



To (Queer) Tango (Argentino) from a queer dancer's point of view

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Tango Argentino is a part of the cultural inheritance and the soul of all Argentines. As a modern international dance, it belongs to anyone (straight or queer) who wants to explore the sensibility that it takes to dance a (Queer) Tango (Argentino).

As a modern queer woman and tango dancer, I would love to ask the tango-world: Why have the straight people of the tango community hijacked Tango Argentino? What happened to the tango community? Tango dancers are usually warm and loving people, but somehow along the way they turned territorial at the *milongas* (tango balls) and excluded some people from the party. And why do the majority of dancers still love the strict heterosexual roles —where a man is a leader and a woman is obliged to follow him?

I see the European tango-world as a child of the mindsets of the Argentine teachers and their European (straight/queer, gay/feminist) colleagues, who carried the modern tango to Europe in the mid 1980s. The teachers are/were all excellent tango dancers, who dance/d both roles, but at the beginning I guess they lacked experience as teachers. It seems as if they shied away from teaching both roles of Tango Argentino to the students in their (mixed) classes, although they'll probably all tell you today that you will be a better tango dancer if you know how to dance both roles. When developing their concepts for teaching modern tango, they turned Tango Argentino (with a bit of help from the media and theater) into the star of modern heterosexual dance. These teachers could have developed a different set of ambitions on behalf of their students, but for most people (straight or queer alike) dancing the opposite role of what you expect (by virtue of your gender) is something that you simply do not do in public—full stop.

My journey into the world of Tango

started in 1992, when I joined my first tango class (as a follower). However, I stopped again almost before I had started. I was young and lesbian, and I didn't really feel at ease with men, so I concluded that the time and place were wrong.

A few years later, I went to a lesbian summer camp where I started dancing folk dances with the other women. I discovered that dancing was great fun! I continued exploring folk dances for a period of five years over the following 14 or 15 years. I danced all the different Danish folk couple dances, and I went on to dancing Irish Set Dances (social dances for four couples) in search of new challenges and more complex dances.

In 2009, I decided that I wanted to take my dance in a new direction. I needed a change of dance scene and I returned to Tango Argentino. As a dancer, I had developed an identity as being both a leader as well as a follower, so this time I did not join my local tango community as a queer woman “impersonating” a straight female follower. Instead, I walked onto the dance floor as queer tango dancer i.e. a leader/follower. It took some courage to do this, as I didn't know what kind of reaction to expect. After all, tango has an image of being a predominantly heterosexual couple's dance.

I am not the same woman as I was 18 years ago. Today I don't mind standing out as queer; and I certainly do stand out. I live in a place where there are no queer milonga. I am a single dancer, and most of the time, at my local milongas, I am the only woman leader on the dance floor. I am deeply honored each time a woman accepts a *cabeceo* (invitation) to dance with me, as the thought still lingers that whatever I do as an out and proud queer woman and tango leader may upset people so much in some places that it automatically will be labeled a political statement, even though all I want is to dance and have a good time with my women. Fortunately for me, my journey into the world of tango has a happy ending, and I'll live the rest of my life with my true love: Tango.

Queer Tango

Looking back at a herstory, which I can't claim to be a part of, I assume that the one-sided (heteronormative) pedagogy of the tango-world, the branding of Tango Argentino as a sensual dance and the sexy star of the





couple dances, together with an urgent need for safe spaces for LGBTQ dancers to dance were the main reasons why some of the feminist tango teachers started same-sex tango in the 1980s. They, alongside their gay male colleagues, initiated a homosexual subculture within the tango-world. In Germany, same-sex tango classes for women, taught by women, were running by 1988. Several pairs of worn-out tango shoes later, the concept of Queer Tango was invented by Ute Walter and Marga Nagel and it was marketed along with the 1. International Queer Tango Festival, the homosexual subculture's celebration of tango, held in Hamburg, Germany, in 2000.

Ute Walter, co-founder of Queer Tango Festival Hamburg explains: "Through our years of intensive work, especially in the early years, we have build the foundation of a well connected worldwide Queer Tango Community, which next to developing into a consumed product, offers an amazing possibility to practice an example of a dialogue focused on cooperation through and by intercultural differences. There are lots of things which connect us but still there are (not only intercultural) differences in the view of Tango/Queer Tango. There are conflicts, distinct interests, identities and identifications. But all the Queer Tango Rooms offer over and over again the opportunity for people with all their varieties to get in touch and meet each other with sympathy, care and solidarity."

