

27th May 2008

To: LUTSF,

RE: Report 2007/2008

Please find enclosed my final report from my recent trip to Argentina courtesy of Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. Looking at other award winners' reports, the range and style of writing, and indeed research, is wide and varied. I chose to write my report in the form of an article that it is divided into sections.

I stayed in Argentina for just over four months and during that time I did formal training in Tango with various dance schools and teachers in Buenos Aires and Rosario. There are a huge number of schools and teachers there, the choice can be overwhelming but it became more about my preferred style of dancing and pedagogy and in the end my main teachers were: Sebastian la Vallena, Julio Balmaceda & Corina de la Rosa, Staff at Estudio DNI and Gaston Torelli & Mariela Sametband from TangoBrujo. I am grateful to all of these people for their expertise. Once a week I went to the Tango Classes at Enrique Tornu Hospital in the palliative care unit whose leading doctor is Mariela Bertolino and the classes there were run by TintaRoja tango school. This formed the second strand of my research.

As you will see from my article this was a fantastic experience and I am hugely grateful to everyone who made it possible.

Sincerely,

Ruth Pethybridge

REPORT

Un Abrazo sin Tiempo

Last year I travelled to Argentina where I gained more than I had bargained for... I came back with a new love, dancing Tango; and a new sense of the body I inhabit. Thanks to the Lisa Ullman Scholarship Fund I was able to return to Buenos Aires this year to develop my skills in this dance and furthermore to investigate the use of Tango in the palliative care unit at the Enrique Tornu Hospital.

Background & Personal Context

One of the things that fascinates me about the Tango is how it is represented, and in my opinion, often misrepresented. To use Savigliano's word the Tango is a dance that has become 'exoticised' as a cultural product, closely linked to the Argentine national identity and ideas about Latin sexuality and its almost brutal nature. The stereotypes that surround it as the most passionate of dances are at once true and yet somehow miss so much of the softness and tenderness that can be found in the intimate embrace of a stranger's arms, that has little to do with sex, and everything to do with connection. This is not to deny the Tango as an expression of an archetypal male/female relationship and an embodying of sexuality, however it is my feeling that this view of Tango limits its potential as an art form.

When I first started learning Tango, it was a surprise to me that the dance is so much an improvisation, an interpretation of touch and weight; as Taylor points out: "you don't remember the steps themselves, you must try to remember how the steps *feel*." (Taylor, 36, 1998.) In Tango there is a point of connection with your partner that does not change. The chests, and therefore the hearts, remain connected (or with the intention to stay connected) throughout, while the decoration and detail occurs from the waist down. The lead however is through the centre; the whole body is involved in reading the movements of your partner and listening, conversing.



Tango brings up many questions about gender roles. Simply the fact that the man always leads is a loaded issue. Sometimes my body screams '*resist resist*' but this stops the flow of the dance and so I have no choice but to surrender, and as such actively discover my role as the passive partner, choosing my moments to hint at my resistance with my own decorations (adornos). I do not intend to discuss here the different interpretations of gender roles in tango, this is a huge area of debate that cannot be covered here. (for a full discussion see Savigliano, 1995) but for me Tango is a way to embody my femininity in a specific context where it is allowed and appropriate to be in a more passive role, as such it serves a function for me and yet I refuse to accept that I am no more than an adornment to the man's dance as "in many feminist interpretations (where) the Tango woman is a victim" (Savigliano, 50, 1995). Plebs illustrates the woman's advantage, and skill, here:

...each encounter has its own DNA. During the night we have various possibilities to have diverse encounters. And therein lies the advantage of being a woman. Given the fact that our role is to adapt to the diverse proposals of the men, for us each time is absolutely different.

(Plebs, 16, 2007)

As society evolves however, so does Tango, and at almost every Milonga you will find women in trainers (haven't seen any men in high heels though...yet!), and as tango is a partner dance of course it can be danced by two men or two women, and more and more

frequently it is (though this is not approved of by everyone in traditional tango circles).

As a European woman learning this Latin American dance I found myself claiming my Colombian ancestry ^[1] in a plea to somehow make it more 'authentic' that I was so drawn to this dance, this part of the world, these people. But somehow it was my body that authenticised my experiences. The form itself provided me with a way to escape my Englishness, an escape route I didn't even now I was looking for. This led me to the question of embodying a dance which has so much to do with a place and a history I have very little to do with. As Savigilano points out about Tango's beginnings: "the Europeans didn't understand the words and thought these 'natives' and their dances were 'charming'" (Savigliano, 29, 1995). I was dancing to songs that I didn't understand, my body as close as it had been to any lover and very much enjoying the anonymous intimacy it provided. The embrace is the significant and powerful distinguishing feature of Tango as opposed to other forms of partner dancing. Alejandra Mantinan, a professional tango dancer states, "*I believe that the great success of Tango everywhere happened because of the embrace*". Being held, the way I was held in this dance became a significant source of healing and fascination for me as I explored the Buenos Aires night and the recesses of a broken heart.

