

"TANGO IS A SHARED MOMENT"

Carlos Gavito often says this in his classes. These poet-dancer is considered one of the last symbols of the "Milongueros" era, now in extinction. Born in Avellaneda, a suburb of Buenos Aires, Gavito started his professional career in 1965. He is currently touring the world with "Forever Tango". He resides in Florida, and travels frequently to New York, where he guest teaches at DanceSport. A few weeks ago we caught up with Carlos Gavito in a NY coffeehouse.

ReporTango: How did you start dancing tango?

Carlos Gavito: I never really learned tango. Tango was part of the Argentine culture, and when I was a boy it was in fashion. When I was seven years old I used to go to the basketball court of the sports club of my town, Avellaneda, where three times a week there were tango "prácticas". In those days, tango was practiced between men. The older men would use boys who were placed in a standing position, mimicking the women, and the men would practice their steps. They would say "hey boy, come, stand here, put your foot here, and now there" and they would try new steps and new ways. So at the beginning I was just a body, but I paid attention to the steps and when I was fifteen, I did the same with a younger boy. It was then my turn to practice steps. In those days there were no dancing schools, and no television, so a kid like myself would have soccer during the day, and tango in the late afternoon.

R: So you were not allowed to do any steps before you were fifteen?

CG: No, I was not allowed to do the steps or go to any milongas.

R: What made you come back to those practice sessions?

CG: I was always into music. When I was fifteen, everybody was listening and dancing to rock n' roll, but all the clubs around my town would still play tango. Tango was always there. From the beginning I always liked tango, I found the music so beautiful, and so I always wanted to dance it; not as a profession, not as a performance, but as a social event. By the way, as a professional dancer, I always make the distinction between social tango, and the tango performed on stage. One has nothing to do with the other. Stage tango is done to sell tickets, while social tango is dancing for your own enjoyment. That's why I've never understood the "ganchos" (hooks) and kicks in social tango. I always make it clear to students that I don't teach ganchos. I would only do it if you want to become professional and you want to learn a specific choreography from me; then I will do that, I will teach ganchos. But not in social tango. I feel strongly about that.

R: What made you decide to make tango a profession?

CG: Well, that happened much later, when I was around 23 or 24 years old. I was dancing jazz and I had taken also ballet classes. I became first a jazz dancer, and then one day a friend of mine, Eduardo Arquimbau (from Gloria & Eduardo) came to look for me. He was putting together a television special and needed guys who danced tango, not just plain dancers. He knew I could dance tango and so he came to talk to me. I will never forget, it was in a coffee place in Avenida Corrientes where we always used to have a coffee or drink. He told me about the possibility to do this show, and I said let's try, let's see what it is about. We started to practice in a club and it was fine. It was a program called "Así canta Buenos Aires" ("This is how Buenos Aires sings"). We then went on doing another one "Yo soy Porteño" ("I'm from Buenos Aires"). I worked with him for about three and a half years. So, without really knowing it, I slowly went back to my roots, to tango. After that, Eduardo, Gloria and I started working in milongas. At those milongas we would perform four days a week as a trio. Later on, Eduardo formed a big show in which I was his leader. While Eduardo went on tour in Japan, and Central America I took care of the show. When he finally came back I decided to go on my own to the Festival of Tango in Colombia with the orchestra of Aníbal Troilo. Before we go any further I would like to mention my teachers, I made a promise to always mention them: contrary to many tango dancers, I didn't have dance teachers, I had tango teachers. One was Julián Centeya, he was a poet and he was my best teacher. If you listen to the tango "Café Domínguez," the one who is talking at the beginning is Julián. He was my best teacher because he taught me tango from the inside. The other teacher I would like to mention is Miguel Caló. I worked with him and his orchestra in Buenos Aires around 1963. He would say "listen to the music, now listen to the voice of Raúl Berón, dance the voice, just the voice, now dance the piano". He directed me like I was another musician in the orchestra. He made me understand how to listen to the music and what I should listen to. These were my two tango teachers.

R: Aren't there teachers like that anymore?

