

FROM THE SCREAMS OF THE **700 WOMEN** IN THIS NEW YORK THEATRE, YOU'D HAVE THOUGHT **MICK JAGGER** HAD JUST STEPPED ON STAGE. AND IN A SENSE, HE HAS, ONLY HE IS A **SHE**, AND THE **MESSAGE** FROM THIS STRUTTING **POWERHOUSE** OF CHARISMA IS THAT IF YOU CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION, THEN YOU'D BETTER FIND SOME **FAST**, BECAUSE IT MIGHT JUST **SAVE YOUR LIFE**



*Meet the new*

# GURU **CONFIDENCE**

Over the course of this weekend, 57-year-old New Yorker Regena Thomashauer, aka 'Mama Gena', will cruise foxily around the stage of the NYU Skirball Center for the Performing Arts promising the assembled women nothing less than a 'pleasure revolution'. Her high-octane one-woman show is filled with catchy bumper-sticker slogans, including: >

Words **Stephanie Theobald** Photography **Silja Magg**

'You're not a victim, you're a vixen!' and 'Serve yourself first!'

The free weekend workshop is a taster for courses at Mama Gena's School of Womanly Arts. One of the courses on offer costs around £8,600 and includes a trip to Paris to learn what 19th century courtesans can teach 21st century women about the art of pleasure. My New York lawyer friend who told me about Mama Gena (she was perturbed when one of her colleagues did a course recently), thinks there's something 'cult-like' about the whole set-up. I'm not sure I'd go that far, but it certainly is a bit embarrassing. There are pink feather boas draped everywhere and beaming women wearing T-shirts that read, '8,000 nerve endings at your service' (referring to the physiology of the clitoris) tickle us with pink feathers when we arrive, saying: 'Welcome to the party, Sister Goddess!'

Yet Thomashauer is far from being some crackpot motivational speaker. It's not just that she's made millions from this shtick, or that she's friends with Diane von Furstenberg and Naomi Wolf (who she presumably entertains at her spectacular loft on Manhattan's fashionable Lower East Side). The (pink) feather in her cap right now is that the Yale School of Management has just signed her up to come and rally its female students.

Zoë Chance, Assistant Professor of Marketing at Yale, approached Thomashauer this January about a Harvard Business School study that had

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shown its female students often fell behind the men, despite starting off with better grades. 'Ours are some of the brightest, most talented, most driven and successful women in the world,' Chance tells me. 'And yet few of them realise it.'

Thomashauer's philosophy is undeniably alluring. Her message is basically that you can transform your love, work and social lives by reconnecting with your body and tuning into your emotional side. If you allow yourself to be controlled by male values (setting goals, fighting your way through life) you will be unhappy. She recommends getting up every morning, dancing naked in your bedroom to an angry song, followed by a sexy song, and then, with that whirling dervish energy stirred up, go into the office and sock it to them.

She doesn't believe sex is an antidote to unhappiness. Rather, it's about: 'Bringing back your life force. Twice as many women suffer from depression as men, regardless of race, background and income; and 90% of eating disorders occur in women.'

Over the weekend, we learn some of Mama Gena's tools. These include 'bragging' (forcing ourselves to talk about our plus points), 'spring cleaning' (offloading what's bugging us to make space for good stuff to come in) and voicing our desire lists. These lists vary wildly. An advertising executive, all sleek blonde hair and cinched-in leather jacket, desires 'to find the perfect bikini for when I get married on a private island this summer,' while a 60-year-old cleaner wants to 'spend

more time with my granddaughter' and 'get my own place to live'.

Yet whatever our income bracket or career path, it soon becomes clear that we all have a lot in common: namely our lack of confidence and a difficulty in believing we are worth it. Many stand up and say why they've come here. Some profess to being 'tired of feeling afraid' of moving on and up to better jobs and new relationships. One woman admits: 'I have this sense I have no right to even know what I want. Even though, intellectually, I know I do.' (Cue gasps of recognition from the audience.)

When emotions run too high or get too dark, Mama Gena segues into a 'dance break' where we get up and boogie to anything from Lady Gaga's *Born This Way* to *What A Feeling* from *Flashdance*. Anna Willis, a product designer from London who travelled to New York especially to attend, says: 'Once you get over the cheesy American thing, it's great to turn off your rational brain. You start to feel this amazing glow.'

I feel the glow when I go out for lunch. I find myself getting special service from the guys at the pizza place and reflect that if I can get free garlic bread from one morning's work with Mama Gena, what might I achieve if I did a full course? Clare Monteau, 41, a former chemist from North Wales who has already taken the £8,600 Creation Course, says it was money well spent. She tells me, after lunch, that she did a PhD in chemistry because 'I wanted everyone to think I was smart'. But after working for 15 years as an industrial scientist, she felt burnt out. 'The idea in today's workplace

is if you're not suffering, you're not going to be successful. That's very male. Mama Gena understands that you'll be more successful if you do something that lights you up.'

It's an idea that's already starting to catch on with high-powered women such as Arianna Huffington, whose bestselling book *Thrive* points out how our relentless pursuit of money and power is leading to a burnout epidemic, not necessarily career advancement. Yale's Zoë Chance agrees, arguing that Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* concept isn't viable any more. 'Sandberg's public persona and her gospel is one of success, but not necessarily happiness.'

