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Make me a babe magnet

British men can be awful at sweet talk, so MARK JAGASIA took a course in the art of seduction

ONE good reason Prohibition has never been attempted in this country is that without booze, our island race would never have kept reproducing. The average British male needs a fearful amount of Dutch courage before approaching a female in a bar, nightclub or, heaven help us, on the street.

And when he does – usually with the dread of a novice fighter pilot flying solo into impossible odds – the encounter generally ends in sweaty-palmed embarrassment. Casablanca, it ain't.

But for every problem there is a solution. One London-based company – a cross between a men's self-help group, a finishing school and a Masonic society – claims that it can help tongue-tied males become effortlessly adept at seducing women.

So, in the interests of journalistic investigation – and to brush up my own questionable seduction skills – I went along to see whether this outfit could deliver on its rather high-flown promises.

PUA Training (which stands for Pick Up Artist) has grown out of the American so-called "seduction community", made famous in a 2005 book *The Game* by pick-up artist Neil Strauss.

The seduction community has proven controversial. Men employ psychological techniques and well-practised routines to convince women they are the greatest thing since sliced bread. Feminists have accused it of being misogynistic and demeaning. Its defenders say its methods simply help men understand and talk to women better and what they do with their skills is up to their personal morality.

PUA Training, which was set up in Britain by likeable twentysomething Richard La Ruina, offers "boot camps" for men. These take place in London – in an upstairs room at a West End nightclub.

When I arrive on a Saturday lunchtime the dozen trainees, who have paid several hundred pounds a pop, are sitting round the dimly lit room looking about as comfortable as rabbits at a fox's dinner party.

They range from handsome and apparently confident to, frankly, slightly peculiar. The group, all in their 20s and 30s, includes two lawyers, a paramedic, a court clerk and a businessman.

Richard, who is good-looking, unassuming but charming, claims that by 21 he had never kissed a girl, was miserable and spent

his time brooding at his mother's house in Cambridge. Determined to progress, however, he spent months studying the theories of American pick-up artists and the theories of self-help gurus.

To teach himself to pick up women, he then moved to London and practised by approaching hundreds of women in the street, cafes and bars, being rejected over and over until he had honed his skills and boosted his self-confidence.

But of course, we only have his word for this tale.

Myself and fellow trainees are taken through several hours of theory by Richard. Put simply, what is taught is a lot of psychology and body language aimed at putting women at their ease, making them laugh, holding their attention and subtly upping the stakes until they are under the impression that you are the most insightful and fascinating man they've ever met.

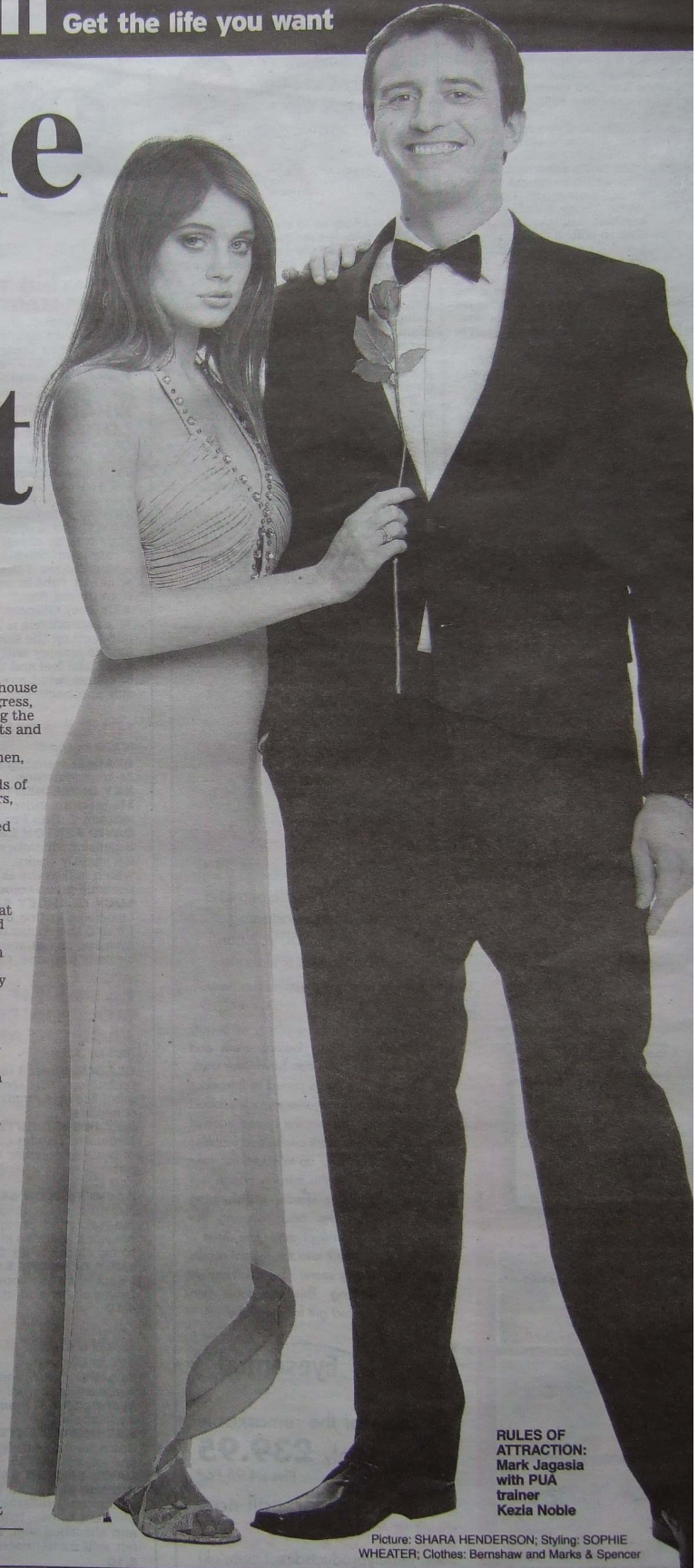
Richard's talk is couched in jargon – the seduction community loves its acronyms, such as AFCs (average frustrated chumps – men who haven't mastered seduction skills) and so on.

