
FIGHTING

FAT

WITH

FONDA

BY KATE COLEMAN

I CAN HEAR MY OWN breath, a raspy sound in my ears, mixed with the up-tempo madness on the record player. My legs and attendant cellulite jiggle with the strain of complicated lifts—two sets of 60, and then 60 more. It is the persecution of my fleshy flesh. Though sweat runs from sopped hair into my eyes, I can still see my gorgeous tormentor in the mirrors.

It is with some satisfaction, as I strain to keep a flat back, that I see *her* mascara streaking, that the darkening sweat stains around *her* tiny waist, crotch, knee-backs, and pits attest to the fact that my celebrated drill sergeant is made of the same stuff as I, albeit hers is firmer and stronger and there's a lot less of it. Her famous blue eyes pick me out of the flailing group—a feat easy enough, since doubtless I'm the flabbiest one. I can see she likes that I'm pushing to keep up with her spirited count.

Suddenly she approaches my reclining body. I've done something wrong. "When you see somebody doing the exercise incorrectly," she addresses the others—all lithe, all attentive, all wearing cute legwarmers on their dainty dancers' bodies—"you may correct the mistake, but you *must* ask permission to touch them. Very important," she admonishes.

She turns back to me.

"May I touch you, Kate?"

What sensitivity—Jane Fonda asking my permission to touch me like that. What an understanding of women's archetypal protectiveness toward the collective

corpus violated by the uninvited touch ever since man first discovered bottom-pinching.

"Sure, Jane, touch me."

So I did it wrong. Never mind, I tell myself. I have proven my point. Intrepid, *macha* journalist keeps up with a class of professionals. The nine young dancers around me are handpicked to be the 43-year-old actress's surrogates in the newest branch of Jane Fonda's Workout, an exercise studio that opened on Maiden Lane last month.

The master class I am suffering through is the one in which Jane zaps her teachers. They already know the routines, so Jane can get down and show off her supple 16-year-old body, offer do's and don't's ("Don't wear mascara to class." "Don't talk about losing weight"), and simply spread her unbridled exuberance at working the body to its limits. She's invited me to participate today so that I may learn about the Workout from the inside.

I agree—just to prove that fatties can move. I'm almost as competitive as Jane, am a glutton for punishment—and more, having gone so far as to eat a creamy, perfectly *al dente* pasta lunch washed down with two glasses of cabernet at the Balboa Cafe, all the while knowing that within two hours I would be undergoing Jane's demanding instruction.

Now Jane begins to whoop it up, cheerleader-fashion.

"Does it hurt? Does it burn? Because if it doesn't burn, you're not doing it right!"

I yell, "Yeah!" with all the other prancing minions, except that the burning-cum-conflagration I feel is not the hot buildup of lactic acid Jane swears is good for us but rather a case of old-fashioned heartburn, fueled by the acrid taste of half-digested fettuccine. She's lucky I haven't lost it on the floor.

But if I did, it would not faze Jane in the least or deter her from her current crusade. She has sized up the spreading foe and lowered her mighty sword to go tilting—not at some new nuke but at a far more subtle and insidious enemy: the unsightly flab and sag of flaccid flesh.

Still, there is more to Jane's message (there always is) than the simple aesthetics of Skinny. Fat's a heart-stopper, and Jane's against that. She can't help it if hordes of Southland women have plunked down their money in her Encino and Beverly Hills studios over the last two years trying to emulate Jane's callipygian loveliness—that's "shapely buttocks" from the Greek. Jane justifies the Workout as one of the important building blocks toward *health*, the Big Issue Jane and activist husband Tom Hayden have tagged as critical for the 80s.

No one, of course, has ever accused the Haydens of missing an opportunity to make political points, whatever the issue. And I found this to be true of Jane when I



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interviewed her before this torture session I've dared to take.

JANE CROSSED THE striking airline controllers' pickets and jetted to San Francisco this morning. She booked a \$60-a-day suite at the residential El Drisco Hotel on Pacific, using it only as a dressing room and a salon to receive journalists; she is leaving tonight on the red-eye for New York. She's never stayed at this hotel before. Just trying it out, in her quest to find a small, "romantic" hotel here, the publicist lady tells me in the elevator. A male journalist leaves just as I enter. Things are running smoothly. Jane does not keep me waiting—a rarity among movie stars.

She walks up to me in the living room

of the suite and shakes my hand in, just the forthright manner I expected of her. She's very pretty and has that "natural" look, but she does wear makeup—lots of dark eyeliner and light foundation, nice and translucent, allowing the attractive lines around her eyes to come through. Her lips shine with colorless gloss.

