

# New Tango, A Brief Overview

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## ***How new is 'tango nuevo'?***

New tango has existed ever since Gloria & Eduardo were a young couple dancing in the milongas of Buenos Aires. Don't take my word for it, ask Eduardo & Gloria. Eduardo Arquimbau, now in his 70s and considered a great *maestro milonguero*, describes in an informal interview, how the dance has changed with every new generation as they practised and improvised; He explains how in the 1940s when tango became hugely popular with the youth of Buenos Aires and shorter skirts became all the rage with the young ladies, new possibilities became available and new steps emerged from the inventive imaginations and 'energetic bodies of the young'. Elements like voleos, ganchos, sacadas, entradas and more all came about in the 40s. The 50s had their own novelty, as youngsters developed more intimate interests; girls started going out without their mothers as chaperones and the liberation from parental supervision led to dancing in a much closer embrace... It's interesting that as these genuine '*viejo milongueros*' describe how tango has evolved in their time, they help contextualise the most recent of new tango movements, because they clearly portray a history where, together with socio-political conditions, the curiosity, creativity and energy of the youth has always been the driving force for change in tango. That every decade with a large enough population of young tango dancers has led to new developments in the dance, and as Eduardo puts it, so-called '*tango nuevo*' is no exception.

Between 1955 and 1982, for a number of socio-political reasons<sup>1</sup>, tango became increasingly a less attractive pastime in Buenos Aires. However, the end of the military dictatorship in 1982, and the popularity of the show '*Tango Argentino*' in the cultural capitals of Europe and on Broadway, brought tango back into fashion with the young well-to-do of Buenos Aires and more and more young people became enticed by the tango. By this time however, there was a pronounced generation gap between the old and new dancers; the only people left dancing from the last boom years (the Golden Era youngsters) were, by the 80s, the '*viejo milongueros*' (old milonga goers). Eduardo recalls how the new young dancers were curious about the dance of the '*viejo milongueros*' but of course, the dance they picked up from them would not look the same, owing to their more supple bodies and distinct energies<sup>2</sup>, as well as the fact that times had simply moved on.

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<sup>1</sup> The reasons for the change were complex and not something to discuss in any detail at this point, but very generally put were as a result of the military dictatorships and changes in the music industry in Argentina.

<sup>2</sup> "su dinámica y su propia energía le hace trabajar movimientos que ellos mismos quizás dentro de unos años no los podrán hacer". From *Historia del Baile de Tango (Recopilación de comentarios realizados por Gloria y Eduardo Arquimbau)*, 02 Oct 2012, Matias Facio. (<https://www.facebook.com/notes/matias-facio/historia-del-baile-de-tango-recopilaci%C3%B3n-de-comentarios-realizados-por-gloria-y-10151177607269586>)

Thus by the 90s the last wave of novelties were well in bloom and for better or worse become labelled as *'tango nuevo'*. What's interesting to note is that the much-loved film and one that raised Argentine tango's profile right across the world - Sally Potter's *The Tango Lesson* (1997) - starred three young dancers from the younger generation who (together with a small handful of others) are considered *the* founders of *'tango nuevo'* that is to say, the new wave of tango. The irony is that whilst most tango dancers speak so fondly of *The Tango Lesson*, they may well poo-hoo *'tango nuevo'* in the same sentence without realising that they are speaking about the different works of the very same people.

### ***What's new about the latest new tango?***

Without the historical and anthropological perspective, it is easy to fail to appreciate what *'tango nuevo'* really is and how it persists in 'traditional' disguise today.

*'Tango nuevo'* is often limited to being considered a 'style'<sup>3</sup>, misconstrued as being simply about opening the embrace (sometimes thought synonymous to 'open embrace') or confused with tango danced to alternative music<sup>4</sup>. However, fundamentally, it is none of the above and unfortunately, these sorts of simplifications create a great deal of misunderstanding and lead to an almost irreparable distortion of the history of tango, especially as it depends largely on oral transmission.

Those who have spent time studying the dance would be much more inclined to describe *'tango nuevo'* as a method of study and analysis. Gustavo Naveira, one of the main actors in the new movement of tango (and one of the three men from *The Tango Lesson*), states in his essay on *New Tango* (2008)<sup>5</sup>:

"In reality, *tango nuevo* is everything that has happened with the tango since the 1980s...The words *tango nuevo* express what is happening with tango dancing in general; namely that it is evolving. *Tango nuevo* is not one more style; it is simply that tango dancing is growing, improving, developing, enriching itself, and in that sense we are moving toward a *new* dimension in tango dancing...The result of this is a dance of greater possibilities, and also of a much more artistic quality."

In line with Naveira's words, I would add that the new wave of tango brought greater self-awareness to the dance as a dance form. Hence it raised the demands on the dancer, requiring an increased awareness and understanding. With this increased awareness, techniques were developed as well as greater structural understanding. In this sense, regardless of 'style' any discussion of 'technique', that is to say, any examination of 'how to', is all part of the *'tango nuevo'* movement. Unfortunately, this 'evolution', the most natural of processes, is not always appreciated and understood within its proper context when it comes to tango. I doubt many today would accuse The

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<sup>3</sup> Eduardo would define a 'style' as being a way of dancing (not restricted to one or two couples but a larger phenomenon) that can be differentiated from another style by the external form it takes.

<sup>4</sup> 'Alternative music' is often a term used to describe non-tango music, or music that uses some tango rhythms mixed with other genres.

