

Queer Tango

by Lindsay Van Gelder

Visiting Buenos Aires without learning something about tango is like planning a trip to Paris without considering the food.

Not that tango is the only thing that makes Buenos Aires unique. It's a European city improbably plunked down amid South American jungles, deserts, and glaciers. Half the population seems to have Italian names, and great swaths of the city's wedding-cake architecture could have been airlifted from Paris or Barcelona. Time and place are a little askew. *Evita* still lives, if you believe the graffiti. It's the psychotherapy capital of the world.

But tango is the air that one breathes in the metropolis. *Porteños*, as the locals are called, do it in the parks and plazas, especially on Sunday afternoons. *Milongas* (dance halls) are everywhere, some in achingly gorgeous *Art Nouveau* ballrooms. (These are not to be confused with the *Vegasy* and pricey tango dinner-theater "shows" for tourists.) There are even tango-step footprints carved into the sidewalks in several neighborhoods, *Grauman's Chinese-style*, just in case you feel the urge for a quick public swirl.

In *La Chacarita*, the world's spookiest cemetery, groupies leave lit cigarettes burning in the fingers of the life-size statue of famous *tanguero* *Carlos Gardel* on his tomb. (His actual *fedora* is enshrined at the *World Tango Museum* in another part of town.) Then there's the ubiquitous music, the accordion-like *bandoneon* sinuously humping up against the cry of longing from the *viola* or the *cello*, that perfectly encapsulates the passionately unhinged, nostalgia-suffused soul of the city.

If you're a lesbian and a feminist, there is also a lot to cringe at. From the *Me-Tarzan-You-Juanita* moves to the fishnet stockings and fuck-me pumps, the superficial tropes of tango are a throwback to a time when macho men dominated and women submitted. At a traditional *milonga*, there are even unwritten rules against women initiating eye contact before being invited to dance.

It was, shall we say, not my cup of *maté*.

Gracias a Dios, there is also queer tango.

I first heard about the phenomenon from a couple of gay-positive straight friends, *tangomaniacs* who love to go to gay *milongas* because (a) hey, gay stuff is fun; and (b) the novelty of leading rather than following (or vice versa) makes straight tango devotees better dancers. "Learning to follow really helps me see the implications of the things I do, which is a great learning experience," says *Alejandro Puerta*, a private tango teacher who's highly recommended, whatever your gender or orientation.

"As a leader you need to be super-clear, decisive, and assertive," *Puerta* explains. "As a follower you need to feel, understand, and be patient. I also like that I get to explore my feminine side. When I'm dancing as a follower, I feel more connected with that part of me."

Two of the most famous gay *milongas* are *Tango Queer* on Tuesdays and *La Marshall* on Fridays, and you can find them online (or check for others through the comprehensive website and smartphone app *Hoy Milonga*). As with most *milongas*, you come early for formal group lessons; if you'd rather just be a voyeur (or if you already know how to tango), arrive later.

My own lesson at *Tango Queer* was hilarious ... and revelatory. The *milonga* was up a long flight of stairs in the boho neighborhood of *San Telmo* on a street with belching buses and broken sidewalks. The other students were mostly men, with a sprinkling of other tourists. Given what I had previously seen of girly fashion at *milongas*, the mistress of ceremonies, *Soledad Nani*, was almost disconcertingly androgynous. (Try Googling her for a demonstration of *genderfuck Argentine-style*, especially her sexy, seamless, back-and-forth role-swapping with her friend *Jesus Pietropaulo*.)

She paired us up with partners according to our ability. I was initially assigned to another rank beginner, *Jorge*, a sweet gay guy from the provinces who was at least a foot taller than I am. After we mastered some basic steps and passed many

minutes of cheerful counting aloud and clomping on each other's feet, everyone on the dance floor was instructed to change roles. *Jorge* giggled; I panicked. I don't think I've tried to lead since I learned to jitterbug with my younger sister in our knotty, pine-paneled cellar rec room. And here's the thing that quickly dawned on me: not only are you in charge of the dance steps, but also you are air-traffic control. Collisions are especially a danger when you aren't even up to your partner's neck. After a few near misses, I was happy to revert to clueless *femme* status.

Although tango is wildly popular these days, several older women I met told me they never learned it because in their youth it was still considered to be whatever is the Argentine equivalent of trailer trashy. According to most sources, the dance was born at the end of the nineteenth century in the red-light districts that flourished when most *Porteños* were immigrant men, horny and homesick for Europe, and thus totally vulnerable to an art form that managed to combine smoldering sensuality with melancholia. Apparently, these lonely guys danced with each other while they waited for their turn with the hookers.

The queer-tango embrace in a hetero setting has now come full circle: four same-sex couples competed for the first time in the *World Tango* championship in 2013 in Buenos Aires. Although Argentina had same-sex marriage before New York did, this was still a big deal. They were crowd favorites, according to my friends, and the media went a little loco.

"It takes two to tango," one gay male contestant was widely quoted as saying. "But they don't necessarily have to be different sexes."

Que bárbaro, che! Amen. Although I'm still leery of the fishnets.

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