A few days after the weekend workshop, when we meet up in her exquisite white loft, Thomashauer pours Ladurée-blend tea into a bone-china cup for me and confides: 'My experience from working with thousands of women, over 20 years, is that when a woman does not create pleasure in her life, she dies inside. The consequence is a life of mediocrity and compromise, of being stuck at a low level of irritation with her boss, her husband, her kids.'

Thomashauer describes herself as the 'disillusioned daughter of a psychoanalyst'. Born in Philadelphia in 1956, she learned at an early age that: 'Studying problems allows you to learn why you had them - but it never teaches you to connect with your enthusiasm or a good quality of life. That just leads to more problems.' She studied Theatre Arts at Mount Holyoke, the prestigious



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liberal arts college for women in Massachusetts, then, after graduating in 1978, she travelled to More University in California - more of an intellectual hippy commune than a university - which taught courses about relationships.

When she left, she decided to dress up the ideas she'd learned, and give them a slicker spin. In 1991, she married a former salesman, Bruce, and they founded a couples' counselling company called Relationship Technologies. Yet

Thomashauer noticed how under-confident women were compared to men. Her female friends were starting to disappoint her, too. 'My best college friend was an amazing artist, but she couldn't bring herself to charge for her work. Another was an incredible theatre director, but she ended up working for her dad's temp agency, having three kids and never pursuing her talent.'

In 1997, when her only child Maggie was born, she decided to close down Relationship

Photography: Sijla Magg. Hair and make-up: Tinna Empera for Laicale Artists using Oribe and Nars.

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Technologies and start up the School of Womanly Arts. She admits she has cherry-picked many of her ideas from 1970s feminists such as Betty Dodson, author of the classic on masturbation, *Sex For One*. Other influences include Jung, Joseph Campbell and books around ancient goddess culture. She believes ‘all women have a touch of the divine’, hence the Sister Goddess epithet. She describes herself as a fourth wave feminist, because: ‘We’re not focused on anger at men. It’s about women taking each other higher.’

It’s a type of feminism that men like. Once a year, she gives a seminar just for them, where she warns: ‘Don’t ever date a cranky woman. If you find a woman who takes

After my pizza experience, when I go back to the Skirball Center some of the more yummy-mummy types are starting to chill out. ‘I’m starting to let my stomach hang out a bit,’ the advertising executive confides. ‘Letting my legs open a bit wider. It’s like a visceral wave going through me.’

The weekend finishes with us being asked to go on stage to walk a ‘runway’, to show that we’re proud of our bodies. This sets off my cheese alert, but then a woman stands up and talks of how she survived breast cancer, showing us her reconstructed

Maybe this atmosphere is what my lawyer friend meant when describing the ‘cult-like’ appeal of Mama Gena but, actually, this is the most refreshing thing about the experience. I’ve always hated that old cliché about women being all too ready to stab each other in the back. If there’s one message that comes across from the weekend, it’s not only the indispensable need to get your life force flowing again, but that it’s probably other women who will be the ones to help you on that path. One of Thomashauer’s smarter ideas is to keep these good vibes buoyant after the courses end by keeping everyone in touch via her internet forums. ‘Once you’ve unlocked your power,’ she tells me, ‘you have a responsibility to light up the next woman.’

I take small things away from the weekend that I gradually realise are quite big things. I’m more confident about looking people – both men *and* women – in the eye. I hold my head higher and notice that I get better service when I do. When I feel angry, I’m not afraid to let it flow through me, experience it, then let it out. I find myself realising that going with your intuition, rather than what the linear ‘career ladder’ theory dictates, is often better in the long run.

Clare Monteau hopes Yale will soon incorporate ‘spring cleaning’ into its curriculum. She finds it Mama Gena’s most useful tool and frequently calls up a fellow Sister Goddess to list the things that are bugging her that day. ‘If you spring clean with a friend and then do a naked dance, that business meeting’s going to go a hell of a lot better!’ ●

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**‘I TAKE OFF MY T-SHIRT, AND THEN MY BRA, IN FRONT OF 700 ALREADY ECSTATIC WOMEN. IT’S A MASSIVE HIGH: IT REALLY DOES FEEL SISTERLY AND MOVING’**

responsibility for her happiness, you’ll have a gratified life because she’ll tell you what she wants.’

Yet her success has come at a cost. She divorced Bruce in 2003, because she realised they’d grown apart. ‘I’d awakened women to living their deepest truths, so I had to live my own. It was very difficult.’ She’s currently dating one man in his 20s and another in his 50s: ‘If a guy can handle me, I’m in!’

She stresses that she’s not promising to rid women of self-doubt, ‘But I can teach them to turn down the volume on their disapproval, and crank up the approval.’ That’s what happened with Clare Monteau. After her first course, she found the confidence to leave her job (‘Before, I’d been terrified of disapproval’), move to the US full-time and set up her own company as a business consultant.

breasts. It’s a lump-in-the-throat moment for me, as I watched a close friend die of breast cancer a couple of years ago. There really is so much support and love in the room – and I think I might as well just go with it.

As I get closer to the stage, sneezing sporadically because of all the pink feathers now floating in the air, I know what I’m going to do. To the soundtrack of Right Said Fred’s *I’m Too Sexy* (yes, really), I take off my T-shirt, and then my bra, in front of 700 already ecstatic women. I close my eyes as I hear a massive wave of ‘WOOHOO’ rise from the auditorium; I can feel the energy. I have a brief flash of what Mick Jagger (and Mama Gena) must feel on stage. It’s a massive high: it really does feel sisterly and moving. When I come off stage, a lot of the women – I mean Sister Goddesses – come and say things like, ‘That was awesome!’

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