

Section 1. Tango in Buenos Aires

The female tango dancer's costume

Section 1. Tango in Buenos Aires

Julie Verbert

Thursday 28 August 2008, posted by [Julie Verbert](#)

1-1 Background

Numerous researchers have been speculating about the origins of tango, studying its etymology for instance, but have been unable to reach an agreement. Most of them presume that it stems from Africa, but the debate is still open and it may be quite dangerous to strike up the conversation with a *tanguero* [[1](#)] to find out, for example, whether tango was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, or in Montevideo, Uruguay (Aguilar 2001, 4).

What seems to be certain though, in conformity with Ferrer and Del Priore (1999), for instance, is that tango became famous at the end of the nineteenth century but was not so popular as it is today. Like many cultural innovations, tango faced criticism. It was regarded as a vulgar and odious dance (Salas 1989, 128), and had to accept a few changes before it was tolerated by the majority.

In the late nineteenth century, Buenos Aires was not so populated as it is today – only 663,854 inhabitants in 1895 compared to 1,575,814 inhabitants in 1914 and 2,776,138 inhabitants in 2001 (last national census to date) – and it appeared to many foreigners as another promised land where anyone would have the opportunity to start a new life with land and a home of their own.

From the analysis by Bourdé (1974), it is possible to see that Argentina was then starting to open its market to the world. As a result, foreign trade became one of the main focuses of the government's foreign policy (Bourdé op. cit, 2). Argentina required a skilled workforce to build its economy. In order to make the country more attractive, it was judged necessary to advertise its natural resource: plenty of virgin land (Bourdé op. cit, 150).

In 1853, the Argentinean political class had already drafted a constitution that clearly encouraged immigration: “We, the representatives of the people of the Argentine Nation, gathered (...) in order to form a national union, guarantee justice, secure domestic peace, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves, to our posterity, and to all men of the world who wish to dwell on Argentine soil” [[2](#)].

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Argentinean government had been stressing its advantages to appeal to newcomers, and was now offering land, for example [[3](#)], to achieve this. The strategy turned out to be so effective that hundreds of people rushed from all over the world to Argentina and eventually settled there (Bourdé op. cit, 150).

However, the number of these immigrants increased markedly and the land promised by the official propaganda turned out to be already distributed to a few wealthy Argentinean owners (Salas 1989, 40). How could the newcomers survive in this environment? More than half of them went back home. The alternative for those remaining in the country was to work for industry.

Industry was booming – the first railroad was set up in 1857 (Bourdé 1974, 39) – and so was the production of local goods – such as leather, dry meat, wool and cereals (Bourdé op. cit, 44). Due to the high labour requirements in the industrial sector, immigrants turned to the cities rather than to the countryside. They needed housing near their working places. Therefore, accommodations were built

around the industrial areas.

As in many big cities that developed so quickly, with immigrants coming from diverse cultures, a gap appeared between people from different communities - in particular between those living in the city and those living in the suburbs of Buenos Aires.

Many people felt excluded from society; among them were Africans, former *gauchos* [4] and *payadores* [5], and others. They often gathered in so-called sleazy dark places, hid to play music, dance and sing together after their long working days. There, they could voice the nostalgia of their lost freedom. That was tango - a blend of universal despair. As Discépolo [6] wrote, "El tango es un pensamiento triste que se baila" [7].

1-2 The first female tango dancers and their costumes

As stated earlier, tango started to be danced in official places at the end of the nineteenth century [8]. According to Deluy and Yurkievich (1988, 17), *academias* were public dance halls where people practiced tango. There, girls were paid for one dance, or more, and for the amusement of men, regardless of their social condition.

Indeed, the customers came from various backgrounds (Lenoble 2001, 4-5). As Salas (1989, 93) pointed out, these *academias* were seen as places of debauchery, attracting shameful and poor individuals. Still, *tangueros* used to be very elegant, whatever class they belonged to, and if there was no typical costume, at least there was an undeniable tango style.

Although the aim of this dissertation is to present the female costume only, it seems necessary to describe briefly the male tango costume, in order for the reader to have a proper representation of the tango dancing couple.

According to many pictures and drawings [9], and taking for example the description from Deluy and Yurkievich (1988, 18-19), a typical *tanguero* was characterised by the following costume: "pantalon moulant à rayures, large ceinture noire, veste très courte fendue dans le dos, foulard blanc, fleur à l'oreille (œillet ou géranium) et chapeau à large bord retroussé (...)" [striped slinky trousers, a large black belt, a short jacket with slit back, a white scarf, a flower over the ear (carnation or geranium) and a tango hat].

As for women, "Elles portaient une jupe courte par-dessus des jupons à volants amidonnés ; c'étaient les seules jupes courtes admises à l'époque, le travail exigeant que les danseuses soient ainsi vêtues car il leur eût été impossible d'exécuter une flexion avec une robe descendant jusqu'aux chevilles. (Salas 1989, 84)" [They used to wear short skirts over starched flounced underskirts, which were the only short skirts tolerated at the time, as it was necessary for the dancers to dress up like this; otherwise, it was impossible for them to perform any flexion with the common ankle-long gown.]

Let us keep in mind that tango ended up in brothels because it was not accepted in public places. Thus, the first women to dance tango in Buenos Aires were not common ladies but dancers in brothels - not obviously prostitutes, although they were said to be easy girls (Hess 1999, 13). The aim of the dance was to entertain men and make them forget the hard reality of the outside world. Dancers were not asked to be pretty but to dance perfectly (Salas 1989, 85).