The concept of Queer Tango

Queer Tango is Tango Argentino danced with open roles—the couple switches roles at least once and often several times while dancing a tango. Sexual preferences and traditional gender roles are said to be irrelevant as Queer Tango elaborates on the improvisational nature of Tango Argentino by adding a queer element: the fluidity of who is the leader of the two persons dancing together. The Argentine dances— tango, tango-waltz and milonga—can be danced as a Queer Tango (Queer Tango, Queer Tango-waltz and Queer Milonga).

Queer Tango— the brand/label of alternative tango events

"Queer" is a label being used in connection with several kind of events hosted by the queer tango subculture: queer tango rooms, queer milongas, queer tango festivals, queer tango marathons, etc., to indicate that a space/event is welcoming queers, LGBTQ dancers, same-sex couples, and other people who find it liberating to leave the gender roles of traditional tango at the door and have fun at a queer milonga.

The invisible dance

The dance of Queer Tango has not yet gained mass interest in the tango-world. When I talk to dancers about Queer Tango, I hear and sense the following reasons for not dancing tango with open roles: Women think that it is too complicated for them to master both roles; leading looks more difficult than following; and the switching of the roles must be confusing for the dancer. As a result, most female dancers decline to learn to lead and to dance Queer Tango. Most women (followers) appreciate good leaders and will accept dances regardless of the gender of the leader as long as s/he is polite and gentle. Male dancers hesitate to dance Queer Tango because they do not want to be in intimate physical contact with other men (a soft version of homophobia) or because they do not feel at ease dancing as/like a queer person at their local milongas. My experience tells me that men who are willing to try dancing as a follower are pleased to dance one or two tangos with a woman leader. *Milonguero/as* (advanced dancers) at the regular milongas of the mainstream tango-world do not dance much Queer Tango. Sasha Cagen (USA) has interviewed Queer Tango dancer and straight woman Helen "La Vikinga" Halldórsdóttir (Buenos Aires) about Queer Tango and the culture of the different tango scenes around the world [Video <http://vimeo.com/26247448>]. As a tango teacher Helen "La Vikinga" has been dancing Queer Tango for many years, and she encourages exploration of tango with open roles in order for people to discover which role they prefer.

At queer tango festivals, queer milongas, queer tango marathons, etc., Queer Tango is now danced somewhat more frequently by same-sex couples, but when looking at a busy dance floor, it takes a trained eye to spot the few couples, who are dancing Queer Tango, as the switching of roles can be so integrated in the moves of tango that you hardly notice it happening.

In searching for this almost invisible dance, I resorted to Queer Tango dance videos on YouTube. Here are a couple of samples:

- Greta Hekier and tango star Ariadna Naveira performed an amazing tango waltz in 2008 [Video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WG87K_Onk-Q]. In this dance Greta Hekier starts as a leader, then they switch roles six times, and the waltz ends with Ariadna Naveira leading. *[The pattern used by this couple, where the original leader gives the honor of ending the dance to her follower, is, in my*





opinion the most polite way to dance a Queer Tango].

- Mariano Garcés and Alejandro Figliolo [Video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_YQla7FByM] performed a lovely Queer Tango in 2011, where Garcés danced in high heels, which is somewhat unusual, even for a gay male dancer.

I believe the female couple (in the first of the two dance videos above) to be more straight than gay, and the male couple to be more gay than straight, but what they may appear to be today doesn't say anything about how they will identify tomorrow. (Queer) Tango (Argentino) is about dancing, not about the sexual preferences of the dancers.

Down to basics: Caminada, let's walk together and feel what the fascination of (Queer) Tango is about?

The Tango (Argentino) consumer experience consists of the following feelings / joys:

- *The Tango Music.* The music (like all music) goes into your body and you feel light, happy, and enlightened for some time after the music has stopped. Music is great medicine, if you feel low. Tango songs are often about great passion and broken hearts, but the music makes complicated emotions easier to bear. It takes away your *weltschmerz*, at least for a few moments.
- *The Tango Meeting.* Tango is a meeting between two dancers on the dance floor. Tango is designed to teach you a special sensibility, how to listen to your partner's body language. Tango opens your heart. All tango dancers fall in love with this non-verbal way of communicating and listening.
- *The Embrace.* To embrace and be embraced is nice. There is no place in modern society where you get as many hugs as in the tango-world, especially if you dance the *Milongero* style, where each tango is danced with a close embrace. Furthermore, if you deliver a lovely tango, then you are immediately rewarded by your dance partner with a happy smile and perhaps even a hug and a kiss.
- *The Treasure Hunt for Wow-Dances.* Every meeting, every embrace, and every tango is different. Some are better than others. After some dances you are at loss for words. They are just more... WOW! And you'll treasure them for months. The treasure hunt for wow-dances may lead to thoughts like, *Maybe the milongas are better in Berlin, San Francisco, or Buenos Aires?* and to tango tourism.
- *The Challenge of the Dance.* The process of learning how to walk the tango way (*caminada*) and how to lead and follow is exciting, as this dance is so different from all other dances, because of its being designed as a dance consisting of nothing but improvisations.
- *Looking at the Milongero/as Dancing and Being Looked At When You Dance.* We all know that we are looking at each other all the time, and many of us like this kind of attention.

