

Petra Broomans (Dancer 1) & Lars Huldén (Dancer 2)

Two Tango Tales in One

DANCER 1:

There are many tales and myths about Argentine tango. The philosopher and composer Enrique Santos Discépolo (1901-1951) wrote that tango is a sad thought one can dance. When you listen to his lyrics for *Esta noche me emborracho* (This night I will get drunk) from 1928, you will understand. The text is about a man who after a long time encounters a woman he once loved and for whom he gave up everything, even his friends. He sees how her beauty has vanished, realizes that his life was destroyed for nothing and decides to get drunk to forget everything. Though many tango lyrics are indeed sad, they can also be ironic or trivial. Songs like *Mama, yo quiero un novio* (Mother, I want a fiancé), a song about a girl who asks her mother to help her to get a fiancé, for example, are trivial. Then there is the ironic *Cambalache* (Exchange mart) from 1934, also written by Discépolo. It's an almost sarcastic tango about the social misery in Argentina in the 1930s, and about the social differences. Though Discépolo denied that the song should be interpreted that way, the lyrics have political undertones that are still very relevant today. Another political tango, in my view, is *Buenos Aires* from 1923, written by Manuel Romero (music by Manuel Joves).

Noches porteñas bajo tu manto
dichas y llanto muy juntos van,
risas y besos, farra corrida,
todo se olvida con el champán.
Y a la salida de la milonga
llora una nena pidiendo pan
por eso que en el gotán
siempre solloza una pena.

[Transl. by Petra Broomans and Iván Torres Concha]

Nights of Baires under your wing
happiness and tears always together
laughter and kisses, the party's over
everything's forgotten with champagne.
But when leaving the milonga
a girl is crying, begging for a bit of bread
that's why tango, alas,
is always a hell of sorrow.

People go out to dance and have fun, they drink champagne and when they leave the milonga (the dance hall), a little girl is waiting outside asking for money to buy bread. I experienced a similar situation two years ago on a beautiful summer's night, at 4 o'clock in the morning, after my glass of champagne and a dance for two at a milonga in Buenos Aires. In the lonely street there was a woman and her child, begging for money. I was shocked.

When you listen to Finnish tango songs, performed for example by Olavi Virta (1915-1972), you could get the impression that Finnish tango, too, is melancholic. But wasn't the first Finnish tango, from 1915, the same year that Virta was born, 'Tango laulu' by Iivari Kainulainen, a parody of the tango disease in the big cities of Europe in the 1910s? According to this song, Finns became overzealous after being infected by the tango virus.

DANCER 2:

Finnish tango lyrics are usually in a minor key, and the texts are sad. It is a joy to let yourself be captured by the melancholic atmosphere. I have translated many tango lyrics from Finnish into Swedish and I can't remember a single one that wasn't sad. However, there are parodies of Finnish tango, like the one you mention, which are funny. One of the most bloodthirsty is *Nuoruustango* (Tango of Youth) by Anu Kaipainen and Kaj Chydenius. Though the song was written as a parody, it became very popular as a dance melody.

I once wrote a kind of parody of a tango, although it was not a sad one, and it was performed in the theatre. Jack Mattsson wrote the music. It is called *Buenos Aires*. You should know that it was about two brothers dancing together! It became never a hit though. This tango is about Eric, who wants to teach his younger brother Gustav the tango. Eric has been to sea and seen the pubs and senoritas of Buenos Aires, and of course the tango. Eric tells his brother all about the different life there, and about the darkness that falls, about the music and the fiery glances under a sky with different stars. But the most important thing, according to Eric, is that you must lead in the dance, a sailor in a Buenos Aires night must never forget that...

BUENOS AIRES

Tango

(Erik lär Gustav dansa)

I Buenos Aires dansas tango, lilla bror.

Det skall jag lära dig så att

du kan när du blir stor

och lämnar hembysfjärden

och seglar ut i världen

och träffar senjoritor

med vilda ögonvitor.
Då är det bra att kunna
 dansa tango, lilla bror!
 En fjärran himmel
 med annorlunda stjärnor
 och annorlunda hökar
 och annorlunda tärnor
 med andra vanor
 och andra banor.
 Men ett är gemensamt:
 Ett liv är ensamt
 om inte man är två.

När mörkret faller går flickorna på krog.
Där har en sjöman en
 rabatt att plocka i stor nog.
Musiken spelar eldigt
och hjärtat bankar väldigt
och blickarna de flammar,
och stora sköldpaddskammar
de kniper hårt om håret
 på de sköna på sin krog.
 En fjärran himmel...

Det är inga lekar, det är allvar varje natt.
Det gäller livet när
 du dansar; sluta le så glatt!
Så! Tvära kast med nacken
och ryggen ner i backen.
Men vad du har att göra
i dansen är att föra.
Det skall en sjöman minnas i
 Buenos mörka natt.

But as I said before, the best tango is very, very sad.

DANCER 1:

But it's really beautiful! Even if it never was a hit. 'Put on your red shoes', a famous pop lyric by David Bowie, was a hit, though. But for us dancers, it is very important to put on the right shoes! They can be red or blue or white, it doesn't matter, but they have to be right. To listen to the music, to feel the rhythm is also very important, more important even than practising the steps. In the milongas of Buenos Aires, Santiago or Montevideo, the dancing crowd is not amused when dancers take up too much room and dance choreographed routines. The milongueros (tango dancers) will drive that kind of dancer into a corner, for those routines, especially with saltos (jumps), are for the stage and not for the milonga. In the milonga you have to improvise, here you can pause, stand still in the flow of the rhythm, move on together with the other dancers like one huge pulsing organism. Here there is no room for acrobatics.

