



## UNDERSTANDING TANGO

Imagine a young man at the end of the nineteenth century, fourteen, fifteen or sixteen years old, living in a village with his large extended family in one of the poorest parts of Spain or Italy. He hears that the Argentinian government is running a campaign to bring people just like him to their country. They will find him a place to stay, feed him for the first week he is there, and help him find work. He has already heard that Argentina is one of the richest countries in the world – far richer than his own country – so he decides he will go there, make his fortune, and then come home and build a grand new house for his mother.

The construction of the railways in the middle of the nineteenth century opened up Argentina's huge agricultural and mineral resources, but there was one natural resource that Argentina had a terrible shortage of – people. Even in the late twentieth century the population was less than 40 million in a country over eleven times the size of the United Kingdom. In the nineteenth century this remote corner of the old Spanish Empire was practically deserted.

The government, aware of the need for workers to exploit the natural riches of their country, made a conscious decision to attract immigrants, specifically from Europe. Young Europeans were offered subsidies, free accommodation and free food on arrival, and promised land or work.

The land rarely materialised, and the work was often terribly hard and lonely, in some of the remotest parts of this empty country. But, enchanted by the promises, the immigrants poured in – hundreds of thousands of them every year – and in Buenos Aires they quickly came to outnumber the existing population. Unlike, say, the United States, where it was not unusual for whole families or communities to arrive, maybe fleeing religious or political persecution at home, but certainly planning to stay and start a new life in a new land, in Argentina the immigrants were overwhelmingly single young men who were looking for work, many of whom thought they would get rich and then go home.



Men in Buenos Aires in 1906

So our young man leaves, for the first time in his life, his mother, his sisters, cousins and aunts, and makes the long boat trip to Argentina. He arrives in the great port of Buenos Aires, only a few years earlier practically a village itself, now a bizarre mixture of sophisticated European capital city and Wild West frontier town. There are more people in each street than he has ever seen before in his whole life, and practically all of them are men.

Probably he never did make his fortune, never did build that grand house for his beloved Mama. In fact, he probably never saw his mother again. The hopes and ambitions he had when he began his long journey crumbled. Some made fortunes, of course, and the rich got very, very rich indeed. But the majority remained poor, or got by, or built a little business and did all right for themselves, but never quite got to be rich.



Avenida de Mayo, Buenos Aires, in 1894

Our young man finds himself far from everyone who has ever loved him and everyone he has ever loved. Perhaps in another place he would have consoled himself by getting married, starting a new family, having children to love. But the city he is in is a city of men. Maybe he will be one of the lucky few to find a woman to love him, but the odds are against him. Perhaps, if he makes a little money, he may be able to bring over a mail-order bride. The chances are, though, that he will find himself completely in the company of men.

Some men, of course, are happy in the company of men and feel no need for feminine companionship. For the majority, though, something vital was being denied them. Buenos Aires, especially in the poorer suburbs, was a dangerous place where men carried knives the size of short-swords in their belts. A macho, independent front was a necessity. Anything else was a sign of weakness. Many of the men must have found the loneliness and isolation almost intolerable.

The only place where they could express their softness – the sweet, tender part of their nature – was either in the arms of a prostitute, or dancing the Tango.

The Tango had begun in the middle of the nineteenth century, mixing elements of music and dance brought to Argentina by the many small immigrant communities. It was one of the first dances to use the shocking new hold, popularised by the Viennese Waltz, in which a man and a woman stood in front of each other and put their arms around each other. A true street dance, it was not created by dancers and taught to people, as so many European dances have been. It was thrown together by people who might not have shared a common verbal language, but who wanted to move together to the pretty new music being made around them, and who were searching for a moment of joy in their often hard lives.

To dance with the women in Buenos Aires the immigrants had to learn their dance – and learn to do it in a way that pleased the women, or

the women would not dance with them. The unique pressures of this extraordinary city, in this extraordinary moment of its history, formed the evolving Tango, and made it into something more than just a dance. The Tango became an expression of a fundamental human need:

The Hunger of the Soul for Contact with Another Soul

### Traditional Methods of Learning the Tango

The Tango was a cornerstone of Argentinian culture. Certainly by the 1940s, and probably long before, there was only one – surprisingly formal – way for a man to learn the dance.

A young man starting to become aware of the charms of young women would also be aware that the only socially acceptable way to meet them was dancing the Tango. And even as late as the 1940s and early 1950s, the peculiar history of Buenos Aires, as well as its social conventions, meant that in the formal dance halls, known as milongas, there were always far more men than women. If a young man went to a milonga with a step or two and a lot of hope, none of the women would dance with him, because the room was full of men who were already skilled dancers. To get a woman into his arms at all, he had to be able to dance, and to dance with the most attractive women and the best dancers, he had to be very good indeed.

To learn how to dance, the young man would go to a men-only practice dance, known as a *práctica*. He would watch for a while, and then one of the older men would decide to start to teach him how to follow – that is, to dance what is traditionally seen as the woman's role. The novice would be taught the grammar of Tango – the technique that is fundamental to everything – how to stand, how to walk, and how the bodies relate to