

Why in tango we are not that social

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We call tango a social dance, yet people often complain that tango is in fact not very social. It is sometimes compared to other couple dances, salsa or swing, with the conclusion that the grass is greener on the other side. Tango becomes labelled as a dance that stimulates snobbism and elitism, instead of being a welcoming environment for dancers of all kinds, ages and levels of skill. Of course, it is not all that black-and-white, or tango would not be growing as rapidly and we would not be as joyously obsessed with it. Still, there is some truth in it. So, why is tango not as social as other social dances?

Tango is there for you to have a good time. Like all things in life, it also gives you an opportunity to grow as a human being, but whether you take this opportunity or not is up to you. You can also just have a good time. What does it mean to have a good time in tango? It means to connect with people you like. All the other things, from learning the technique to buying the right shoes, are merely attributes serving the main goal: to have a fulfilling experience. What exactly is a fulfilling experience varies from person to person.

This is true for any social activity. Yet, there is one distinct difference between tango and the rest. This difference is best explained by the words "close embrace". You see, close embrace is a tricky matter. The kind of connection we create in tango embrace is physically intimate, personal, inwardly oriented and totally encompassing. It takes time and a lot of practice to learn how to improvise together in close embrace. It is not something you just get up and do.

Tango is the most introvert of all dances, for the better the connection in the couple, the less the outer impression matters. This is also, I believe, the reason why everywhere such nice people end up creating such horrible dancefloor traffic: connecting to our partner takes up practically all of our attention. Learning to be aware of other couples is a skill that takes practice, just like ochos, but unfortunately we do not invest an equal effort in it. Tango is also a dance of profound and often serious emotion. Look at photos from any tango event and on people's faces you will see deep inward concentration as well as a kind of inner glow. Tango connection makes us vulnerable, opens us like a book, invites us to go inside ourselves and share what we find there with another person. All of this quite discreetly. Even the erotic connection in tango, when it happens, is discreet.

To me, it comes as no surprise that we cannot (and do not want to) connect in that way with just anybody. To create this kind of connection there has to be some compatibility between people and a DESIRE on both sides. It is more surprising to me that we actually do end up connecting deeply to so many partners. To some we prefer not to, and this often causes suffering and becomes a highly debated issue. In tango rejection and avoidance seem to directly impact our intrinsic value as a human being, rejection hurts, a little or a lot, depending on how much importance we attach to it. Knowing how rejection affects ourselves, we also find it tricky to reject others. We are empathic

beings, despite the cruelties we are capable of. We normally prefer not to cause other people harm we ourselves would rather avoid.

Tango is a quickly growing subculture, but it consists mainly of small local scenes. The smaller the community, the stronger the social ties and therefore the more profound the consequences of a rejection. In bigger cities the communities tend to form subgroups, because as humans we are only capable of comfortably socializing with a limited number of people. The moment we find ourselves in too large a crowd, it is similar to finding ourselves in a desert: we cannot connect to all those people around us meaningfully and therefore only care about those inside our circle of friends. This explains why in a small scene a stranger feels welcome, but in a big city the same person feels lost and ignored. This does not mean people in small scenes are warm-hearted and those in big cities are arrogant assholes. This view is a bit too simplistic.

To deal with the not-so-social side of tango you can start by accepting your basic right to a preference. Our life is also a “social dance” and in life we say “yes” to some experiences and “no” to others all the time. It does not matter what your reason is for wanting to dance with a particular person, but if you feel a DESIRE then your reason is valid. It may be considered wrong by others, it may even be considered wrong by yourself. It does not matter. What matters is the desire. The same is true for NOT wanting to dance with someone: the reason “why” does not matter. Often we cannot even explain why we want or don’t want a certain experience. Desire works in mysterious ways.

Next, accept that other people, too, have a right to a preference. Other people are just like you. They feel a desire or they don’t. All reasons to dance or not to dance with you are valid, even if you consider them wrong or hurtful. The desire can also come during the dance, like appetite. The desires might not match, but that is usually not a problem. Someone might want to dance with you because you are young and beautiful, whereas you want to dance with that person because s/he is an experienced dancer. As long as you are both desiring that dance, it works. The mutual desire gives a chance to forge that initial connection from which a fulfilling dance can be created. A chance, not a guarantee. What about “transactional” dances, the practice of taxi dancers? Believe or not, there is desire on both sides in that kind of tango, too: the desire to have a partner to dance with on one hand and the desire to make money on the other. You might think this kind of a desire is morally wrong, but it is simply different from yours.

We often think of desire as willingness to take, but when you invite somebody to dance or accept an invitation, you should also be willing to give. If you accept to dance without desire and then just wait for the tanda to end, you are not giving anything. Accepting to dance and merely showing how much you dislike it is disrespectful to your partner. If you are not willing to make the effort to enjoy the dance, to adapt to it in a positive way, learn to say “no”. If you are inviting, ask yourself: what do I want from this dancer and what am I able and willing to give in return? People always feel sharply when you only wish to take. They become much less willing to give it to you. I am not talking necessarily about the level of skill, it is not even necessarily about tangible things. If you have a giving attitude, your chances of success are simply much higher.

When inviting (as a man or a woman), do not put people in situations in which it becomes difficult for them to refuse your invitation. You will never get a fulfilling dance with someone who is not willing to connect, the experience will be mediocre at most. Remember, saying “no” is just as difficult as being rejected, you can’t help feeling bad afterwards. Use mirada and cabeceo to avoid the awkwardness of a verbal refusal and to give the other person a discreet way out. By accepting

each person's right to a desire, you can also accept the rejection without feeling that it has an impact on your value. The reason for not desiring to dance with you sometimes has nothing to do with you and sometimes it has everything to do with you. Accept that you will never know. Unless you ask that person "why", all your thoughts and opinions are just that: your own thoughts and opinions. Accept the rejections gracefully. Relieve it of all importance and forget about it. Do not make that person into your personal enemy. Do not demand explanations, unless you choose the right moment and are prepared to hear the answer. Do not beg. Do not make the person feel more uncomfortable than s/he is already feeling. Do not act entitled or insulted. Do not post messages about why some people are wrong not to dance with you. Do not call people snobs. Do not discuss their outrageous reasons not to dance with you, you have probably invented those reasons yourself. All the above actions will only have one result: you will feel worse.

"This is all very nice", you might say, "but I live in a community in which there is a very limited choice of partners. If I allow myself the luxury to only choose people I truly desire to dance with, I will probably not dance at all. Either because I desire people who ignore me or there are no people around I truly desire." These situations are indeed not easy. Yet, you cannot simply discard or force the desire. Putting pressure on men to dance with more women because of a gender imbalance will not solve the gender imbalance, only getting more men into tango will solve it. Making people feel guilty and hoping they will want to dance with you will not be productive either, desire does not work this way. If you are short of dancers you like, look for them elsewhere, start to travel, there are plenty of partners out there. If you find yourself short of partners who like you, find ways of becoming a desirable dancer or look for those who might like you now. All solutions can pay off in delightful ways. Tango is there for you to have a good time, but if you use it to grow as a human being, your journey will be so much more surprising.

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