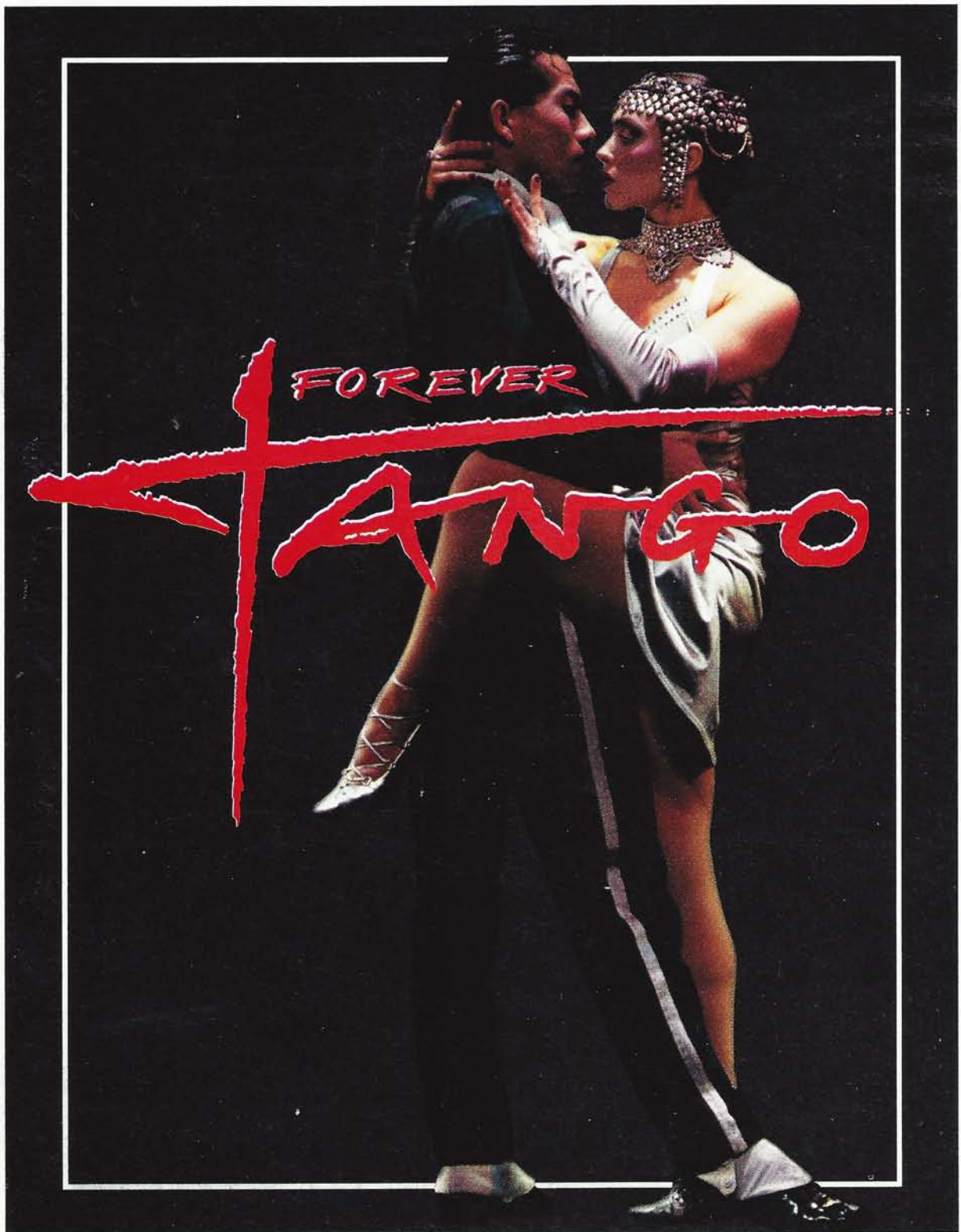


# PLAYBILL®

WALTER KERR THEATRE





# A BRAVO FOR TANGO

*In Forever Tango, the creation of director Luis Bravo, every movement tells a story of sadness, sophistication and passion*



Luis Bravo (top l.) and scenes from his highly acclaimed *Forever Tango*



PHOTOS: MARTY SOHL

When Luis Bravo, creator and director of *Forever Tango*, demonstrates how an Argentinean walks, he looks like one of his dancers. Part strut, part slither, he eases into movement; glaring eyes peering from half-drawn lids, he stalks across the room like a brazen rooster. Then within seconds the gestures become graceful, and the preen transforms into something smooth and sensuous, something like a tango.

