

IT TAKES TWO...

Text and photos by Tom Cockrem



With dangerous abandon bodies slap together. They graphically align. Legs flick from the knee like horses' tails, while heads in lofty profile are welded cheek to cheek.

Expressions are at once aloof, impassioned and yet pained. The dancers wrench themselves apart only to entwine again as mood and tempo shift. And all these emotions—far too steamy to be quelled—seem at the mercy of the music, the tortured strings of the solo violin and the squeezed and strangled notes of bandoneon accordions.

The dance is the tango. Born in Buenos Aires, it is Argentina's most cherished institution, and gift to the outside world. Its origins hark back to the turn of the last century and beyond. Like most great art forms it is a hybrid, owing much to imported dancing



styles. The European polka fused with the Cuban *habanera*, to become the *milonga*. This in turn got overlaid with the African *candomblé*, which arrived in Buenos Aires with the slaves. Tango—the name itself—also most probably came from Africa. Its meaning, in several tribal dialects, translates loosely as: “a place set aside for dance”.

The tango first took hold with the flashy young suburbanites colloquially known as *compadritos*. Sporting dapper grey hats, loosely tied neckerchiefs, and high-heeled shoes, they would partner up in mock imitation of a knife fight. It caught on in dives where the low-life hung out around the *arrabales*, or semi-rural

Bordellos, brothels, brawls and booze

outer suburbs.

Graduating over time to the more shabby dance halls, *compadritos* might well find themselves with a lady partner. This would be most definitely so in the shady *clandestinos*, or houses of ill-repute. Bordellos, brothels, brawls and booze—for such locales nurtured the tango, and from here it derived its

signature salaciousness and verve.

The dance finally took all Argentina by storm, shunned only by the upper class elite. It reached its “golden age” in the 1920’s. By then it had already been exported to Paris, where it became an international phenomenon as well. But in France, the Parisians dressed the tango down. And the dance that we know in the West today—the somewhat prissy version of the tango danced in ballroom competitions—is essentially this form.

To enjoy the tango at its rawest, most unabashedly lascivious—some might even say downright dirty—you really have to



Tango Cabaret

go to Buenos Aires. For by coincidence or otherwise, the Argentine capital reached its golden age just as the tango was making its mark. The economy was booming. A grandiose Buenos Aires was touted as the Paris of South America. And in today's gloomy atmosphere, it is this glorious reputation that the city is at pains to uphold.

Nostalgia, then, is a hallmark of the capital, a harking back to those heady times gone by. The early tango legends are still idolised today—names like Carlos Gardel, the singer-movie idol, or Roberto Firpo, the bandleader, the controversial lyricist Enrique Santos

A traditional tango haunt is the old harbor district of La Boca.

Discepolo, and the charismatic female singer Azucena Maizani. Their images are found all over town, and their music emanates from CD shops and bars everywhere. Always close to the hearts of the *portenos*, tango has rarely

stirred their passions more than it does now. Its current resurgence is highly public. You find tango everywhere—in plazas, market places, shopping malls, *salons de baile* (dance halls) and cabarets.

A traditional tango haunt is the old harbor district of La Boca. Tango may not have been born in the docks, along the harbor, but this is where it grew up and thrived, embraced by Italian and Spanish migrants who swarmed into the city at the turn of the last century.

Today La Boca is in many ways a relic. The docks are rusting away, and the only busy parts are where the tourists come, like Caminito, a



pedestrian mall lined with colorful old homes built of corrugated iron. They owe their preservation to the pronounced nostalgia which likewise celebrates the tango with such gusto in their midst. For a peso, the visitor can have his photo taken with a Carlos Gardel look-alike. Time-honoured street musicians play their time-honoured art beneath wall plaques and statues of their time-honoured heroes. They make you want to cry in tune. And the souvenirs and art works are all about the dance—paintings, figurines, beer mugs, jewelry, tee-shirts, caps.

San Telmo lies between La Boca and the

city's "Microcentro". This is Buenos Aires' oldest residential district. Every Sunday it dresses up in style, playing host to a giant antiques fair. Antiques, cobblestones, aged terrace houses—a perfect backdrop for the tango. Dancers perform spontaneously amidst the mandatory crop of "human statues" dressed in 20's-style attire. A resident organ grinder ambles past.

Maybe some of these diehard street performers are a little past their prime. But the dancers in the popular tango cabarets are definitely not—they are all in peak form. With the physique and skill of Olympians, they perform their highly theatrical, highly charged, and highly entertaining routines. Clad in double-breasted pinstriped suits, with felt hats slanted just so, fishnet stockings for the ladies in their slinky side slit gowns—the dancers transport us back to the seamiest of the seamy 1920's tango bars.

The atmosphere is filled with tension. Jealousy flares over the attentions of a

"lady". A knife fight breaks out. The woman intervenes to prevent bloodshed, but is flung aside. The weapon finds its mark. But here among the lowlife, in the back streets of Buenos Aires, a knife fight is no reason to stop the music. The tango goes on.

Throbbing songs by Gardel and Maizani sound-alikes punctuate the dance programme. The virtuoso orchestra with scintillating solos sends tingles up your spine. Not all the musicians seem to have stepped out of the past. Some are so young—fresh-faced, with flowing hair; they might've come straight from school. It's somehow reassuring all this talent. The future of the tango is safe in the gifted hands of Argentina's youth. And where better place?

***Inca Tours can arrange tours of Buenos Aires, (which include La Boca and San Telmo, and evening excursions to a tango cabaret.) Tel: 1800 024 955*



Tango at San Telmo



Tango wall plaque at La Boca



Tango figurines on sale in La Boca



La Boca souvenir shops