The Bonus Experience of the joys of Queer Tango:

- *Queer Tango.* The unique thing about the Queer Tango (danced with switching roles) is the playful game of exchanging musicality with your dance partner. The rest is just Tango, danced the way that comes most naturally to you. [Note that the pose of the arms, the visual indication of who is the leader, is not necessarily the indicator of who is actually leading. An advanced dancer can lead just as well from the position of follower, since the lead is performed by movements of the torso. Leading has nothing to do with the arms at all.]
- *The Queer Milonga.* Meeting 150 to 200 queer-identified dancers from all over the world at the gala milonga of an international queer tango festival is an awesome experience. There I am just one of the women, and I have a chance to network with female dancers, who accept and perhaps even appreciate my sexual orientation. I enjoy watching the queer milongeras dance, and I hope for a few wow-dances with some of the amazing women, whom I'll probably never get to meet at my local international tango festival as this is too mainstream (i.e. heterosexual) a tango-scene for these queer milongeras.

The Tango Meeting

Above I introduced the term *Tango Meeting*, as it is not a part of standard tango terminology. The Tango Meeting is about the love and flow of energy between two people when dancing. Having accepted an invitation to dance, or having invited someone to dance and received a yes, you and your dance partner meet on the dance floor and dance for one *tanda* (a set of 3 to 4 tangos). A Tango Meeting is not only about the couple in their little bubble of tango love, however, it is the whole package of being together, the music, the room, the flow on the dance floor, smells and other sounds (for example the sound of your partner breathing). When tango teachers want their students to improve the Tango Meeting aspect of their dance,





they usually say, “Let's go down to basics, no complicated dance figures: *Caminada*, listen to your dance partner and walk together as one [being].”

Queer Tango in a world of remix

When branding a commodity like (Queer) Tango (Argentino), marketers of the tango-world use a number of arguments or Ultimate Selling Points (USPs) to convey the advantages of their products (tango, same-sex tango, Queer Tango). One story about Queer Tango is told in the mainstream media, and stories with altogether different USPs appear in LGBTQ media. However, words alone do not sell tango. An image says more than a thousand words because it talks directly to our emotions. The visualization of tango via images, film, and video is what really sells tango. Tango films like “The Tango Lesson” directed by Sally Potter, and the modern sound composer Astor Piazzolla’s tangos have had a major influence on the popularity that Tango Argentino holds today.

The imagery of the tango-world is very stereotypical, as is the mainstream notion of tango. Tango portraits taken from a conventional point of view—full figure or half-figure images of the tango couple (straight or homosexual) in a tango pose—will sell tango courses and events much better than images that are closer to the actual tango experience (as described above). This is because the true tango images have a different feel to them than the more conventional, superficial photos. The true images visualize something not generally associated with the mainstream image of tango: They capture the uniqueness of the well-designed experience of Tango Argentino, the core of which is the display of the qualities of love, such as when the tango couple is performing moves that look so romantic or erotic that you are bound to believe that the dancers are in love, even though you know that what you see is them being in love with (Queer) Tango (Argentino).

QUEER TANGO RESOURCES

The Web is a new, amazingly democratic medium. You can post/publish as many queer images and home tango videos as you like. Tango teachers and tango event organizers use social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook when spreading the word about their queer-friendly activities. The sheer number of photos, video clips, and websites available on the Web in the years to come is bound to change both the image and imagery of Queer Tango.

I have compiled (below) some links about milongueras dancing Queer Tango or same-sex tango in order to help the interested reader access a sample of what is available now. The videos feature the three Argentine dances, tango, tango-waltz and milonga, which are danced at all queer tango events.

Photos:

Photographer Wenjie Yang has made a photo essay (slideshow and interview) titled “Queer As Tango” with Lexa Roséan [Slideshow <http://www.wenjieyang.com/queerastango/>]. In this multimedia essay you hear Lexa Roséan talking about her experiences as a lesbian and queer milonguera and you see photos of Lexa dancing with, among others, Gayle Madiera and Helen ‘La Vikinga’ Halldórsdóttir.

