



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

one another. These are the things that define the dance and make the communication and comprehension between the two dancers possible. He would also begin to pick up a sense of the vocabulary of Tango – the common moves that emerge as a result of the technique, which are the shapes that dress the communication and give it outward form.



Posed photograph of men dancing in 1903

When the young man was considered good enough as a follower, a process that usually took several months of going to the *práctica* four or five times a week, the older men would invite him to try to lead another young man who was also following well. He would try to lead some of the steps the more experienced men were leading. Sometimes the younger men would be shown steps by the older men. Sometimes they would watch, and then work out the steps together.

Because both the leader and follower were experienced in the grammar of the dance, and had experienced the vocabulary from the follower's side, they could quickly and accurately work out together the best way of combining steps, and of leading them so they could be followed by someone who had never followed that combination of steps before.

One day one of the older men would tell the young man to put on his best suit, because he was going with them to a *milonga*. Naturally, no woman would dance with him in the *milonga* unless she had seen him dance and knew that he could do it. So his more experienced companions would ask a woman who was a friend, as a special favour to them, to dance with him, so the others could see.

If his first *milonga* didn't go well, it would be back to the *práctica* for a few more months before he dared to try again. Even when he was a success in the *milongas*, with lots of women wanting to dance with him, he would continue to go to his *práctica*, to learn more, to create his own steps, and generally to practise dancing both parts. Sometimes in the *prácticas* two men would give a demonstration dancing together, and the standard was expected to be very high. The standard of general dancing in the *prácticas*, too, could be outstanding. In the best *prácticas* it would be higher than in the *milongas*.

The whole process, from first going to a *práctica* to first dancing with a woman, generally took a man three years, with the first nine months spent only following.

I asked many men, from many different parts of Buenos Aires, why they decided to start the long process of learning how to dance the Tango. Almost without exception they would get a faraway look in their eyes, a smile would dart across their face, and they would say, 'There was this girl, you see . . .'

One man, born in the early 1930s, told me that as a child he hated the Tango because his uncles made him sit and wind up their gramophone when they practised at home, while all he wanted to do was go out and play. But a few years later, when the girl he was dreaming of told him he should learn to dance the Tango, he found the best dancer in his part of town and asked him to recommend a *práctica*. He knew there was no alternative. If he didn't learn how to dance, his chances of ever getting a girlfriend were practically nonexistent. What happened to the girl he never told me, but the love he found for the Tango stayed with him all his life.

The mechanisms for learning the dance for a woman were less structured. Generally women learned in the home from their fathers or brothers, or from their mothers or sisters. Women's experience of leading was one of the better-kept secrets of the Tango. However, while there was no public forum for women to dance together, they did practise together in private. The first time a woman who had danced in the Golden Age told me she had learned by dancing with her mother, she was very amused by the look of surprise on my face. I had been under the impression that in the Golden Age women did not lead, but the fact was that her mother had been a skilled leader. To her this was quite normal.

The process of learning for the novice was the same as for a man learning to follow. She would be trained in the technique of the dance – how to walk and stand, and how the two bodies related to each other – both by doing exercises and by dancing with someone who was already skilled in the dance. As social conventions meant that a woman would follow rather than lead in public, her training did not

need to go any further, but those who were interested would go on to lead – though always in private.

Because there were no formal 'classes' of the kind we have now come to expect in the modern Tango scene, people sometimes make the mistake of thinking that the men who danced in Buenos Aires were self-taught, but that is to misunderstand completely the process of the *práctica*. Men who danced in the Golden Age always spoke with reverence and warmth about the men from whom they learned. In a society where formal education stopped at the age of eleven, apprenticeship was the normal way of acquiring any skill, and young men expected to learn by studying a master, rather than by being taught.

In the absence of classes, there was no need for the master to articulate or to rationalise the way that he danced in order to instruct the person who was learning, as someone teaching a class must, and no need for the beginner to understand intellectually what he was learning to do with his body. (This meant that when Tango classes first appeared in the 1980s, few of the people who knew most about Tango could explain what they were doing when they danced in a way that new dancers could comprehend, as they had never had it explained verbally to them when they themselves were beginners.) Instead, a newcomer to the *práctica* learned the way a child learns a language, first absorbing the language from the fluent speakers around it, then after about nine months starting to speak the occasional word, gradually gaining confidence and skill, until after about three years the child can have a reasonable conversation. Beginners would be a minority in the *práctica*, and they would be surrounded by people who danced well, so their mistakes would not be compounded, as they often are in a setting where beginners outnumber experts. They had many models of excellence to aspire to, and personal experience of what did and did not feel good to the follower. They were not working out how to do the dance for themselves. They were absorbing the accumulated wisdom of the many generations who had walked the path before them.



Strikers dancing on a beach in 1912

There was a hierarchy in the *práctica*. The younger men looked up to the best and most experienced dancers in their own *práctica*, and were guided by them. If an older dancer thought something that a younger one was doing was inelegant or not in good taste, then the younger dancer would be told never to do it again – and the younger man would comply (or would at least be careful not to repeat it in front of the men he looked up to in his *práctica*). That relationship continued over the years, even if the young man was becoming well known in the milongas as a good dancer – or even if he went on to become a professional dancer performing in shows in theatres (or, towards the end of the Golden Age, on television).

The *práctica* was not just a place where new dancers went to learn the dance. It was an important part of the lives of all male Tango dancers. Men continued to go to the *práctica* for a couple of hours each night before they went to a milonga, and would often go on to the milonga together as a group.

Even in the 1990s, I was lucky enough to be invited to join a small group of men who had gone to the same *práctica* in the 1940s and 1950s, and who still got together to practise, and to get comments on how to improve their dancing from people they respected. The first time they invited me to join them it was because one of them had seen me leading. Although there was some resistance to women leading in milongas in Buenos Aires (I was always careful only to lead in a place where it would be acceptable), I was surprised by how often a man who learned in the Golden Age would react to seeing me lead by wanting to help me become a better leader, just as they had been helped by the older leaders in their *prácticas* when they themselves were young.

