

# Queer Tango and the ephemeral abrazo

By Birthe Havmoeller, Aarhus, Denmark. June 2012

When I took up dancing Tango other dancers were asking me, 'Why do you want to lead?' Now a couple of years later, as they can see that I more or less know what I am doing on the dance floor this kind of questions are less frequent. The 'why?' puzzled me a bit. What kind of answers were they expecting from me - the ambitious, the straight, or the queer one? I was just dancing the way that comes most natural to me, but as it happened hardly any of the other tango dancers were dancing both roles (= leader / follower) at my local tango balls, and I found myself invading one of the modern dance culture's heterosexual strongholds. Their questions made me question my reasons for leading, but it didn't make me stop doing what I was doing i. e.

DANCING with people regardless of their gender switching between dancing as a leader and as a follower as often as needed. Their way of dancing tango isn't the only way.

Soon I was introduced to the concept of *Queer Tango*, the latest in a long series of tango styles , and I had found a mind set by which to mirror and contemplate my own practice.

## Queer Tango [Argentino]

Describing a dance style, which is constantly evolving is complicated. In the following I'll share some of my thoughts and observations with you.

a) *Queer Tango* is often described as Tango Argentino danced with *Open Roles*. In this context 'queer' is a re-appropriation the academic concept of *queer* as presented in the Queer Theory by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Lauren Berlant.

[Wikipedia: "*Queer theory's main project is exploring the contesting of the categorisation of gender and sexuality; identities are not fixed – they cannot be categorised and labeled – because identities consist of many varied components and that to categorise by one characteristic is wrong. Queer theory said that there is an interval between what a subject “does” (role-taking) and what a subject “is” (the self). So despite its title the theory's goal is to destabilise identity categories, which are designed to identify the “sexed subject” and place individuals within a single restrictive sexual orientation.*" Source, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_theory) ]

The concept of *queer* takes Tango into the realm of *the Other*, the non-mainstream. It destabilizes the traditional (heteronormative gender) role play and division of labor of the Tango Argentino, where the man leads and the woman follows by suggesting that both dancers may learn to dance both roles. - However learning both roles does not necessarily mean that a dancer will dance both roles at a public *milonga* (tango ball). Most dancers, who pursue dancing Queer Tango are inclined to preferring one of the roles more than the other.

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b) The tango couples, who practice some kind of shared leadership when dancing the dances of Tango, Tango vals and Milonga are in my opinion dancing *Queer Tango* (Queer Tango vals and Queer Milonga). The practice of shared leadership of the dance opens for shared musicality, new creative processes and a more equal division of labor within the couple and the power associated with the roles of leader/ follower.

At queer tango events the tango couples often share the leadership of the dance by taking turns when leading. One dancer lead the first two tangos and gives the lead to the other dancer who'll lead the last two tangos of the *tanda* (set of 3-4 dances). At these events you may also see advance dancers dancing Queer Tango, brilliantly switching roles as they dance, turning the lead into a flowing energy where one can not tell who is leading and who is following. These dancers look as if they refrain from being the holder of a specific role in order to co-create their dances.

[See more details about Queer Tango at Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer\\_Tango](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_Tango)]

### **Abrazo - the ephemeral embrace**

A dancer once told me with a smile, *'There is nowhere you can get as many hugs as in the tango community!'*

Escaping the frantic outer world into the microcosm of the milonga all tango dancers are dying to be embraced and the embrace is just what Tango gives us.

Forming the traditional A-frame of the classic Milonguero style Tango our bodies meet at the upper part of the torso in the *abrazo* (the closed tango embrace). The tango leader leads by leaning forward, pushing ever so gently at the heart of the follower. The follower receives the lead by accepting their shared axis.

The aesthetics of the dance simulates and stipulates a loving relationship between the two people; the tango dancers are in in love, not with each other, but with dancing Tango. Having accepted your *cabeceo* (invitation to dance) a tango dancer will attempt to be the love of your life during your dance.