As far as the results of this research are concerned, the female tango costume does not seem to be a central issue in tango. Therefore, it was hard to find written references on this subject. In this regard, an interesting source for the subject can be obtained through visual references. One of the most helpful examples for this research was the tango scene in the film *Moulin Rouge* (Luhmann 2001).

In *Moulin Rouge*, the tango scene is said to represent a brothel in Buenos Aires. The main female dancer is wearing a black transparent and short dress, of which the edge seems to have been ripped. The top of the dress is a corset, very close-fitting, with a large V-shaped décolleté. There are no sleeves, only thin

straps, which gives the impression of even more nudity. She is also wearing black stockings with refined patterns. Her shoes are designed like typical tango shoes: black with high heels, a strap on the upper part of the shoe and the toe box halfway between rounded and spiky.

As for the other female dancers of this tango scene, they can be seen to be almost all wearing very short dresses too, quite similar to underskirts, mostly beige – only some are black or dark red. The top of their costume is also a corset, very close-fitting and rigid in appearance. Either they wear it like underwear or they put it above a chemise, a kind of nightgown French ladies used to wear in the beginning of the twentieth century (Simon 1998, 108-109). It seems to be made of fine lace, very delicate. They also wear beige stockings with a suspended belt and laced seam on the top, and their shoes are also typical tango ones.

In summary, the female tango dancer's costume is mostly defined as being erotic and sensual, very close to lingerie items. Mainly black, their dresses tend to be short or reveal most of their body. Dancers show their legs off by wearing top stockings and their shoes are elegant high heels.

1-3 Social environment and the female tango costume

An interesting aspect of the female tango costume is related to the social environment in which tango developed in the Buenos Aires of the late nineteenth century, as well as the place that women had in society in this period. It would not seem possible to properly understand why women had such a costume to dance tango without taking into account the social environment in which they evolved.

At the time, the female tango dancer was not seen as a "femme fatale", or sexy woman, as she may be nowadays. She was merely appreciated for her ability to follow her partner and to perform figures. She was the absolute representation of the exemplary woman, faithful and devoted to the male figure, executing any movement he would make her achieve, as long as she was paid for her performance (Schneider 1998, 17).

The fact that female tango dancers used to wear sensuous clothes may not have only been aimed at showing their "female assets", but also to emphasise their vulnerability. Therefore, we may assume that the female tango costume also represented the social situation of women at the time.

The style of the female tango costume also had a very tragic flavour, expressing sensuality through abandonment. It may also have reflected the sacrifice of these young girls who had to deny their body and personality to earn a living. It may have presented the female body as a sexual object, a violent image contrasting with the innocence of youth, as many of these girls would end up selling themselves. Brothels could be thought of as places where desperate souls were melting together - men who could not find love and women who sold it (Hatem 2001, 6-7).

If tango was said to be provocative and very sexually directed, it may be mainly because it was quite shocking at the time to see men and women dancing so closely and sensually, and even more to see women putting forward their body and playing with their legs in such a way against the body of a stranger - and what is more, in public.

Moreover, the Argentinean society was mostly governed by rules imbued by Catholic standards (Spaniards being the main ones who conquered South America) and the image of women conveyed by tango was even more controversial. Indeed, following Savigliano [10]'s arguments (1994, quoted in Archetti 1996, 105), Argentina was profoundly male-dominated and the main figures of tango were men (Piazzolla, Gardel, Discépolo, among others).

According to Hess (1999, 16-21), the waltz had already destabilised the social order in dancing by introducing equal steps for men and women. Dancing in symmetry and turning together, men and women were in harmony. Tango was now distinguishing both individuals, allowing one to perform figures while the other was stopped, and giving total freedom for improvisation. The male choreography is very different from the female's. Although the male tango dancer still has the lead, most of the steps are

putting the female dancer forward and she is supposed to embellish them and may add her own variation according to the space she is given.

Tango brought new moral standards that jeopardised the authority of men over women as established by the Catholic Church. It gave women confidence and enabled them to assert themselves as sexually independent persons, questioning the role of women as being mere reproductive instruments.

However, Argentineans were not ready yet for such a strong social reversal. Therefore, tango and its revolutionary ideas were rejected and sailed to Europe. One of the main focuses of this essay being to follow the evolution of tango, it seemed necessary to contrast the Argentinean female tango costume with the French one, as Paris had a great influence over the female tango costume. Consequently, the following section will concentrate on the evolution of tango in France.

[>> [Section 2](#)]

[>> [Table of contents](#)]

Footnotes

[1] According to the Lunfardo Online Dictionary, a tanguero is a person who dances tango. Following the Larousse Dictionary of Spanish, lunfardo is the slang language of Buenos Aires, often used in tango songs.

[2] See the official text of the Constitution of Argentina (www.biblioteca.jus.gov.ar/Argentina...).

[3] For more examples, see Bourdé 1974, 151.

[4] According to www.wikipedia.org, a gaucho is a South American cattle herder.

[5] In conformity with the Larousse Dictionary of Spanish and the Diccionario de la Real Academia Española, a payador is an itinerant singer who improvises stories with a guitar.

[6] According to Ferrer and Del Priore's work (1999), Enrique Santos Discépolo (1901-1951) was a theatrical performer, director and author.

[7] "Tango is a sad thought that you can dance".

[8] According to Salas (1989, 85), the first academias opened in the 1870's.

[9] Ferrer and Del Priore (1999) among others.

[10] Marta E. Savigliano is the author of *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (1994), reviewed by Archetti in *The Passion of Tango* (1996).