

Marta Nagel and Ute Walter

Thwarting Roles

Marga Nagel & Ute Walter are dancing queer

by Tanja Thimm

Marga Nagel and Ute Walter were two of the pioneers of tango dancing in Hamburg. Back in the 80s, the queer coffee bar Tuc Tuc was drawing a passionate and experimenting crowd of tango lovers each Sunday afternoon. Rudolf Gutzmann (La Yumba) and MariePaule Renaud (Academia Tango Gotan) were also part of the close-knit scene. Not least because of the pioneering work of the early actors, the seaport at the river Elbe is now one of the strongholds of tango. Marga Nagel and Ute Walter thought well ahead and established the, at that time visionary, first Queer Tango Festival, which has since then spawned imitators in Berlin and even Buenos Aires. And here is their story, and that of queer tango, too...

→ The tango partners are just standing there, facing each other intimately in front of the Hamburg harbor. Nightfall is setting in. No superfluous bells and whistles, no striking of a pose – they are just there, elegant and timeless, caught in an instant of utter closeness. One character showing sovereignty, the other diffidently lascivious. But the wandering eye pauses with consternation – the superior person appears as of an androgynous nature. This is Ute Walter. This photograph of Marga Nagel and Ute Walter is shown at the opening milonga of the, to date sixth, International Queer Tango Festival. Gender is socially constructed, and may thus be deconstructed again. The “conventional passing on of roles” in the realm of tango has long lost its absoluteness. But let’s admit one fact at least - same-sex partners or partners swapping their traditionally assigned gender roles still seem to many like an odd thing. The handling of this issue involves the questioning of one’s own understanding of gender in a societal environment. Following men fear the loss of “masculinity”, leading women are afraid

of losing their “femininity”. Apart from drawing the world in black and white, there is a number of grey tones between being a masculine or feminine person, all of which you will find are resurfacing in a multitude of expressions and representations when dancing tango. Ute Walter has specialized on taking up the leading role, while Marga Nagel switches between the two roles in tango. But why not asking them to provide us a clearer picture?

→ Why does Tango Argentino still – as if set in stone – represent heterosexuality and even machismo?

Ute: Sure, like hardly any other dance, tango is widely associated with heterosexuality. A reserve of femininity and masculinity of the old order, so to speak. Where something has coagulated into such strong stereotypes, there is much allure to deconstruct such alleged unambiguousness. And this describes the very idea of introducing the concept of queer tango into (at least) the realm of tango. San Diego, Toronto, New Orleans, Sidney, London and Berlin have come to establish schools and events offering queer tango. In April 2007, Stockholm invited the world to the first Swedish Queer Tango Festival. And in November 2007, even Buenos Aires has held a similar festival. *Clarín*, one of the larger daily newspapers in Buenos Aires, commented to the surge of queer tango in the August of that year with “los nuevos milongueros”. Indeed, the stone begins to crumble. The conventional view of tango is also a socially constructed stereotype. The Argentinian cultural scientist Dr Magali Saikin has discovered traces of a repudiated history. The first milongas were populated by gay pimps with heavily made-up faces, lesbian prostitutes carrying knives in their straps and men dancing with other men not only for the lack of women. The renowned tango musician Azucena Manzani conspicuously dressed herself in men attire. In 1913, the tango singer Angel Villoldo explicitly sang about his male dancing partner, Tita Merello as, as shown in the original lyrics, “se dice de mi” - a lesbian tanguera. These passages seem to have been lost or replaced in later sound recordings. On the one hand, tango is a place of reproduction, but, on the other hand, also provides the ground for a creative reformulation of the conventional gender system. Queer theory considers gender and sexuality as socially constructed categories, rather than being founded in human nature. This makes them subjects to change.

Marga: Thus tango has always been a niche, a reserve to discover and live up to new identities. And this is what the legendary queer café “Tuc Tuc” here in Hamburg was all about; it held the first milonga in the 1980s and so became the birthplace of Hamburg’s tango community.

→ What exactly is “queer”?

Ute: Paula Villa, a tango dancer and sociologist, who we met several times at our Festival, which she attended as a lecturer and



body dialog is how you handle silence and emptiness, which provide for the development of something new but are hard to bear by many people. People bring along their individual history and put all their conflicts and peculiarities into the dancing process. What is happening in the actual act of dancing is also determined by these manifold individual aspects of the partners. The topics we are talking about here are also those which define our ability to establish a dialog in our "real" life. For my academic work, I am currently researching aspects of internal mindfulness and dialog in the context of tango and are developing a teaching concept that is based on the so-called dialog process, a communication method closely related to the ideas of David Bohm and Martin Buber. This method essentially works with internal mindfulness. I want to find ways of teaching the skills to establish a dialog in an even more systematic manner. As I see it, queer definitely has the potential to provide impulses for tango to better open up to such new ways, because a queer perspective frees tango from the restrictions of heteronormative and gender-specific structures and representations and values instead its capability to accomplish an emancipated dialog. The conventional understanding of tango restricts dancing partners in finding new ways of communication.