"When the dancers walk onstage, you can recognize they're Argentinean. They dance with their whole identity," said Bravo. "And that's what tango's about. It's about form. It's about identity. Tango is not a dance. It is an artistic expression of the whole culture. Tango is a way of living."

*Forever Tango*, at the Walter Kerr The-

atre through January 4, is a steamy show of sharp movements, snaps and slides that tell stories through dance and music. An 11-piece orchestra, 16 dancers and one vocalist convey the passion of these stories, offering a mesmerising glimpse into the world of tango.

The tango first developed sometime during the last 25 years of the nineteenth century when, after toiling long days in the factories and on the docks of Argentina, impoverished foreigners longing for home would gather at night in the "barrio" (or neighborhood) and drink wine, sing songs and dance. The tango, initially danced only by men, became a mixture of motion and sounds from their cultures. Later, when the dancing moved to brothels, women prostitutes joined in, and the tango became considered a lascivious,

by Sandra Mardenfeld



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sexual dance. Some of its abrasiveness was eventually lost as it became a European dance phenomenon and a staple performed in Argentina's cabarets and theatres. But still, the influence of the "porteno"—the poor, lonely immigrants—remained. "If I had to define tango with just one phrase, I would say it's a sad feeling that you dance," says Bravo. "Tango is very internal, very melancholy. You dance it with a partner, but in a certain way you dance it with yourself."

Bravo understands this language of loneliness. Born in a tiny town—Añatuya Santiago de Estero—he moved to Buenos Aires when he was eight. "I didn't understand the language of the kids because I went to live in an Italian neighborhood. They all spoke half and half. Half Italian and half Spanish."

Bravo studied guitar and cello in a conservatory and became a world-class cellist, performing with symphonies like the Los Angeles Philharmonic, The Colon Theatre Opera House and The Buenos Aires Philharmonic. But in 1989, after a visit to Argentina, he decided to forgo the cello and produce his own show: an illustrated concert of the tango. He foraged the library and read about costumes, make-up, hair designs and lighting.

Bravo based his show—*Forever Tango*—on the history of tango and on images from his life, creating stories onstage as if he were making a movie. Some moments capture a romantic tale, with dancers clutching each other tightly, their faces pressed together, their legs entwined like lovers. Others emphasize the music and the plaintive wail of the bandoneón, a smaller version of the accordion, which seemingly cries in commiseration with past immigrants' sadness, while still

others embrace the memories of a young Bravo, who as a boy frequented Saturday afternoon films, once molding a cardboard box into a seat to watch *Dracula*.

"The story about the compadrito [a bully or braggart], the men with the knives and the story of the old man and young woman: Those dances are all fantasies of my life," said Bravo.

While finding the ideas for the show's various numbers, Bravo also auditioned dancers, hired musicians, chose the colors of the costumes, the height of the dancer's heels and designed the lighting. Even today, with over 200 lighting cues in the show, he knows them all. "When I watch from behind the scenes and look around and see how much I've made, I ask myself, 'how did I do it?' Because it is so much work, so much risk," said Bravo.

The first *Forever Tango* played to critical acclaim in San Diego in November 1990. Next, it played in Beverly Hills and then San Francisco (running through May 1996). In San Francisco Bravo would get to the theatre at nine o'clock, work all day rehearsing dancers and tweaking scenes. Then after the show, he'd rehearse with couples who hadn't performed that evening.

Bravo started a second *Forever Tango* company, and the shows toured Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, England, Toronto, Montreal and the Spoleto Festival, where it won the Simpatia Prize in 1996. Bravo, currently preparing a European tour, hopes to begin filming a documentary in November about tango and how he developed the show.

MARTY SOHL



Even after all these years, Bravo remains devoted to his show. "I know every single chord in the orchestra by memory," he said. "I know every single size of the show's dancers by memory. This is my child. And I love my child." □