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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: David Mielcarek

Tango, Day and Night, Night and Day: 2nd Philadelphia Tango Festival

By Carolyn Merritt

Reflecting on the meaning of homeland, Milan Kundera contends that our short time on this earth necessarily limits such feelings to a single place. Kundera did, however, drop his native Czech for French, after having lived for many years in exile and becoming a citizen of France. *Tangueros* (tango dancers) similarly appropriate other ways of moving, hearing, speaking, and being in our pursuit of the dance. While we do not necessarily relinquish our homeland, dedication to the dance drives many to forsake the comforts of home, sometimes for days, sometimes for months or years at a time. We are perpetual border crossers, regularly traversing city, state, and country lines for a good dance. And in this world, pilgrimage to the tango 'mecca' of Buenos Aires stands as the ultimate sign of membership.

Outside of Buenos Aires, tango festivals function to sate *tangueros'* appetites for an experience approximating mecca. Intensive, multi-day and night (and wee morning hour) programs of workshops, performances, and social dancing, festivals bring together esteemed professionals, revered DJs, skilled social dancers, and dedicated novices from near and far. They are occasions for travel, couch-surfing, hosting, reuniting with friends and acquaintances, stocking up on lessons, refueling on inspiration, sharing the floor with some of the best of the best, and dancing for hours on end. Given the small size of tango communities in the U.S., festivals entice with the promise of numbers, the potential of novelty, and an air of authenticity that justifies a level of tango consumption outsiders might view as borderline mad. To dance all day and night, and to keep dancing until the sun comes up, is to live the tango like a *porteño* (a resident of the port city of Buenos Aires) if only for a moment.

Given the sheer quantity of activities offered at the 2nd Philadelphia Tango Festival, my long involvement with the Philadelphia Argentine Tango School (host of the event), and my ties to many of the teachers/ performers, this review will be partial at best. What I

offer are impressions from the inside, including reflections on the specialized instruction that draws dancers to festival workshops, and the joys to be found on an often overcrowded dance floor with tango friends old and new. But my emphasis is on the exhibitions – for me, the highlight of the festival. While tango as it is danced socially *is* performative (whether or not we choose to admit it, we perform to attract future partners, both on the dance floor and in our comportment on the sidelines), formal exhibitions are a special occurrence in Philadelphia. In Buenos Aires, where certain *milongas* (events for dancing tango socially) present performances every week, live exhibitions in close proximity also drive home the inadequacy of video. Videos allow dancers around the world to track tango's evolution, to connect virtually one to another, and to keep up with the goings on in mecca. But the magic of live performance is irreplaceable; like the magic of a transformative lesson or the bliss of a perfect *tanda* ('set' of dances), this magic is what *tangueros* feed on, ephemeral though it may be.

The Tango Lesson: Music

Tango music is a subject of endless debate among insiders. Many have embraced dancing to everything from Astor Piazzolla's *nuevo* compositions (1960s-1980s) to electronic tango to 'alternative' (non-tango) music. An interesting counter to all this experimentation has occurred over the past few years among young *tangueros* proclaiming a return to the "essence" of tango, where that essence is firmly rooted in traditional music.

This period in tango music, from its origins in the early 1900s through its Golden Era (1920s-1950s) to the bridging figure of Osvaldo Pugliese, was the subject of Evan Griffith's (NYC) and Nick Jones' (Denver) musicality workshop, where we listened to recordings spanning decades, observing shifts in instrumentation, sentiment, rhythm, and cadence over time. Through words and movement, they demonstrated varied approaches to interpretation, offered insights on closing the gap between music and dancer, and showed us how to dance big with small steps. Jones occasionally played out a rhythm on his *bandoneon*, while Griffiths evoked containment and grandiosity with the swoop of his voice. Throughout, they exchanged the roles of leader and follower flawlessly to bring to life their ideas, and I marveled, with the slightest twinge of bitterness, at their mastery of following.

The Sad Thought Danced?

Tango composer Enrique Santos Discépolo famously called the tango "*un pensamiento triste que se baila*." While the themes of nostalgia, lost love, and the neighborhood left behind are prominent in tango lyrics, these are by no means exhaustive. Likewise, the sentiments expressed in the dance may range from melancholy to passionate, playful and more, and this breadth was wonderfully evident in four nights of performances.