She looks trim and smart in a tailored beige silk shirt and tight burgundy slacks. I can see her breasts clearly through her sheer blouse, but I think she's wearing a "no-bra." I don't want to stare. She wears backless and toeless high heels—and is in need of a pedicure, if you care about such things. She looks very much the TV reporter she played in *The China Syndrome*. We sit down together on the couch and quickly get down to business. Jane is on a tight schedule.

"What's the connection," I begin, "between the Workout and progressive politics?"

"There's a very direct financial relationship: the Workout is a CED business—that's the Campaign for Economic Democracy. That's one aspect of it; the other is a concern about health. Self-reliance and health. Instead of depending on doctors to make you well, one of the best ways to remain healthy is to exercise. I mean—" she pauses, fingering the huge gold turquoise-studded cross mounted like a museum piece on her neck—"it's not going to cure cancer, but it's a great medicine preventative, especially for psychological things."

There it is. The twin prong of profit and political righteousness, a step above Zsa Zsa or Eva Gabor's launching a line of cosmetics or synthetic wigs. The Workout offers an intrinsically valuable service—health—and the profits go to finance the administrative overhead for Hayden's CED headquarters. (The CED, a statewide political organization, has fielded candidates for local and state offices and has pushed hard on issues ranging from the support of farmworkers to opposition to nuclear power plants.)

According to Jane, it was the wild success of her last movie, *Nine to Five*, that suddenly gave her real money—enough to send her searching for solid investments. Her list of financial no-no's was so long—no oil, no gold, no pharmaceuticals, to cite just a few—that, by her own admission, her investment counselor laughed at her.

And she had been funnelling her earnings into Hayden's political machine. She credits her husband with coming up with the notion of investing in a business that, after recouping the original money, would then be turned over to CED. There could be no political discomfort or embarrassment in the *right* business. This, after all, was in step with Hayden's 1976 senatorial campaign, when he countered critics' accusations that he was anti-

capitalist with a rousing defense of the "ma and pa store."

Jane toyed briefly with opening a restaurant or an "honest" service garage. But it was another two years before the Workout came to fruition. She became sincerely committed to the project when she started taking an exercise class to get in shape for her bikini scene in the film *California Suite*. A broken foot, she explains, had prevented her from doing her usual ballet workouts, an activity she pursued religiously from the time she was 20 years old. ("Whether it was Leningrad, Rome, Paris, or London—wherever I was making a movie—the first thing I would do was find the local ballet school. For 20 years I did that obsessively. It was like a cord—a spinal cord that held my life all together." I winced at that, thinking of my own degenerating L-5 disk.)

The broken foot, according to Jane, had turned her to fat. "I was *totally* in a panic. I would not have put a bikini on in front of my own children when I got the cast off, and I had just two and a half weeks before shooting started."

The confession about her children is unsettling. I wonder what effect Jane Fonda's words might have on an overworked, overweight mother of six.

Jane went to the exercise class that became the inspiration for her own studios. "I could not move for days," she recalls with a groan, but it did the trick. She went twice a day for two weeks—an astonishing feat—and was sold. She claims she got stronger, dropped her weight, and actually changed her body shape. "I had muscle tone where I never thought I could have it, and yes, I wore the bikini in the movies and everybody thought I looked great!"

She found the class a more thorough workout than her beloved ballet classes ("I did a mean barre, but I wasn't too good center floor"), and she's been doing it ever since, teaching classes at the old establishment even before she decided to start her own studio. Looking at her I'm ready to plunk down my \$6 a class, or buy a three-month card for unlimited classes for \$200, but I'm dismayed when she tells me she also jogs some six or seven miles a day.

Exercising, says Jane, is not only a way to maintain health and keep the odious AMA types from your door, it's the most natural and sure-fire way to stay thin and fit. Exercise instruction, combined with her pointers on good nutrition—a rehash of all the anti-cholesterol, pro-bran advice we've read in newspapers and magazines since Adelle Davis became popular and then abruptly died

of cancer—is also the message of Jane's new book, *Jane Fonda's Workout Book*, which will be published this month by Simon & Schuster. Jane is just as messianic about the harmful salt, sugar, and chemical additives in our diets as she is about the evils of oil cartels.

But lest I get the idea that she's the perfect goody-two-shoes, we are interrupted by the delivery of a steaming pot of coffee and a dozen pastries smeared with sugary icing. An obviously near-starving Jane leaps off the couch and begins wolfing down the junk food with a guilty shrug. She can justify her binge: she ran seven miles this morning.

The way Jane tells it, between munches, before she found exercise she had a long history of suffering from being fat, pudgy, ungraceful, and awkward—just

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the way the rest of us grew up. She claims she was just as obsessed about her weight as the myriad housewives who buy each new tabloid at the checkout stand that promises a new miracle diet.

