



Swept Away

Passion and control go toe-to-toe on tango night.

BY DEIRDRE GUTHRIE

Venturing into the 720 Club salon on North Wells on a Tuesday evening I walk past the street-level room where women in swirling skirts and hip-swaggering men are doing salsa. As I ascend the stairs to the second floor, the cumbias and merengues fade, replaced by the eerie plinking of a piano. Looking down from a third-floor balcony, clutching the folds of my gray skirt, I gaze upon a faded landscape. Couples shuffle counterclockwise around the dance floor as if in a silent film; there's no talking, only a sticky, punctuated melody accompanied by the slightest static, like the scratching of lint on a phonograph record.

Disco balls throw their sparkle against the solemn spectacle. But the air isn't weighted or dreary; rather most couples, eyes pinched tight, seem to be riding the wave of their own private rapture. An old couple clasp wrinkled hands etched with purple veins as she, wearing a crisp red suit, kicks daintily between his legs. A young blond in a leather skirt presses her cheek to her black lover's shoulder, their pelvises flush their steps so synchronized the couple appear to be joined at the ankles.

The nondancing men idle about, smoking in their black turtlenecks and cleanly pressed suits, casually scanning the bar stools for partners. The women, whether reeking of librarian or siren, are more visually engaging, with their sequined berets and costume jewelry.

A tragic-looking creature dressed with Amish severity, a long brown braid streaked with gray hanging somberly down her back, ochos

Chicago Tango Club Argentine.

"It's positively dangerous out there tonight," says a woman, fanning herself with a Japanese paper fan, gold earrings like pieces of sculpture weighing down her earlobes. Her partner nods and remarks that the floor has exceeded its dancing capacity—it's now an arena more suitable for bumper cars.

"He calls that gypsy dancing," says another critic with a sigh, raising an eyebrow toward a curly-haired Argentine in a pin-striped jacket engaged in a flurry of intricate footwork. "Once he split a woman's leg open—we had to call for an ambulance!" The more experienced club members tend to embrace the old-school concept of Argentine tango—distinct from the stiffer, repressed American style and the glittery Broadway version—as simply a "way of walking with another person."

There are definite rumbles of discontent when one couple position themselves at the floor's epicenter and hover there under the spotlight, blocking traffic as it were, alternating deep lunges and high kicks. The club's president, Charlotte Vikstrom, offers a polite reminder between sets that though all dance styles are appre-

ciated, this isn't a stage but a milonguero salon for social dancing.

"Tango should be accessible," Bob Hall, an interior decorator and studied ballroom dance pro and has been tangoing for five years. "It's seen at weddings, among people and little kids."

"There are arenas that show good stage dancing," Hall says. "Real milongueros do not dance for an audience."

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The tango was spawned on cobblestoned streets of Argentina's port cities, Buenos Aires and Montevideo, in the early 19th century when Spanish, Italian, Cuban, and German immigrants mingled with former African slaves and Argentine mestizo cowboys. The violin, flute, and guitar of the original tango later fused with the piano and accordionlike bandoneon from Germany to create tango's trademark doleful sound, suggesting the stories of embittered men in exile, remembering their homeland.

The seedy origins of the dance in warehouses and taverns were obscured, however, when the tango emerged from the underground.

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Tom Lueders

demurely, scissoring in a series of tight kicks with an almost invisible lick of pleasure on her lips, while her partner, despite being nearly two heads shorter, anchors her with his firm stance. Beside them a haughty woman brushes one fishnet-stockinged leg across the floor in a slow semicircle before abruptly hiking a spiked heel to her thigh and leaning into her partner, who appears a bit bland in comparison, as the bandoneons swell to a close.

Once a week in this room high school Spanish teachers, real estate agents, busboys, and carpenters suddenly shape-shift into elegant milongueros, or authentic tango dancers, adding their own spontaneous adornments to the dance's basic steps. The night wears on, a vision of flexing calves, flashes of red nail polish, heavily styled hair, and dewy cleavage. But from some bar stools come mutterings of disapproval, commentary by the old guard of the



our town

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become a middle-class rage in 1912. Tango's idol was Carlos Gardel, an Argentinean bastard whose tango singing brought global attention to the form in the teens and 20s. He died in a plane accident in 1935, but his vital presence remains in the port-side barrios of Argentina. Tango orchestras peaked in Europe in 1950, but other, more contemporary dance forms dominated: the jitterbug, the twist, and—perhaps the antithesis of tango—the flailing, rubber-limbed, euphoric swing. Meanwhile Argentina's dictatorships relegated the tango—politically dangerous because of its potential to gather people together in the streets—once more to the underground.



Tom Lueders, a gray-haired man with beads of sweat clinging to his lined face and a fierce gleam in his eye, is getting frustrated with my stiff-limbed resistance to his lead. "Pretend you're in love with me!" he commands. "This isn't a minuet—give in to me or this isn't going to



work."

We're upstairs at the 720 and I'm wobbling in black lace-ups with an ambitious heel for someone who spent the better part of her debutante

years in combat boots. Despite my determination, I'm finding it excruciatingly difficult to hover without anticipating Tom's next move. My foot itches to step backward but no,

I'm suspended, leaning forward with one foot crossed behind the other, waiting...

Think of a good lead as a gentle urging, Tom says. Think of the pauses

as resting points on a continuum. He tells me tango is the alchemy between two connected bodies, as unpredictable and magical as the dance itself. Two strangers meet and, within seconds of dancing, feel an incredible intimacy—which has no consequences. The music is the catalyst for feelings that are exquisitely controlled.

"It's the safest sex you'll ever have," Tom says and winks. Then he explains that actually tango isn't driven by a sexual urge at all but rather by the "noblesse oblige" within your soul. "Though a transient experience, with the right person, you walk away feeling elated," he promises.