CG: No. Today, when people dance tango you can see every dancer rush to do steps. There should never be a rush to do a step, we should enjoy it while we are doing it and make it last, dwell on it. I often say this, when I dance tango, I enjoy so much the step I'm doing on that moment, that I want to make it last. The same as when we were kids and we would get five pennies to get an ice cream; we would lick it slowly, trying to make the most out of it because we knew that when the ice cream is gone there's no more! So I don't see the rush to finish one step and go into the next one. I think it's much more interesting to do one, stop, without really stopping but more like a pause and just do nothing for a while, enjoying the moment and then go on to do

something else. I think most people rush because they don't know how to do nothing, and that's the most difficult. Even if your dance is not choreographed, you learn the basic step: the one that goes from one to seven. Then you think you have to do the whole step. But what happens if someone is in front of you or next to you and you cannot finish the step? In actuality, the step never ends, it's a three-minute step, it's the whole dance.

R: Is this why you make such a big distinction between social tango and stage tango?

CG: Yes, because in social tango you move with your partner and with the music. And that is also something that people should understand: the relation between you and your partner is not personal. What is personal between the two of you is that you are both trying to caress the music with your feet.

R: Can you describe your ideal tango partner?

CG: My ideal tango partner... Well, at the moment, it is definitely, my partner in the show, Marcela Durán. We are a good duo, we understand each other without words, we don't need to talk, and we don't need to rehearse. Each one is trying to accomplish his own role, I lead, she follows. Some girls get fed up with following, and they want to dance like a man because they say it's more entertaining. But I say you don't have enough time in your lifetime to learn how to follow well. So I would recommend to these girls to really learn how to follow.

R: Do you think you and Marcela have a chemistry, that you share the same emotions when you dance a tango?

In other words, do you feel/interpret the music the same way, or you experience a different emotion than she does?

CG: It's a beautiful question. You know, even if we are having a different idea, a different understanding, or a different feeling, we are still thinking alike. What we get is the mood. She doesn't listen to my thoughts, I don't listen to her thoughts, but somehow we communicate the same mood to each other. Marcela and I don't have a personal relationship, we are friends and dancing partners, but our souls communicate, we don't need to talk. So, right now I feel like I'm dancing with my ideal, but really, my ideal does not have a face. She's a dream of something I want in real life, but that ideal does not have a face. You know, when you dance tango, you should really put a little bit of your life into it. If you dance your life, you dance better.

R: What makes a good tango dancer?

CG: A good tango dancer is one who listens to the music.

R: Is that the only criteria?

CG: Yes. We dance the music, not the steps. Anybody who pretends to dance well never thinks about the step he's going to do, what he cares about is that he follows the music. You see, we are painters, we paint the music with our feet. Musicians play an instrument and use their fingers, their hands. Dancers use their toes.

R: Has teaching tango been difficult at any point in your life?

CG: Yes, because tango was not always in fashion. To arrive to the point I'm at today took many years. Now I'm very much in demand, and I enjoy that because I've spent a long time dancing tango. I think I deserve it. I had been dancing tango before it became popular, and I didn't become a dancer because it was fashionable. Some dancers start with folklore or flamenco and then when tango became a commercial success they started dancing tango. It was not my case. I danced tango when it was not in fashion, and even when it was politically dangerous. So, I deserve what I've earned. I've earned it through the years.

R: Is teaching tango in the U.S. different than in Argentina?

CG: At the moment, I think it's the same, because in Argentina it has also become very commercial. Teachers everywhere try to surprise and impress others. They sometimes teach steps they would not even do themselves. They say that if you teach simple things, students get bored. But a good teacher should never worry about that. He should teach social tango, not the tango to impress others. I don't care if there are ten, twenty or a hundred people in my classes, the way I dance is the way I teach, and I teach simplicity. Sometimes, a step can look very easy and simple, but when people try to recreate it, they can't, because simplicity is not always easy.

R: It's easier to dance fast than dance slowly...

CG: Right. I sometimes see that the person who dances fast is actually trying to hide mistakes. The dancer who dances slowly does it because he's a hundred percent sure that what he's doing is perfect.

R: Most people here don't understand the tango lyrics. Do you think they are missing out by not understanding the meaning of a song?

