

## Tango Bliss by Isabelle Oppenheim

This text offers a translated, partial, and abbreviated overview of my master's thesis in dance from the *Université du Québec à Montréal* entitled "The Experience of an Ecstatic and Unforgettable Connection between Argentine Tango Social Partners" [*L'expérience d'une connexion extatique et inoubliable entre les partenaires de tango argentin social*] (2023<sup>1</sup>).

I have been dancing tango for thirteen years. My passion for this dance began when I experienced for the first time a particularly intense feeling of connection with an occasional partner. I experienced in that moment a state of bliss that to this day remains unforgettable. This is a common experience among *tanguerxs*<sup>2</sup>. This type of connection is shared in community, often discussed among us, and belongs to the culture associated with socially danced tango. The subject of my qualitative research was therefore born out of my interest in the tango connection, particularly the one that brings about an ecstatic experience, in other words, tango bliss.

Argentine social tango emerged among the immigrant peoples of the port cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo in the late 19th century. It is a couple's dance that is improvised, the figures not being planned except in the second before they are executed. In the tango danced socially, as opposed to show tango<sup>3</sup>, the tango connection is established between partners by the subtle attention that each person pays to movements and displacements, both their own and those of the other. Agreements are made without speaking and the dance is improvised together from a few basic steps. The tango connection is therefore physical in nature as it begins within the touch of the embrace, the *abrazo*. It finds its foundation in the technique of the dance. The tango connection is a form of non-verbal

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<sup>1</sup> Thesis awaiting publication by the end of 2023.

<sup>2</sup> *Tanguerx*: The gender-neutral form of the Spanish words *tanguera*, female tango dancer, and *tanguero*, male tango dancer, the "x" replacing the "a" and "o".

<sup>3</sup> Show tango, danced on stage for an audience, is choreographed and aims to impress. It does not offer the same intimate connection that originates in the improvised dialogue between the *tanguerxs* who dance tango socially.

communication. Beyond the physical realm the *tanguerxs* feel connected when conditions favor an attitude of openness toward one another.

Occasionally, in an unpredictable and uncontrollable way, the tango connection provokes a sublime sensation of floating, or gliding, which I name "tango bliss". It is different from the tango connection defined above, which can be pleasant or not. Tango bliss involves the experience of merging with one's partner, as well as with the music and the environment. It gives the impression of being transported out of oneself and the real world. It can provoke intense feelings. Loaded with existential meaning this experience becomes anchored in memory, remaining unforgettable.

My first research objective was to describe, and thus better understand, the components of the experience of tango bliss. The second was to extract the meaning that the *tanguerxs* give to this experience while it continues to exist within, unforgettable.

### **The research**

To meet these objectives, I documented the lived experience of the tango bliss of six non-professional social tango dancers. I conducted one interview with each of the six *tanguerxs*, each of which began with a question such as this one: "I suggest, if you agree, that you allow yourself to relive a moment of tango connection that stands out from the rest because it was exceptional, one that you consider special and unforgettable."<sup>4</sup> I then transcribed and analyzed the recorded interviews. The phenomena that emerged were categorized to identify the actions performed during the tango bliss as well as the meaning that was ascribed to it. The phenomena were explained using concepts and ideas

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<sup>4</sup>Each interview combined two methods: 1) Action Explicitation (*l'explicitation de l'action*) (Vermersch, 2017), which targets concrete memory and allows for a deeper recall of details, and 2) Meaning-decryption Interviewing (*le décryptage du sens*) (Faingold, 2021), which allows for the emergence of existential meaning hidden behind a lived experience.

from the fields of psychology, somatic education<sup>5</sup> and phenomenology. The resulting data is rich in information; I share some of it here.

### **The *abrazo*: a touch that is present and listens**

It goes without saying that the encounter between the *tanguerxs* occurs essentially in the *abrazo*, the tango embrace. The *abrazo* engages all the sensoriality of the body. Participants to this study testified that during the experience of tango bliss, the *tanguerxs* engage in a touch that is attentive to the other: "I don't know how conscious it is, but the hand will not be still. It will seek to relax and at the same time, gather information about the other's state of relaxation" (KV<sup>6</sup> 58). KV speaks of a touch that is curious, listens, tunes in and gives. Another participant describes that "it was his presence that was most important" (BO 60). This participant is touched by the fact that her partner was attentive, available to her. In addition to listening and being present, the data highlight that *tanguerxs* actively seek to be comfortable to the other, through attunement.

### **Comfort**

Attunement is allowing one's own internal state to change in order to resonate with the inner world of another. The tango bliss phenomenon of seeking comfort with the other through attunement is depicted in this detailed *verbatim*: "The muscles relax. I feel that her *abrazo* is no longer just resting in a few places on me but is becoming more uniform and more malleable. The spots where I hoped she would land, she's landed there. We succeed even better in marrying each other's shapes, and the *abrazo* is better" (KV 22). Aiming to welcome the shapes of the body of the other and to find comfort in it are voluntarily processes. It is enveloping them with the intention of creating not only a comfortable sensation, but one that is also comforting. Each partner harmonizes their

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<sup>5</sup> Somatic education encompasses various approaches to bodywork and movement studies, which aim to increase self-awareness, progress toward ideal body alignment, promote injury prevention and encourage expressiveness.

