

Three-Minute Love Affairs

The tango and flamenco dances have long been showcases for the beautiful and the young—but art and obsession know no age.

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“Dance is a vertical expression of a horizontal desire” —George Bernard Shaw.

We begin with a glance and a nod of assent. I snake my arm around my partner's shoulders as I feel his right hand warm my back. I turn my head toward him and we take a moment to feel each other's balance, to harmonize our concentration. I respond to a slight dip of his body and glide into one backward step and then another; I follow his lead into a figure eight, a turn, a pause. My left foot is weightless, touching his right, and when his foot slides out, mine goes along willingly. We step forward and shift back, our legs twining and lifting before we're on to another move, pulled along by the music's melancholy seeking and soaring. There is a moment where I flick my leg defiantly, then immediately lean forward against him in complete trust. We both listen and succumb to a rush of stringed instruments, crooning vocals, and the wail of what seems like an accordion under exquisite torture. I feel his breath in sync with mine as he moves with and between my steps, anticipating ending together perfectly on the last note of the song.

“We should have a warning at our website: ‘may be habit forming’,” says Gustavo Hornos, a native of the world capital of tango, Buenos Aires. His teaching partner and wife, Jessica Salomon, adds, “The elegance, the romanticism and the sensuality attracts people. If you don't have those things, you want them. If you have them, you want more!”

“What's so addictive is the feeling of connection,” Hornos says. “The tango is a very close dance, your bodies are very much in contact. You almost feel the heartbeat of your partner, really you are facing each other heart to heart in a beautiful zone of sharing. It's about your life moving with another life. This is so powerful, it's maybe the main reason people get so crazy about tango.”

When I watch a demonstration by these two salon-style dancers under the lights at Ellington Hall, I can't help but be swept away. Anyone who has seen even a photograph of “Forever Tango” knows that the dance stirs desire and generates heat. This kind of intimacy is what defines tango as a “three minute love affair.” It might also account for the preponderance of 40 and 50-somethings in the classes I attend. It requires maturity to take the risk of getting close.

Tricia, 61, a political activist and teacher, says, “Every time you dance with someone, it is an event. You are right in front of the person, with a very intimate frame. You can't think about anything but what you are doing—sometimes you can't even think. It's a great stress release. It also becomes obsessive. You want more and more of what it gives you.”

There is a cliché that tango was born in the brothels of Buenos Aires, but as scholar Christine Denniston notes, the brothels were where people of the upper and middle class first encountered it. The lower classes and immigrants from Africa and Cuba had already brought their rhythmic patterns and dance vocabulary to the *barrios*. Early tangos were accompanied by improvising on guitar, violin and flute. Around 1910, the *bandoneon*, originally created as a kind of organ for religious services, was put to better use and has since become the trademark tango instrument.

In the 1800s, many tango musicians got their start, as many a New Orleans jazz artist did, in the red light district, playing to entertain the customers while they waited. Since the ladies were otherwise occupied, the men used the opportunity to practice dance by dancing together. They used their skills

later in the dance halls to attract eligible women into their arms. On the street corners, tango was a challenge dance men did with each other to display their prowess.

Despite the tango's original sexual disposition and combativeness, the contemporary relationship of the partners is not one of tension, or dominance and submission. "When I lead Jessica," Gustavo Hornos says of his wife, "I am feeling her movements, her balance, and I am sensitive to that. So she is also leading me. We are both leaders and followers."

"I believe that the woman is an individual at all times," says Jessica. "A good leader gives space for the woman to do embellishments and to express herself in any moment. When you're first learning, there is a lot of emphasis on leading and following, but actually the partners are making the dance together. It's like we are one body, one leg, one arm."

Amid the stacks of tables and chairs in a large, multi-purpose room, Donna Agoita flashes her remote toward the boom box and prepares couples for their across-the-floor practice. Tango happens in Petaluma at the Luchessi Community Center because this teacher wants to create more of a community for tango north of San Francisco. She works with beginners to understand the basics.

"Tango is a grounding dance, full of challenge and subtlety," Agoita says. "The follower needs to be willing to let go, to be extremely present, flexible and very ready for the lead. The leader must be focused on the partner, aware of their skill level and sensitive to it. This dance is not about showing off, it is about making a connection."

In order to experience such co-mingling and aliveness, students make a considerable investment of time and money. Carol, 50, travels weekly around the county and to Marin so she can take several classes and occasional private instruction.

"I'm ga-ga over tango. I first saw this dance in a small ballroom in Vienna where a group of seven men and seven women called *Tango Seduccion* gave a 3-encore performance. They knocked me off my seat. As the show progressed, the dancing became more and more intimate. When I got back to the United States, I couldn't find Argentine tango classes soon enough."