Within the *práctica*, experienced men often had regular dance partners. There would sometimes be demonstrations in the *práctica*, and the standard was expected to be higher than it was for the professional couples (with a man leading and a woman following) who danced in theatres. The men worked extremely hard to become the best dancers they could be, and used the *prácticas* to stretch themselves, as a safe place to make their mistakes. When a man had the opportunity to dance socially with a woman he made her comfort and pleasure his first priority, so he would never put himself in a position where he might make a mistake, and make her uncomfortable.

Men and women did not go to classes together and learn a repertoire of steps. No man could assume that when he danced with a woman she would know what movement she 'should' do next. He had to be able to lead every part of every movement. Indeed, the men took great delight in creating choreographic patterns that the follower could not have danced before, as a way of proving to anyone who might be watching how well they led.

There was only one definition of what it meant to be a good male Tango dancer that mattered – the best dancer was the one that gave the woman the best experience.

THE MAN'S ROLE AND THE WOMAN'S ROLE

In the milonga men danced one role and women danced the other. The English-speaking Tango community generally uses the terms 'leader' and 'follower' to describe those roles, because they are not gender specific. These terms do not come to us from Tango, but from the Ballroom community, and they can be taken to imply a hierarchical relationship, with the 'leader' having higher status than the 'follower'. The vocabulary used by the dancers of the Golden Age implied no such value judgement.

Often when a man who had learned to dance in the prácticas asked me to lead him, he would say that he would dance the woman's role, and I would dance the man's. He would see no contradiction in that. The two roles were easily labelled the man's role and the woman's role, because that was how they were divided in the milongas of the Golden Age, but the expectation in the práctica was that all the men danced both roles (and that if they chose to, in the home, when they danced together, women also danced both roles). It would not occur to him to think that he could not dance the woman's role

The shortage of women in Buenos Aires ensured that that definition was the only important one. It did not matter how good a man looked when he danced, or how many steps he knew. If a man made a woman uncomfortable in any way, she, quite rightly, would not dance with him again, and nor would any other woman who had seen what he had done. In the práctica each man experienced what it was like to dance with someone who led well, and what it felt like when something went wrong. If a man wanted the best women to dance with him, he knew from personal experience that respect for the follower had to be the foundation of everything he did as a leader.

To a man who danced in the Golden Age, if the follower was not

because he was a man. All men danced it. To him that would be obvious.

In describing what the leader does, dancers of the Golden Age often used the verb *llevar*, a verb which has a number of possible translations, including to carry, to take, or to wear – a very different idea from the one implied by the verb 'to lead'. (It does not mean, though, that the leader was literally carrying the weight of the follower's body through the dance.)

In describing what the follower does, a number of different verbs were used. One was to allow (*dejar*) oneself to be carried (*llevado*). Another was *acompañar* – to accompany.

But *acompañar* could also be used to describe what the leader was doing, especially when discussing turning steps. This represents a fundamental truth about the relationship between the leader and follower as understood by the dancers of the Golden Age. To lead was in fact to follow the follower. This paradox lies at the heart of the choreographic freedom enjoyed by Tango dancers in the Golden Age. It is by following the follower that the leader gets the power to carry the follower wherever the leader wishes.

treated with respect and dignity, then whatever the steps might be and whatever the music might be, the dance was not Tango.

That is not to say that the men got no pleasure from leading – far from it! The relationship between the leader and follower that gives the maximum pleasure to the follower, once it has been understood, also gives maximum pleasure to the leader.

This is the essence of what makes Tango unique. Because of its environment, it evolved as a dance whose aim was the giving of pleasure to the other person, with the understanding that giving pleasure to the other person was the wisest road to pleasure for oneself.

MACHISMO AND THE TANGO

Tango is often perceived as a macho dance. The man leads, and the woman follows. The man gives the orders and the woman does as she is told. Natural as this assumption may seem, it is to misunderstand the nature of the dance as it was done in Buenos Aires in the Golden Age. In order to learn 'the man's role', a man was expected to put himself into 'the woman's role' until he completely understood it – until he had felt from personal experience exactly what the woman wanted and needed for her comfort and pleasure. Only once he had completely understood what the woman went through in dancing the Tango was he allowed to start learning 'the man's role'. This is, in fact, the antithesis of machismo.

A dear friend of mine who learned to dance in the 1940s once said to me, 'I don't want a woman to say, "You are a wonderful dancer," I want her to say, "How sweet it is to dance with you."' (*Que dulce que es bailar con tigo.*)

Even the way in which a man and a woman came together to dance in the milongas was far less macho than it seemed. The man always walked over to the woman and led her onto the dance floor, and at the end of the dance he returned her to her place. But the agreement to dance was made by the *cabeceo* – by making eye contact, and then a small gesture of the head. This was not something the man could initiate if the woman was not willing. And the woman could catch the man's eye as easily as he

Men Dancing with Women

A friend of mine who had learned to dance in the early 1950s described to me his first experience of dancing with a woman. He had been going to a *práctica* regularly for three years, and took his dancing extremely seriously. One day he found himself at a wedding. An older man from his *práctica* was there with his girlfriend, and

could catch hers. A man would not approach a woman who had not made eye contact with him. She had as much power in the choice of partners as he did.

And the man returned the woman to her place at the end of the dance not because he was in charge, but because if the follower had been completely involved in the dance, she might be disorientated, and might appreciate the courtesy of being guided back to her seat.

While it cannot be denied that Argentina in the first half of the twentieth century was a very macho place in most respects, machismo was not inherent in the nature of Tango.

Curiously, while our own society today is much more equal in general, in the Tango the modern idea that a man will only learn to lead (without learning to follow), and a woman will only learn to follow, has brought a new kind of machismo to the dance floor that did not exist in the Golden Age. In a milonga a man walks up to a woman and asks her to dance, putting social pressure on her to dance with him whether she wants to or not, and disempowering her, forcing her either to become passive and wait to be asked, or aggressive in pursuing the partner of her choice. And the dance itself changes when a leader without the skill of following is not able to follow the follower in the way the leaders of the Golden Age did – which in turn may force the follower to follow in a different way. Without the understanding of the follower's role that leaders once had, it becomes possible for leaders to dance with a machismo that the leaders of the Golden Age would have found unacceptable.

suggested to my friend that he and the woman have a dance. 'I took the woman in my arms,' my friend said, 'and I forgot everything.'

For the majority of men in the Golden Age the main reason to go to a milonga was to dance with women. Another reason was to dance to live music – all the great Tango bands of the period played live for dancers – but for most men the presence of women was the main attraction.