This is an easily accepted image of tango, dark argentine nights and broken hearts, passion, displacement. The *Lonely Planet Argentina* begins its description of Tango thus: "the air hangs heavy, smoky and dark" and goes on to say it is "a strong blend of machismo, passion and longing, with almost a fighting edge to it" thus buying into the stereotypes mentioned at the beginning of this article. So how does this fit with the bright sunshine of daylight in Enrique Tornu hospital where I danced with patients, doctors and families from the palliative care unit? As my Tango teacher Sebastian Vallena said to me once: "Tango has many faces", these are but two.



Tango in Palliative Care

Enrique Tornu is a small hospital which dates from October 1904 and provides the only four beds that exist solely for the use of palliative care patients in Buenos Aires. The facilities there are perfectly adequate but still far from what we would expect in the UK. The Tango classes have been running for three years and began when a terminally ill patient wanted to learn Tango before she died. This was taken on by Ignacio Lavelle who began the classes in Tornu and went on to write the book: *Tango: Una danza interior (Tango: An Inner Dance)*. The classes are open to patients, but also patients families, friends, carers and any of the doctors and nurses who work at the hospital, thus providing a space where everyone is on equal terms and able to participate without their usual day to day roles. Mariela Bertolino, the doctor who runs the palliative care unit talked about how the classes allowed her to mix with patients in a different way and thus improved communication about medical matters that may have previously been difficult to discuss.

It is well documented that babies and children need physical affection and touch for their healthy growth and development and so it stands to reason that people at the end of life or with a debilitating illness, need the same; "touch is as important as breathing" says Dr Field from the Touch Research Institute. In fact we need touch throughout our lives but I believe that illness, and particularly terminal illness induces a sense of vulnerability that requires a different level of care and affection. In the last months of his life I had more physical contact with my grandfather than I had had throughout my life. Yet being close to death is something many people fear or at least find uncomfortable. The Tango embrace becomes a way to overcome this by giving and receiving intimate touch in a context where it is 'allowed' and specific. The intention maybe just to dance, an activity for fun and distraction or in this context it can be construed as something more, Arthur Frank, in his book 'The renewal of generosity' explores issues around illness and medicine. He states:

"Care is enacted in gestures that can console beyond what they accomplish as practical components of treatment. For touch to console and thus to heal it must be more than efficient. Touch must be generous, seeking contact with a person as much as it seeks to effect some task. Generosity is the resonance of touch, endowing the act with a capacity to give beyond its practical significance"

(Frank, 63, 2004)

This illustrates how touch functions as an important tool in palliative care. The functional touch of someone preparing you for bed or bath can be very different depending on the person giving it. Likewise, the intention of the people dancing is as important as how they dance. In Tornu no-one is watching to see if you are good enough to dance with, no one minds if you don't have the right shoes, or if you make a mistake on every step, the intention is different and the attitude is generous. Of course any dance activity for such a group would raise levels of serotonin through exercise, perhaps provide an atmosphere of community and sharing but I believe it is this close contact that gives Tango its particular strength in this context. When asked, Carmen the class co-ordinator also sites this as the reason for using Tango in the hospital, "Tango is an important part of our culture but it also provides communication through the embrace". The physiological effects of Tango as opposed to other forms of dance is not something my research could cover but for example, researchers from Washington university compared Tango to other forms of exercise for patients with Parkinsons and found that the tango patients showed more notably increased balance and mobility than the other group. As well as the fact that tango "has several aspects of movement that may be especially relevant for these patients including dynamic balance, turning, initiation of movement, moving at a variety of speeds" (Uni of Washington, 2005) the researchers also mention the social element as a strong advocate for the dance.



At Tornu, those that cannot dance listen and watch (and sometimes sing), drink mate ^[2] and eat biscuits, it is a social occasion as much as a class. Many people I came into contact with in Argentina first knew the music and the lyrics of Tango before the dance. A large number of the songs are inextricably linked to places, particularly Buenos Aires, which



gives it a special significance to these people in this city:

“Mi Buenos Aires querido, cuando yo te volver a ver, no habra mas penas ni olvido. El farolito de la calle en que naci fue centinela de mis promesas de amor...Mi Buenos Aires, tierra querida”
Alfredo Le Pera 1934

My beloved Buenos Aires, when will I see you again, there will be no more sorrow nor forgetting. The street where I was born witnessed my promises of love...my beloved Buenos Aires, dearest land

Thus this dance is more than its physical manifestation, tango songs are often about memories, full of nostalgia and a longing for times that have passed. Far from being negative for people at the end of their lives this provides a way to frame and channel their own experiences, as Lavalle states in his proposal for the classes:

Las intervenciones desde la música y la danza del tango apuntan a trabajar los diferentes estados que se generan en relación a la enfermedad y el aislamiento. Permitiendo que los silencios se carguen de sentido, sonidos y movimientos, como una forma de trascender el tiempo, la muerte; recuperando momentos y seres queridos a través de una melodía, una letra o un paso de baile. La intención es reencauzar la energía de historias y recuerdos cargados de dolor y sufrimiento a través de la danza, la música, el vínculo...