Marga: You hear people talking about tango often say "dialog". The

limitation of tango to the traditional orientation would make look the notion of "dialog" appear rather odd. For here, the following partner is more or less forced to be lectured and may be permitted to bring up some short remarks in the stops once in a while granted to them by the leading partner. I wouldn't call that a dialog between equals.

From a practical point of view, a real dialog, that is, one that includes two emancipated dancing partners, is much easier to establish, than widely anticipated. I have gained some amazing experiences in this regard, even with persons that haven't had much dancing practice by then. An essential precondition for this is nothing more than the openness towards this opportunity and a passionate readiness of both partners to integrate the aspects of the 'other' into the own process of dancing, to accept it as part of one's own identity. After all, we all have some of the 'otherness' in us. I contend that it is not harder for the following partner to temporarily take on the improvised role of the leading partner or for the leading partner to temporarily take on the improvised role of the following partner, than learning tango the traditional way. I understand this concept not as an alternative, but as complementing conventional tango: Dancing depending on the current mood, on what you and your partner are up to at the very moment. Why this should not be called tango anymore, as has

participant, found the following words: According to her, queer is "the oftentimes conscious and experimenting, not always, but sometimes agonizing experience of the transgression of borders of identity, with a consciousness that is more or less aware of the existence of these borders and the fact that, after all, they allow us to be." I consider this a very accurate definition.

Marga: It is about the recognition of the flowing nature of gender and sexual identities. They are not at all inevitable or last for a lifetime. Rather, the constitute categories that, if we never ever put them into question, will limit our own expressions and social diversity. We are not required to see them as something nature has given us to live with irrevocably.

➔ **Which aspects are telling you, Marga, to take either the leading or the following role when preparing for a milonga?**

Marga: It depends on my momentary mood. I won't analyze whether my mood is sometimes this or that. Most of the times, I

like to dance with someone allowing me to express all my different facets, no matter in which role. This opens my mind up for new things to come. And there are days I prefer to dance the "traditional" way only. It makes me feel much more aligned with a role and I will only pick up the shoes that fit with this particular role. For leading with high heels is not such a special treat. And, of course, the decision quite naturally depends on my dancing partner

➔ **What impact has the notion of queer on the communication in tango?**

Ute: The way dancing partners communicate in tango is rather unique compared with other dances. This type of communication can be used to follow the traditional distributions of roles, that is, leading and following. But the communication is also open to being shifted from one partner to the other and back again. As I would say, tango offers this option as, other than other couple dances, it is structured around communication. And here, I see the opportunity to make more of it. A vital prerequisite for the establishment of such a

been rumored sometime, escapes my understanding, because this, and only this, renders dialog possible.

➔ **What led you to the idea of establishing a Queer Tango Festival in Hamburg?**

Marga: We don't want to discriminate against anyone or establish a fenced-in island for tango-dancing gays and lesbians, but rather welcome experimenting tango lovers – no matter how proficient they are, which sexual or gender identity they have – to embark on playing with their role identities and tango. From a political viewpoint, it seemed to take into account more recent developments. At the same time, we also encourage gays and lesbians to feel home at least for a 3-day period, for the hetero-dominated world of tango may make the feel at times disconnected and lonely. We were really excited and were guessing as to the number, types and whereabouts of people that would attend our festival. The curiosity and the anticipation to meet people from other walks of life was something we could also see in the eyes of the attendees.

➔ **How has the festival developed over time?**

Ute: We felt it imperative right from the beginning to offer a qualitatively sound schedule, including internationally renowned teachers who were committed to our case and the idea to bring it to the fore at a festival. According to the comments of many visitors, it is the only festival that succeeds in encouraging tango dancers to explicitly think about the dance as such and put their bodily experience up for discussion. Since then, it has become a fixed institution and a true annual highlight for queer persons and people dancing queer tango. Figures of attendees are rising every year. There is an atmosphere of cordiality and kindness. Each year, we set up a different and varied program, added with a good portion of humor. To date, it is considered the currently most successful festival in Hamburg. We offer spaces for people who want to live their otherness without any hassle and encourage them to try themselves out. It's a particularly joyful atmosphere, and I would suggest it has come this way because of the fact that otherwise dominating social norms are not as prevailing as elsewhere and also because the sensual excitement that comes with being outside of social conventions and free to experiment.

