

Performance Tango or Tango Milonguero ?

Collected notes :

Susana Miller:

Two styles of Argentine tango, performance and milonguero, bring about a controversy in the dance community. Some attribute a false dichotomy between these styles. False because, in reality, they are complimentary. In a certain aspect, performance tango and milonguero tango are two sides of the same coin.

The Milonguero, or "close embrace" style is danced in the crowded clubs of Buenos Aires. It evolved to compensate for large numbers of couples dancing in limited space. The Milonguero style is a rich and complex form of body signals and incorporates deep respect for the music and its varied rhythms. The result is a form of Tango that allows for simplicity of steps while encouraging a natural connection between the dancers.

However, tango is known throughout the world because of **performance tango**. The beauty and splendor of its figures are spread by TV and on the stages of theaters across great distances to far away places. In this tango the couple separates in order to execute complicated figures and steps that have more visual appeal. They separate because it would be difficult to see the "closed" tango in a large theater of 500 or more people. The body work, particularly the leg motions, would not engender great interest. In the performance tango the steps are based on milonguero style, but are enlarged and embellished, and become choreographies that cross the stage diagonally, creating displays and making full use of the ample space available. The tango is known throughout the world thanks to the artists, very fine and expert dancers, and thanks to their

inspiration and the hours of daily work that they devoted to their talent. Thus, the tango was saved from remaining an exotic popular dance of a remote country. The far away Buenos Aires brought the heart of its culture near the heart of the world.

However, the origin of tango was in the salon, where it still lives. This tango relates to the passion which is awakened and grows within the couple, including a specific manner of manipulating the space, and a special combination of rhythmic beats. This is what the people who come from other lands discover in Buenos Aires; another tango. Then they understand that the true place of performance tango is on the stage. This is why the best performance dancers always go to the salon, to immerse themselves in its foundation, to invigorate their choreographies and enrich them with the spontaneity of the salon. After all, for the choreography to be thrilling and exciting, *it must not appear to be rehearsed. Instead, it must translate the spontaneity and heat of the salon.*

In the salon the couple dances for their own enjoyment, and not for show. The steps are a method to circulate within the space, which is very limited. It is a "closed" tango, with erratic figures that vary within the necessities imposed by the place. The milongueros can dance on four tiles, one tile, or even in place, while preserving, with great passion, the rhythm and contact with the other body, with a mixture of relaxation and tension both physical and emotional. The man offers his musical consciousness to the woman, and she follows him as if she was his shirt. Her creativity flows through her interpretation of the manner of enjoying in her body, and giving back what the man proposes.

Anyway, this explanation is ineffable, and the emotion of the "salon" is non-transferable. It's only verifiable with that wink that characterizes all communities that share a passion a little secretively. The beauty of this style is its simplicity, the great energy that flows on the dance floor. The couples are as in a trance, in a kind of "beyond consciousness". The body language is extremely rich. The feelings give meaning to the steps and to the movements of the bodies.

The vocabulary that this dancing elite communicates with permits a view, a gaze at the meaning of this dance: "to walk the tango". "apilarse", "to sleep the woman", "to move her", "to dance her".

The performance must have spectacularity, but it needs the "salon" as inspiration because otherwise it would be showing something that does not exist. The "salon" also needs the performance tango to disseminate itself and transmit itself to other generation. But even though everyone can dance "salon" not all of us can dance "performance". Sooner or later, anyone who intends to will learn the "salon" tango, which is something feasible and more near to the expectations of those who begin to take classes.

The people are a solitary community which seeks love, to love and be loved. The embrace of the tango, la franela, the excitement it contains, are an emulation of love, a relief for the soul and an act in which the man and the woman tell each other without reservation their joy and passion in an embrace.

Notes:

1. Apilar means "to stack". In this context it suggests to stack the woman on the man, and the man on the woman. It refers to the leaning posture used in this style of tango.
2. "Franela" is a Lunfardo term that has no word in English. Literally it means "flannel", but the Lunfardo meaning is a subtle and sensual caress of the woman's body by the man's body. In

tango when the man rocks the woman in place, he enjoys the feeling of her body against his. Also, a tight caminata, with the legs brushing together is franela. "sleaze" dancing has franela, but the word "sleaze" might have a vulgar connotation not implied with "franela".

Susana Miller has probably put more people on the dance floors of Buenos Aires' milongas than any other single teacher. In a 1999 article in the Buenos Aires daily paper "Clarín," she was named one of the four most important contemporary influences in tango. Susana is internationally noted teacher of the Milonguero style of Tango.

Milonguero style is danced in a close embrace that is not altered during the dance. You both have your weight over your feet and maintain your own balance. There is body contact from the head to the waist area. I don't agree that a woman has to lean on her partner in this style. Perhaps some have come to this conclusion after observing men with extra weight around the middle dancing with slender women who need to change their body position to adjust to his shape. In order for her to maintain a straight back, she needs to bring her feet away from her partner and change the angle of her body position. But for the majority of men I dance with in Buenos Aires, this is not necessary. In fact, if you lean on some men, they may ask you to stand up and dance on your own two feet rather than leaning forward on them.

It's important to relax when you dance. I admire the wonderful calmness that milongueros have. Even on a crowded floor, they can move around and use the space well. If there is a collision, they quietly pause and wait for the space to continue without interruption. If a woman has tension in her body, he will feel it.