The gentle abrazo spark feelings of love, joy, and tenderness. Like bubbles in a glass of champagne the emotions flows in your body, when you adjust the embrace and start to *caminada* (the basic tango walk) and start dancing, but when the music stops, it is all over! What the untrained eye sees as a couple in love is the well designed sensual moves of Tango Argentino and a good measure of the love and dedicated attention, which come natural for all tango dancers to share with each other... be it with a casual dance partner, a friend or a stranger. The tender embrace is as ephemeral as a rainbow after the rain has stopped; it only



leaves a faint impression on your heart, before it evaporates as the music stops, we smile, hug, and go our separate ways to share the next tanda with another dance partner.

Tango Argentino is a non-verbal dance. It may look as sensual as a kiss, but the tango dancers flirtatious *cabeceo* (invitation to dance by eye contact) never reads, 'Give us a kiss!' It just says, 'Give us a dance!' The follower accepts the invitation to dance by a subtle nod ( - or says, no thank you by looking away, and thus cutting off the flirtatious eye contact). Western people, who are out of their element, when it comes to adopting the Argentine tradition of *cabeceo* often resort to the traditional verbal invitation to dance: 'Would you like to dance?'

### **Female wisdom: The first mystery**

A milonguera revealed the esoteric mystery of Tango Argentino to me, '*If you have control of the lower part of the torso i.e. hara and root chakra, the dance will open your heart chakra and change your life.*'

Control of your posture and body language is an inherent part of excellent tango technique. The arts and creativity are said to be a sublimation (a process of transition) of man's (pro-)creative energy. On the tango dance floor, we see lots of love and connectedness, but no explicit sexual arousal as this is against the codex of the milonga. Besides the concentration and connectedness needed in order to dance well is of a different nature than our basic sexual energy. The general notion is that we have better dances, when we can put aside our sexual desires and concentrate on the flow of the dance. However, we are all flirting with each other in order to get our dances and embraces.

At the milonga we all love to look at the dancers' sensual tango moves and in return we accept the gaze of the spectators, when we are on the dance floor. The Tango and the milonga experience are about turning the dance, the abrazo, along with the music and the lyrics of a tango song into a romantic embodiment of togetherness, flow and sensual almost meditative tango improvisations.

When '*we dance Tango in between each others leg*', as an Argentine dancer described one of the provocative element of the Tango and as we dance the Milonguero style tango cheek to cheek, we honor the roots of the Tango as a substitute for or foreplay of sex at the brothels of Buenos Aires in the 1890s until about 1915. Later the dance moved from the brothels to the cafes and the dance halls. The 'porn' elements of Tango were subdued and the aesthetics of the dance evolved into the Tango, which we dance today. However, the dance never lost its sensuality and tango instructors teach that absolute connectedness between the dancers is essential for a good dance experience. Access to the sensual non-verbal experience of the dance and the abrazo are a must at the milonga, and all dancers will wait until after the tanda to try to find out, if their



physical attraction might carry over to an intellectual and emotional attraction as well off the dance floor, if that is where they want to take their conversation.

### **Female wisdom: The second mystery**

Modern science tells us that the music and dancing releases joy hormones in our bodies, and there is a subtle correlation between the dancers and the spectators by which joy is transmitted to everybody present at a milonga. On a physical level, yet subconscious to most of us, we all share love and other deep emotions with each other at the milonga, and magic moment is, when all the couples on the dance floor start dancing together, as this will make the individual couples little bubble of Tango Love become a part of a deeper and higher flow / flush of harmony.

### **Tango roles and role play**

Professional dancers and tango instructors know how to dance both roles and at tango workshops they encourage their students to do so, but privately they seem not to be interested in dancing tango with open roles or reversed roles in public. They adhere to the strictly hetero normative role play of the tango world, and they pass on characteristics of this mind set to their students by virtue of being role models. The (unspoken) assumption of heterosexual normality is very useful for making straight people feel fine in the world, but not the rest of us, lgbtq people.

Dancers, who pursue the creative path of dancing Queer Tango (Argentino) often attend queer tango events. The term *queer* as in 'queer milonga', 'queer tango festival' refers to what most of us think it means – not-necessarily-straight-and-quite-possibly-lesbian, -gay, -bi-, -transsexual, -questioning, -intersex, -queer-identified people. Being *queer* is usually defined by the young generation of queer people as a non-identity. It is a deep wish not to be defined by your sexuality.

