

You've Got To Laugh

Ruth Spencer—Metro Magazine—December, 2012

Laughter without jokes is like yoga without pain

There are a lot of reasons why a person might find themselves at the Youthline rooms on a Saturday morning, but to have a good laugh seems the least likely. Nevertheless, a hesitant Alice heading along a horizontal rabbit hole towards probable madness, I follow a series of little yellow signs through lino-floored corridors to Laughter Yoga. It's just as well they're providing the laughs, because finding a car park at brunchtime in Ponsonby is no joke.

Laughter Yoga has been around since the mid-90s, when it was apparently normal to come up with this kind of thing. There isn't any traditional yoga involved, which is good for those of us who abhor contortions; instead it promises the benefits of "internal jogging", and a dose of healing endorphins from the body's natural response to mirth.

I'm welcomed by Bob and Gay, who are in charge. They are effusive, sweet and jovial. They are also Laughter Yoga instructors. It's a little like meeting your lovely new in-laws and simultaneously finding out that they're nudists. It's nice, but it's awkward.

Bob and Gay greet a mix of regulars and newbies, and a mix it is. Two strapping young men who look fresh from rugby practice. friendly ageing hippies with crocheted brooches. Urban hipsters in skinny jeans. Then there's Owen. Owen is a Character, sporting a *Last of the Summer Wine* aesthetic, and he lets me in on the secrets of the club. "There are no jokes," he tells me. "We don't need them. Maybe a few beforehand, or a few after. Oh, and the odd one during." He fixes me with a gimlet eye. "I'm the odd one."

This is either hilarious or terrifying. He's right that in Laughter Yoga they don't use humour or comedy to drag a medicinal chuckle from the dour. I'm told to fake it, as the body doesn't know the difference. If I had a dollar, etc.

What they have instead are Exercises, but not the kind you do when you exercise. Improv exercises, drama exercises, team-building exercises, whichever name instils you with the most dread. Pick the most cringeworthy thing you've ever done at an office away day and add a laugh track. We spend some time as giggling lawn sprinklers, have hysterics into invisible cellphones and show people our invisible credit-card statements. We're having as much fun as a group of amateur mimes can pretend to have.

At one point we start an invisible lawnmower. *HAAhahaha*. Bother these pull-start cords, we mug. *HAAhahaha*. Will it never start? Finally the engine catches and we're off. *HAAAAA*. Pushing our invisible lawnmowers around the room, we're encouraged to make eye contact, which is hard because then you have to accept that people can see you. Someone crashes into my mower. We pretend this is funny. It's bedlam, but with tidy grounds. I'm comforted only by the thought that out there in Ponsonby, real people are trying to start real lawnmowers and not laughing. Lucky bastards.

LAUGHTERYOGA.ORG.NZ

EACH MONTH, RUTH SPENCER SAMPLES THE ATTRACTIONS OF AUCKLAND.