There are three head positions for the lady: 1) your left cheek bone to his right cheek bone (for salon style) 2) your right side of face to his right side of face (for milonguero style) 3) your nose and forehead to the right side of his face (alternate possibility for milonguero style)

Try these positions out with a partner and notice that you can stand directly in front of your partner with your head in position #2. However, in position #1, you may be in a V position with your body in relation to his; more appropriate in salon style, but not in milonguero style.

Daniel Trenner :

In the spicy night life of Buenos Aires city center, **the close embrace** that we foreigners have been less familiar with until lately became popular. This helps to understand why it was frowned upon in the neighborhoods where elegance implied a paper thin separation of respect between gentleman and lady. Even so, it could be that there were neighborhoods where the close style was preferred.

Exhibition tango was first developed within the warfare between different neighborhood schools.

For the most part it was danced as a kind of loose warfare between different neighborhood schools, at the social dances, in breaks between the social dancing. In the fifties, Juan Carlos Copes led the development of tango for stage dancing, which culminated in Tango Argentino and modern show dancing. With this development, the tango style branched again, and the show dancers quickly broadened and evolved their vocabularies creating even more stylistic diversity.

In the modern epoch, after the return of democracy, stylistic differences in social tango still loosely exist by geography. The best known style is from the north and west, based on the style originally developed in the Devoto neighborhood by Petroleos circle. More recently popular among

younger students is the close embrace style, danced mostly downtown. And, while there are certainly other styles, these two styles dominate the Argentine social scene of today.

So finally we get to names.

This is not an easy subject, tango dance history being for the most part an oral one; there have been many names.

Canyengue, refers to the late twenties and thirties neighborhood styles. Dancers tell of how the canyengue died out and the forties social style tango took hold. Then tango actually had two divisions: **Salon**, the walking dance, and **Orillero**, the one with the turns. (Styles were also identifiable by orchestra allegiance). Also, some dancers were known best for their **milongas**. In the forties the word milonguero was not all that flattering, as it referred to one who was addicted to the night life, never worked, and was often begging for a loan.

However, in the modern epoch **Salon** and **Milonguero** have become more interchangeable in describing the more vaguely defined styles of a now older generation. They are now allied in being contrasted to the **stage fantasy tangos**, inside and out of Argentina, and foreign social dance forms.

Hence, dancers from each of these two major stylistic groups in Buenos Aires today refer to what they do at their most elegant, i.e. when walking the salon as opposed to showing off figures, as either Salon or Milonguero. It is a matter of oral history. What words you use to describe what depends on who you learned from first. But history marches on, and the meaning of these words seems to be diverging again.

The modern proponents of the style from the North West are all first or second generation followers of the early group led by **Petroleo**. This group includes the social dancers, **Fino** and **Miguel Balmececa** (passed on), and **Juan Bruno** and **Mingo Pugliese** (living). The fantasy artists including **Todaro** and **Virulazo** (both passed away), many performers still working from the **Copes** generation and many important youngsters. They all seem to be most comfortable calling the root of what they do **Salon Tango**, although **Lampazo**, for example, still uses **Milonguero** to describe this style, while **Juan Bruno** continues to insist on dividing this style into **Salon** and **Orillero** styles.

Then along came **Pedro Rusconi**, "**Tete**" (the first proponent of the close embrace to arise to prominence as a teacher) and **Susana Miller**, who has coaxed several other milongueros of this style to teach with her. They all would be comfortable with **salon** as the label for their style, but most people in Buenos Aires are calling it **milonguero** style.

So, for the most part, the salon and orillero styles of **Devoto** have become combined into salon style tango. The closer embrace style, which went untaught for longer, has taken milonguero style tango by default.

Nobody yet is talking about the style of the south or of the neighborhoods ringing the capital, where the younger Argentines often go on their own spelunking expeditions. One thing that I am sure of is that these neighborhoods offer fertile ground for further explorations in Buenos Aires.

As for myself, while I have been attracted to all these distinct "styles" of tango as I've seen them danced in Buenos Aires, I have not yet formed personal preferences for any of them. I didn't even start noticing close embrace, "Milonguero", style until I'd been in Buenos Aires for a while. It took several years to get past being fascinated with the steps, which were my first draw to the dance. The dancers who were doing less footwork were uninteresting to me and I just didn't see them.

Then, years of milonguero advice to feel the dance, not just learn steps began to take effect. I

started to notice the dancers for how they stood, embraced and felt the music. It isn't like I didn't know about these things before, I just didn't see them even though they were right in front of me.

I awakened when I saw Tete dance.

I watched him for two years without ever being able to steal a single step or copy his style, but with great envy for his ability to express the tango feeling, sensuality and music. He could do this with his partner Maria, Mingo's wife Ester, who is a mistress of the other style, and a plethora of young tango starlets.

Two years ago Tete began to teach, albeit with all the pedagogical glitches of a beginner teacher, and I finally had a chance to get into it. Here was a style that challenged from the inside out. *If I couldn't make heart-to-heart contact I couldn't dance.*

As I made my first breakthroughs I started to gain a much deeper understanding of what I call tango trance, that is the state in which one dances a set at the milonga in a timeless space. Becoming one with the music and my partner was no longer an abstract, intellectual concept to be related somehow to my footwork. The music in its simplest syncopation, came into focus as the basis for my connection with my partner.

After that experience in milonguero style my other tangos have also improved. My "salon tango" is ever richer as I learn to stand tall and make elegant my footwork and musicality. My "Orillero tango" keeps offering more and more complexity and variation as I improve my strength, agility, and concentration. It is also easier to try the vintage canyengue styles and, several distinctive versions of milonga. Most importantly, I am winning the sensual attention of the good dancers I partner.