Dancing in the street in Buenos Aires

What a Man Wanted from a Woman in the Milonga

In Ballet the ideal woman is an ethereal creature, almost lighter than air. In some couple dances the ideal follower is one who is so light that the leader almost does not know that the follower is there.

In the Golden Age of Tango a man went to a milonga because he wanted to hold a flesh-and-blood woman in his arms. He wanted to meet and connect with an individual. He did not want a follower who was so light that he did not know she was there. That is not to say that he wanted a follower to be heavy or to be hard to move. What he wanted to feel was presence.

It is easy to assume that the more important person in a couple is the leader. But the social environment in Buenos Aires during the creation of Tango meant that the more important person was the follower. Women were precious and rare creatures, heavily outnumbered by the men in any milonga. Women who were good dancers were even rarer.

So a woman who could dance well had a high status in the milonga, and her awareness of her status was part of what made her a good dancer, as it gave her the confidence to wait.

It is common for inexperienced or insecure followers to assume they will dance better by trying to 'do the right thing', that is, by trying to guess what step the leader wants the follower to do, and then doing it without putting the leader to the inconvenience of leading it. The follower may be afraid of not feeling or understanding the lead, or may simply be trying to be helpful. If the leader's aim is to create a beautiful choreography that looks wonderful to anyone watching the couple from the outside, or if the leader's main interest is in taking pleasure in his or her own dancing, then a follower who 'does the right thing' all the time may be the ideal – and dancing pre-choreographed routines may be even more effective.

But if the leader's aim is to connect with the real individual standing in front of him or her, then dancing with a follower who constantly tries to 'do the right thing' – even if that follower does indeed do the step the leader wanted most of the time – feels as frustrating as trying to catch hold of smoke.

What a man in the Golden Age of Tango was searching for was a woman who waited – a woman whose presence he could feel, and who did not move unless he moved her.

TANGO AND THE MARTIAL ARTS

I have often found in my own teaching that my favourite students have been the ones that have come to Tango from the martial arts. Indeed, the martial arts and Tango have a great deal in common.

That is not to suggest there is any violence or aggression involved in Tango (though some people suggest that the frequent knife fights that were part of everyday life for men in Buenos Aires at the time of the birth of Tango were an influence on the technique of the developing dance). In Tango it is the dancer's responsibility to give as pleasant an experience to their partner as possible, and to avoid causing them pain at all costs! Martial artists need to defend themselves from the other person, whereas good Tango dancers make themselves open and vulnerable to their partner.

Waiting takes confidence, and trust in the leader's ability to lead. The follower was not being passive, but was allowing the leader to take care of her or him, and waiting to be given the pleasure of the dance.

Dealing with Reality

While dancing, the leader is steering the journey of the couple, and with each movement will have an expectation that a certain result will be produced in the position of the follower's feet.

Sometimes that just does not happen.

This is reality. To the men who learned to dance in the Golden Age, it was the leader's responsibility to deal with it, whatever the reason for the unexpected outcome – whether it was the leader's fault, the follower's fault, or just one of those things.

It was not the follower's responsibility to put right anything that had gone wrong, even if it had been the follower's fault. Indeed, the leaders of the Golden Age never allowed the follower to feel that she

However, in one-to-one combat a person must be completely focused on where the other person is at all times, and must constantly adapt his or her own movement to that reality. Allowing the focus to slip from the other person for an instant could result in defeat, and possibly a great deal of pain. The martial arts share with Tango the need to be completely aware of where another person is at all times.

Tango and the martial arts are also both based on natural movement, rather than the aesthetically pleasing modifications of natural movement that are at the heart of performance dance.

So while people with experience of the martial arts, but no dance training, may at first struggle with moving to the music, or with learning figures, they nevertheless come to Tango with some important skills already in place, and tend to progress quickly.

or he had made a mistake. They instantly repaired the relationship between the two bodies and reinvented the plan, with every step if necessary. As one older dancer once said to me, 'If the woman goes wrong, I go wrong with her', by which he meant, if the follower goes somewhere that was not where I intended, I follow the follower to where she or he actually is. They knew that this was the only way to regain control. They could only change reality by first accepting it.

Indeed, some men took particular pleasure in finding solutions to the choreographic challenge posed by occasionally finding the couple in an unexpected position.

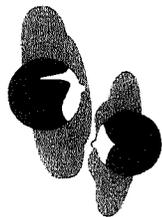
A follower is not a robot. The men in the milongas knew they were dancing with a flesh-and-blood woman, and they were very glad of it, even if she might make the occasional mistake. Not all followers danced equally well. A beginner with poor technique, or who tried to 'do the right thing' and guess what step was coming next rather than waiting, would inevitably end up in the wrong place from time to time. But the reality was that the leader was dancing with *this* follower, poor technique or excellent technique, constant guesswork or meditative stillness.

The follower is where the follower is. To the leaders of the Golden Age, that was their only reality. If the follower was not where the plan in the leader's head would have taken her or him, then it was not the follower who was wrong, but the plan in the leader's head, which had become useless and should be immediately discarded. To carry on with the plan regardless of where the follower actually was ('I led it correctly, so I'm not wrong!') would have seemed to them to be the height of stupidity. The experience of the dance for both leader and follower would have been ruined.

The leader wanted a follower who waited. The follower could only wait if she or he could trust the leader at all times, throughout the dance. The leader could only be trusted if he or she was prepared to deal with reality.

The Physical and Emotional Relationship Between the Leader and the Follower

In the competitive Ballroom dances, the leader and follower stand slightly to one side of each other, with their bodies making a V shape. The leader's upper right arm becomes an extension of the leader's shoulders, and the follower is placed in the space made by the leader's bent right arm.



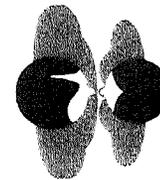
Ballroom position

This position has many practical advantages. From the point of view of someone who is a complete beginner trying to dance with another complete beginner in a class, it places the leader's and follower's feet

on different parallel lines, so it reduces the danger of treading on each other's toes – a major worry for beginners in any dance. In fact beginners tend to adopt this position naturally for that reason. Once they have become used to it, it can be hard to dance in any other way, so dances that are passed on through beginners' classes tend over time to adapt to suit this position.