<sup>5</sup> *Tango, A History of Obsession*, Virginia Gift, 2008, ISBN 1-4392-1462-X (self published, appeared first in 2009).

Royal Ballet of diminishing the tradition of ballet or of causing the loss of emotional expression, simply because of its emphasis on study, on an intellectual understanding of the physics of the dance and on technical skill<sup>6</sup>. So why is *'tango nuevo'* criticised for this same process?

### ***Misunderstood?***

One of the main reasons that *'tango nuevo'* has had its share of bad press in recent years has been because people who have not yet developed an understanding of the essence of tango, or developed their skills enough to control their movements have nevertheless taken to the dance floor trying to do ambitious or inappropriate movement with little connection to the music, the limitations of the space and/or their partner. Towards the end of the first decade of the new century, teachers such as Chicho Frumboli and Sebastian Arce (leaders in the newest generation of *'tango nuevo'*), started to express their feelings of a sense of responsibility for what was starting to take place in the young people's milongas of Buenos Aires and around the world. They started to question whether they had been a little unwise in putting complicated tools into the hands of students who had not yet learnt the essence of what tango was about and were therefore unable to apply their limited knowledge appropriately. In an interview in the *Tangauta*<sup>7</sup>, Chicho admits "we missed something in the teaching...I lost the way to be able to pass on the tango essence that I have very much inside...there are a lot of people who don't understand or know what the real essence of this dance is."

These realisations amongst a handful of influential *'tango nuevo'* dancers (together with two significant micro and macro socio-economic conditions<sup>8</sup>), led to a visible shift in the younger generation milongas and *practicas* in Buenos Aires and more significantly in the large European tango cities and festivals. Young teachers and their students started to tend towards a closer embrace, to avoid too much extroversion, to channel complexity inwards, to stop playing alternative music for tango dancing, to shift towards less abstract phrasing etc. In short there was an active effort to impart what tango was about in terms of a feeling, something that all those who had learnt directly from the *milongueros* knew intuitively and had it within, but something that was starting to get lost in translation in some sectors of the tango community in Buenos Aires and worldwide<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> I would argue emotional expression is not lost once one understands the workings of a movement, in fact ones capacity for expression can only be enhanced by deeper understanding, as long as one is not consumed by performance anxiety.

<sup>7</sup> 'One on One with Milena Plebs and Chicho Frumboli Interview', *El Tangauta* 182, Dec 2009.

<sup>8</sup> The change included the growth of more formal and grander tango festivals and events worldwide and the economic crisis, which peaked in 2008 worldwide, both of which have led to a tendency for more conservative behaviour.

<sup>9</sup> It's important to note that the many newly spouting tango communities in Europe and the USA have needed time to mature, to be ready to go into subtleties. Anyone who teaches absolute beginners knows the limitations of a new dancer. Only a few layers of information can be processed at any one time. One can't ask a beginner or improver dancer to focus on the music, the emotion, the connection, improvisation, their posture, their partner's axis, the distance in the embrace, the direction of movement and the size of step all at the same time. I would even argue that most professional dancers can't consciously focus on all these things at the same time, though over time they learn to automatize enough to free their mind to be present in the moment. As dancers improve they can focus on processing several layers simultaneously, and the same can be said for a community of dancers. And whilst with the beginner, there is one type of

This return to an appreciation of the essence of tango was a very important and necessary development in the life of the dance. However the backlash came with a sting as some people<sup>10</sup> started to create rules about what tango is and how it *should* be danced<sup>11</sup>. Superficially it seemed '*tango nuevo*' was 'out' and 'traditional' was 'in'. However, whilst the style of dancing in the Palermo milongas has changed in the past eight years or so, '*tango nuevo*' is very much alive in the bodies and minds of the very talented and skilled dancers who started learning and investigating tango in the 80s, 90s and the start of the new century. Some of the very top dancers touring the world today showing and teaching their quite different styles, have all developed out of the process of new tango, the process that led to investigation and growth rather than learning through memorisation or copying.

### ***A new phase...***

I'd say the last few decades up until about 2006 can be considered the development years of '*tango nuevo*', the period of discovery. But in the last decade as the dancers have matured, so have their dancing and teaching. It's important that we too develop and mature our understanding of what '*tango nuevo*' is, what it has brought to tango and the sophisticated elegance and high level of skill it requires to do it justice.

We have entered a new phase now; the new movement in tango brought us tools and knowledge and with this comes new responsibility and an opportunity for personal and collective growth. The question for this new phase is, are we going to move towards greater levels of mastery or are we going to hide the tools for fear that they may kick somebody in the shin?

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responsibility, as the dance becomes more complex there is another responsibility on teachers to produce well-balanced dancers, ones who understand structure and technique, connection, rhythm, the emotion imparted in the music and lyrics and how to express themselves through the body. In short the whole grammar, vocabulary, elocution, poetry, metaphor and history of the language that is tango.

<sup>10</sup> Often people with a limited knowledge and understanding of the process and development of tango in the last decades and often also people with a limited knowledge of what it means to be a '*milonguero*'.

<sup>11</sup> This has been an unfortunate turn of events, because they seem to have forgotten that tango is about expression, the self-expression of each dancer, expression of the complex music as he/she feels it, that at the very heart of it it's about improvisation and about developing an internal and personal intelligence to flow skilfully with a partner in space to music. In this sense, it's certainly not about rules. There are some conventions to lubricate the social space, but these conventions for the most part have developed out of necessity and common sense and the applications of these conventions can even be milonga-specific. These social conventions in themselves, like the dance, are a skill and an art form and neither can be taught like the times tables!