➔ **When visiting the Queer Tango Festival, I was amazed about the sheer creativity in the performances, the representations of milongas - even as a place. Would you say that the dealing with the topic queer releases such creative energies?**

Marga: I believe that we from the queer community are used to get out of line – whether deliberately or not – and set our-



one-dimensional. Queer tango is also not to abandon roles altogether, it only assigns them to categories other than gender, such as internal qualities, which allow me to play with and make use of for trying out myself if I want to, and which take on a different form of expression in every single individual. And not, because my gender has said so.

Marga: Experiment with these roles is also part of queer tango. As we are not obliged to assume any specific role. After all, we are free to choose and give it a try. Something that goes beyond the world of tango. Tango gives us a number of points to start with as dancing is less loaded than other areas of life, a perfect realm to put roles into practice, get rid of them, change between them and discover personal traits that might have been harder to detect and put to a test in everyday life.

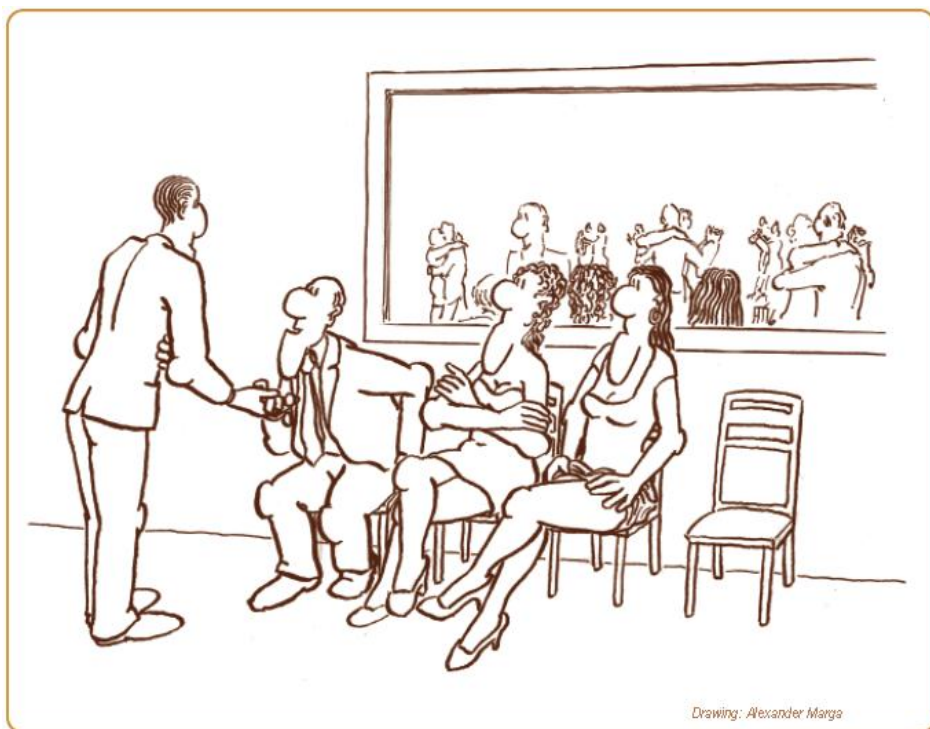
➔ **Are today's queer dancers still feel boxed in by intolerance and prejudices?**

selves apart from conventions and likings, which may contribute to our relaxed and creative approach to such a festival. Queer, weird, prone to experimenting – it all fits together very well –, but I am far from saying that there are no other aspects as well. For me personally, events full of spirits, humor, bravery and all combined with a hearty cordiality are the one I prefer, and they help me make up my mind to get new ideas.

➔ **Not few of those starting to learn tango are determined to fully comply with a role cliché for at least one time. How does it relate to the self-perception of queer dancers?**

Ute: Queer tango is no unisex tango. Queer tango is neither sexless and genderless, nor

Ute: It surely has happened a lot since the early 90s. Yes, even on the level of society. Whether this can be described as deep-rooted tolerance or rather a cloak of silence, remains to be seen. Even today, same-sex tango partners are far from being a natural phenomenon, finding your place in the milongas and being welcomed there still comes like a real ordeal. The range of reactions towards same-sex partners includes disapproval and ostracization as well as tolerance and acceptance. And those who allow to be led (as a heterosexual man) by a woman, will be sure to earn at least amused or even contemptuous glances. Being openly lesbian or gay in the predominantly heterosexual tango scene remains a provocative act. But as I said, times are changing. Even in Buenos Aires, and at traditional milongas, the responses I get from people there have changed to the better, when compared to the early 90s. Lately, I think it even has yielded peculiar results, because how



Drawing: Alexander Marga

come that some Argentinians contend that I were "one of the best men in Hamburg".