It is not, though, the most natural and intimate way for two people who care about each other to embrace.

In a natural, loving hug, two people generally stand directly in front of each other, with their shoulders parallel, and the centres of their bodies aligned. They are standing heart to heart.



Tango position

Two people in this position are saying to each other with their body language that they are giving each other their complete and undivided attention. They are each placing the other member of the couple at the centre of their universe, making that person the most important thing in their world. The direction in which the heart is pointed reveals what matters to us much more clearly than the direction in which we are looking.

Tango evolved in a society where loneliness and isolation were the norm, where many people were forced to live on their own, and where attention and true intimacy were rare and precious. Naturally, then, Tango dancers chose the most intimate, personal, and perhaps even emotionally challenging position possible in which to dance. Tango dancers of the Golden Age danced with the shoulders parallel, and the centres of the bodies aligned.

They danced heart to heart.

THE HEART

In discussing the relationship between the leader and the follower I am going to refer frequently to the two hearts. This is not quite anatomically correct. The physical heart is placed slightly to the left of the centre of the body. I am speaking metaphorically, about the emotional centre – a place at the level of the heart, but precisely at the centre of the body. Some people might refer to it as the heart chakra or heart centre – the part of the body that resonates with loving energy.

Even though this is not exactly where the physical heart is placed, the word conveys the meaning, so I shall use it when I mean the centre of the upper body.

Movement Puts the Unity of the Two Hearts to the Test

In life it is change that helps us discover who our true friends are. In Tango it is movement that proves whether we are truly together, or merely in front of each other. Only if my partner's heart continues to be pointed directly at mine, whatever happens, whatever the dance may bring to us, do I know that my partner is committed to me. If my partner's heart slips away from me, then I know my partner's attention has wandered. I am not the most important thing in my partner's world at that moment.

To the dancers of the Golden Age, nothing mattered more than the person in their arms. Their focus never wavered for an instant. Whether they were great dancers or undistinguished ones, whichever style of Tango they danced, this part of the experience of dancing with them was always the same.

The room moved around us. The floor beneath us shifted. Our legs, whose function was to help our hearts stay together and motionless, folded and stepped, allowing our two hearts to remain completely still, completely united, as the world changed around us. Unity and stillness

in the face of motion proved that for three minutes we were not two dancers, but one couple.

To the dancers of the Golden Age, this was the purpose of Tango.

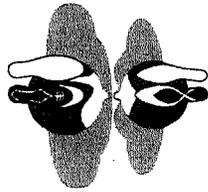
How the Dancers of the Golden Age Avoided Treading on Each Other's Toes

While dancing in this position gives the couple the greatest emotional connection, it poses a serious practical problem. How do you move without treading on your partner's toes? How does the leader take a step forwards, knowing that the follower is directly in front? Obviously, treading on a woman's toes in a milonga would have been unacceptable. It was necessary for the men to find a way of moving that put the follower at no risk of pain, or even discomfort.

When I asked the men who learned to dance in the prácticas how to walk forwards in the Tango, they always said that one should walk naturally, in the same way that one walks down the street. And it is true that those men did walk down the street in the same way that they walked on the dance floor. It is also true that they spent countless hours working on how to walk forwards in the dance. What seemed a natural way of walking to them is not natural to most other people (including most modern citizens of Buenos Aires) – or at least not without a fair amount of practice.

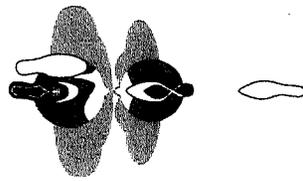
For those men, a step forwards did not begin with a movement of the foot, or a movement of the knee, as it tends to for most people. It began with a movement of the heart. The free foot, passively hanging from the body, moved with the heart, taking the body's weight only when necessary to prevent the body from falling. Many years ago when I was studying mime, I was taught a walk called 'The Walk of the Matador' that was very similar. This confident, elegant way of moving would be impossible with the shoulders slumped forwards, or with any stiffness or tension in the legs.

A step back for the follower and forwards for the leader



1) Initiation

The movement begins, as do all movements in Tango, in the leader's heart. The leader moves his or her body directly towards the follower's heart.



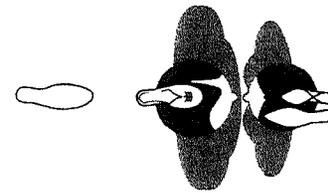
2) Extension

The follower's body moves with the leader's body (as it does at all times). Before the movement is large enough for the follower to be consciously aware of it, the follower's free foot extends back, with the toes flat on the floor, but with no weight on them.

By moving forwards with the heart first, before moving the leg, the leader could lead the follower to move back so that the follower's toes were no longer there when the leader's foot arrived, and there was no danger of their being trodden on. The leader moved directly towards and then through the follower's heart, carrying the follower's heart back. The follower in turn waited to be carried. The follower did not move the heart, but allowed the leader to carry it back. That way the two hearts stayed together and motionless, even as the step took place, and the emotional connection within the couple remained constant.

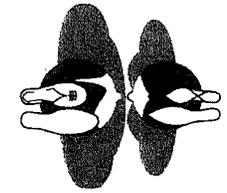
Taking a Single Step

In Buenos Aires in the Golden Age a beginner never had to try to dance with another beginner. A person who was new to the Tango, whether that person was a woman or a man, only danced with experienced



3) Transfer

As the leader's body continues to move straight towards the follower's body, the leader carries the follower's body back, transferring the follower's weight from the front foot to the back foot. The follower's front leg travels with the follower's body, so by the time the follower's body is over the back foot, the follower's front foot is by its side. The leader's front foot arrives directly under the leader's body, which is directly in front of the follower's body, at the same moment, taking the leader's weight.



4) Conclusion

The leader allows the back leg to fall into place next to the leg bearing the leader's weight.

dancers. Only once they were themselves experienced would they ever find themselves dancing with a beginner, and almost without exception that would be an experienced leader dancing with an inexperienced follower. Before a person started to lead, they would already understand the way that Tango worked, and, most importantly, they would already have learned how to walk.