Students—even if they are experienced dancers—talk about how hard it is to survive their first attempts at the complex steps. Emil Waldteufel, the chef-owner of Emil's restaurant in Santa Rosa, has studied all kinds of dance in his life, including tap dancing in the hooper style. He has even performed on stage. "The first few lessons, I found tango difficult. I was blurting out 'I'm sorry' all the time, but I've progressed well. Sometimes a breath of the music will come over me while I'm working and I'll happily execute a little step. Then I'll go back to my sauté pan."

Paul, a 58-year-old vineyard mechanic and Calistoga resident who takes class in Sonoma, Petaluma and Santa Rosa, describes tango as "a dance for over-achievers. It draws intelligent people because it's not easy to learn. But it still has soul. Tango has a way of making you yearn for it." And a retired artist who gives her age as "senior" says the dance makes her feel feminine and seductive. "You want to dress up and look beautiful when you do it."

Indeed. When tango took Paris by storm in 1912, it was said that women abandoned their corsets to dance tango. Couture designers changed the position of feathers in women's hats—from sweeping horizontally across the face to going up vertically from the forehead—so as not to get in the dance partner's face. "Tulip skirts" which opened at the front, made leg flicks and *ganchos* (hooks) easier, and manufacturers then, as now, sold anything they could with the "tango" adjective preceding it.

In an increasingly competitive and mechanized American culture, people in the tango community find it a relief to have an activity that is non-competitive, yet personally developing, warm and pleasant to do. Traditionally, tango etiquette allows no one to snub or abandon a partner. It can even require the courtly gesture of escorting a woman back to her seat after dancing, and it's considered polite to engage her for more than one number. In Argentina, eye contact, a nod or a smile is enough to indicate a man's intentions. The same is true for the partner's response. The dynamics of the dance venue were a result of all the participants being neighbors and friends, with an understanding of social graces.

Bill, a 52-year-old self-described teacher-sailor-poet and single father who finished high school and started college in Argentina, remains enamored of this cultural phenomenon that went in and out of favor, and at one time was even banned as subversive under a repressive military regime.

“Back then, tango was something that only my father listened to,” Bill remembers. “We had to learn in order to dance with our mothers at our graduation ceremony. I preferred folklore and rock and roll. It wasn’t until later, after being prohibited by the military government of Argentina to return [Bill assisted his brothers’ escape from the country in 1976], that I could allow myself to be embraced by the deep melancholy and defiant joy of the tango. I started to listen to it deliberately, and learned to dance again.

“I love to move in unison to the music—suggest, wait, follow until my breath and chest and pelvis melt into my partner’s. The tango has certainly helped me to be more gracious sexually, and should be a prerequisite to intimacy.”

Tango and its cousin flamenco were both created by the kind of people who generally leave no mark on history: the poor and the underprivileged. Flamenco arose from a melting pot of Roma people who migrated to southern Spain, particularly Andalusia, in the 15th century, and from two other cultural minorities, the Moors and the Jews. These groups made common cause with the native Spanish mountain people and a smattering of Christian infidels. Around their campfires, the flamenco arts developed, probably beginning with only voice and rhythmic hand-clapping, and followed later by guitar and dance.

The students of flamenco I have met range in age from a 22-year-old recent college graduate to a 67-year-old retiree. Some women say the combination of fast, intensive footwork with graceful arm and hand movements makes them feel very powerful. Others like that it’s “sexy but not explicit and over the top.” Most reported their interest was piqued by seeing the dance either in live performance, in the movies or on television. Many said it was a lifelong, even secret, desire.

Christina is a 33-year-old social worker from Sebastopol. When she was about 11 years old, she saw *Carmen* and was enthralled. “I tortured my parents by playing the record for hours and stomping around the house,” she laughs. What Christina terms a “little splash of experience” remained latent until she began a relationship with a man who was interested in flamenco guitar. The couple began to explore their mutual dream of music and dance through friends who were performers.

Now Christina studies with Phoebe Vernier (who goes by the professional name of “La Fibi”) at Ellington Hall. Christina and her boyfriend can practice together, although she says that keeping the dance and guitar in *compas* (locked into the rhythm) is one of their most difficult tasks.

About her three years’ worth of flamenco study, Christina says, “Honestly, it has not been all fun, especially in the beginning. This is the most challenging form I’ve tried, by far. It’s the most complex in terms of rhythm, footwork and the multiple things you have to do simultaneously. It’s very specific, almost like a science.

