



SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER — It takes just two to tango but thousands are rediscovering the dazzling drama of the dance in North American theatres and ballrooms. Story, Page C5.

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Theatre and Dance

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Dancers warm to tango's superheated passion

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PURISTS don't speak of "the tango." They say *tango*. Short, sharp, succinct. Like the steps of the dance that has taken over the stage of Toronto's Winter Garden Theatre. On Thursday night, *Forever Tango*, a glorious spectacle of passionate dance, opened there to rapturous applause. Choreographed and directed by Luis Bravo, the grace and passion of this show has already thrilled audiences in London and across the United States.

The curtain rises on a black stage shot through with the starry brightness of a thousand pencil-point lights. In the foreground, a lone bandoneon player coaxes a tune from his square box. As his song rises to a melancholy crescendo, a dancer inches across the stage, his legs and body taut with longing. A woman, dressed in glittering silver, glides into his arms. They begin to tango, kicking their legs in and out and around each other. Their liquid energy curls through the air, almost painful to watch.

But watch you do. The dancing in *Forever Tango* is so powerful you can hardly tear your eyes away.

Tango aficionados argue that all this has nothing to do with sex. The tango, they say, is a physical song of lament that presents a tragic image of human destiny. It's true, the faces are deathly serious, the backs poker-straight, the eyes anguished. But not sexy? Ha. You've never seen anything so hot.

Forever Tango's dancers are virtuoso talents who perform with compelling intensity. They dance fiercely, ripping through the music with carnal abandon. But if it looks like a free expression of emotion, that's an illusion. The tango is one of the most complex and difficult of dances — its apparent freedom has taken those dancers years to master.

The extraordinary skill in this show makes it stand out from its predecessor, *Tango Argentino*, which caused something of a tango

DANCE / *The world's most sensual dance is back on stage in a mesmerizing new Toronto show. And in ballrooms everywhere it's bringing couples closer — much closer — together.*



Some fancy footwork from *Forever Tango*: an energetic showcase for bravura performances.

craze when it toured just over a decade ago. Not that *Tango Argentino* was bad, but *Forever Tango* is a more energetic showcase of bravura performance. The show boasts a marvellous orchestra directed by bandoneonist Lisandro Adrover, and singer Carlos Morel pays tribute to Carlos Gardel, the legendary voice of the tango, in bittersweet songs of love and solitude. *Forever Tango* also updates the dance with an acrobatic display whose athletic prowess undercores the silky tango's brute strength. Perhaps it is a reflection of how much the tango has developed

over the last 10 years. In that time, the dance has left the stage and flourished in dance schools and clubs across the continent.

At Anna's Dance Centre in Toronto, for instance, the tango outnumbers all other dances during the weekly ballroom free-for-all that explodes under a glittering disco ball every Saturday night. When the familiar rhythms of the tango fill the air, the floor is suddenly packed with Rudolf Valentino wannabes and their sultry dates. The novices generally hunk it up, faces squeezed tightly together, lips pursed, eyelids lowered, teeth

clenched as if gripping a rose. The pros, on the other hand . . . well, you can tell who they are. They glide with extreme grace, using the complex steps of the tango to show off their skill and control.

But all those neophytes are eager to become experts. Helena Granger-Sandov, a one-time tango champion who heads her own Academy of International Dance in Toronto's west end, says that over 95 per cent of her students are tango fanatics. "It's the most popular dance at my school, or anywhere. The first thing people ask when they walk

through the door is 'do you teach the tango?'"

But Granger-Sandov doesn't seem sure of the purity of her students' motives. The tango, she stresses, "has nothing, nothing, nothing to do with romance. The attraction is that people *don't* fit it romantic, but it is really very mysterious, very sad, very emotional."

Historically speaking, she's right. The dance has its origins in the 17th and 18th centuries, when African slaves in Argentina created the dance to express their sorrow and bitterness. Men performed it secretly in the forest night — "tango" is Swahili for "a clearing" — as a ritualized lament for a life in captivity. "When you watch Argentines they are very stern, very serious," says Granger-Sandov. "For them the dance is never happy-go-lucky."

But it's not clear that dance-floor denizens entirely agree with this sober-minded reading of the tango.

The Gravity Lounge, an upscale club in Toronto's Yorkville district, attracted 300 patrons for their first all-tango evening in July, and now they are test-driving the idea of establishing the city's first dedicated tango bar.

David Novello, co-owner of the lounge with his brother Dino, recognizes the tango's more-than-romantic appeal. It seems to be one of the best pick-up options in town. After all, as they say, it takes two to tango. "You need a partner," says Novello. "No matter what happens when you come to the club to dance the tango you will definitely be having one dance that night with someone you might not have known before you walked in."

... Sometimes what we see here is one week somebody comes alone and meets someone dancing and the next time they walk in together.

Forever Tango plays at the Winter Garden Theatre in Toronto until Nov. 31 before moving on to Broadway in March.