When I first started to try to walk backwards the way skilled Tango dancers did, I found it immensely frustrating. I came to Tango with a dance background, and I'd always found that I could go into any dance class and pick up the steps with no real trouble – once you've learned the skill of picking up steps, learning new steps is pretty straightforward, so I could take in fairly complicated routines without too much difficulty.

But I couldn't walk backwards correctly, and my years of Ballet and Ballroom as a child didn't help – except, I suppose, that they helped me to be aware of where my body was and realise it wasn't doing what I wanted it to do. And if I couldn't walk backwards correctly then I wasn't really able to allow myself to be led. A highly skilled Tango leader could give me the illusion that I was following perfectly – that is an important part of the leader's skill in Tango! – but the reality was that until I learned to walk backwards correctly I would never give that leader a dance that allowed them to experience the higher levels of Tango.

Fortunately, while walking backwards correctly is not easy, learning the skill is only a matter of patience and application. It does not take special talents. Anyone who can walk can learn to do it, provided they understand what they are trying to achieve, and put in some regular practice. And once walking backwards correctly has been mastered, learning to walk forwards correctly becomes relatively straightforward.

The men who learned to dance in the prácticas rarely analysed exactly how they did what they did, beyond understanding the exercises they needed to master in order to dance well. Though few would have been consciously aware of it, a step back for the follower and forwards for the leader was made up of several different parts (See box on P.34).

The thing that frustrated me when I first tried to walk backwards in this way was that I could not extend my foot back without moving my body back, and putting weight on my back foot. But if I moved my own body back at the same time as I moved my foot, I would be pulling my heart away from my partner, giving a skilled leader the sensation that I was running away from him or her, and tearing apart the connection between our two hearts (even though I myself might not be aware that anything was wrong). Learning to allow my leader to move my heart, and not to move it myself, was a real challenge to me – as it is to many people who come to Tango with some dance training, since we are used to being in complete control of our own movements. But I practised my exercises every day, and in only a few weeks the difference was great enough for all the leaders I danced with to comment on it.

This way of walking takes time and effort to learn. Two complete beginners standing together in their first class have almost no chance of being able to do it correctly. However, this way of walking allows the couple to keep the two hearts united at all times while dancing, giving the most connected and emotionally satisfying dance possible.

But it does more than that. Where most social dances rely on both dancers knowing some routines, even if those routines may sometimes be made up of only two or three steps, Tango allows much greater choreographic freedom. The leader is able to lead not just each individual step that the follower takes, but each part of each step, which means that the couple can, if the leader chooses, create extraordinarily complex patterns on the dance floor. The same technique that gives the most emotionally satisfying dance also gives the most choreographically liberated dance.

This is the secret of the blend of sex and chess that makes Tango so uniquely intoxicating.

The Attitude of the Men to their Own Feet

I was once watching a man who had learned to dance in a práctica showing a group of young dancers a figure – a series of movements. He took one of the women and led her through it. One of the men asked him to demonstrate the figure again, so he took the woman and led her through it once more. The young man protested that the second time it had been a different figure. The older man disagreed. It had been the same figure. The young man would not be convinced. It had been a different figure, he insisted – the older man had done something completely different with his feet. 'Oh yes,' the older man replied. 'I was on the other foot. But it was the same figure.'

On another occasion a young man I knew asked an older dancer to show him some turning steps. The older dancer took his partner and led

her through a beautiful turning combination. 'That was wonderful,' my friend said. 'What did you do?'

'We went that way,' the older man replied, indicating the direction of the turn of the hearts with his hand.

'But what did you do?'

'We went that way,' the older man said again, starting to get puzzled.

'But what did you do with your feet?' my friend asked.

'With my feet? Oh, um, well, I suppose I did something like this . . .'

These stories illustrate a fundamental truth about what the men who learned in the *prácticas* thought of as important in the Tango. What mattered was the follower's movement. No matter how complicated the things they chose to do with their own feet, the purpose of the leader's movement was to facilitate the follower's movement. Which foot the leader happened to be on was insignificant. It was the movement the follower was making that mattered.

Tango took place not on the level of the floor, but on the level of the hearts. The movement of the feet was a symptom of the movement of the hearts, caused by it, not causing it. It was the follower's heart that danced. The leader's job was to make that happen.

The leader's heart was the most important part of the leader's body because it was used to move the follower's heart. The follower's feet mattered, because the leader would never try to make the follower do something that was physically impossible – the follower cannot move one leg through the other as they are both solid, nor can the follower move the foot the follower is standing on. The leader needed to know where the follower's feet were in order to know what movements the follower's body could make. This was the leader's responsibility, not the follower's. With a competent leader the follower would not need to pay any attention to the movement of her or his own feet.

The leader's feet served only one function in the dance – they were there to stop the leader's heart from falling on the floor. Anything more than that was pure decoration.

THE LEADER'S AND FOLLOWER'S FEET MAY DO

DIFFERENT THINGS

The *salida* of northern Buenos Aires is an example of a step where the leader took only two steps, while leading the follower to take four. It illustrates the way in which the two dancers can do quite different things with their feet.

The easiest way to visualise this step is to imagine how a first dance there might begin. During the Golden Age, in a *milonga* the single women would be seated at tables, while the single men often preferred to stand at the bar. A man standing at the bar would be scanning the room, looking for a woman he wanted to dance with, and trying to make eye contact with her. The women seated at tables would be scanning the room trying to make eye contact with a suitable man. Once they had established eye contact, and, with a gesture of the head, one had invited the other to dance, and the other, with a smile and a nod, had agreed, it would be the man who would walk up to the woman's table (whether he had asked her to dance or she had asked him), and only when he arrived in front of her would she stand up. They would then take the embrace of the dance.

At this moment, they were at the edge of the dance floor, and as he took her right hand in his left, the joined hands were pointing in the direction of the line of flow of dancers around the floor.

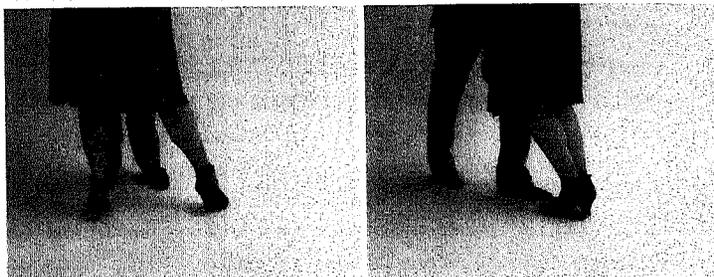
How should they take their first step? In a *milonga* in Buenos Aires in the Golden Age, a leader would never begin the dance by taking a step back, any more than a driver would suddenly reverse from traffic lights. The leader couldn't see what was going on behind him, and suddenly taking a step backwards into the dancing couples would be dangerous, as it could easily lead to a collision.