“Once the basics are mastered, a person can have more freedom. So I can’t quit now, just when I’m getting a taste of that freedom. I’m seeking mastery so that I can get full expression of grief, anger, pain, exhilaration—all the extreme emotions. I want to express with full force, no holding back. That’s what attracted me as a child, and that’s what attracts me now.”

All things fiery and passionate appeal to Bonnie, a red-haired soprano and voice teacher just six months into flamenco classes. She describes it as being “like opera where you have to sing with your whole body, you can’t dance with a bland face. Whatever feeling you can imagine, there’s a song and a rhythm for it.”

For Serafina, a 55-year-old trying to overcome her anguish following the dissolution of an 18-year marriage, listening to the language of the songs has provided an emotional catharsis, a way to love life again: “I stumbled,” she says. “And wept. I lost my balance. And screamed in the car on the way home. But I felt the spirit of Flamenco rising up from the floor, pushing and shoving me to keep trying The

music was my constant friend. The other middle-aged dancers were my family. The singers my strangled voice.”

One instructor maintains that “women don’t have anything to dance about until they are older than 35.” On the other hand, flamenco expertise seems to transcend age and body type.

Carol and Bernard W. are both eligible for senior movie discounts. I met them at Flamenco Arts Co. of Santa Rosa, where they were practicing *sevillanas*, a social dance often done in pairs. “It’s a big ego boost at my age to accomplish what I have,” Carol says. In addition to dance, Bernard studies flamenco guitar and was one of two men at class the night I visited.

The other, a 44-year-old chiropractor from Sebastopol named Brian, appreciates flamenco for stress reduction. “I like to make noise and stomp my feet, especially on a Friday night,” he jokes. Brian studies alongside his wife, who is a champion ice dancer. “What’s great is that my lack of expertise doesn’t hold her back, as it would in ballroom-type dancing.” Several women agreed that their feelings of strength, femininity and independence through Flamenco was due to not needing a partner to excel.

“There’s no limit to the things you can try as long as you can still walk,” says Barbara, a 54-year-old designer and builder from Petaluma who has studied flamenco for five years. Barbara says learning this form of dance is like learning to play an instrument—with your feet. “The sound of the shoe is so defined, anyone can tell when you’re off! But when everything is in sync, it’s like those days at the office when you’re wearing high heels and they tick down the hallway. You’ve got things rolling, you’re wide awake and on top of it, you’re making something happen.”

Revealing the cultural context is very important to musical artist and scholar Robin Brown, who, with his wife Elena, owns Flamenco Arts. “We are very much into instructing form and style with precise attention to detail, but we also emphasize the total collaboration of forces that make up the community and this huge family of Spanish dances and song. We want our students to know more than just the translation of lyrics. We want them to understand where the music comes from, what the politics and folk ways had to do with the expression.”

Many lyrics flowing from the mouth of the *cantaores* (flamenco singers) were written by poet and dramatist Federico Garcia Lorca, who was committed to preserving the traditional music of southern Spain. Similarly, the world-renowned Argentinean author, Jorge Luis Borges, wrote poems that were adapted to tango by many of the genre’s finest composers, such as Astor Piazzolla. Curiously, both of these giants of literature were exiled from or politically harassed in their home countries.

There are those who believe that entering and understanding cultures other than their own is the first step toward empathy for “the other,” a pathway to world peace. This is a focus for Darcy a 45-year-old bodyworker. “I’m doing this because, for that brief hour, I am not an American,” she explains. “I am part of an entire cultural milieu of people doing *palmas*, (clapping) yelling *olé*, dancing, singing, and thoroughly enjoying themselves.”

Zangria Latin Supper Club, a Petaluma restaurant, is the only regular venue for live flamenco north of the Golden Gate. Phoebe “La Fibi” Vernier dances in and produces Saturday night performances there. She also brings in artists who give workshops in authentic technique.

“I grew up on the road with my mother, an Italian immigrant who was a professional Middle Eastern dancer; I was on stage for the first time at the age of four,” Vernier says. “A lifetime with dance has fulfilled something that’s missing for me in American culture: song, music and dance as an *integral part* of everyday existence.

The teachers and the owners of show venues are, of course, enthusiastic, but clearly the *aficionados* of tango and flamenco are the best promoters. They fly off to Buenos Aires, take jaunts to Spain, book cruises and hold conventions—anything to help perfect their execution and deepen understanding of the originating culture of their beloved dance. They host ever more *juergas* and *milongas*—social gatherings where dedicated practice pays off in an evening of big fun.

As one *tanguero* confessed, without apology, “It’s a madness that grips you.

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