



Beijing, July 17, 2006

The Beijing papers

This series of 6 articles on argentine tango wishes to be a modest but positive contribution to the Beijing argentine tango community.

They will be distributed via email every week or every second week until the 11th of September.

Here are the titles of the articles that will be published in the coming weeks:

- How to maximize your dancing experience during milongas
 - The twelve most common mistakes in argentine tango
 - How to avoid the twelve most common mistakes in argentine tango
 - Our most precious assets in argentine tango
 - Musicality for tango dancers
- ...and maybe more, once these topics will be covered.

First paper

How to maximize your dancing experience during milongas

In a young community, or in a community in constant state of flux with a large turnover like Beijing, characterised by few people with long tango experience, a certain attitude during milongas (dance evenings) will help you bloom in the dance and develop your dancing skills.

Let's start by looking at some basic factual evidence: there is usually a gender imbalance in favour of men in any tango communities. Generally speaking, dance appeals more to women than men.

In places like Beijing this is especially acute.

Men dancing tango have usually a short dance history, and/or due to work obligations etc are more likely to come and go.

Typically they will be new to it, or will have learnt it just enough to reasonably enjoy themselves and not be rebuffed by the ladies. Once they feel they are there, they usually stop learning.

Only a few of them wish to take it to the next level. This is true here, this is true everywhere.

There are a number of reasons for that, and they are good reasons too.

First, men are usually more challenged by dancing than women, they find it rather difficult, and argentine tango is a difficult dance.

Second, to learn it properly, you need the sustained presence and attention of a good teacher that you trust.

Third, you have to commit to that teacher and take lessons regularly, preferably private ones (the best way to learn) and this implies an investment in time, effort, and money.

Fourth, you have to practice.

The milonga, the dance evening, is not a practice per se .

To find and keep a good practice partner is difficult. Many women would say that they would eagerly volunteer for it but, due to the emotional nature and difficulty of the dance, practice can be rather technically frustrating and/or emotionally bumpy.

Solutions:

The first thing that all building tango communities should do is to nurture their (too few) leaders. In other words, dance with them. This happens usually naturally since the odds are in their favour.

But the question here is:

How do you build confidence in your new leaders while not letting their lack of skills potentially destroy your own dancing?

I mean this regardless of the level of the follower.

Typically, I am thinking here at a leader, a newcomer or a rather poorly trained one that is tense, uses force, hints more than leads, and expect you to know, and/or precipitate everything.

Let's take tension for instance. Due to the intimacy of the dance, if he is tense, he will make you tense.

A tense body cannot dance. Period.

Tension is like noise. If you have too much background noise on a record, as it amplifies it will eventually take over and drown the music altogether.

Can you relate to this?

Did you experience tension?

Did you feel exhausted after dancing or felt pain in your body tension induced?

If affirmative, you know that this is not pleasant.

In fact, this is terrible.

Why? Because if you allow tension to be part of it, you tell your body that this is normal and it will remember it as such. Tension then will creep in and may become intertwined with your dancing technique to such a degree that it will do to your dancing what excessive noise does to music.

Please, ask yourself these questions:

Am I tense when I dance? Where am I getting this tension from?

From the leader or am I bringing it to the dance myself?

In any case here is what you should be doing:

Stop being tense!

How?

a) center yourself and learn how to breathe properly from your center (from the belly).

- b) be nonchalant, don't try to be perfect. Accept that what works works, what does not work does not work at this point in time.
 - c) be humorous, relax and have fun with your friends. When you dance, try to focus and concentrate a bit but not too much...
 - d) still stressed? ...have a glass of wine. (although for leaders alcohol makes you rather sluggish).
 - e) don't go to a milonga to dance away your problems. This bad energy will only make matters worse. If you need to transfer bad energy find other outlets or go to a therapist, they do that for a fee.
- f) tango is fun. You can make it deep fun, serious fun, artful fun, passionate fun etc.
But nonetheless it's fun!

Obviously, these are general pieces of advice, but what can you specifically do when you have accepted an invitation and you are stuck on the dance floor with a tense and rather insecure leader?