The leader would also not start the dance with a step forwards. Although he would be able to see what was happening in front of him, they were at the edge of the dance floor, so there would be nowhere for them to go.

A step to the side was considered the ideal way to start a dance, and as they were standing with the joined hands pointing in the direction of the line of dance, naturally the ideal step to take would be a side step in that direction, that is, along the line of the joined hands, which would be with the right for the follower.

This posed the problem of what step they should take next. Straight forwards for the leader was still out of the question, as they would be carried off the dance floor. A side step in the opposite direction would take them against the flow of movement around the dance floor, and back to where they started. A step back would still be a dangerous option because of oncoming traffic. So the solution was for the leader to turn the follower, leading the follower to step back with the left, more or less in the direction of the line of dance.

In the northern areas of Buenos Aires, this is the way in which the leader would lead these two steps for the follower:



The leader leads the follower's extension, then turns the follower's heart anticlockwise to lead the transfer of the follower's weight. This allows the leader to complete the follower's first step while his or her own weight is kept back.



The leader then leads the follower's second step by moving straight towards the follower's heart.

So the leader had succeeded in leading the follower to take two steps, while the leader had taken just one.

The leader would then lead the follower to take two more steps, again while taking only one step, to finish the pattern.



The leader leads the follower's extension.



While leading the transfer the leader turns the follower's heart anticlockwise again, carrying it, and the follower's left leg which hangs from it, across the follower's right leg, so that the follower's weight goes onto the left, with the legs crossed.

The couple is now moving in the direction of the flow around the dance floor.

Of course, once a leader had enough skill to have complete control of the follower's movement, the leader was free to do with his or her own feet whatever pleased the leader's taste and musicality. The leader could take two or more steps while the follower took one, or could lead the follower to take several steps while barely moving his or her own feet at all. Men in the prácticas competed to find

better and more interesting combinations that they could add to their repertoire. Being able to maintain the correct relationship with their follower at all times and yet also do complex things with their own feet showed that leaders were highly skilled. But concentrating on doing complex things with the feet and losing the relationship with the follower would have seemed to them absurd and self-defeating. To them it would have been completely to misunderstand the meaning of Tango.

The Skill of the Follower

The social reality of Buenos Aires during the Golden Age meant that women did not go to classes to learn the Tango. We tend to assume that learning a dance means learning a repertoire of steps. The follower did not do that, nor did becoming a better follower involve learning a larger repertoire, as it does in some other dances. Instead the follower trained her or his body to move correctly with the leader's body. Becoming a better follower involved being more accurate, more finely balanced and having greater stillness.

The leader led the follower's extension back or to the side by moving the follower's heart sufficiently to take the follower's body imperceptibly off its axis. A novice follower sometimes needs to be taken quite a long way out of balance before she or he takes a step. As the follower improves, the movement of the heart needed to lead the extension of the foot becomes smaller and smaller. In the práctica the men learned to lead and follow with precision, and the more precise the leader is, the easier it is for the follower's body to become trained to be finely balanced.

If the follower always waited for the leader to lead not just each step, but each part of each step, then at any time the leader could lead the follower to do anything.

The perfect follower needed to be able to stand perfectly, extend the free foot back or to the side perfectly, allow the leader to transfer the follower's weight perfectly, maintain the relationship between the two hearts perfectly, turn perfectly and wait perfectly. (Perfectly, of course, means in the perfect way for Tango. Other dances have different ways of moving and of relating to the partner, so someone with perfect technique in another dance will find they cannot do these things in the perfect Tango way without training, and vice versa.) If the follower could do all those things then the follower could follow anything any leader dancing any style of Tango led, from the simplest combination to the most complicated, including the spectacular kicks and flicks so loved by Tango performers.

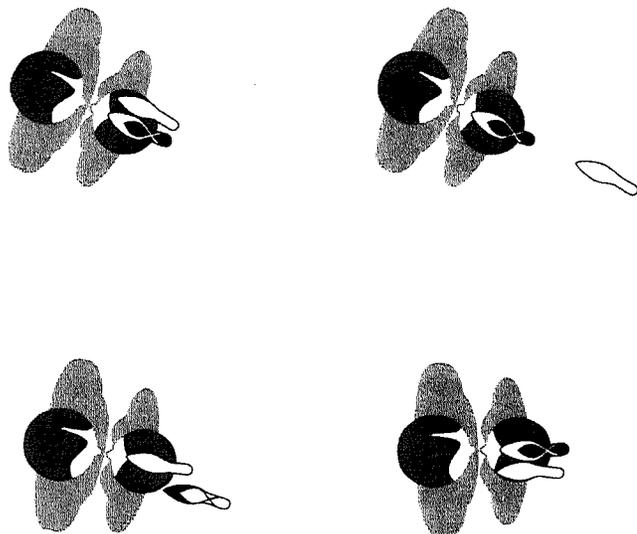
A leader was able to choose not to lead movements that the leader was not technically competent to perform, or that did not suit the leader's body. The follower did not have that luxury. A great follower had to be able to do whatever the leader chose to lead.

So while it is undoubtedly easier for a complete beginner to learn to follow a little than to learn to lead a little, and while a novice follower finds it easy to have a wonderful time following a highly skilled leader (because it is an important part of the leader's skill to give the follower that feeling) at the next level, following is harder than leading.

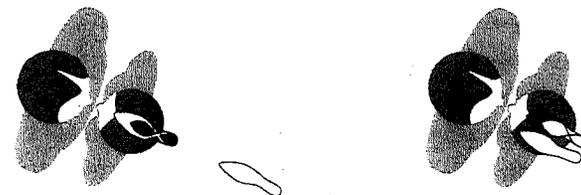
An accomplished follower rose beyond the technical skills of standing, walking and waiting. In order to allow her or his body to be taken in whichever direction the leader chose, the follower needed to abandon the left-brain activity that normally keeps us safe through our daily lives, and shut down the mechanisms of self-preservation that prevent us from getting run over as we cross the street. The follower had to stop taking any responsibility for her or his own safety, so as to be able to stop taking any responsibility for her or his movement through the room – the follower needed to give up that responsibility to the leader. In this way the follower allowed the leader to lead. In order to truly follow, the follower entered a kind of active meditative state.