"I've always fought a weight problem," she insists when I tell her I find it hard to believe her self-portrait of a fat klutz. "Between the ages of 10 and 16, I was chubby and my weight would fluctuate wildly. The most important thing about all that is, it doesn't matter if I was really plump or homely as a child. I *thought* I was. My girlfriends were all athletic, toned, and beautiful."

In many interviews elsewhere, Jane has recalled the painful periods in her life when she wore falsies (because she was too thin?) and was forced into the sex-kitten role she eventually portrayed in the fantasy space movie *Barbarella*, which she made for her first husband, director Roger Vadim. These various unfortunate, sexually oppressed Janes are trotted out by her as proof that she too has been humiliated by sexist stereotypes in our society.

But there are inconsistencies. Jane paints a picture of her diet-conscious upper-crust girlfriends, who are all beautiful and who all bloom before she does—she mentions Brooke Hayward, for example, author of *Haywire* and daughter of actress Maggie Sullivan and agent Leland Hayward—yet at another point in the interview Jane is insistent that her "best friends were always the underdogs: the stable boy, the gardener's son—the help."

For Jane, such statements seem to be a kind of dressing down, a deliberate attempt to make her one of the people. Being beautiful, staying trim are necessary to being a movie star, and one can't fault her for that; but she stretches matters on her history, I suspect, to disarm imperfectly formed women like me, who might resent her for it.

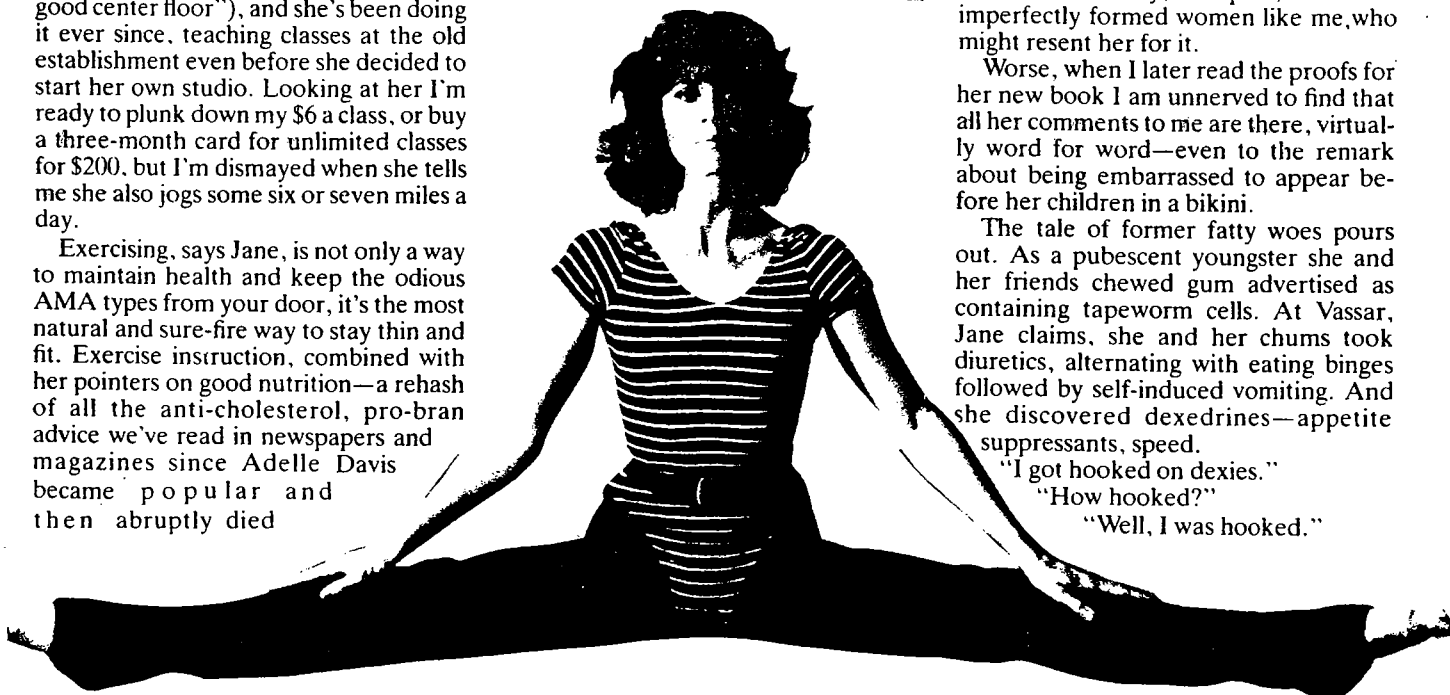
Worse, when I later read the proofs for her new book I am unnerved to find that all her comments to me are there, virtually word for word—even to the remark about being embarrassed to appear before her children in a bikini.