You have to manage the situation now.

Here is how:

Usually we accept an invitation at the beginning of a tanda (a group of three or four songs in the same style).

Etiquette requires that you dance more than one (one song is considered rejection), so you are there for two songs minimum.

What to do then?

First, if you feel tension, the first thing that must pop into your mind is: "ahah! tension here, I will be as calm as he is tense to start with. I will not allow tension to creep in my body and destroy my dance".

Second, tension leads normally to the use of force and this is confrontational in nature.

In other words, you meet tension with tension.

You don't want to lock horns with him.

So what do you do? You absorb it.

Example: He wants you to take a step back but can't lead it and uses his left hand to push your right hand to try to move you. The worse you could do would be to step back. Why? Because it does validate it and tells him "it's OK to lead me that way".

No, you don't do that. Instead, you just let your arm become like cooked spaghetti and drop it. Maybe he will try a couple of times but will stop when he sees that force does not bring any results.

If he gets the message, and usually leaders get it because they do not use force for force sake, but because they usually do not know alternate or better ways to get what they want...

So, if you see now that he still wants this back step, because he makes it clear through his *intention* and his *body language* but has stopped pushing with his arm, take it!

OK, you may have compensated a bit, but you remained calm and cool and, more important, you made him feel that he can get results by other means.

As you dance with him, you see that he tries something else, a giro (a turn) for example but is not too sure as how to lead it, and you feel that he is at the point of tensing up or forcing you into it; go ahead, compensate, do it and stay cool.

Send him good waves too, I mean, that you appreciate his dancing, especially his calmness with the intent message that just being there with you simply walking is good enough and that he must not try all kind of things fearing that you might get bored.

Body language does speak volumes!

Now, let's shine the light on the follower.

In this next example, we assume that our leader is an "enlightened beginner",

Which means, somebody who assumes who he is as a dancer, that does not want to show off; someone who just wants to enjoy himself and make it equally enjoyable for his partner in a way that allows both of them to connect to the music, with each other, and keep things cool and relaxed.

But the follower now is tense. She is a beginner, maybe a bit of a perfectionist, or she does not want to disappoint him etc.

If he senses that, his duty now is to show her that everything is cool.

He will keep things simple to make her relax. He will watch her body language.

Example: He locked her in a close embrace where the bodies touch. She has accepted the embrace but is arching her back considerably. He should read her body language. It means that she is not too comfortable that way...than he will relax the embrace and let her come back straight. She pushes on his left hand, he relaxes his left arm to defuse it. If she has balance issues, (because of high heels etc), he offers more support with his right arm around her while maintaining a good presence and support on the left side of her thoracic cage.

And he does not forget to send her good vibes too...

As he sees that she is relaxing and regains confidence, he might try a few simple steps he masters well.

If she tenses again, drop it off, simplify to the max, slow down and never forget that:

Tango is not about steps, Tango is about connection!

In all cases, you should be surprised how fear is what often gets in the way and prevents us from dancing properly. Fear is the great inhibitor and can be overcome quite easily with a good, positive and affectionate partner.

We said at the beginning that tension kills the dance, creeps into the other and spoils everything. It is a vicious circle.

But in tango we have a virtuous circle as well, meaning that what you do well is also absorbed by the other who will reciprocate and invite you to give more etc... we can create harmony this way. The dance then will become magical.

You do not have to be an advanced dancer for experiencing tango moments. To be an "enlightened beginner" is more than enough.

Now let's consider another potential source of tension:

What do you do when being an "enlightened beginner" you have accepted an invitation from an advanced tango dancer?

Example:

Mister Big has extended an invitation.

It can be rather stressful indeed. What to do now? your palms are sweating, your heart is racing, you are nervous...

Mr Big may be your teacher, or your friend's teacher or you have seen him on stage etc.

Now you want to be at your best, rise to the occasion and shine... what should you do?

Nothing!

Remember the phrase of the architect Mies van der Roeh:

“Less is more”

It applies here 100%.

First, if your hands are sweating and your heart racing let it happen (breath correctly though).