THE SUBTLETY AND PRECISION OF THE LEAD

One of the characteristic movements for the follower in the Tango of the Golden Age is the cross (*cruce*), where the leader leads the follower to extend the right foot back, but then, instead of finishing the step back as normal, the leader turns the follower's heart during the transfer, carrying it, and therefore the follower's left foot (which hangs passively from the follower's heart), across and in front of the follower's right foot.

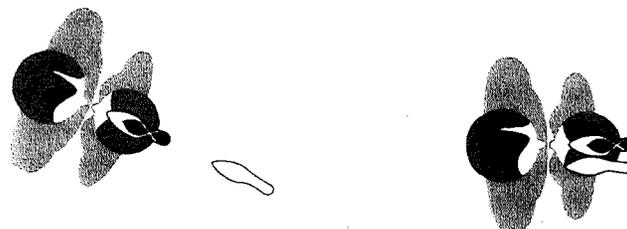


This movement can only be done correctly if the two hearts are completely united, if the leader is completely aware of the follower's movement, and if the follower steps back correctly. The difference for the follower between being led into the cross and being led into a normal step back is tremendously subtle – too subtle for the follower to be able to work out intellectually which movement the leader intended, and 'do' the step. The follower can only wait, and allow the leader to carry the follower's heart to the correct place.



Starting position

Final position – step back



Starting position

Final position – cross

The difference for the follower between the two final positions is a turn that carries the follower's heart little more than the width of the follower's foot

This makes it an extremely difficult movement for two beginners to do correctly in their first Tango class. However, the movement is so ubiquitous in Tango choreography that it is often one of the first things that beginners learn, and sometimes, as a kind of shorthand, they are taught it as though it is part of a routine, and that at certain moments the follower is expected to cross, and should do so without waiting to be led.

This would never have happened in Buenos Aires in the Golden Age.

Dancing movements this subtle flawlessly requires the dancers' skills to be developed to a certain level – a level that was the norm in the Golden Age.

This was an unusual kind of meditative state, in that it was externalised rather than internalised. The follower was focused completely on the leader, the other member of the couple, and was not withdrawing into a private, inner world. It was a generous act – the abandonment of the self into the other.

In order to allow that to happen the follower had to be able to trust the leader completely, and the leader needed constantly to deserve that trust.

The Responsibility of the Leader

Once a follower had given up her or his normal mechanisms of self-preservation, if the leader made a movement that did not respect the follower's axis, therefore compromising the follower's balance, the follower was in danger of discomfort or even, at extremes, injury. The more finely tuned the follower's balance – that is to say, the more skilled the follower was – the more potential danger the follower would be in if the leader did not treat the follower with care and respect. Putting the follower at risk of discomfort or injury was considered unacceptable.

Collisions on the dance floor were also unacceptable, as the follower had to be protected. While it is impossible to avoid all collisions on a crowded dance floor, it was astonishing to see how rarely the leaders who learned in the *prácticas* collided with other couples, even on impossibly packed floors, and even when doing what seemed to be very complicated figures. Fitting the dance to the space available and avoiding collisions was considered an important part of the leader's skill.

The leader's first priority at all times was to keep the follower safe. The leader had to be focused on respecting the follower's balance, and had to care for the follower's safety as devotedly as someone would care for the safety of a small child who has not yet learned to understand danger. The follower had placed her or his own safety in the leader's

hands. The leader needed to take responsibility for it completely and consistently.

At any moment if the leader compromised the follower's comfort the follower's self-preservation mechanisms might kick in. It takes a great deal of presence of mind and determination for a follower to prevent that from happening. Whether the follower managed to continue to follow or not, the follower would certainly be jolted out of the meditative state that accompanies following at the higher levels – if the follower had managed to reach that state at all during the dance – and reaching the state again in that dance would become much harder.

When the follower is concerned for her or his own safety, rather than being able to trust it to the leader, there is a great deal of pressure on the follower to anticipate. To people who learned to dance during the Golden Age, that was not Tango.

For this reason, the care of the follower's comfort and safety was at all times the priority of leaders who learned to dance in the *práctica*. Part of that is, of course, simple good manners – if you want someone to dance with you then it is only right that you should make them feel as comfortable as possible. However, the main reason was much less altruistic. The more perfectly the follower followed, the better a dance the leader would get, the greater flexibility the leader would have to create choreographic shapes in the free-flowing improvisation of the dance floor, the more control the leader would have, and the more connection the leader would feel. The follower could only give the leader what the leader wanted if the leader could be completely trusted, and the leader could only be completely trusted if the leader made the follower's safety the first priority in the dance. In order to get complete control of the follower's movements, the leader needed to make the follower the centre of his or her world.

If the leader's focus slipped for an instant from the follower, then the follower's trust would be lost, and the leader would have to work to regain it. If for an instant the leader's heart was not directly in front of

the follower's heart, the follower would feel it, and the follower's ability to follow would be compromised.

So, paradoxically, it was by giving his or her whole focus to the follower that the leader was able to create the richest and most satisfying experience for him or herself.

The principle that one receives most pleasure by abandoning thoughts of one's own pleasure, and concentrating on giving pleasure to one's partner instead, is one that is familiar to students of Yogic and Taoist theories of relationships. With no apparent knowledge of these ancient spiritual traditions, Tango dancers discovered in the *prácticas* and *milongas* of Buenos Aires that the best dance came not from focusing on one's own dancing pleasure, but from abandoning oneself into one's partner.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MUSIC

Most dances are defined by a rhythm. The music created for the dance sets up that rhythm for the dancers, and the steps are designed to fit into the rhythm in a specific way. If the dancers place the steps into the rhythm any other way, they are said to be 'off the music'. That is not the case in Tango. There is no rhythm section in an *orquesta típica* – the Argentinian Tango band. Instead, the interweaving melodic lines of the different instruments offer the dancers a variety of possibilities at any moment. Each piece of music has a rhythmic structure subtly different from the next. Experienced dancers allow themselves to be inspired by the music, moulding their movements into their own unique interpretation of it.