Most people will tell you that they don't like being labeled by virtue of their sexual preferences. Queer people want to be accepted like everybody else, and dream that sexuality and all the shyness, taboo and bias isn't what will constitute your first impression of them. They do not want to be one of the *Others*, marginalized by their choice of soul mate, just because this person isn't of the opposite gender, and thus (un-)intentionally is turning them non-straight and potentially queer / gay. The term *queer* is liberating, as it blurs the boundaries of the groups by claiming that sexual identity is a fluid practice.

[*Queer* has a growing body of scholarship to explicate it. Learn more at Wikipedia:  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer>]

### **Tango is so hot and sexy!**

There are no 'neutral' space in the realm of Tango - especially not at a queer tango event. All dancers are all flirting to get their tangos and hugs, but here the role play is different: Women

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cabeceo women, men cabeceo men, and friends dance together as mixed couples. The sexual energy (for lack of a better word) at a queer milonga is much subdued compared to that of a regular (straight) milonga, as you may not assume anything about the sexual preferences of the dancers.

However subtle your (queer) cabeceos are, a person who is actively blurring (/ queering) the gender boundaries of regular milonga by dancing Queer Tango is bound to stand out, as only few straight people pursue the dancing of both roles at the mainstream milongas.

“Coming out” as a dancer, who dances both roles (regardless of your gender and sexual preferences) may make people wonder, why you are dancing the *other* role i. e. flirting with someone of your own gender? - Considering the hetero normative mind set of the tango world, I find that it is important to take the topic of taboo into consideration when discussing the Queer Tango Argentino / Tango danced with *open roles*. The negative attitude towards homosexuality in general make me doubt that any lgbtq person may state that his or her life has not been affected by discrimination or internalized bias. My personal experience is that it may take years fully to learn to embrace one's Otherness and the Otherness, which one sees in other people. Dancing Tango with open roles may potentially make you very conscious about your sexual identity, as you will be dancing with partner of both genders.

The subtle homophobia of the tango world – or looking at the other side of the coin: The sexual preferences which are the key to many people's choice of tango partners and their engagement in the tango role play is something, which we all assume is happening, but we just don't talk much about it.

### **The pedagogy of Queer Tango [Argentino]**

The concept of Queer Tango was invented by Ute Walter, Marga Nagel and Felix Feyerabend and launched in 2001 alongside the 1. International Queer Tango festival in Hamburg, Germany. This dance style it requires a high level of connectedness and ability to listen to your dance partner's body language for both the leader and the follower, or you'll miss the subtle moves and invitations coming from the person in the position of the follower.

I see open minded tango teachers teaching their (predominantly straight) students how the tango leaders in their dances now and then may let go of the lead and let the followers be free to improvise as they please.

Tango teachers, who have taken up teaching Queer Tango or Tango with open roles teach how to switch roles gracefully or how to lead from the position of the follower as a strategy for dancers, who pursue dancing both roles. They explore the numerous ways by which to *queer* a tango for example by making small moves as musical interventions from the position of the



follower. Moves which add something extra to the flow of dance without the follower actually taking over the leadership of the dance by initiating a switch of roles.

The benefits of learning Queer Tango is a higher level of awareness and acceptance of your queer tango dance partners as diverse, strong dancers; and knowing the other role will make you a better dancer, even if you decide only to dance one of the roles.

Taking up dancing Queer Tango on a regular basis will open your eyes and heart to wonderfully creative people. Brave dancers, who are willing to share their musicality and creativity with you, when you'll let go and share the leadership / follower-ship of the dance and start co-creating with them. This is the amazing gift, which the makers of the concept of Queer Tango [Argentino] are trying to make all of us see, cherish and love.

***About Birthe Havmoeller (b. 1962)***

*I am an un-coupled social dancer and a lesbian. I have danced tango since 2009. I came to tango as a folk dancer having been dancing both roles of the Danish folk dances and Irish set dances (i.e. coupled dances) for five years, so it came natural for me to take up dancing leader / follower, when I joined my local (straight) tango community in Aarhus, Denmark. I dance Milonguero style tango in a predominantly open embrace dancing tango community. I have attended queer tango festivals in Copenhagen, Stockholm, Hamburg and Berlin.*

