

Of bordellos and bandoneons

DANCE



KATHLEEN M. SMITH

Has any dance been the butt of more jokes than the tango? The long-standing stereotype of the oily Latin lover gripping a partner with a long-stemmed rose between her teeth is particularly resistant to change. The reality, of course, is much more complex and interesting, but even so, the history of this famous dance from Argentina is painted in broad, almost mythical strokes.

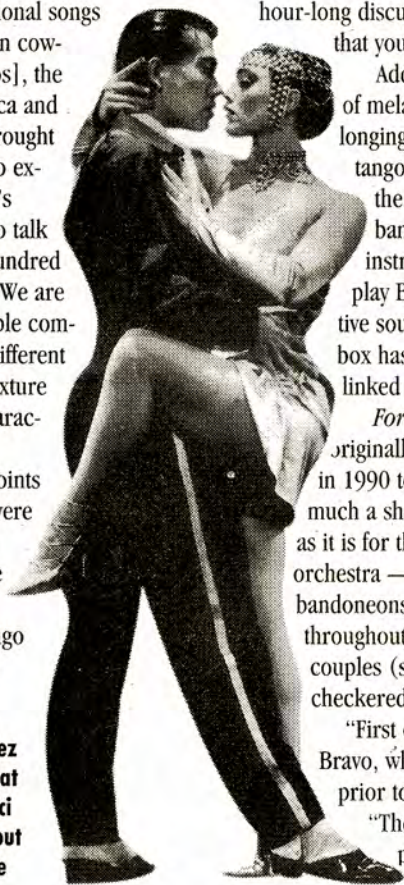
According to Luis Bravo, the creator of a tribute to tango called *Forever Tango*, the dance began in the bordellos of Buenos Aires in the late 1800s.

"It started in a place where all the social cultures got together, not just for sexual activities, but to play cards, do business and socialize," says Bravo. "All these people brought their own music: the Italians brought their arias, the natives of the pampas brought their

milongas [traditional songs of the Argentinian cowboys, the gauchos], the blacks from Africa and the Caribbean brought their rhythms. To explain the tango, it's impossible not to talk about our last hundred years of history. We are an unstable people coming from many different sources. This mixture gives tango a character of its own."

Bravo also points out that "these were lonely people," leading up to the first of many definitions of tango he'll offer in an

Like him, Fabio Narvaez just knew that Miriam Larici was not cut out to linedance



hour-long discussion: "It's a sad feeling that you dance."

Adding to the general feeling of melancholy and unrequited longing that is as much a part of tango as its fire and passion is the unearthly sound of the bandoneon. A German instrument originally used to play Bach, the lonely, distinctive sound of this simple squeeze box has become inextricably linked to the dance form.

Forever Tango, which Bravo originally conceived and toured in 1990 to great acclaim, is as much a showcase for tango music as it is for the dance. The 11-piece orchestra — which includes four bandoneons — remains onstage throughout the show as a series of couples (six in all) dance the checkered history of the tango.

"First came the music," says Bravo, who was a concert cellist prior to life with *Forever Tango*.

"The dance came as an interpretation of the music.

Both can have so many different moods."

Those varied moods have allowed Bravo to devise an evening-length show that includes comedy, spectacle and musical virtuosity as well as different versions of a complicated dance form based on precise partnering and intense emotion.

Scenarios that offer glimpses of the history of tango give way to pure dance numbers in which

women and men share the limelight. The balance between female and masculine power is a particular feature of tango dancing as it's done Argentinian-style, ballroom and contemporary-style. Maintaining that balance is what Bravo, as creator and producer of the revue, feels is his particular job. "That's my work," he says, "to keep even the relationship between men and women who are vying for power — onstage, backstage. That is the tricky thing about tango artists."

Which leads to the obvious question — who leads? With some renditions of

tango it's unclear — given the backward and forward momentum of the dance, anyone could be leading. "The man thinks he's leading," Bravo says slyly. "That's the machismo of tango. It looks that way. But I think he's more insecure than that."

PREVIEW

FOREVER TANGO

Choreographed by Luis Bravo. Winter Garden Theatre, 189 Yonge St. Oct. 24-Nov. 24.
\$19.50-\$59.50, 872-5551.

For mystery, history, passionate movement and inherent eroticism, it's hard to find a

dance form with as much to offer as the tango. It's no surprise then that tango is enjoying a renaissance around the world, with tango clubs springing up in cities everywhere.

"It was never just for the old people," Bravo says in reference to proponents of the old-style tango of the '50s and '60s. *Forever Tango*, which rides the groundswell that started with another tango revue called *Tango Argentina*, can only result in new converts to what Bravo ultimately refers to as the eternal dance.

"It's a love story that you tell in three minutes." 🍷