

THE weekender

LEISURE & LIVING

GIVE DANCE A STAMP OF APPROVAL

GINA DAVIDSON

THE sound of feet stamping on wooden flooring echoes through the corridors, the staccato beat getting quicker and quicker until, abruptly, it stops.

Maria Calderon smiles at the class watching her. The flamenco tutor, who trained at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona, has just shown what she expects of them – and age is no excuse.

This is an adult dance class, the numbers of which have shot up in Edinburgh in recent years, possibly thanks to the television exposure of dance in shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *Got To Dance*. While ballroom and even street dance are popular, the classics of ballet, tap, jazz and even flamenco are in big demand. And if you're here, then you're expected to perform.

Forget little girls in sweet tutus, adult dance classes are for women and men – but mostly women – who want to get fit without having to go to a gym or pound the pavements, and perhaps even reuse the skills they once learned as children.

"We've always taught Spanish dance but with Maria being in town for a while, we jumped at the chance of having her as a guest tutor," says Dance For All director Tracy Hawkes.

"We've been going for 26 years and adult dance has always been popular, but it does go in waves. Right now it's very popular, especially ballet, as it's the mainstay of dance training.

"Some people could be coming back to it after learning as a child, but its main attraction is that it's a totally comprehensive workout for the body. It doesn't just focus on one particular group of muscles or body part but on the whole body. People also like the grace of it, the control and the artistry. It's satisfying on so many levels."

She adds: "It's definitely a leisure activity, but one of pleasure not of pain, and people feel committed to coming once they start because they don't want to fall behind. I've got

people in their 40s, 50s and 60s coming two or three times a week because it's more enjoyable than going to an aerobics class or the gym."

It's this contrast with gym-based exercise which many believe is driving the rise in numbers of adults attending dance classes. Dance, after all, uses the whole body with its mixture of quick, high-energy steps complemented by slower, graceful moves which tone the muscles.

Posture, stamina and flexibility are also improved, core muscles strengthened and the particular style of stamping in flamenco and tap, or jumps in ballet, all improve bone density, reducing the risk of osteoporosis.

Tracy adds: "The other thing with dance is that it requires focus, co-ordination and varying levels of motor skills, so it exercises the mind too. If you're learning the steps of flamenco or ballet then you have to concentrate. You can't fall into that mind-numbing feeling you can get on a treadmill."

Indeed, the *New England Journal of Medicine* published a study in 2003 citing that dance, more than any other leisure activity, reduced the risk of dementia in elderly patients.

It's little surprise then that the Scottish Government has targeted dance as part of its Active Nation campaign to inspire people to be more physically active.

As a result of its Get Scotland Dancing programme, DanceBase, Scotland's national centre for dance in the Grassmarket, has received investment from Creative Scotland to put on a celebration of the art as part of the UK's Big Dance 2012 project.

On June 30 and July 1, every dance group, school and society in Edinburgh is being invited to perform, teach or demonstrate throughout the city centre, while in the evenings there will be outdoor dance-along movies and a fringe programme of dance in bars and clubs to get people moving. As well as the health benefits associated with dance, John Lyndon, communications editor for DanceBase, admits that the glamour on shows such as *Strictly* also does much to encourage older



STRIKE A POSE: Maria Calderon displays her flamenco skills at Dance For All; inset, Tracy Hawkes leads from the front in her ballet class



people to get back to dance. "The wonderful thing about *Strictly* is that it shows so clearly that dance can be both accessible and aspirational," he says.

"Accessible because audiences have seen that anyone can dance, and aspirational because it makes people wonder if they could achieve a little bit of the glamour on

show for themselves. They invariably can."

■ The eight-week course of adult elementary classes in flamenco are held at Dance For All, 106 St Stephen Street at 7.30pm on Mondays. Visit www.danceforall.co.uk. For more information on DanceBase's Big Dance, visit www.dancebase.co.uk

gldavidson@edinburghnews.com