

The Scandalous Tango -- Good or Evil?

Nira Pullin

Through the ages there have always been people who criticized dancing - some dances more than others. Many were “deemed inappropriate because they crossed boundaries of acceptable behaviour for a certain class or gender”. The most criticized in the past have been the Animal Dances, Charleston, Waltz and Tango.¹ The Animal Dances became new dances, especially the Fox Trot, or died out completely. The Charleston is still with us in performances and socially and it led to the Lindy Hop. But the Wicked Waltz and the Scandalous Tango are still popular and danced today. It seems like controversy leads to popularity and that is what has happened with the Tango through the years.

The Tango became the first Latin American dance to reach the ballroom and one of the most popular dance crazes of all time. But... “There are so many variations of the Tango and so many different names for the same steps that the more one studies the Tango the more confusing does it become”.² The Tango is not only a specific dance but it developed into various styles. Let’s take a look:

[VIDEO CLIPS - eight minutes]



Buenos Aires Tango Postcard - 1900

Figure 1: Buenos Aires Tango Postcard - 1900

So... where did this Tango come from and how did the numerous styles develop?

The Tango is a rags to riches story born in the brothels of Buenos Aires, Argentina. At least that’s what most dance historians write:.

“The Tango’s complex history begins with seemingly unsolvable mysteries. Perhaps the earliest reference to the tango as a dance is [found] in some proclamations of the municipal court of Montevideo, Uruguay, which prohibited performing the ‘tangos de negros’ in public. The first extant description of the tango, from 1856, does not mention Argentina. This reference is in a Philadelphia dance manual and is attributed to a Parisian dance master....the 1856 description gives nodding acknowledgement to South America as the tango’s place of origin”.³

But no two people agree about the birth of tango. It has important roots traced to Spain, Italy, Portugal, Africa, and probably many more countries. Some say it is not of Latin American origin, but comes from an old gipsy dance from Spain, and others that it comes from folk dances of Cuba and Brazil. One claim even states it is from Tango, Japan. There are many more theories and differing opinions, but the search begins most successfully in Buenos Aires in the 1880s where many exiled immigrants fleeing Europe, landed in the outskirts of the port cities of Argentina. They were poor and lonely male immigrants [mostly from Spain and Italy]. Longing for home they would gather at night in the “barrio” (or neighbourhood) – to drink wine, play cards, dance, fight

and sing songs from their home countries. This dance called tango, initially danced only by men (mostly as practice partners), became a mixture of motion and sound from their cultures. Later when the dance moved to brothels and cafes, women prostitutes joined in, and the tango became a lascivious and sexual dance.

Men led, women followed, and tango was improvised. Part strut, part slither, the dance was defined by clutching each other tightly, the man's arm snaked around the woman, faces pressed together and legs entwined. Because of the close embrace, there was very little upper body movement. At this time no acrobatic or exhibition moves were seen. It was simply salon tango, with many sharing the same smoke-filled dance floor. Men outnumbered the women, but brothel men knew the dancing trick: "The best way to capture a girl [for the evening] is to squeeze her tight and never stop dancing".⁴

It was this close physical embrace and its seductive qualities that caused much scandal but, despite the controversy, both the music and the dance began to spread to larger cities. By the early 20th century one of those big cities was Paris. Parisians went completely mad about it. "Half of Paris

rubs against the other half. The whole city jerks: it's got the tango under the skin."⁵ Wealthy young Argentine men on their grand tour of Europe introduced it to their Parisian hosts and it invaded the clubs and cabarets. Unlike the Apache Dance popular in Paris at the time, the naughty tango was not as dangerous to do.

To make it even more acceptable, the dance was toned down and became the "French Tango". Partners were no longer glued together -- there was space between bodies and the dance moved around the floor more. The hold became similar to a regular ballroom hold. Now it was gaining entry to the upper classes and was being danced by exhibition performers at clubs and in shows. It became a staple at Tea Dances:

"There were tango teas held between four in the afternoon and seven where the public for an entry fee of up to five francs including tea and sandwiches, could dance to their heart's content. There were champagne-tangos, surprise-tangos, charity tangos, dinner-tangos, and of course tangos in nightclubs, then spreading like wildfire to cater to the dance craze."⁶

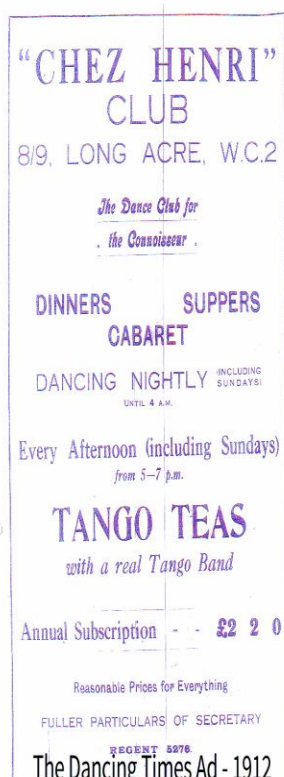


Figure 2: Ad from *The Dancing Times*, 1912

At many establishments, the management hired dancing partners, or gigolos, to take the unescorted women through their paces. Cashing in on easy money, immigrants were becoming dance partners, performers and teachers. "Male instructors were

particularly in demand, especially if they were handsome, exotic-looking Latins, or at least masquerading as such."⁷ Who wants to learn from John, James or Jim when you can be taught by Pablo, Maurice or Carlos?