The beginning of a conversation with a woman is an "opening" and if you are lucky, you might "number close" or "kiss close" the encounter. A single woman is referred to as a "one-set" a pair of women a "two-set". You can begin to see where accusations of objectification come from.

BUT it also makes sense. It's seduction by a rulebook and, although not exactly romantic, they are techniques which have been field tested by hundreds of PUAs.

Richard talks of the three stages of a successful encounter: first, make yourself seem attractive by being confident, smart and funny; second, make her feel at ease; third, escalate the first two elements into a successful romantic approach.

Most important is keeping eye contact during an encounter – not



RULES OF ATTRACTION:
Mark Jagasia with PUA trainer Kezia Noble

TURN TO PAGE 38

Picture: SHARA HENDERSON; Styling: SOPHIE WHEATER; Clothes: Bernshaw and Marks & Spencer

Cover story

FROM PAGE 35

staring, but easily holding a gaze. Second, is paying close attention to what a woman is saying and letting that lead the conversation rather than bombarding her with a series of questions like a CIA interrogator.

The most amusing part of the course came in the afternoon when several of Richard's co-instructors (none of whom looked like love's young dream) took us out in groups of three on to the streets of London to approach unwitting females – what PUAs refer to as “the day game”.

TO THE surprise of most of the trainees, none of the women fled screaming down Oxford Street or attacked the stuttering blokes with their handbags. In fact, after their initial bemusement, most women were happy to chat – and several ended up giving their numbers to the delighted chaps.

“The most important thing to learn is to embrace ‘transition anxiety’ – the feeling of butterflies you get when doing anything on the edge of your comfort zone,” said Richard. “If you can break through that, you are more than half way there.”

On the evening of the first day of the two-day course the trainees were let loose in Tiger Tiger nightclub for “the night game”.

They had earlier been given an opportunity to test some lines and routines with a group of female

trainers. One of them, Kezia Noble, a 24-year-old singer, said she thought PUA was doing men a favour. “I feel sorry for men,” she said. “Years back, women were told to be demure. Now they can be pretty intimidating.

“Men are still expected to take the lead but they don't know how to do it. The poor things are terrified. All we are doing is showing them some skills which will make everyone happy.”

When unleashed in the nightclub, the trainees showed more success than they would have done 24 hours earlier. Unfortunately, many of them used the same opening routines given them by Richard and his colleagues – leading to some rather puzzled young women being asked several times in

‘Overcome those butterflies’

the same evening, “Do you think these clothes make me look gay?” (Yes, I know it sounds odd, but it worked).

Having spoken to some of the trainees after the course, there is no doubt that the techniques taught have given the men a lot more confidence than they had before.

As for the ethics of the whole business – well, just be careful if a strange bloke asks your opinion on his dress sense.

● For more details visit www.puatraining.com