DANCER 2:

Indeed, you have to put the right shoes on to dance the tango. No rubber soles, absolutely not. But if your shoes are too slippery, there is a risk you'll fall and that is so embarrassing. At the big tango festival in Seinäjoki it seems to be less important what kind of shoes you have. People dance in the streets and in the squares, where the surface is bad anyway. It has to be overwhelming and, I guess, inspiring to dance with thousands of couples simultaneously.

When I think about what it was like in the old days, the ideal situation was a dance hall that was not that crowded. There was hardly any chance of colliding with someone else when dancing the most delicate turns. I like to remember dance occasions, for example at a wedding, say 3 o'clock in the morning with only three couples on the dance floor. Then you can dance! You don't need to

make any studied steps: two long ones, a change step, two long ones. Yes, like that. No big improvisations, they feel odd, and may look ridiculous to those who are watching.

DANCER 1:

About the masses. In Argentina, and also in Chile and Uruguay, tango is regarded as folklore, as a dance of the people, and not for the upper classes. However, when the Argentine tango returned to Europe in the 1980s, it became a dance for the few, and it became intellectualised. It became a dance that had to be more thought than felt, more choreography than rhythm, more display than movement or flowing to the beat of the music of the *orquesta típica* (the tango orchestra). It seems to me that Finnish tango still is a people's dance and not for the bourgeoisie.

DANCER 2:

Yes, tango in Finland is mainly a folk dance. The people dance tango regardless of their language, Swedish or Finnish, but it seems as if Finnish speakers are more devoted to tango than Swedish speakers on the coast. An experienced tango dancer from Österbotten told me that the most skilful tango dancers come from the Finnish interior. They also dance tango sometimes at academic parties, but maybe not with the same commitment as those who dance the so-called 'down-to-earth' tango, with more body contact. The role of the *mons veneris* in this kind of dance is a little bit vague. Some people say that it plays a greater role in Sweden than in Finland, but I could be wrong.

DANCER 1:

Well, in other parts of Europe there are also many dancers who believe that tango is a sexual thing. But it is more a sensual dance, and a dance that you dance in a very concentrated way. It is more a

feeling than passion or sex. You're not only embracing another person, but also the music. For three minutes you're a creature with four legs and one heart, together in rhythm, but after the music stops the illusion or whatever it is ends. I'm of course describing an ideal situation; most of the time it is not possible to dance with someone in a way that is divine.

For me, though, the quintessence of tango is anarchy. Tango is for everybody, including intellectuals, and it is more than a dance or a music genre, it also a way of life, a culture you can create for yourself. It can be even someone's destiny, as it was for Virtanen in the novel *Tango on intobimoni* (1998) by M.A. Numminen: 'Many ask what is the meaning of life. I know that this is tango.'

A strange thing about Argentine tango is that it became globalised right from the start. It came to Europe around about 1910, and was transformed into a fixed form as the European tango in the 1930s. However, in the 1940s, tango experienced its Golden Era in Buenos Aires, suffered a backlash in the 1960s and 1970s, but it made a comeback in the 1980s. The grand tours of the Tango Argentino show started, with famous dancers such as Eduardo and Gloria Arquibau, and the Argentine tango became popular again in Europe, too. The phenomenon of the 'Tango nomad' came into being, dancers who travel from milonga to milonga, but always with Mecca in mind because the ultimate destination has always been and will always be Buenos Aires. As we know, Argentine tango also came to Finland shortly after 1910 and a Finnish tango developed. This was not the case in other European countries.

DANCER 2:

I cannot give a good explanation of why tango in Finland developed as it did. Maybe it was imported at the same time as the fox-trot and was mixed with this dance.

DANCER 1:

Argentine tango is more international than Finnish tango, and may therefore be more sensitive to modernism (the struggle between 'puritans' and 'neotangueros', those who want to leave the traditional rhythm behind, something I believe never can be done). You have told me that translating Finnish tango lyrics into Swedish was as important as the translation of the *Kalevala* into Swedish.

DANCER 2:

I regard the Finnish tango lyrics and *schlager* texts in general as very expressive. The destiny of a human being described in only a few stanzas. I was very pleased when, in 1978, I was asked to translate some Finnish tango texts into Swedish by Vivica Bandler, the director of The Stockholm Theater. She was planning a Finnish tango evening in the theatre. It took place in January 1980 and was an enormous success, also because of the singer Arja Saijonmaa who performed. I believe that this kind of 'low culture' exchange between our countries is also important.

But our tango tales may be about a passing phenomenon. Now only middle-aged people dance as couples. The youngsters are not interested. They have their own popular bands who play their music, and that is not dance music. The public listens and reacts, and sometimes someone is so inspired that he or she starts a solo dance. But dances like tango and the foxtrot, no. The television in Finland tried to create interest in those kind of dances, but I've not seen any results yet.

DANCER 1:

In Europe there is a growing interest, due to television duels, in dances like the foxtrot, the samba and the rumba. Salsa and merengue are also very popular. There is less interest in Argentine tango, but here, too, an increasing number of young people are being at-

tracted to this dance. What I like most, and what you see in Argentina or Chile, is that young and old dance together. A young lad knows that he can learn a lot from a woman of a certain age, because she has the routine, the experience. And I have seen men of ninety dancing in milongas with younger women. Tango is ageless anarchy.

DANCER 2:

By the way, I have to confess that tango is not my best dance. It was much better when I was young. In those days to dance the tango was easy. I remember that I liked a tango called *Illusion*. I've never heard the words and I don't think that it was a Finnish tango. I have been thinking about why some people can dance the tango in a way that is both a joy for themselves and for those who are watching. I believe it has to do with confidence.

DANCER 1:

And I believe that with tango age does not mean a thing. So, trust your feet, dance your memories, even if it hurts.