

Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund Report

Avatâra Ayuso | Researching Tango at its roots: Uruguay and Argentina

Travel dates: 6 April to 26 April 2026 | Locations: Montevideo and Buenos Aires

I am deeply grateful to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund for supporting this research trip to Uruguay and Argentina. More than ten years after receiving a LUTSF Award to travel to Japan, this new journey has reminded me of the rare value of being given time, trust and support to follow an artistic question in its original context. I travelled with the aim of reconnecting with tango, a dance form I first encountered more than twenty years ago, and of understanding how its history, training methods, musicality and social practice could influence my choreographic work today.

I feel I achieved what I set out to do, and more. My aim was not to become a tango specialist or to reproduce tango on stage, but to understand its ethos more deeply: how it is taught, how it is danced socially, how it lives in the body, and how its ideas of connection, listening and partnership might enter my own choreographic practice. In both Montevideo and Buenos Aires, I was able to observe, take class, speak with artists and cultural professionals, and experience tango in formal and informal contexts. I visited dance institutions, university settings, national companies, independent schools and social dance spaces where tango is treated not as a nostalgic form, but as a rigorous, embodied and evolving practice.

Professionally, the trip has opened a new line of research in my work. Before travelling, I was interested in the traditional relationship between leader and follower in tango. After the trip, I feel much less attached to those words. What stayed with me most strongly were the ideas of the guide and the listener. These terms feel more generous, more contemporary and more useful for the questions I am currently asking as a choreographer. They also allow me to think about leadership not as control, but as responsibility, attention and care. This has immediate relevance to my work with dancers, especially in partnering, improvisation and ensemble practice.



Personally, the journey was very moving. Tango has been part of my life since I was twenty, after a tumour in my left leg interrupted my ballet training and changed my relationship with dance. Tango gave me back confidence, pleasure, musicality and a different understanding of the dancing body. Returning to its roots now, as a mature artist, felt like closing a circle and opening another one. I travelled with respect, curiosity and some vulnerability, and I came back with renewed artistic energy.

One of the strongest highlights was having the privilege of experiencing both scenic tango and tango in milongas: the formal, theatrical expression of tango alongside its social, living and nightly practice. Seeing tango on stage helped me understand its theatrical possibilities (field I'm very familiar with), but dancing and observing it in milongas brought me closer to what most connects with my choreographic practice: the social intelligence of the form. Buenos Aires alone offers an extraordinary living ecosystem of tango, with around 20 to 25 milongas taking place each day, and many more at weekends. To witness this density of practice, from national institutions to late-night social dance floors, was a privilege.

In the milonga, one sees how people negotiate space, age, desire, etiquette, listening and community through movement. I was particularly struck by the range of ages on the dance floor, and by the way tango continues to adapt while carrying its memory. I also saw how roles are shifting. Although tradition is still present, there are many dancers and teachers questioning fixed gender assumptions and opening the form to new ways of relating. This was one of the most important learnings of the journey: tango is not only a dance of the past; it is a living practice where society, gender, intimacy and leadership continue to be reimaged.

Another highlight was the generosity of the people I met, from national institutions and university departments to independent schools, teachers, dancers and milonga communities. These conversations helped me situate tango not only as a dance technique, but as a cultural, historical and social practice. I returned with notes, embodied experiences and questions that I know will continue to unfold over time. Some of the most valuable learning happened between the official meetings: in conversations after class, in the pauses between rehearsals, while watching how teachers corrected touch and intention, or while observing how each city holds tango in its everyday life.

I plan to share this research first through my choreographic process. The learning will enter the studio through how I work with dancers: through partnering tasks, exercises around listening and guiding, and a more nuanced approach to leadership inside movement. A new methodology is beginning to emerge from this trip, one that brings tango principles into dialogue with ballet and contemporary dance training without forcing them into another form. I am excited by the possibility of offering students and professional dancers tools to think about touch, decision-making, sensitivity, rhythm and mutual responsibility in new ways.

The trip has also reawakened a writing project I have been carrying for the last two years: a book on tango. Before travelling, the idea existed, but its structure was still unclear. After this journey, the format, main themes and my desire to write it have become much stronger. I now see the book not only as a reflection on tango, but as a wider contribution to conversations around leadership, gender, partnership and creative practice.

For future awardees, my main suggestion would be to prepare carefully, but also leave space for the unexpected. The most meaningful moments are not always the ones that can be planned in an itinerary. I would also encourage future applicants to approach their research

with humility. Travel of this kind is not only about collecting information; it is about entering another cultural context with respect, listening deeply, and allowing the experience to change the original question. For artists, this is invaluable. It gives permission to be a student again, to be surprised, and to let the body understand things before language catches up.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all the people and organisations who opened their doors to me during this journey. In Montevideo, I am especially grateful to the Escuela Nacional de Danza del Sodre, Paola Mainero, Rossana Borghetti, Giovanna Martinatto and the tango and ballet dance department, the Ballet Nacional del Sodre, the Ballet Juvenil del Sodre, Lucía Chilbroste and the cultural journalist Ana Rosa Rodríguez for their generosity, insight and trust. In Buenos Aires, my thanks go to the Universidad Nacional de las Artes, its Compañía Joven de Tango led by the outstanding Nico Schell, the wonderful Ballet Folklórico Nacional, the Ballet Contemporáneo del Teatro San Martín, the Ballet Estable del Teatro Colón, Fundación Julio Bocca, and Betsabet Flores and her international school, including her student Fede Bozzano. I am also grateful to the teachers, dancers and tango communities I encountered in classes and milongas. Their generosity, open hearts and the connections they allowed me to experience have shaped this research in ways I will continue to carry into my choreographic practice, teaching and writing.

This LUTSF supported trip has been invaluable. It has given me artistic material, renewed confidence, a clearer research direction and a deeper understanding of how tango can inform my choreographic future in the UK. I hope that, through my work with dancers, students and future writing, this learning will continue to travel beyond me and contribute to the wider dance community.

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Photo 1
Avatâra Ayuso in Tango Class
Image by Betsabet Tango Dance Studio

Photo 2
Avatâra Ayuso with the National Folclore Ballet of Argentina. Image by National Folclore Ballet of Argentina