Besides the popularity of tango dance, music and lessons, there were tango dresses, corsets,

The Scandalous Tango

bloomers or trouserettes, slippers, lots of postcards and much more. Tango had arrived.

Around 1910, the dance arrived in Britain. English tourists returning from vacationing in France wanted to dance the Tango. And many of the new teachers and performers came across the channel and brought tango with them. The DANCING TIMES in 1911 ran photos of the dance and it was seen in a West End show called THE SUNSHINE GIRL. Soon all of Europe was gripped by Tangomania.

Across the ocean another craze was happening -- Ragtime music and new dances to go with it. By 1913-14, America has gone absolutely dance-mad. Ragtime was sweeping the country. The Animal Dances which seemed like an inventory for the zoo -- with the Grizzly Bear, Turkey Trot, Kangaroo Dip, Camel Walk and more -- were dying out, but the One Step, Brazilian Tango, or Maxixe as it was called, were on the list. But the whole world was divided for and against the dance at the top of this list -- the Tango. Headlines from *The New York Times* Indexes at the time indicate the widespread views:

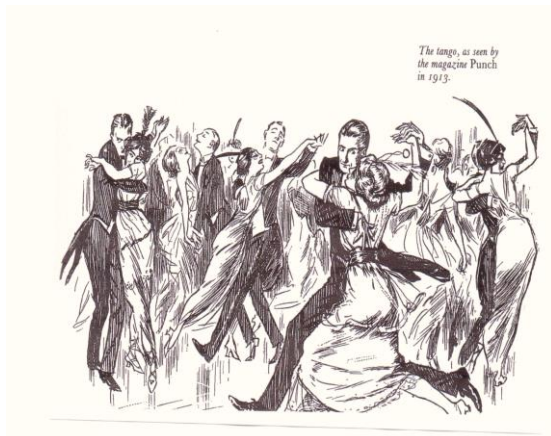


Figure 3: *Punch Magazine*, 1913

Tango Captivates Paris

Tango Absurd

Tango Defeats Vatican

Berlin is Tango Mad

Mayor Out to stop Tea and Tango now

Middle-aged dancers warned against Tango

Tango Party Given by Mrs. John Astor in London.
None Given by The Duchess of Marlborough.

But a young American exhibition dance couple named Vernon and Irene Castle did a lot for the acceptance of the new dances, especially the Tango. In *Modern Dancing*, they downplayed the disreputable Argentinian origins of tango pretending it was a quaint Spanish gypsy dance. Tango, they promised their readers, was: “today a polished and extremely fascinating dance...”.⁸



Figure 4: Vernon and Irene Castle

Their version was more refined, not full of jerky and complicated steps. The Castles performed it, taught it, wrote about it in their book in 1914. They opened a school and a restaurant. What they did and how they looked mattered. Around the world, especially in Paris, London and New York, they were as famous as famous could be. Vernon was English (family name Blythe) and he changed his name to Castle, after Windsor Castle. Today they are also credited with inventing the Castle Walk and with ‘Teaching the World to Dance’.

Tango was not just an obsession. This was also the beginning of the craze for “How To” books, especially about dancing. The American and English ones were translated and spread around the world. Then came the First World War and dance took a back seat for a few years. However, soldiers kept the craze going by spreading their country’s dance steps to wherever they were.

After the war the tango was back. Men returned home and wanted to live again, so partners were willing and available. The Jazz Age of the 1920s brought new music and a sense of freedom in the air. The adventurous Tango reflected that mood and the demand for it continued to grow along with the new Fox Trot and Charleston. In England, fewer private balls were being given and “Going out to dinner and dance in restaurants and hotels became quite permissible, indeed fashionable, and even more so going on to a nightclub after the theatre to have supper and dance into the small hours.”⁹

In Prohibition America, nightclubs and cafes offered entertainment and dancing in lieu of alcohol and the establishment became less risqué. Now more customers, especially men, flocked to dance the night away. In the 1920s, Argentina was enjoying a period of unprecedented prosperity and tango venues multiplied. It was even danced in the Presidential Palace at a banquet in honour of the Prince of Wales.