<sup>6</sup> In order to ensure the anonymity of the participants, their identification is encoded, and the initials used are not their own.

reactions with those of the other and adapt to each other, matching one another. They communicate through their touching bodies, a modality of dialogue that is not the same as that of words. The dialogue of bodies is learned early in life; it is an integral part of human development.

### **Gestural identity**

The " postural tone " is the relationship a person develops with gravity. It starts to develop early in life, from one's first autonomous movements. For example, when a baby, by pressing one hand into the ground, can roll off their stomach onto their back autonomously. The baby's postural tone, that is, the core musculature system which acts on breathing, the tone of the body, and the posture, becomes organized allowing, among other things, for the child to eventually stand up. The postural tone has not only a physical component, but also a psychological one since it is influenced by the physical and emotional support that baby received while being carried by a caretaker. Each person has a unique postural tone; it is, according to Hubert Godard, a movement specialist, the backdrop that colors each of one's gestures throughout life. This may explain the feeling of familiarity with one's partner that can develop during the tango connection, even when dancing with a stranger.

The process of attunement between tango partners can quickly give a very tangible impression of discovering aspects of the other that are otherwise not revealed in verbal exchanges. "What was shared are not addresses nor ages or names, but there's something that was shared. You are left with this feeling of familiarity" (KV 100). Information is exchanged without words during the tango dance, directly through bodies in a contact that moves, inevitably revealing aspects of one's personal and unique history. Due to this, dancing tango involves giving to a partner who is sometimes a stranger, permission to transgress personal boundaries normally in place in everyday life. Regardless of the role adopted, each person exposes his or her vulnerability. If one of the partners experiences a lack of respect, they automatically adopt a defensive attitude as a

way of protecting themselves. The dance may continue, but something has stopped being exchanged in between them, even if it may not be visually detectable if someone was to observe them. The data therefore suggest that tango bliss touch is above all carried by a respectful attitude that invites openness. If agency usually refers to a feeling, it is possible to express it in the physical realm, in the movement that is formulated from the axis, or the plumb line in the vertical alignment of the body. When a moment of tango bliss happens, testimonials indicated that an attitude of respect and/or a feeling of being respected was part of the dynamic, nurturing this vulnerability. It is expressed by honoring the other person's agency.

### **Respect for agency**

The sense of agency refers to the feeling of having control over one's actions and their consequences. The feeling of being a free agent of one's own actions is an essential element of the tango bliss. HJ offers this comment, "I feel so good, I'm not being pushed around, I'm not being pulled, I'm being invited to do a figure, and if I want to go, I go. ... It's freedom" (HJ 145). She then juxtaposes this experience of tango bliss with another, unpleasant one: "It was just the opposite to this beautiful moment. I felt 'You are going to come this way, I'm the one deciding here'. I don't want to be managed in that way" (HJ 149). Losing one's sense of agency causes one to become defensive, to retreat inwardly, and to cut off connection. A person who is physically under the control of another without their consent is stripped of that which makes them whole as a person, no longer recognized as being free to accept or decline a proposed step, but rather as a passive object that can be manhandled. Dancing tango involves giving permission to another to transgress personal boundaries normally in place in everyday life. Regardless of the role adopted, each person exposes his or her vulnerability. If one of the partners feels disrespected, they automatically adopt a defensive attitude in an attempt of self-protection. The dance may continue, but something is no longer being exchanged between them, even if it may not be visually detectable by an outside observer. The data therefore suggest that the touch of tango bliss is above all carried by a respectful attitude

that invites openness. If agency usually refers to a feeling, it is possible to express it physically, in how one moves from their axis, or the plumb line in the vertical alignment of their body.

### **Standing upright on your feet**

One participant described finding a state of optimal alignment within herself allowing her to feel stable: "I'm more grounded, I'm more in my feet and it feels like everything [in my body] aligns and I am able to connect with how he leads me. A new mobility is created in me, in a way" (NB 242). She discovers a new mobility within herself by becoming more conscious of her feet touching the ground. This allows her to better feel the distribution of her weight and to be aware of her axis. She better understands the intentions of her partner, which increases for them the possibility of finding attunement together.

Becoming aware of one's axis leads to a deepening of the dance technique<sup>7</sup>. It is to act on one's way of "standing up" and therefore on one's sense of balance, autonomy and agency. Being able to choose how to be on one's axis increases the quality of connection since it is from the axis that wordless agreements with the other is formulated, while moving together. Communication therefore becomes clearer and gains in subtlety. As NB notices, one way to organize one's axis is to pay attention to the contact of one's feet with the ground.