Queer tango videos – the milongueras:

[When I evaluate a tango dance video from the queer tango-world, I always look to see if kisses are exchanged afterwards as an indication that the dancers believe the tango was a great experience and perhaps even a wow-dance.]

[Other videos, including performances by queer/gay milongueros can be seen by visiting the YouTube video stream 'sfqueertanguero'.]

Queer Tango

Mariana Docampo (Buenos Aires) & Soledad Nami (Buenos Aires), 2010
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eu3wkaa0TqI>

Soledad Nani (Buenos Aires) & Jesus Pietropoulos (Buenos Aires) performed at Festivalito de Invierno Tango Queer 2010
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bISqsygnf1k>

Ariadna Naveira (Buenos Aires) & Fernando Sanchez (Buenos Aires) performed at the queer milonga La Marshall in Buenos Aires, 2009 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0ngz10oulM>

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Rebecca & Brigitte (Seattle), 2004
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnHIJv1VtbA>

Queer Tango-waltz

Astrid Weiske (Berlin) & Mareike Focken 2010
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p038-kN5sX8>

Greta Hekier & tango star Ariadna Naveira (Buenos Aires) 2008(?)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WG87K_Onk-Q

Queer Milonga

Sharna & Aja at "Tang-O-Rama", June 29, 2011
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCTP6Nf8Jfk>

Helen La Vikinga & Janier Guiraldi performed at the 9th Tango Queer Festival, Hamburg, 2010
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zg-qA8vOg7Q>

Tango

Sharna & Aja at "Tang-O-Rama," June 29, 2011. Opening show for the 2011 International QueerTango Festival, San Francisco - <http://youtu.be/v-UiWzpos-g>

Pier Voukos (San Francisco) & Winter Held (San Francisco), June 2011
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_profilepage&v=F05fDdOdpLg

Ariadna Naveira (Buenos Aires) & Mariangeles Caamano, 2011
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjPBHNEs4h8>

Erin Mally (San Francisco) & Winter Held (San Francisco) published to promote the 3rd Annual International QueerTango Festival, San Francisco, 2011
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnBhC63rm_U

Ute Walter (Hamburg) & Eliane Reigner (Hamburg), 2011
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsyW2p9sCOc>

Astrid Weiske (Berlin) & Anne Marie Arlent, 2010
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEfrU1DSI2A>

Ute Walter (Hamburg) & Eliane Reigner (Hamburg), 2010
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8t59WevOA_E

Ariadna Naveira (Buenos Aires) & Ines Muzzopappa (Buenos Aires), 2008(?)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLXPC5DxnHA>

Tango-waltz

Astrid Weiske (Berlin) & Pier Voukos (San Francisco), 2011
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vY-n5RiFGkk>

Milonga

Lexa Roséan & Gayle Madeira (New York), 2009(?)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IXyB4DHvac>

Helen "La Vikinga" Halldórsdóttir (Buenos Aires) & Lexa Roséan (New York), 2009
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfGzZWhtGog>

Helen 'La Vikinga' Halldórsdóttir (Buenos Aires) & Alejandro Andrián (Buenos Aires), 2009
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-2QNHUegcU>

Valya & Silvina (Moscow), 2006
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhknYQ41j9Y>

Silvina Valz & Alicia Jumar-Loffler, 2006
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Axh7BWgAmM4>





Queer Tango Performances

Nancy Lavoie & Karen Gouderault, Québec 2011

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDyBsxyrFKo>

Tango Con*Fusión, Mariana & Debbie, San Francisco 2010

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qm3Bm5aKlig>

Valeria Solomonoff from TangoMujer Dance Company, solo at the International Queer Tango Festival, Hamburg, 2007

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EX1my9cgu0>

Silk by TangoMujer Dance Company, Brigitta Winkler & Fabienne Bongard, San Francisco, 2006

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-RqtiMZZpl>

Cumparsita by TangoMujer Dance Company, Brigitta Winkler & Rebecca Shulman, San Francisco 2006

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSNKMhcA7xE>

Tango movie:

The trailer of "The Tango Lesson" (1997), directed by Sally Potter. Starring Sally Potter and Pablo Veron.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfn5_sz_B8M

A lovely interview with Sally Potter about the process of learning to dance tango as well as writing and directing "The Tango Lesson." In this interview you also see clips from "Orlando" (1992), a film based on Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* (1928), directed by Sally Potter.

Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6q7DmuYzyng>

Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyDd5P4VBWc&NR=1>

Where to go to dance Queer Tango?

See Claudia Mai's queer tango calendar - <http://www.queertango.net/>