The English and American Ballroom Associations now fully accepted the dance and included it in their syllabus and in their ballroom competitions. They codified the steps and postures and now couples are attached only at the hips and were farther apart in the torsos. Walks were introduced to make the dance progress around the ballroom floor, stopping occasionally to pose and do sharp head turns. The seductive character was suppressed beneath a more aggressive drum beat instead of the original Argentinian mournful melody. The couple no longer looked at each other or pressed heads together and the intimate passion of the authentic tango was now paraded around the dance floor in a style more showy than sensual.

Popularity soared as the Tango danced its way onto the Silver Screen. Rudolpho Alfonzo Raffaello Guglielmi, better known as Rudolph Valentino, tangoed his way to fame. Valentino entered America from his home in Italy in 1913 and worked as a taxi dancer and escort before moving to Hollywood. He was an extra before becoming the great ‘Latin Lover’ on the big screen. Fred Astaire tangoed in a tuxedo with Ginger and Groucho Marx’s spoof of the dance was one of his trademarks.

In the 1930s, Latin American rhythms became the craze and the dance floor turned to the Samba, Rumba and others, but Tango remained a staple in the ballroom repertoire.

The 1940s brought in the Big Band sound, the jitterbug and another war. The 1950s turned to Rock n Roll and the Tango began to lose some popularity, but remained in the ballroom schools, competitions and of course, the tango salons in Argentina.

The 1960s brought in the Frug, no partner needed, but the late 60s/70s needed couples again for Disco and a new dance fever. But the Tango refused to die. In the early 1980s, the Argentine Tango style returned to the world stage in full force with a little show called “Tango Argentino”. It introduced show tango with lifts, dips, kicks between the legs and spellbinding acrobatics. “Tango Argentino” opened in Paris, moved to New York and became a smash sensation. The New York Post announced:

The Scandalous Tango

“Don't cry for Argentina anymore - simply rush, rush, rush, but quickly, to the City Center where, this week and this week only, you can feast your eyes, minds and hearts on TANGO ARGENTINO which opened the other night to a magnificently deserved standing ovation.”¹⁰

Then came “Forever Tango”, “Tango x 2”, and more shows and tours throughout the world. The craze was everywhere - again.



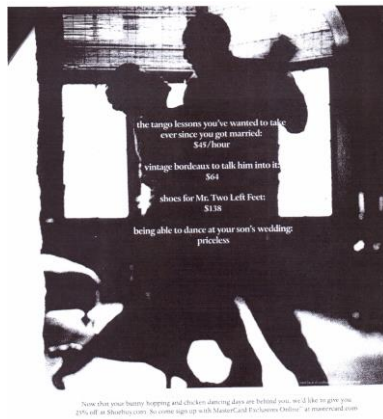
Broadway Show Posters

Figure 5: Broadway show posters

Couples were cemented together again, ladies sleekly dressed. The passion and intimacy is back. What was considered scandalous and shocking in the beginning is now applauded, accepted and copied. It has become the national treasure of Argentina.

Dance studios are offering Argentine Tango classes alongside their Ballroom Tango classes. Tango clubs are being formed, offering trips to Argentina to study the dance.

Films, such as *The Tango Lesson*, *Assassination Tango* and many more, feature tangos. Both Argentine and Ballroom styles are danced on the TV programmes *Dancing with the Stars* and *Strictly Come Dancing*. Tango fashions are in -- stiletto heels, slit skirts and slicked back hair for men.



Master Card Ad, PEOPLE Magazine - 2005

Figure 6: Master Card Ad, People magazine, 2005

Tango music has gained popularity. Placido Domingo and Julio Iglesias have CDs of tango songs. Yo Yo Ma recorded a CD called *Soul of Tango*. Chamber music societies are including tango music in their programs. Ice skaters are doing tangos in competition and newlyweds are choosing a tango instead of a waltz for their first dance.

Despite the loss of some popularity in the 21st century, the Tango is here to stay. And tango, like other dance crazes, has not been only for the young. One finds all ages doing the tango.

Here is a collection of comments that label the scandalous tango as good or evil, naughty or nice. Tango is:

“The Dirty Dancing of its Day.” “Cat on a hot dance floor,” “Sex in a black tie,” “A War of the legs,” “A secret danced by two.”

An NYC dance student stated: “The teacher told me that tango is synonymous with passion, and suggested I join the beginners’ class.”¹¹

Actor Al Pacino's character in the film *Scent of a Woman* said, “Tango is not like life my dear. There are no mistakes in tango...if you get tangled up, you just tango on.”

A French Countess once asked “Is one supposed to dance it standing up?”

Judge Len Goodman on *Dancing with the Stars* nicely defined the difference between two styles of Tango -- “The ballroom tango you dance with your wife, the Argentine Tango you dance with your mistress.”

