

SPEAKING OF DANCING

Pampa Cortés and the Romance of the Legs

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In 2001, I suggested to my business partner and maestro, Pampa Cortés, that he should write about his thoughts and experiences with Argentine tango. For a guy who had to leave school in 4th grade, that seemed a daunting task. I offered to help him organize his thoughts and polish his words. What follows is Part 2 of that effort.

I learned so much from him because of this article. It helped me to form my own thoughts about this beautiful and difficult social dance that is so often misunderstood. I hope you enjoy it, and I know he would want that, as well.

- Gigi Jensen

Modern Argentine Tango - Part 2

By Pampa Cortés

"A romance of the legs, a conversation of the feet," is my description of Argentine tango. Thanks to tango, I have traveled all over the world and it brought me to San Francisco in 1994 as a principal of "Forever Tango." Performing eight shows a week left little personal time, but I found time to attend the local *milongas* (tango parties) and meet the local *milongueros* (social tango dancers). I still make a point of going to the *milongas*, partly because I like to see what is current in this tango community, the largest in the U.S. What I will talk about in this short article is how I see the influence of different tango styles as reflected in current social tango community.

First, I need to explain the differences between stage tango (tango *fantasía*) and social tango. Dancers who perform on stage are trained to use their dance to please the audience. While a dancer may find personal satisfaction in the dance, ultimately it is the audience who must be pleased with consistent, high quality performances, or there will be no tickets sold. A dancer must wisely use the whole stage, incorporating a variety of interesting and difficult passages. The choreography requires great skill, strength, and speed, all of which come through years of specialized study. Choreography must be created in advance, takes hours to craft, and requires hours of practice to hone its execution to as near as perfection as possible.



Pampa Cortés 2013. Photo by M. Giusto.

Milongueros, on the other hand, dance principally for their and their partner's pleasure. Social dancing is really a personal experience. Hours may be spent studying and practicing, with attention given to *mana* the dance floor, and the lead and follow skills necessary for the frequent change of partners. Social tango doesn't include the difficult "*fantasía*" passages because these can pose a danger to the couple performing them in crowded conditions if someone bumps into them, or they might kick or hit someone beside them.

Social tango in Buenos Aires looks different than what you see here. Milongueros are more traditional in what they do. There are years of custom as to what is acceptable, and change doesn't come quickly. San Francisco's tango community is relatively young, maybe ten years old, and you can see the effects of the various traveling maestros who give workshops, the different stage shows that pass through, and the various recent hit tango movies. San Franciscans like to experiment, and like to try what they see the professionals do.

I see a potpourri of dance styles depending on what music the local DJs play. Like any dance form, tango's movements are influenced by what the music asks for. If a DJ plays music from the early 1900s, or music from a recent show, you will see some of the dancers respond accordingly, but generally most dancers here dance in the *milonguero* or *salón* styles, as those are what are most frequently taught. San

Franciscans are lucky in that they have the opportunity to study a variety of styles, something that I recommend to my students and the dancers in my dance troupe. It makes for a more complete understanding and enjoyment of Argentine tango. I'm glad I've had that opportunity, and know that my life has been enriched by it. Because of it, I have made a good life for myself. Tango has been very good to me.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts. (gigi@tangoandmoredance.com).

