



This is the first of a series of true stories prepared entitled “Exceptional Dance Experiences.” As I have traveled extensively, I always found the time and opportunity to use my dance training to good practice meeting people and having fun. Many of those occasions, however, led to some fascinating experiences, as the one I tell below, just as it occurred.

The Tango Bar

The slow curl of cigarette smoke gently ascended into the air as I watched the doctor, now deep in animated discussion and ever-faster Spanish which seemed to run together in an incoherent series of syllables. I was seated at a rustic Tango Bar on the outskirts of San Jose, Costa Rica in 1998, and it was late for me – about 12:30 AM, but the beginning of the night for the crowd around me. This was a break from a day of seminars and discussions – some in halting Spanish, most in English to a physician group about a new type of physical therapy. I was invited down for 2 days and persuaded to stay another five, but it seems as if life does not start until the evening.

In Costa Rica, and many other venues, a Tango Bar is a place for drinking, talking, smoking and-yes, the singing of the old Tangos. Mostly written in the 40’s and the 50’s, these are the Tangos that portray the soul of the Latino; tales of sadness, desperation and longing. Unlike Country songs, where the story is always of the horse, the mother, the dog or the girl, in Latin America it is always about the girl except for a few very special horses. To the Latino, the tango is much more than a song. It is an expression, a protest, a statement of what they are and what they long to be. To us Gringos, we see it as an art form, beautiful to listen to, but little else. The Latino, however, sees and feels it as much more. It is a “sad story that must be sung”.



Tango Bar

Now, the bandoneon player seated on the stool at the end of the hall shifted on his seat and began a popular tango, *Recuerdo* (Remembrance), a historic tango by the famous tango composer Osvaldo Pugliese.

As the bandoneon started its wail, a gaunt patron in his 70’s on the opposite side of the hall stood up. Wizen and leathery by much sun exposure, he wore a faded denim jacket and had a scarf loosely around his neck. He spontaneously broke into song as the bandoneon continued its mournful wail.

This was a unique experience. Whereas the other patrons took it as a normal part of the evening, I could not help but be impressed by the spontaneous nature of the singer – now totally caught in the story he was telling. In the states, we would call this some form of Karaoke, but here in Costa Rica, or in many such tango bars in South America, this was far

more. The singer was not engaged in the song as much as in the feeling – the picture of a people oppressed, of loves lost and of hopes frustrated.

Here, you did not need to know the language to feel the heart of the tango. You could not help but be affected by the pure emotion in front of you, as the singer told his tale in melodies born of desperation and tears, which now coursed down his leathered face.

At last he finished, or rather sank into further depths of despair, another patron stood to take over the song. This was a burly campesino in his 50's, but gifted with the knowledge of the meaning of the tango. With a stronger voice, but no less emotion, he filled the hall with his tale of woe.

I edged a glance at the doctors, who took a mild interest, but continued their discussion in preferred treatment modalities. I saw this was the norm, and my own astonishment the exception. The doctors took notice of my interest with a type of mild amusement. They all think that the gringo cannot understand the tango.



Bandoneon player

At last the singers ran out of words, or ran out of emotion and sat down. The bandoneon continued while I started to more carefully assess the room.

This was not a dance hall. They sing, rather than dance the tango. Having training in tango, however, I could not resist the impulse to act, especially as I spotted a beautiful raven-hair *tica* (Costa Rica girl) of about 25 or so, across the room.

Raising my arm, “Senor – *Adios Nonino*, por favor”, I beckoned to the bandoneon player, much to the surprise of my hosts. The player nodded appreciatively, as that tango was one of the favorites, as well as one of the most expressive in the literature, written by Astor Piazzolla as an elegy to his father.

Across the hall, on a picnic table, I saw the burly companion of the *tica* had fallen asleep straight on the rough table. She sat there, looking bored and wishing to be somewhere else. Purposefully, I strode across the room and, touching her hand, said, “*hágalo quiere bailar, por favor*” (do you want to dance).

She suddenly looked up and responded in a flood of Spanish, which I totally lost. “*Mas depacio, por favor, y menos palabras*” (much slower and fewer words) I replied, while looking her straight in the eye. She said, “*Senor, como no*”, (why not) and I took her hand, and beckoned her to rise. Her companion continued to slumber away. This was just as well, as that action of mine in Latin America could have led to a knife fight, and my knife fighting skills were not too polished.