➔ **Are you considering your work as a political effort as well?**

Marga: Yes, definitely. But I wouldn't put that in terms of a mission. We strive for living our live and remaining true to ourselves.

Ute: Or, as my teacher Annette Kaiser would say: "A Yogi changes the world by his being." In fact, this attitude has certainly made the world a better place.

➔ **How important is tango for you personally? Where would you put it on your life's agenda?**

Ute: It has enriched and altered my life in many ways and continues doing so. I might write a book about it. And, what's more, tango has been the major fixed point in my eventful life. I feel grateful for all the encounters with other people and for having experienced the deepness of their souls, for which I blame the wonderful dance called tango, and it hasn't lost much of this capability.

Marga: I appreciate tango for allowing me to getting in contact with other people by communicating in non-verbal ways. Having more to do with the sensing of something I couldn't have discovered without tango, and which may not be able to bring to the light outside of the realm of tango. It had an impact on my entire life. And so, I have come to perceive people differently as tango has made my inner attitude towards the outside world more open-minded. ◀

Marga Nagel and Ute Walter regularly teach in Hamburg and hold workshops

More information:

www.marganagel-tango.de

The Hamburg Queer Tango team offers a trip to the Queer Tango Festival in Buenos Aires in November 2007. The seventh International Queer Tango Festival will take place in Hamburg in October 2007.

More information:

www.queer-tango.de

interview

Nelly Omar

A Living Myth

„La Gardela" talking to Carlos Bevilaqua

➔ With its 95 years, Nelly Omar has preserved not only a remarkable clearness of mind, but also a great voice. She is a vital old lady with an alert mind, excellent manners and the distinguished pride of people who have always lived up to their principles. Nelly Omar is a living myth from the world of tango and despite her old age, she has maintained an excellent voice, which she raises when being on stage, as has happened in 2005, when she was celebrated by the Luna Park Stadium crowd in Buenos Aires. As the seventh daughter to Marcos and Salustiana, Nilda Elvira Vattuone Pesoa alias Nelly Omar was born close to the village Guamini in 1911. Her older sisters received piano lessons, which she attended silently as early as the age of three, thus gaining her first input of music. Her parents did not recognize her musical talent in the first place, so Nelly Omar was excluded from special teaching. In 1924, her family moved to Buenos Aires, where Nelly started working in a factory and became familiar with the tango music played by the then very popular hand organ. In 1928, Nelly Omar premiered for a pay of 10 Pesos a day at the Argos movie theatre in Buenos Aires. It triggered a unmatched career as a singer. In her self-description, she always saw herself as a national singer with a folk music repertoire in the widest sense. As of 1930, her voice, which was mostly accompanied by guitars, became for decades a central component of radio stations across Buenos Aires. Because of her open support of the politics of Peron, she was banned from public programs in 1955, but started a fulminant comeback to the stages of Argentina in the late 1960s. As late as 2005, Nelly Omar recorded some tracks for the CD

compilation *Café de los Maestros*. The following interview of Nelly Omar, which was conducted by Carlos Bevilaqua, was held in Buenos Aires in the same year.

➔ **How did you get the nickname "gardel in a skirt"?**

The audience made it up after a show at the Valentin Alsina Cinema in the late 30s. They carried me on their shoulders and I asked them to let me down as I feared that I would hurt myself because of my small build. The truth is, I alone sang Gardel's repertoire. I followed his musical traces as I had always thought he is the number one. But one day, I began to ask myself why I only sang his music, and then I started developing a repertoire of my own.

➔ **Have you ever met Carlos Gardel?**

Yes, of course. When I was still living in Guamini, he came with Razzano and was playing without any pay; when the performance was over, they were just passing a hut around. My father was a friend of Gardel and managed to get him a performance at the Prado theater, when he was still not a famous singer. I saw him in Buenos Aires as well, as he used to sing at a horse farm, which was close to the place where I lived, in Las Canitas. I also went to all of his performances in the movie theaters there.

➔ **Did you also make your debut at a movie theater?**

Oh, yes. At the Argos, performing the tango "Ancalo en Paris". It was the place where Ignacio Corsini listened to me and offered me a contract to sing for the radio. I said: "I have to ask my mother for permission first." I was not even 18 but was taking flight lessons.