(Lavalle, no date)

Working with tango music and dance intervenes in the different states that are generated in relationship to illness and ailments. Allowing the silences to have a sense, a sound, and a movement as a way to transcend time and death; recapturing moments and loved ones through a melody, a lyric or a dance step. The intention is to re-direct the energy of stories and memories loaded with pain and suffering through the dance, the music, the bonding...

I was lucky enough to experience this bonding as a participant in the classes at Tornu and was warmly welcomed and accepted by the group who taught me a lot more than just Tango. The current teacher Alfredo when asked why he taught in this context said that to him the time at Tornu is sacred, everything else is work but this, he says, is a reminder about life...he is giving his time to do this, but actually feels he receives so much through coming here where he meets people who may be in terrible situations but facing life with joy and optimism. Everyone I spoke to cites the class as an opportunity to share a moment of happiness, to be together as a group and to communicate with each other at another level through the music and the embrace of Tango.

To explain further the significance of the embrace, for me the connection allows me to be completely present in the moment as it unfolds, if I think ahead or in the past, I lose that connection and therefore the flow of the dance, Plebs articulates this experience well here:

Each couple enters necessarily in a trance while improvising, since it is like a meditation. Meditating means simply to concentrate on something, In somebodies arms or embracing someone we concentrate on pleasing and complimenting each other and flowing through the dance floor. The mind becomes quiet and as a consequence, the outside world disappears.

(Plebs, 16, 2007)

To anyone who has danced Tango this will sound familiar, and it is this transcending of time that Lavalle was referring to. In the moment of the dance if there is no outside world then there is no illness, no death, no other work to be done, no past and no future: 'un abrazo sin tiempo'. This has been referred to by some psychologists as a state of 'flow' where "being immersed in what we're doing counts for more than the end result, being completely involved in an activity for its own sake...with a sense of transcending the ego and time" (Ricard,234,2006). Again, this can be found in many activities but in my opinion the Tango encourages it due to the necessary level of attention required to follow your partners lead and the fact that what you are focusing on is another human being. I have had similar experiences when dancing contact improvisation which also requires an immediacy of focus and a complete presence in the activity and the body of another. What could be more significant and important for someone facing a serious illness, or the end of his or her life, than to transcend time and live in the moment?

The team at Enrique Tornu are dedicated, skilled and humble about what they do and it was an honour to be a small part of it for the months I was there. The attitude of the Tango classes is embodied in this statement from Carmen, the class co-ordinator:

“All the work done here comes from love, anything worth doing has to be done with love and dedication, done without love it means nothing”

So the Tango is a dance about love, but not necessarily always the passionate or violent romantic love it is associated with: love in the moment of the dance, for the form itself, lost love, love for a city, a homeland, a song...love that lasts a lifetime and beyond.

Pasts & Futures

Now back in England I have visited a hospice here and noted the enthusiasm with which all the older day patients talk about their dancing days, but they talk of them in the past tense. It would be great to change their perception that they cannot dance anymore because they are too old, too fragile, or too immobile and instead empower them to find their own dances, perhaps through a familiar and comfortable cultural reference. I hope to be able to work on a pilot project here to use some of what I have learnt in Buenos Aires to engage these people with the partner dances they love. Tango may hold a particular resonance for the Argentine people, but the embrace is universal.

I continue to practice and learn my own tangos and feel there will always be more to learn, another level to go to, I am consistently surprised by it and it nearly always brings me back to my body in the most immediate way. I would love to experiment and

play with it more, marry it with my training in contact improvisation to explore this intimacy and generosity of touch; while also recognising and valuing its original form. Thus my own love affair continues...

As a dancer and a teacher this trip gave me a chance to engage with a new form and feel what it was like to be a student again in an intensive way: humbling, frustrating, exciting, stimulating, boring, exhausting, thrilling. The souvenirs I bring into the dance studio from Argentina are much more than my gorgeous tango shoes, they are innumerable and immeasurable.

Thank you to everyone in the UK and Argentina who made this possible

Footnotes

1. My great grandfather was Colombian
2. A traditional herbal beverage drunk throughout Argentina which is passed around in a communal cup and drunk through a 'bombilla' (a metal or wooden straw).

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