My evening companions looked up in mild amusement as if to see what this foolish Americano was about to do. They were amused on several fronts. Normally, I never discuss the fact that I studied tango for four years with the best in South Florida, or that I could just as well have danced the other two styles – American and International, as that discussion always led to the wrong assumptions.

To the non-trained, dancing is more about conquest than cooperation. They do not understand that it is enough to dance with a woman whom you have never before met and leave it at that. So, therefore, my companions were seriously interested in how I was to negotiate this relationship without getting into trouble with the lady's boy friend. The dictum for the trained dancer is that the interest is in the art form and not the dance partner. The untrained assume that the interest is only in the woman and what that may lead to, whereas the trained dancer understands that the dance itself is sufficient, and going further always leads to problems. That is why, with some exception, amateur partnerships only work if the attention is kept to the dancing. A departure from this understanding destroys the partnership.

“*Pero señor, yo no sé el tango*” (I do not know the tango), the lady said to me as we sought out an open space. “*Senorita*”, I said in Spanish, “it is enough for you to feel the music, to keep your knees soft, your top firm from the waist up and stick to me like a bug”. She then pressed close to me and nodded agreeably.

The music, now building in the *Adios Nonino* tango now changed from the simple opening theme to the dominant introduction – a pulsing single beat once per measure. This allowed me to lead her into a few simple opening moves, as I knew it would, without getting into the intricacies of the tango technique.

She moved with surprising ease, keeping her knees and ankles together which said to me that, even though she did not know the tango well, she knew the style and how it was presented. Here I saw that raw talent beats out a lot of training.

The tango music now moved from the pulsing introduction to the longing and wistful first part, where the melody develops its full expression. Originally written by Astor Piazzolla, this tango expressed his sadness at the death of his father (hence the name *Adios Nonino*). To the two of us, however, it was just very expressive music, and we moved to the feeling, rather than the sound. She lost her reticence, and threw herself into the dance. I found it easy to lead her in any number of advanced moves.

Now the tango changed to the singing adagio part, where the sadness and separation says the most. At this point, I led her in a few moves that belonged more to bolero and theater arts than pure tango – using dips, drops and lines. Light and shade, firm and soft – all part of the dance which communicates with movement rather than with words – we swirled around the hall center as the patrons moved chairs away from all around us. The 220 pound boyfriend, meantime, slept peacefully in the corner, which helped my state of mind and my confidence to no small level.

Now we rotated very fast to the left, as I wound her over and across my left leg outstretched, so that her legs wrapped completely around me. She arched her back, squealed with delight and let her long blank hair reach to the floor.

My doctor companions, in the meantime, were all in a state of pure astonishment, as their lower jaws unhinged from the rest of their face. I could flick cigarette ashes on their molars, I thought. Well, I am just another gringo.

The lady, now, oblivious to the doctors, the boyfriend and the audience suddenly seemed a little more passionate than the dance required. This was clearly a time to end the performance, as I reminded myself of my own dictum.

I quickly rolled her out and then into a tight spin as the tango music wound down and led her to her table. She smiled sweetly and sat down carefully next to the monster.

Whistling softly as I made my way back to my companions' table, my host said, "When did you learn that?" I shrugged but said nothing. The other doctors, however, being more circumspect, motioned my to gather my coat and leave *este muy minuto* (this very minute). I rose and followed them out the door where they hailed a taxi. They piled into the taxi, but then I felt a pull on my arm.

Looking back. I was appalled to see it was the Senorita I danced with. She pleaded in a passionate outpouring of Spanish that sounded like so much babble.

"What is she saying", I cried out to my companions, now laughing from the back of the taxi.

"You idiot, she wants you to take her with you," and they pointed back to the tango bar hall. Now I saw through the open door the lady's large boy friend shake awake as his friends spoke to him and pointed in our direction.

"*Senorita, su amigo*", I said, gesturing excitedly to the tango hall. She looked back, and in that instant I wrenched my arm from her grasp, jumped into the taxi and we sped off into the night.

© Richard F. Parker 2003