The music becomes the third member of the couple, drawing out of the couple choreographic shapes they would otherwise never have created, and deepening the communication between the dancers.

Improvisation and the 'Vulcan Mind Meld' – The Ultimate Level of Tango

Tango as danced in the Golden Age was structured in a way that was similar to a language. Steps or figures – the little choreographed routines that define our understanding of many other dances – were like poems or quotations that the leader may have learned from someone else, or may have invented in a *práctica*. There can be great pleasure in throwing a quotation into one's conversation, and learning poems can be a good way of becoming more articulate. Still, while it might be possible to choose to speak only in quotations from Shakespeare, it would be a strange way to live a life. To the dancers of the Golden Age, only dancing figures would have been a strange way to dance the Tango.

Dancers of that generation often talked about 'walking' (*caminando*) the Tango. When I first heard this term, I assumed it meant keeping it simple, and avoiding showy movements, but I quickly learned that it meant nothing of the sort. Often the people who spoke most about walking their Tango were the people who did the most complex and eye-catching things on the dance floor. What they meant was not that the dance should be simple, but that it should be free. They would lead the follower to take a step in one direction, and then another step, perhaps in a different direction. Each step that they led the follower to take had its own existence and life in that moment. Nothing happened because it was the next step in the sequence. Each individual step was a response to the moment, the music and the space available on the dance floor. When they talked about walking the Tango, what they meant was that it should be danced with the ease with which one walks down the street, moving one foot and then the other, with no forethought, existing completely in the moment. What they meant was what we would call improvisation.

But when they used the word *improvisando*, they meant something else.

When dancers who danced in the Golden Age talked about

improvisation, they were referring to a higher level – the ultimate level of Tango to which they all aspired. This was the level where not only the follower but also the leader accessed the active meditative state, abandoning the self into the other, when a new creature was created with one heart leading all four feet, and being led by the music.

At this level both the emotional experience of the dance and the choreographic expression of it are at their most profound. To see a couple dancing at this level is unforgettable – to experience it is even more so.

The first time I experienced it, I struggled to find a way to explain to my friends what had just happened. I could only find one, about as far removed from the Tango as it was possible to get. Bizarre as it was, the only image I could think of that explained it was one from *Star Trek*.

In the original *Star Trek* series one of the characters had the ability to put his hands onto another being and fuse their two minds, so that they shared their memories and thoughts, and became, for a moment, one being. He called it the 'Vulcan Mind Meld'. This was the only image I could find that came close to explaining the sense of being completely known, completely understood and completely accepted that I had just experienced.

To reach this level both the leader and the follower must be in the active meditative state in which the self is abandoned into the other. It is impossible for the leader to reach this meditative state if the follower has not reached it. If the follower stops following the leader even to the smallest degree, then the leader must be jolted back to an everyday consciousness. And it is impossible for the follower to reach the meditative state if the leader breaks the follower's trust even for an instant.

So good technique, as the dancers of the Golden Age defined it, in keeping the hearts united at all times and focusing both dancers on each other, not on themselves, became a mechanism designed to make the highest level of Tango easier to access.

Of course, this is not the only way to enjoy a dance. There is much delight to be gained from playfully and spontaneously creating a choreographic shape together that suits the music. As a leader I take great pleasure from making my follower laugh, which happens when we do a movement that fits, just so, into the music, perhaps with a shape traced on the floor that she or he was not expecting, or an interesting change of direction.

But to those who have experienced *improvisando* – improvising as the dancers of the Golden Age understood the word – it remains the holy grail of Tango experience, once glimpsed, always sought. It may happen out of the blue, even to those without much skill or experience of the Tango, when everything comes together in exactly the right way. When that happens without explanation, the dancers are inclined to believe that it is something mystical or unique. They return to the Tango again and again in search of it, without knowing what to do to increase the chances of repeating the experience in the future.

The dancers of the Golden Age understood that, while this state might occur spontaneously, the purpose of good technique was to make accessing it easier. Indeed the purpose of good technique in the Tango is to re-create what happens in those spontaneous moments – the coming together of two hearts into one.

Why Your Best Dance of the Evening May Actually Be With a Beginner

Golden Age Tango technique was designed to make it easier to bring the two hearts together, and in doing so to give the greatest sense of intimacy and connection with the other person while dancing. Training the body to move in the correct way allows each dancer to improve his or her own ability to connect with a partner.

Some people may come to the Tango already skilled in focusing their attention on another person and giving them their trust and respect,

while other people may struggle with trust, or get caught up in their sense of their own dancing, not realising that they are not engaging with their partner as fully as they might, or that they are being disrespectful. Some people may come to Tango with a history of issues connected with their desire to dance, or with their relationships with other people, while others may be happily unencumbered by a sense of having anything to prove.

When someone comes to Tango with respect for their partner, with the willingness and ability to focus on the other person and to connect with them rather than concentrating on their own dancing, that person is already in tune with the meaning and purpose of Tango. Technical shortcomings may limit the actual steps that make up their first dance. But the experience of dancing with a complete beginner who has this attitude is far superior to the experience of dancing with someone who has spent months or years learning steps, but who does not engage with the partner.

For a person who comes to the Tango with the correct attitude and manages to maintain it, learning the skills of the dance will only make them more of a pleasure to dance with – the goal of any Golden Age dancer.

Some people get caught up in the process of learning steps, or find themselves distracted by other personal goals. Some choose to dance with a technique that is different from the technique used by the dancers of the Golden Age, and may then find they have selected a technique that makes it harder rather than easier for them to connect with their partner. (This may happen if the dancer's focus is on the stage rather than on social dance, or for many other reasons.) Some people may have had so many disappointing experiences of dancing with people who did not engage with them that they have lost the ability to trust their partner. So the length of time a person has been dancing may give little indication of how pleasant they will be to dance with – unless their experience of learning the dance has allowed them to learn at least part of what was learned by the people who danced in the *prácticas* and *milongas* of the Golden Age.

It is attitude that makes the Tango dancer. Skill improves the dancer, but attitude is the essence of skill. People who learned in Buenos Aires in the Golden Age learned the attitude as inseparable from the dance.