

What makes a Tango?

Argentina's 'forever' dance is back at the Winter Gardens

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THE TANGO is a dance like opera is a kind of singing. What North Americans think of as a schmaltzy form of ballroom coupling is actually an index to Argentina's culture.

Tango is the passionate singing of Ruben Juarez; the piercing squeeze-box music of Astor Piazzolla's bandoneon; a three-minute drama in four-four time; and, of course, a sensuous display of cheek-to-cheek, crotch-to-crotch dancing.

It's also a hit show. *Forever Tango* comes to Toronto next week, opening Thursday, with previews Tuesday and Wednesday at the Winter Garden Theatre.

Created by cellist Luis Bravo, *Forever Tango* is a reflection of an Argentinian's longing for his culture.

Bravo left Argentina at the age of 23 to further his music studies. He made his home in Los Angeles and played with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Later, as a freelance musician in New York, a friend who was playing in the orchestra for *Tango Argentina* asked Bravo to fill in for him.

"And then I had a chance to play my music," says Bravo. "I said to myself, 'Wow, here I am, being an Argentinian' and being appreciated through my own art." Bravo was on the next plane home.

A tall man with a silver-streak to his hair, a long pony tail and an impressive stance, Bravo recalls a poignant past. Tango is nostalgia, after all. The immigrants from Spain, Germany, Cuba, and especially Italy, all isolated men without women, left their mark on the tango.

"My life is a tango in a certain way," says Bravo, born in Anatumayo, in the poor interior district of Santiago del Estero. "I moved to Buenos Aires when I was 8 years old.

"I didn't understand the language the boys the streets were speaking. I was like an immigrant in my own country." He learned to play guitar and later attended the music conservatory to study classical cello. At a young age, he was a principal in the national symphony orchestra.

The old melancholy returned when he arrived in the United States. "I've been a foreigner my whole life. But in a certain way, I belong to everywhere, too."

Certainly to the popular stages of the world. *Forever Tango* opened in 1994 for nine weeks in Los Angeles. It took over San Francisco for two years. Londoners thrilled to it for four months when it played in the West End. This summer, Bravo brought his dancers to the Spoleto festival. Next March, *Forever Tango* goes to Broadway.

In the meantime, Follows Latimer Productions has it in Toronto.

Expect a warming effect, says Bravo. "I don't mean to be arrogant, but every show gets a standing ovation."

Sex and death, those old constants, are the two poles of the tango. It is said that some tango gestures mimic the swipe of a dagger. No wonder the Pope prohibited it in 1914.



FORBIDDEN DANCE: Argentina's culture unfolds in *Forever Tango*, starting Tuesday at the Winter Garden Theatre. The show's creator, Luis Bravo (below), says standing ovations are the norm.

The tiny bordellos in the backstreets of Buenos Aires gave shape to the tango around 1880. Here's Eduardo Galeano in *Faces And Masks*, volume II of *Memory Of Fire*:

"The tango, wistful offspring of the gay milonga, has been born in the corrals at the city's edge and in tenement courtyards.

"On the two banks of the River Plata, it is music of ill repute. Workers and malefactors dance it on earth floors, male with male if the woman is not able to follow the very daring and broken step, or if such a body-to-body embrace seems more suitable for whores: the couple slides, rocks, stretches, and flowers in coupés and filigrees."

The milonga was an indigenous Argentinian folk dance. The Cuban *habanera* also lent its rhythm to the tango. The word itself is African, meaning "closed place" or "reserved ground." It could have come from the Latin *tangere*, meaning to touch. In any case the word came into Portuguese on an island that was a centre for the slave trade.

Carlos Gardel, the illegitimate offspring of French parents, grew up in the streets of Buenos Aires around the turn of the century. He became the first poet of the tango. He remained a well known recording artist until his death in a head-on collision in 1935. Gardel's music is still sung.

Ballroom dancing adopted the tango in 1914. The dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle popularized tango in America and gave it those long, striding steps across the floor.

Rudolf Valentino danced it in *The Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse* (1921). The rhythms worked their way into black ragtime and early jazz. Think of "Whatever Lola Wants," from the 1955 musical *Damn Yankees* and you get an idea of how far tango permeated American culture.

Tango never disappeared, but every decade or so it comes back with a surge. *Tango Argentina* was a Broadway hit in the '80s. "Now it's our turn," says Bravo.

The tango, according to Bravo, tells a tragic history of a country.

"It's very sad. There is no reason to be happy in our country. Like any art form it is the testament of the time in which the artist is living. The first lyrics spoke about sexual activities in the bordello.

"The '40s, when Argentina was isolated from the rest of the world, was the most creative time of my country, the golden age of the tango.

"In the '60s the tango songs spoke about social problems. Then in the '70s, during the time of the military government, many, many tangos were not allowed because they were testimony of their time.

"If you talk about tango, you are forced to speak about politics."

As with flamenco, tango derives from a folk tradition. But there's a difference, says Bravo.

"Flamenco is external dance. Tango is the other way around; it's internal. It's an introspective dance. You dance about yourself, but with somebody else."



The tango, says Bravo, is about showing your feelings, not a prominent North American trait, especially in Toronto. Bravo first learned that a kiss and a hug on first meeting was not the thing to do when he was a student at UCLA. He used to protest to demurring women. "It's okay, you are not going to compromise yourself," but he learned to adapt.

Tango, he says, relates to this aspect of Latin American culture. "It's like you are pulling off your skin."

It seems to translate into steamy sex among the viewers of *Forever Tango*, entirely Bravo's creation, "right from the height of each woman's heel."

Forever Tango has been so successful, he no longer has time to play music or spend more than a few days at a time in Argentina. That's not the point, says Bravo.

"You have only three alternatives in life: You can work for a name, you can work for money or you work to do the things you love. The first two alternatives can come as a consequence of the third, but if they don't, you will still be a happy person."