SB describes, regarding feeling grounded, that "with each step, you have to push the ground. That gives a great quality to the tango... We are not simply embracing together. It is not really that we push against one another, but we somehow move through each other, entering each other. And that's the energy that each gives to the other " (SB 120, 125). Each partner makes sure to have their feet well anchored before pushing against

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<sup>7</sup> That said, technical skill is not necessary to experience tango bliss. One person describes a moment of tango bliss when she was a beginner and barely initiated to the *caminata*, the tango walk. Another, a seasoned tango dancer, describes living a memorable moment with someone who had been dancing only for a short time.

the ground to move and transmit from there a pressure on the upper body of the other. It is a gravitational and penetrating touch - which is however, not sexual.

### **Reserve and sensuality versus sexuality**

Several of the participants are keen to specify that, contrary to what the collective imagination would have us believe, the tango connection does not draw on sexual desire. One of the participants distinguishes that the tango bliss was experienced for her as "an emotional connection, heart to heart, which was not sexual, by the way, but rather warm and human" (BO 68). In talking about how she feels during this experience, she describes feeling strongly connected to her partner and is careful to point out that it is indeed in an asexual way. Another participant specifies that "in general, in tango, we keep in place some boundaries, because often we dance with people who are in a relationship. Because in a *milonga*<sup>8</sup>, one dances a little bit with everyone. And therefore, we have this duty of reserve to be able to continue to dance tango and have good relationships with people" (SB 70). In SB, pleasure is governed by an inner control system preventing him from acting inappropriately. This averts him from damaging his reputation and relationships with people in his community. *Tanguerxs* rely on clear tango protocols, as well as their respective value systems which dictate what is socially acceptable and what is not. They tune the intention with which they engage with the other person accordingly. Intention is also important on another level; being aware of one's intentions in movement is what allows for communication, in other words for the improvisation of the dance.

### **The intention and the premovement**

The data suggest that *tanguerxs* are very conscious and clear in their movement intentions. They adopt an attitude of intention before each gesture. It is concretized in the "premovement". The premovement is a preparation that stabilizes and orients the body in space and time. Although it is most often unconscious, it is possible to develop

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<sup>8</sup> *Milonga* : Tango dance event.

one's awareness of premovement. For example, one participant explains, "I start to shift my weight to get a good feel for how we can follow each other. I see how she reacts to my lead. I feel that we align very clearly on our timing " (KV 26). He communicates with his partner through a premovement that is motored by clear intention. He then feels all the subtleties of his partner's response, confirming that they are attuned to one another and to the music before launching into improvised steps. Dancing tango is an act of cooperative creation that unfolds in musical interpretation.

### **The music**

Music plays an important role in tango bliss. During the interview, several participants expressed their pleasure in tuning into each other and agreeing on the musical interpretation. They feel that together, they become united with the music which deepens their connection. One participant said, "She understands my musicality. Our ways of being musical work together, so that it flows... " (KV 92). His impression of perfect harmony comes from agreeing on their choice of musical cues. Because the tango superimposes different rhythms and melodies, played by different instruments, this agreement is not a given. One person may feel inspired to dance on a musical layer that is different from the one their partner would have chosen. KV confirms that he and his partner have aesthetic affinities, probably because they easily agree on these choices. As a result, he feels a cohesion with her that allows for fluidity in their dance. They are essentially in a state of co-creation.

### **The co-creation of meaning, an unforgettable experience**

The co-creation of meaning emerges from the emotional depth of tango bliss: "It's very satisfying, like we wrote the music together" (BM 98). He compares his emotion to the process of inventing something new together by inspiring each other, like a musical piece. Meaning is also expressed in the emergence of identity facets, such as that of the artist: "Maybe it means I am able to make art. I don't consider myself an artist, not at all, but I am a dancer" (BM 100); or the part of oneself that is a child: "I feel like a child who just



wants to play on the music" (KV 44). Thus, the emotionally charged experience becomes deeply anchored into memory. Underscoring this, one of the participants spent nearly a full hour explicating a single moment of tango bliss lived fifteen years before, demonstrating its unforgettable aspect.

### **What endures**

When it is time to change partners, the way in which a blissful moment of dance ends is also an integral part of the experience. For example, many question its reciprocity: "I wonder at first if she had as much fun as I did. She looked happy, but was she just being nice?" (BM 110) While noting his own pleasure, which is considerable, a doubt persists about his partner's level of pleasure.

The person who experiences a moment of tango bliss often becomes driven by a thirst for more, seeking to relive the intensity of this pleasure: "Living a moment like this with someone, it's almost like a drug. These are moments of bliss" (NB 126). Many admit to the feverish state that tango bliss can generate, especially at the beginning of one's tango journey. Seeking to relive this experience becomes a powerful motivator to invest in classes, practice intensely, and return to *milongas*, or dancing events, week after week.

### **Conclusion**

Tango bliss is a fascinating phenomenon; the interest that this study has provoked in my local tango community as well as the tango community with which I am connected on social media proves it. Tango dancers are very curious about this experience, which most often leaves them stunned and lacking in concepts or even in vocabulary to make sense of it. The detailed testimonies I gathered from the interviews allowed me to expose the multiple conditions in place when it occurs. Moreover, the meaning that emerges, unique to each person, offers a very intimate insight into the depth of the imprint that the experience of tango bliss leaves within.