Evan Griffiths and Meredith Klein opened the performances on Friday evening, and if they faltered a couple of times on a slippery floor, the audience forgave them for the sheer daring of their dancing. Here was a partnership reminiscent of tango's evolution in male-male practice groups, its members challenging one another and pushing the dance forward in endless bouts of one-upmanship. Griffith's stride seemed to devour miles in seconds, Klein's extensions matched them, and each kept the other (as well as the audience) on their edge for ten minutes straight.

Diana Cruz and Nick Jones headlined the festival, and with good reason. A Paraguayan native and former ballerina, Cruz is a dancer of star presence who combines profound elasticity with strength, the ethereal quality of a bird in flight with the grounded weight of tango's dirt-floor dancing predecessors. It is to his enormous credit that Jones met Cruz on equal footing time and again. Both electrifying performers, together they took the audience from awe to laughter in seconds, but Jones always allowed Cruz to shine. Their seamless integration of social and stage tango (including jumps, flips, and outlandish extensions) with elements of ballet and contemporary partnering was breathtaking; that it all was executed in improvisation literally took my breath away.

Adam Hoopengardner and Cigdem Tanik, beloved teachers based in NYC, had the unenviable task of opening for Jones and Cruz. To compare them would be unfair, for their emphasis was entirely on the floor, on a tango that would be danced socially, and notably, on the careful balance between movement and stasis, or all that exists in between those notes of music – the pauses, or as the late, great Gavito put it, *la esencia del tango*.

Likewise, Philadelphia's Marc Hussner and Kristina McFadden had the tough job of following Guillermo Cerneaz (Buenos Aires) and Nick Jones, who delighted the audience in a hammy exchange of lead and follow, tossing one another right side up, reveling in lap-switching *sentadas* (the follower 'sits' on the leader's supporting leg), and playing to countless clichéd images of tango.

Hussner and McFadden rose to the occasion, dancing with cool elegance, McFadden gliding effortlessly across the floor like an ice skater under optimum conditions, punctuating an otherwise meditative pacing with razor-sharp *ganchos* (leg hooks) and *boleos* (throw of the leg). Also performing on Sunday evening were Jesse Roach and Xavier Vanier, who, like their NYC compatriots Adam and Ciko, offered a sweet rendition of a tango on the floor.

Escuchen mi compás: Yo soy el viejo tango que nació en el arrabal

Hear my rhythm: I am the tango of old, born in the suburbs

-Homero Expósito, Yo soy el tango (1941)

Whatever strange twists of fate led Argentine native Damian Lobato to the tango and to Philadelphia, local *tangueros* are blessed. A wonderful teacher whose exhibitions are few and far between, he offered festival-goers a rare treat when he performed with Naomi Hotta (Los Angeles) at Monday's closing *milonga*. While Hotta shined on the social dance floor, my eyes returned again and again to Lobato in their performance. *El viejo tango* born again, Lobato moves with the weight and deliberation of the *milonguero* who has danced decades, but with an understanding of mechanics and the vocabulary of a young *tanguero* in his prime.

Another young Argentine whose dance bridges old and new, Guillermo Cerneaz packs an astonishing amount of charisma into his slight frame. His closing performance with Meredith Klein had special significance for me; we met when Klein and I traveled to Buenos Aires in 2005, a trip that led Klein to her profession and me to my research on tango. Watching them dance together brought me back years, and reconfirmed my belief that both are veritable masters of *milonga*. Not only a tango event, *milonga* also refers to the fastest of the three varieties of tango music, and the fast-paced, rhythmic, generally happier form of the dance. One of the best leaders of *milonga* I've ever encountered, Klein clearly reveled in the opportunity to follow Cerneaz. Moving at breakneck pace, they floated above the floor, each rhythmic element of the song brought to life in their giddily spot-on feet.

Milongueando

Summing up four evenings of social dancing is an impossible task, and one person's impressions are utterly insufficient. Still, there were highlights: the 'magic forest' atmosphere of the Ruba Club; dancing with Guille Cerneaz for the first time since 2005; seeing newbies from the beginner seminar bravely test their skills at the *milongas*; watching incredibly skilled dancers grace the floor together; the return of a tango friend I hadn't seen in years (we crashed carts at the supermarket and I insisted he start dancing again); following Cigdem Tanik, and promptly resolving (again) to learn to lead; and listening to some of the best tango DJing there is.

Sadly, I didn't last to see Saturday's after-*milonga milonga*, from 2-6am, though sources report it was not entirely unlike mecca, greeting the return of the sun in a tango embrace.

2nd Philadelphia Tango Festival, presented by The Philadelphia Argentine Tango School at the Ruba Club, May 25-28, 2012.

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