The tale of former fatty woes pours out. As a pubescent youngster she and her friends chewed gum advertised as containing tapeworm cells. At Vassar, Jane claims, she and her chums took diuretics, alternating with eating binges followed by self-induced vomiting. And she discovered dexedrine—appetite suppressants, speed.

"I got hooked on dexies."

"How hooked?"

"Well, I was hooked."



"How many a day?" I press her.

"I don't ever remember taking more than one a day," she concedes. I'm not impressed with her habit, but who's to judge dependency? For Jane, the memory is so horrible she almost shudders thinking about it.

"So many women are so concerned with getting skinny, they'll do anything. One of the reasons I wrote my book was to warn people about what can happen when they try to lose weight this way. And doctors will just dispense anything! Many of them are dealers!" she cries in an alarmed voice, as if she were trying out for "General Hospital." "If I can keep my daughter, Vanessa—or anyone—from going through what I went through, it'll be worth it."

I point out to her that for more than ten years now, according to my local Co-op pharmacist, the consumption of dexedrine and other appetite suppressants has been drastically curtailed. The drugs have been reclassified as dangerous and habit forming, and federal guidelines recommend their use only for weight loss, for a very short duration, or for narcolepsy. Moreover, the actual manufacture of stimulants has been put on a prescribed quota system.

Undaunted, Jane invokes the new perniciousness of cocaine. She sees it all as part of a conspiracy to make us dependent on unnatural substances. Her answer

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to that, and to the pollutants in our environment, is to meet these challenges with the healthiest bodies we can muster. I have visions of Jane leading a multitude of svelte Amazons to the barricades, but it's my fantasy, not hers.

The Workout remains a business. Profits are acceptable. Will she, nevertheless, give scholarships to poor working or welfare mothers—those who are overweight and in need of just this kind of program?

"Yeah, well, this is not for welfare mothers," she concedes. "I wish we could address those people . . . but we're not big enough yet. There are other places for them. There's the Y. . . ." The businesses are, however, going well, astonishing her business managers and anyone else privy to the books. How well? I ask.

"I don't know if that's a good thing to talk about. I don't think I will." She laughs. "But it's already in the black."

Jane admits that the best thing about the Workout for her personally is: "I don't have to feel guilty about working out every day." She confesses to feeling guilty for devoting too much time to herself. "I'm so busy, I think, shouldn't any spare time I have go into—I don't know—doing things like cleaning the house, or making a more elaborate dinner?"

After much debate on the subject, Jane and Tom have admitted a housekeeper to their domicile once a week, but otherwise there are no servants, and most of the work, by Jane's admission, falls to her. She does not find fault with her husband's politics on the subject.

"Tom doesn't do the housecleaning. He doesn't care. He doesn't leave a lot of mess after himself, but he just says, 'Look, we have so much time. What matters is the living things. If the kids are okay, the dogs are okay, and the plants are okay, then it's okay.' So there's dirt

on the stairs."

Jane doesn't want the servants she could afford; indeed, she proudly tells me her daughter, Vanessa, wouldn't stand for it. "Look, I grew up in a houseful of servants, and I didn't learn to do chores—never went into the kitchen, wasn't allowed to cook. Having servants changes the nature of the house. Also, it separates you from others. My kids don't go to school with wealthy people."

So Jane likes to do as much as she can herself. She often gets up at five in the morning so she can jog before her children wake up. Once they're off to school, she does her workout. Later she picks the kids up from school, and in between, she's juggling all the other apples and oranges in her life.

She's a driven perfectionist who strains to acquit herself well in every endeavor. "If you want to try to be a responsible parent, a responsible wife, and you're making movies, acting and producing, and a political activist, and running a business—and I'm not willing to give any of them up because they're all really important to my life—then you have to be real organized."

So why does she feel guilty?

The phone interrupts us. Right on schedule, the courtesy limousine from KQED's "Over Easy" has arrived to whisk Jane to the studio for a little on-camera talk with host Mary Martin ("She

used to bounce me on her knee").

We make our plans to meet later for the Workout master class. Amid goodbye amenities at the door, I catch one more glimpse of Jane whirling off into action. Prodigious energy, I think. Admirable, disciplined, dedicated, modest—even affecting a stutter at one point when she talked about the embarrassment that prevented her from doing her own nude scenes in her movie *Coming Home*. Though she manages her own image with a shrewd and iron hand—thus, I believe, the well-rehearsed answers that forbid the clumsy ad-lib gaffe—there is no question she is at the height of her powers, and on her it looks good.

As I leave, I think, only one thing can wipe out a dose of saintliness like that: pasta.

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Kate Coleman is a writer and backbiter who lives in the Bay Area.