What is it. We do not lie in tango. (anyway we cannot lie, you can try, but it does not work...)

Second do not, I repeat, **do not** excuse yourself (true at the beginning, the end AND during the dance... even if things go a bit astray).

If you are a beginner or an intermediate it is not your problem. There is no shame in that

HE has extended the invitation, you did not ask anything, so HE must take care of you.

Plus, if he is so good, he should be able to make you dance, right?

That is one of the reasons why it is the men who do invite according to tradition. If they do not want to dance with you, their loss!

If they invite you, they have to make sure that you will have a good time.

They have to behave like a real “caballero” (gentleman). This is very much in the tango tradition

By the way, this etiquette would be known to an “*enlightened beginner*” too.

The man is there to take care of the lady and not the other way around.

(and certainly not to correct her and give her free dance lessons on the dance floor...)

Beware gentlemen, even if your follower should beg for advice, do NOT give dance lesson on the dance floor, this is bad form.

There are outlets for that: Practicas!

What is a Practica?

A Practica is an informal dance where people go to practice their steps between partners and friends and help each other. It could be supervised or not.

So, with a good dancer, the follower must simply do *nothing*... But what exactly does this *nothing* means?

To answer this properly, first let's remember what we have said regarding the attitude of the follower with a beginner leader.

We talked about how reducing tension by way of compensation or anticipation while the follower has to remain calm and tensionless all the time.

But for the calm, the rest of it is **wrong** now.

In fact, compensation, anticipation, decoding in the mind of the follower etc, all this is normally to be avoided.

In the first situation, she fills the blanks a bit, now she must not do that at all.

A good leader will (must) dance in her body. He will control her pivot, make sure where her axis is at all times. He will trigger the movement by using his/her spiral and will lead by invitation only.

To lead by invitation might be a bit confusing at the beginning. Let's explain it a bit.

The invitation means that, from the energy it feels, the body of the follower will move accordingly.

There is no push-pull at all but grounding-spiral-intention-preparation and release.

Let's not dwell too much on these technical (cryptic?) words as it would lead us to too technical a discussion.

In the first case the follower helps a bit, in the second case she just let it happen.

Passivity? Not at all.

Empowerment instead.

In the first case:

Her mind thinks, her body dances.

In the second case:

Her body thinks, her mind dances.

(the best way to climb the stairway to tango heaven...)

Her role as a follower is to connect, amplify and beautify the dance. Add colour and flavour to the dish if you want.

Once, I asked my former teacher in Montreal Noel Strazza (Pablo Veron's partner), what are the essential qualities of a good follower?

She answered:

"To be silent, empty, and awake"

From there, she feels that she can add fragrance, colour and flavour in a complementary way while giving herself totally, being totally free at the same time, be totally in the moment.

These words are worth meditating by all followers, but let's be even more practical.

To do *nothing* means to be totally grounded, on axis (offering your most perfect posture), in possession of your spiral, peaceful and calm. Now your body is tuned like a good violin and ready to sing.

You can embellish (add adornos) but do not backlead or take any steps of your own, do not even think of that.

Just be there.

The most beautiful gift you can give your leader is: Freedom.

Freedom for the leader means options.

Example:

Let's take a giro, a turn from a side step to the right (seen from the perspective of the follower):

a) from a beginner point of view:

The beginner takes a side step to the left, starts turning his shoulder, the follower understands it as a turn and triggers the sequence of a giro taking in succession a back-side-front-side, than the beginner pushes her back (sigh! he should not be pushing) to continue walking etc.

b) from an advanced point of view:

The leader invites her into a side step of a certain width controlled by pressing the ground, this is validated by a corresponding pressure on the left side of the follower rib cage. Once the step is landed, he grounds and invites her to ground, then start spiralling from the muscles of his back. She mirrors this. Once the spiral has reached the proper degree in his-her torso, he grounds more and relaxes (flex) a bit the knee of his supporting leg, she mirrors it, and this creates an inner

tension in her spine. Once it has reached sufficient potential energy, she lifts the heel of her supporting leg and a pivot occurs naturally. The leader, taking advantage of the pivot, gives it an extra impetus in his spiral which triggers a rhythm of simple or double time (quick-quick-slow). Then, while remaining on the same spot, in his mind and body he dances each and every step of her giro by feeling her body going from a pivot to a back step to a circular side step where he pivots her again to prepare her for the front step, than pivot, than side step, than he grounds and let the pent up energy of the turn dissipate. Once all is quiet again, he invites her to a walk, in order to contrast circular with linear energy. She will be doing this with her eyes closed and will realise (or not) after the fact that she just did a turn there. In fact when we enter in the the “flow” of tango, we do not even remember what we did (we don’t even care), we just remember how marvellous it was that night dancing with such and such person.

Alternate scenario: after the side step he spirals her, grounds, everything looks very much as if a turn will start imminently, than he changes his mind and transforms her back pivot to a front one and it becomes a front ocho etc.

Why? maybe because there was no room anymore on the dance floor for a turn, or maybe because he thought that on that particular spot on the music it was more interesting choreographically speaking to do a front ocho; or maybe just because he felt like it...
Total freedom, total spontaneity!

A follower that gives options to her leader opens doors to his creativity.

Let’s not forget that we are always thinking about a relatively beginner follower.

And we reiterate that it is the problem of the leader to find the steps that will make her feel comfortable.

If it is only walking, well, if he is good he will make walking feel creative and wonderful.

If walking is too difficult, he can spot dance her.

Finally,

What to do when you, an “enlightened beginner” leader have extended an invitation to a female tango star and....gulp! she has accepted.

Chill!

But don’t freeze ☺

Offer your most beautiful connection, lose yourself in the music and do keep it *simple*.

Create the magic!

Do not try to dance above your level.

Please, do keep it *simple*.

Bear in mind that this woman dances complicated steps every day with the best in the trade...

and may be a bit tired of that too. The fact that she has accepted to dance with you, could be an indication that she would be perfectly happy with: fresh, spontaneous and sincere!

Besides, you are not Pablo Veron. ☺

Yes, it could be nice to try these complicated sequences and off-axis turns you learnt somewhere in a workshop. Indeed she would make them feel gloriously beautiful if you master them well, but what if you do not lead them properly?

Is it worth the risk?

In a word: **No!**

She would not resent you, but you might resent yourself though. It could be enough to bruise your ego and make you become frustrated and self conscious at once. Bye bye the connection, bye bye the magic, and welcome frustration.

Indeed, it can be rather frustrating to have had the opportunity of your lifetime to play on a Stradivarius and, instead of playing music you know, feel and play well, you tried a complicated piece that resulted in a bunch of wrong notes and no music at all...

Less is more!

Conclusion:

Flexibility and awareness are paramount in dancing argentine tango.

One size fits none.

Have more than one style of dance to offer. If you do have to compensate, being fully aware of it will prevent it from generating unconscious ingrained bad habits that practice would only make permanent. But try to keep all this (these sins...) to a minimum, use it sparingly and with the idea of serving a better purpose like building up confidence in your leader or to battle the evil of tension. Be vigilant.

Said otherwise, just remember that with a proper attitude and flexibility in your dancing, tailored to the reality and the circumstances you are in, you can make argentine tango a qualitative and fulfilling experience, enriching your life in so many ways while discovering the specificity and the inner beauty that each dancer, each milonga or each tango community has to offer.

Love to all,

And see you on the dance floor!

Richard S.

Richard Sagala bio notes:

Canadian born musician and dancer, a certified music teacher, Richard Sagala has been teaching and performing argentine tango in Canada, USA and now China.

While a student in the conservatory of music (where he graduated with four diplomas: DEC, CES, DES, Premier Prix), Richard studied classical ballet and got involved in ballroom dancing from 1990 to 1999.

Richard discovered the art of argentine tango in 1999 and has pursued it relentlessly ever since training with the best and brightest everywhere.

While in China, Richard teaches with Beijingtango. You can get information about regular and private classes by writing to beijingtango@hotmail.com