CG: Look, it's simple. When I was a boy, I listened to Bill Haley. I didn't know any English, but I could tell whether the song was happy, or sad, or romantic. The lyrics in tango and the voice are very clear and you can hear when there's romance, nostalgia or

sadness. You can feel it even though you don't understand the lyrics. Once again, the mood of the song, of the music is important to listen to. For instance, I can never understand why a person who dances to Miguel Caló, for example, does ganchos, when the tango talks about love. A gancho is an aggression, why would the woman agree to this aggression when the music is about love?

R: Who would you want to model your dancing after?

CG: The answer is not so much who but what. My model would be the way a cat moves. When a cat moves, you see his paws, and every single muscle. He moves slowly but he's always ready to jump, you can't catch it. I like that when it moves slowly, there's a rhythm to his slow motion, it's something beautiful to admire, and I think all dancers should try to imitate it.

R: What is your favorite tango?

CG: It's tough to answer since I've been dancing for so long. There was a time when it was "Quejas de Bandoneón," another time "Chiqué", "La Ultima Cita", and also "Yunta de Oro". I'm very much in love with Pugliese's music, especially "Pata Ancha". One of my favorite tangos is Café Domínguez because at the beginning you can hear the voice of my "godfather" Julián Centeya. I also love the tangos of Miguel Caló, each one of them. I love the voice of Raúl Berón, also Alberto Podestá. I love Pugliese and Ricardo Tanturi. But I'm not a big fan of Biagi or Canaro. These are not my kind of tango. Biagi is from the 60's, and I don't like the rhythm, it's too sharp on the beat. I prefer the music that goes away from the beat, that is softer, smoother, even looser. I don't like strong marks or accent on the music. I prefer tangos that are more like a dream, like flying.

R: Can you describe your best tango moment?

CG: It's so difficult. I swear to God that I enjoy every single tango I dance. That is why, when I go to a milonga, I don't dance the whole night. I dance a few selected tangos. What is important is that I always dance well. If I get tired, I go sit and watch, because I'd rather do that than dance badly. I dance to the inspiration of the music. I need inspiration. So first, I need the right music, and then I have to find the right partner. If I can't find the right partner, I won't dance. If I don't like the music, I won't dance. So, to describe to you my best tango moment is impossible, because for me every tango is a best moment.

R: I have met some people who think that if you are not Argentine, you can't dance tango.

CG: Well, I think they are mistaken right from the beginning. Tango was an immigrant music in my own country, so it does not have a nationality, its only passport is feeling, and everybody has feelings. Passion is a plus. If you are a passionate person, you will be dancing better. There's a misperception that if a dancer knows a lot of steps, he's a good dancer. I think it's a mistake. It only means that that person has a good memory. I prefer the tango you dance while enjoying the moment, because then I will see that my partner is closing her eyes. That she is enjoying it too.

R: Unfortunately, you can't dance with everybody with your eyes closed.

CG: True. I've met girls who thought they had to have their eyes closed to dance a good tango. That's a mistake too. You close your eyes when you feel like it, when you're comfortable, not because you have to, or because it looks better. Trust is also important. Marcela said that very well in my video; when you dance with a partner you are close and the dance is very suggestive. But as I said before, it's not personal, it's what the music inspires you to do. The embrace looks personal, but what we are actually embracing is the music.

R: Why do you think some people, get so passionate, almost obsessed about tango?

CG: Well, if you go back to the beginning of tango, tango is defined as a feeling, a "sentimiento" which you dance to. So when you start the dance, you don't start with a step, you start with a feeling. That's why I think we are not like other dancers. Other dancers go through a combination of steps, tango is improvised, improvised all the way, there are no combinations. In tango you can't be preoccupied with the steps, you need to express your emotions while listening to the music. You can spot a mile away a person who is actually thinking about the next step. On the other hand, the dancer who follows the music will move at the same time as his partner. They will move as one. The American language says it clearly: "it takes two to tango". Why not two to cha-cha, or two to swing? Why two to tango? Because two makes one.

R: Last question: How would you like to be remembered as a dancer?

CG: Only one way: that I was honest with my dancing.