And my favourite of all: the tango is, “The vertical expression of a horizontal desire.”

I leave you to make your own decision. But my conclusion is that the tango has to have a lot of good in it because it is still here. And when you dance it with a really good partner it is ooh soo good. And I have a really good partner, Bill Wilson, to help teach this workshop. Let's push the chairs back and dance the TANGO.

End Notes

¹ Mark Knowles, *The Wicked Waltz and Other Scandalous Dances*, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2009, p. 3.

² Betty Lee, *Dancing - All the Latest Steps*, NY: Edward J. Clode, 1926, p. 231.

³ Jo Baim, *Tango: The Creation of a Cultural Icon*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007, p. 2.

⁴ Victor A. Levant, *A Pickpocket's History of Argentine Tango*, 210 Canadian Intellectual Property Office, p. 32.

⁵ Simon Collier, Artemis Cooper, Maria Susana Azzi and Richard Martin, *TANGO! The Dance, The Song, The Story*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1995, p. 74.

⁶ Collier, p. 76.

⁷ Knowles, p. 113.

⁸ Ian Whitcomb, *The Best of Vintage Dance*, Pacific, Missouri, May Publ., 1976, p. 25.

⁹ Belinda Quirey, *May I Have the Pleasure? The Story of Popular Dancing*, London: Dance Books, Ltd., 1987, p. 83.

¹⁰ Clive Barnes, “Fandango Tango at Center”, *NY Post Newspaper*, June 27, 1985, p. 26.

¹¹ Robert Dominquez, “Scent On Tango”, *NY Daily News*, June 9, 1996, p. 8.

Suggested Reading

Baim, Jo. *Tango, The Creation of a Cultural Icon*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.

Barcia, Jose. *Tango, Tangueros, y Tango Cosas*. Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1976. (in Spanish).

Bravo, Louis, creator and director. *Forever Tango*, Program Copy, 1976.

Castle Irene. *Scrapbook*, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dance Division. NY: New York City.

Castle, Vernon and Irene. *Modern Dancing*. NY: Harper, 1914.

Castle, Mr. & Mrs. Vernon. *Victor Records for Dancing*, Pamphlet with Step Instructions, 1915.

The Scandalous Tango

- Chester, S. Beach. *Secrets of the Tango*. London: T. Werner Laurie, 1914.
- Clendenen, F. Leslie. *Dance Mad: The Dances of Today*. St. Louis, Missouri: Arcade, 1914.
- Collier, Simon, Artemis Cooper, Maria Susana Azzi and Richard Martin. *TANGO! The Dance, The Song, The Story*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1995.
- Golden, Eve. *Vernon and Irene Castle's Ragtime Revolution*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007.
- Hopkins, J. S. *The Tango and Other Up-to-Date Dances*. Chicago: Saalfield, 1914.
- Humphrey, Walter. "How to Dance the Tango." *Ballroom Dancing Times*, (London, 1911). Reprinted in *Ballroom Dancing Times*, October, 1990.
- Knowles, Mark. *The Wicked Waltz and Other Scandalous Dances*. North Carolina: McFarland and Co., Publ., 2009.
- Lee, Betty. *Dancing - All the Latest Steps*. NY: Edward J. Clode, Inc., 1926.
- Levant, Victor A. *A Pickpocket's History of Argentine Tango*. 210 Canadian Intellectual Property Office.
- Malnig, Julie. *Dancing till Dawn: a century of exhibition ballroom dance*. NY: New York University Press, 1992.
- McMains, Juliet. *Glamour Addiction - Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2006.
- Merritt, Carolyn. *Tango Nuevo*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2012.
- Mouvet, Maurice. *The Tango and the New Dances*. Chicago: Laird & Lee, 1914.
- Orezzoli, Hector and Claudio Segovia, Creators & Directors. *Tango Argentino*. Program Copy, 1996.
- Quirey, Belinda. *May I Have the Pleasure? The Story of Popular Dancing*. London: Dance Books, 1987
- Richardson, P. J. S. ed., *The Guide to the Tango*. London: Francis Day & Hunter, 1914.
- Taylor, Julie M. *Paper Tangos*. Durham, North Carolina & London: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Thompson, Douglas. *Shall We Dance? The True Story of the Couple Who Taught the World to Dance (Vernon & Irene Castle)*. London: John Blake, LTD., Publ., 2014.
- Thompson, Robert Farris. *Tango: The Art History of Love*. NY: Pantheon Books, 2005.
- Trabel-Amiel, A. *Das Buch fur Moderne Tanze*. Berlin, 1922. (Nice picture charts).
- Walker, Alexander. *Rudolph Valentino*, New Jersey: Stein & Day, 1976.
- Whitcomb, Ian. *The Best of Vintage Dance*. Pacific, Missouri: May Publ., 1976.

