

THE HISTORY OF THE TANGO

A ten-minute play with commentary and music

***by
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CHARACTERS

Man

lecturer, button-down shirt, tie, khakis, glasses; he is epitome of male academic

Woman

dancer, dress, high heeled dancing shoes, tightly pulled back hair; lace, fringe, tightly laced dress, bare arms, bare back, bare shoulders

TIME

Lecture hour.

PLACE

Lecture hall. . .and Buenos Aires

MUSIC

Begin with tango sung by solely instrumental, played on traditional instruments. (There are recordings of "orchestral" recordings--do **not** use these.)

Then change to male singer; example: Julio Iglesias, "*Tango*" (CD).

About half-way through the play, the music should change again, either to solo female singers, or solely instrumental. Example: "*Women of Tango*" (CD).

The point is the singer's voice and the traditional instruments, and the noted place where the music changes. At first the music is simply a counterpoint to the lecture: this changes as MAN changes.

For Heath and Scott

TANGO music is heard. It should be throbbing, Latino street tango. It should also be instrumental, at this point.

MAN appears in a downspot: a lecture. He is at an invisible podium, or one that can get out of the way when immediately necessary.

MAN

The History of the Tango.

(as he lectures MAN might use the floor space, the "podium," the audience as his classroom. The MUSIC continues under his speech. He uses it to punctuate his talk, perhaps acknowledging its help, its emphasis, calling even for change of music. However, he uses space in limited way, around podium only.)

The tango is a street dance, originating in the waterfront slums of Argentina in the final two decades of the 19th century. The 1880s, 1890s. Buenos Aires was a cosmopolitan city on international shipping routes. Ships sailing from Europe to South America, the US West Coast, China, stopped there en route. In the waterfront bars, where European sailors and women for sale met in an exchange of money and rhythm, the tango emerged.

It is a dance of dominance, of interpretive flourishes within a rigid beat and stride. The competition of the dancing couple. The first dancers were *canfinfleros*--can-fin-fleros--pimps--male couples dancing on street corners in a bizarre sort of showmanship, as performance of machismo as elemental as cock fights.

(he recognizes the unintentional pun.)

MAN, continued

The later addition of female dancing partners and singers--even the introduction of the song itself--

(MUSIC CHANGES to a singer, male—Julio Iglesias, for example)

--changed the balance of the tango, its shape and texture. How?

(takes an answer--)

Of course, by adding heterosexual play to the equation. It stayed a performance form of the lowest classes, but renegotiated with gender, sex and fertility, foreplay, a pre-mating ritual.

(MAN changes tone, removes glasses, muses)

It is interesting to those of us, scholars like myself, researchers in cultural and sexual politics, I mean--that these people--bricklayers, clerks, laundry women, secretaries, pickpockets, cat burglars, cutthroats, prostitutes, pimps, and sailors--gave birth to a dance so dedicated to passion--to blood, yes, but to passion, and beauty--and tenderness...

(Slow LIGHTS UP on WOMAN, UL, during this last speech. She is fully dressed for the tango, an Argentine street dancer, including red silk roses in her hair. She is in silhouette, half in the dark. She appears in complete contrast to MAN. They are seemingly unaware of each other.)

He replaces glasses, comes to stand behind podium again.)

But I stray from our subject.

MAN

The tango was a fever to the people, giving voice to Eros--like a virus it spread and infected strong and weak alike. A febrile disease...like malaria. Like a malarial fever it raised your basal temperature, caused a hot and humid ...a sultry film of perspiration to coat your skin, made you shiver and hallucinate and--and--and---delirious.

The music perfumed the streets, night and day, day and...night---

(The volume of background music has increased. WOMAN sprays herself with cologne taken from her cleavage, throat, wrists, hair, knees, air; she may pull a lipstick off hip or out of garter, applying it in mirrored case; she may straighten seams: whatever, it is stereotypical "female" gesture used to punctuate his words, steal focus a bit, to music's rhythm, sensual, deliberate--these two people cannot inhabit the same universe--and they fit stereotypes too closely.....Ego & Id.)

MAN

--in the air, everywhere the sound of the instruments, the singer's voice--

(singer's voice in passionate passage--)

The hot Argentine nights, when the chaste, sinless stars were eclipsed by the flickering of fuschia and carmine and scarlet-tinted neon, by the smoke from a hundred thousand cigarette coals in the reflection of a million rum punches. When the song of the bird or cricket was drowned in the passion of a human throat, choked and throbbing--

The tango is a duel for dominance. Partner against partner, man against woman, machismo leading female, using the weapons and lures of sexuality.

(it occurs to him--)

MAN

A small demonstration.

(MAN steps away from the "podium" and signals stage mgr. about MUSIC, which CHANGES again, gets louder. This time to a woman's voice. He removes his glasses, folds them and places in pocket. MAN holds out hand without looking at WOMAN. She reaches to take it. He rolls her into tango stance, torso to torso, face to face. They dance, he continues to lecture until he can no longer continue. Over the course of the dance, her expression changes from aloof/impersonal to warm, welcoming, even shy and loving, as does his.

As they dance--)

MAN

The dance. The rhythm--

(he hums out rhythm, to beats of music)

See--

(again, with Bah and bum and Duh and dum)

The mating.

The head.

The shoulder.

The torso.

(pause for cross and glide)

The leg.

(WOMAN does flourish and kick. MAN steadies her, pulls her in again)

The arm.

(MAN holds her hand out, demonstrating.)

WOMAN

The spine.

(MAN loses beat, catches it.)

MAN

The spine.

(He strokes a hand down her naked back; then up, slower, with the music, realizing something, distracted.)

WOMAN

It is not until the 1920s that the tango traveled back across the Atlantic to Paris, in the blood of French sailors, Buenos Aires to Marseilles, to Paris. To international stardom.

MAN

The tango gained cachet, ambiance, mystery-- elegance.

WOMAN

The spine.

The hip.

The stride.

MAN

The glide--

WOMAN

The turn--the dip--

(MAN dips her--stay in dip)

MAN

The shiver.

WOMAN

The *frisson*.

(They rise up out of dip)

WOMAN

Fever.

MAN

Virus.

(he loosens tie)

WOMAN

The glance.

MAN

The--gaze.

BOTH

The eyes.

(They dance, eyes locked)

MAN

The breath.

WOMAN

The pulse.

MAN

Holding her carefully, arms, hands--

WOMAN

Fingers.

MAN

Each partner steps out, each partner makes space for the other's creative impulses. From a dance made of shattered illusions, betrayal, poverty, alcohol and cocaine, boredom and abuse, lovers' quarrels and the sale of sex comes a dance where each partner enables the song of the other.

WOMAN

Tenderness...

MAN

Holding her tenderly, arms, hands--fingers.

Being held tenderly, arms, hands--

(pause--dance)

The step. The glide. The turn. The dip.

(again, they dip.)

WOMAN

The kiss.

(they kiss without losing stance of dance)

The kiss.

(again)

The kisssssssssssssssss!

(again--longer)

MAN

The sigh.

(both sigh)

WOMAN

The tango.

(both dance-both rest foreheads together.

LIGHTS FADE into silhouette, downspot; LIGHTS out; MUSIC SLOWLY FADES, while dancers continue in dark until MUSIC gone, LIGHTS gone, end--silence, darkness--hold a beat).)

END