

Argentine Tango

social dance health 'to' you

Text and Photographs by Jonathan Skinner





Argentine Tango: social dance health 'to' you

These three photos evoke the plaint of life. They are a static portrait of Argentine tango dancers mid-movement. This is life and action frozen and memorialized from a long-awaited Christmas party in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Unlike Julie Taylor's (2001) succession of mini-tango moves in her ethnography of tango and Argentina, a choreography by flipping, there is only the hint or trace of movement in these photos: the legs in open position with torque on the body, a shoelace working its way free; couples in closed embrace, the leader with motility, the partner with either open or closed eyes, primed to follow their initiations. There is longevity in the pictures from the detail of the marriage rings to the wrinkles on faces solemn with the dance, concentrating but also flowing with solace – 'relaxed responsiveness' as Richard Powers (2013) puts it.

Dance - described by Spencer (1) as that 'nonutilitarian patterned movement' - can be cathartic, controlling, competitive, communitarian as well as sustaining, maintaining and self-generating. There is solidarity amongst dancers, regularity in the order of attending, learning and performing a dance, and mutual self-affirming of an ontology of being-in-the-world each night when one dons one's dance clothes and horns a pair of dance shoes. Leslie Gotfrit (1988) speaks to the nostalgia and longing of a bygone body in women reclaiming themselves on the boogie floor. The same can be said of the tango couple, rejuvenating under the Christmas decorations. There is familiarity and comfort in the sociality of the Other in one's arms, often a life partner of decades moving with you, reassuring walking as one. "I dance to you": the 'to' a linking narrative and a metaphor for corporeal intimacy in the eyes of Judith Hamera's (2001) appropriation of Irigaray-ian philosophy.

'Indistinction' is how Jonathan Bollen (2001) phrases it as the dancers lean in, support each other, and begin to move in an improvised script to a music from a far-away land and a far-away time. In this case, social dance transports us to Argentina in the 1940s. In the beating of the hearts, and the fleetness of the feet, and the alert anti-clockwise lead around the room, there is wellbeing. Solace seeps up through the motile feet and calm descends from a labile imagination. Argentine tango, a self-selecting social dance, affects the dancers – variously, an anti-psychotic (Anon. 2013), a stabilizer for Parkinson's (Hackney et al 2007), an omni-therapy (Woodley and Sotelano 2011). These are just some of the benefits of this genre of social dancing. Other social social dancing such as ballroom dancing also has its strengths as a form of 'serious leisure' (Stebbins 2006) – a personal vehicle for successful ageing (Skinner 2013) - and can retain muscle density and stave off social isolation amongst other benefits. But Argentine Tango has the 'Healing Embrace' (Berve 2008): it is a resting place for the active. Those interested in more tango visuals and in following up on the worth of tango in the medical setting can follow this link to the annual '[All of Us Are Crazy for Tango](#)' programme put on by Hospital Borda in Buenos Aires.

Wherever danced - from Buenos Aires to Belfast, and carrying whatever condition - from physical to mental health issues, this dance addiction can become a boon and adjunct to other fracturing and faltering rhythms in life.

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