Friend studied in India, then after years of trying to synthesize what he has learned for western students, he realized that his yoga practice was "dry," and that yoga should be pleasurable.

Anusara means both flow of grace and its essence. The core of the philosophy is that everything in the universe, from the sun to the cells in your body, must draw in to shine out. A film like *Anusara Yoga: The Heart of Transformation* makes it clear that whatever the system—Anusara, for instance—the basis is always the ancient vocabulary of asanas. But there are many different ways to think about postures, a variety of attitudes toward them. Friend wants you to work hard while enjoying every breath you take, and use what you've learned in your life off the mat.

Also directed by Saraswati and Kate Clere, the recently completed *Yogawoman* claims that of the innumerable yoga practitioners around the world, 85 percent are women. The irony is that after the advent of Brahmanism, which, according to one of the characters in the film, compared female humans to filthy water and rotten food, women were barred from practising and teaching.

More elaborate than *Anusara Yoga: The Heart of Transformation*, *Yogawoman* covers different chapters of its subject, from the history of how women connected with yoga to its specifically female medical and psychological benefits. Narrated by Annette Bening, encountering high-profile female practitioners and teachers like Shiva Rea, the blonde goddess of flow, the doc argues that women bring a nurturing effect to the practice and then proceeds to demonstrate. As it moves forward, *Yogawoman* travels to Pune, India, and Kampala, Uganda, where high-profile yogini Seane Corn's organization Off the Mat, Into the World teaches yoga to Ugandan women who are HIV-positive and opens a birthing centre. "This is definitely yoga, this is it," a volunteer says.

The idealism of *Planet Yoga*, *Anusara*

Yoga: The Heart of Transformation and *Yogawoman* is not entirely absent from John Philp's *Yoga Inc.*, which suggests a Nick Broomfield (*Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam*; *Sarah Palin—You Betcha!*) exposé with its emphasis on yoga as an \$18 billion dollar business in the U.S. Philp moves in on anomalies like yoga-pose competitions, which play like a combo of a sports event and a beauty pageant, not to mention ancillary products like Chakra Panties and Fuck Yoga T-shirts.

Throughout his film, Philp keeps circling back to yoga's bad boy, Bikram Choudhury, whose particular system is supposed to work best in a room heated to 40.6°C, hence Hot Yoga, which many yoginis and yogis, including me, delight in. Bikram yoga, in play since the 1970s, is widely respected. However, Choudhury, a show-bizy character fond of wearing flashy suits and slouchy fedoras, has alienated people by copyrighting his system and sending cease and desist letters to small studios purporting to teach Bikram yoga. They've argued that Bikram yoga, like any other method, is built up around ancient asanas obviously in the public domain.

Watching these films as someone who practices yoga is yogic in itself. The push-pull, expansion-contraction, earth-sky paradoxes inherent in the asanas are mirrored by the contradictions between idealism and blatant materialism in yoga culture. And what about the European and North American wannabe babas who show up in yoga centres like Rishikesh? "They walk around in orange or white garb as if they're holy men," observes Lisa Shalom. "But you look in their eyes and there's no smile in there, and you look at their mouths and they're solemn people. It's an example of missing the point, and it's almost tragic to me. If you miss your smile, you've missed the point." **POV**

Maurie Alioff writes about movies for publications off- and online and is also a screenwriter. He longs to go on the road again in search of the eighth major chakra.