Tom nervously made his way to a Chicago gymnasium for his first tango lesson in December of 1990, at the age of 64. His instructor, whom he refers to with bashful reverence as his guru and mentor, was a 23-year-old from Tokyo, Miki Kawashima; she cofounded the Chicago Tango Club in 1991. Though she's long since fled the fledgling Chicago tango scene for a thriving one in her homeland, Tom kept on and is now known as one of the club's most passionate dancers. "Tango is my mistress," says Tom slyly. "And fortunately my wife understands that."

Hall's initial reaction to tango wasn't so positive. "When I first saw this



dance, I thought it was ugly, brutal, misogynistic," he muses. "But gradually I learned that it's about the tension between dominance and submission. It's about cooperation."

In tango, the woman's skill as a follower is as important as the man's ability to provide a strong but subtle lead. Each partner offers me new suggestions. "Remain calm, be patient," Hall whispers gently, sensing my frustration as he scuffs my slow-moving heel. "We're just walking."

A tall, bespectacled insurance salesman ushers me along by bellowing "bump-a, bump-a, bump-a" as we fly across the room to a waltz. An image of my patent leathers atop daddy's slippers flashes in my head.

But the crowning moment of my early dance career comes when Stanley, a 76-year-old Lithuanian with slicked-back hair and a bolo tie, urges me to step on his thigh, a maneuver it seems could only result in a puncture wound. Sensing my hesitation, he draws forth a thick stack of photos from inside his jacket and gesticulates at an impressive series of shots of a young Japanese girl, the slit in her red kimono racing up her thigh, in the poses he wishes me to replicate.

"Water," I whisper hoarsely, fan-

ning myself, then head toward the bar. Tom greets me and offers to take me under his wing, for if I truly feel the passion of tango as he does, he has an obligation to see that I'm not ignored.



Tom heard his first tango melody—"Orchids in the Moonlight," by Vincent Youmans—when he was seven, in the Fred Astaire/Dolores Del Rio vehicle *Flying Down to Rio*. It was the Depression in Chicago, a time of "uniform bleakness," Tom says. His father, who suffered poor health after being gassed in World War I, had been taught sewing-machine repair by a Russian Jew. According to family legend, Mrs. Capone was a steady customer who lent Mrs. Lueders her spaghetti recipe. But in 1930 Tom's father moved the family to Niles, Michigan, for a brighter job opportunity selling vacuum cleaners.

As a teenager in Michigan, Tom would search the radio, sampling old Latin rumbas, or squat in the weeds outside a black piano bar called "Busties" and listen to the strictly forbidden "whorehouse blues." But the moonlight tango of *Flying Down to Rio* never left him.

One night Tom tells me that the

sadness of the tango resonates with his Germanic sensibility, steeped in weltschmerz, nostalgia, and anhedonia, a la Woody Allen. He speaks of it as a genetic vulnerability.

"How else could Hitler have captured the minds of the people?" he asks, shaking his head. "They were ripe for him. All he had to do was whip these war-torn people into a frenzied longing for their once greatness." Images of blue-eyed soldiers in rows pausing mid-goosestep to embrace one another in a tango tickle my mind's eye.

Might this dance be a trifle morbid, I ask? "In Finland, where there's over 200 clubs, I agree, it's morbid," he says, acknowledging the reputed black repression of the Finns. "But for me," he says with a slow smile, "well, I'm happiest when I'm sad. T.S. Eliot said, 'The past is a bucket of ashes.' Well, I think the future is a bucket of ashes!" And he laughs, hoisting his mug to tango.

Tom's musings seal my fate, making me realize I was infected by the tango before I even knew of its existence. For all my early punk-rock angst, I could never escape the Gothic romance of my upbringing. My father named me after an Irish princess—a Gaelic name meaning

"sorrow"—whose suicide brought famine to her land. He had a strange affinity for accordions and eked out a living for a time by selling them door-to-door, but he was more inclined personally to Gregorian chants, listening to them midafternoon, sipping vodka over ice, occasionally offering up woozy supplications to Saint Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, or to my mother, sanctified through death.

I was raised with a thousand anniversaries of a thousand family tragedies that catapulted their victims into eternal martyrdom. I always knew that, against my will and despite the futility of my state, I was heavy in Kunderian terms, an old soul haunted by my past. The only difference between Tom and me was the proximity of our time of innocence, a time when life was good and promised to get better. The milonga offers a weird and wonderful little world to validate our melancholy and nostalgia. In this sacred space, dwelling on our demons is acceptable and ultimately cathartic: the music ends and we descend from the second floor, reenter the night, and leave our ghosts behind.



"I'm a late bloomer," Tom tells me during another milonga, on a humid,

stormy night. "But I've found a way to trick time. Right now people are dancing in some sweaty little parlor in Argentina just like we are. Here, all these beautiful girls respect me. I can go back to when I was a young man." He pauses, closing his eyes. "Listen to this little Italian tarantella, you see how asymmetrical the music is? It defies analyzing! Excuse me, I must dance."

Tom's frame, slightly stooped, descends the balcony staircase. He breathes in slow, raspy gasps, looking for his favorite dance partner. I watch his profile darken against the arched windows spotted with rain and lit by sudden purple sparks of lightning, which causes the lights in the cabaret to flicker and dim.

As Tom approaches Sandra, she smiles and pushes a strand of blond hair behind her ear. She leaves her boyfriend's side, allowing Tom to take her hand, and twirls into position so that her skirt, sprinkled with bloody rose petals, cascades on currents of air. Their heads bow as if in prayer, and he clasps her hand, cupping it to his heart, his other hand supporting her back. She wraps an arm around his neck, and the lights surge and dim again as they slowly stride across the floor. ■