

TANGOING GENDER. POWER AND SUBVERSION IN ARGENTINE TANGO.

Conference. 10 November 2008.

Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI) Berlin.

Website: <http://gendertango.wordpress.com>

Ute Walter and Marga Nagel

Beyond the usual: Experiences and suggestions for the development of a qualitatively different communication culture in Tango.

We have been dancing and teaching Tango for over 20 years and today it forms the basis of our livelihood. Our experiences and relationships with this topic are very diverse. Our course participants come from very different background contexts. They are mixed with regard to their sexual orientation and gender identity. This unusual fact alone already brings about a certain awareness process: an interest in and experience with different ways of life, and with this, possibilities for self-change and respecting diversity without making it an explicit theme. As the individual expressiveness of gay and lesbian Tango dancer lifestyles can barely concur with the highly heterosexual relationship model seen in Tango, the heterosexual norm gets disturbed.

Most people come with the clear task of wanting to learn 'authentic' Argentine Tango. There surely are a high number of Tango dancers who nurture their longing for old role clichés, even though they perhaps refuse these in real everyday life.

Also, the relationship to predominant images in Tango is frequently distorted, either through difficulties in converting these physical instructions and especially also on attitude and self-concept levels that pose a contradiction to this.

How open our course participants are to further approaches is usually strongly dependant on the fact that they consider us to be competent and authoritative in the field of traditional Argentine Tango. A base upon which trust can develop. The participants have the opportunity to get to know us and we give them the chance to see and use us as models.

We as people offer a different model with which prevalent perceptions of gender roles and also sexual identity are questioned. The fact that we take our non-heterosexual preferences for granted, influences the perceptions our course participants have – out of the mainstream and into same sex or other ways of life. This also contributes towards obscuring gender and sexuality in Tango in terms of a queer strategy.

It is important for us to make clear that Tango has a great wealth of possibilities for questioning gender roles and discarding them: Which role do I want to dance and in what way? What does leading as a woman and following as a man mean? In the best case, these questions arouse curiosity and interest, but often they also result in stress and seem to be perceived as jeopardizing.

For us as Tango teachers, it is important to show that roles which are mostly perceived as natural have a character of construction, and to offer possibilities for different physical experiences.

How can new accents that point towards developing a qualitatively different communication culture in Tango be placed? Queer approaches made Tango more accessible to change by analysing deeply rooted traditional gender and sexuality constructions which reserve Tango for femininity and masculinity of the old order.

How are we caught up in this? What do we ourselves develop and contribute towards this?

For a long time Ute didn't ask herself what her own contribution to this standardizing process looked like - neither as a dancer nor in her lesson strategies, in spite of her growing awareness. Her being caught up in the identification with the "male" leader role without giving it much thought, permitted her to benefit from these structures rather than wanting to change them as a dancer or a dance teacher.

Marga, who danced both roles from the start, had more motivation to change. With Ute, however, she solely danced in the following role. Her dissatisfaction with the inequality in the dance-relationship-roles grew, initially without constructive solutions.

The debate with Paula Irene Villa's point of view and the Queer Tango Festival (see below) are important impulses that inspire to think far more about this and look for possibilities of breaking up these immensely restricting structures.

Because, as has been frequently stated, the dance roles are not equal. Leading and following have to do with ruling and hierarchy: Leading means, to exercise power, and following means to cede power, even if this is more or less done 'out of free will' and 'actively'.

Changing roles doesn't fundamentally change anything within this structure from an outside perspective. But something will probably change between the dancing couple who has changed roles. It is now about two people who master both roles and are dancing as equals.

Tango is generally accepted as a danced dialogue. Though we believe that there is something severely wrong with this dialogue-model because "HIERARCHY IS THE ANTITHESIS OF DIALOGUE" (David Bohm). We could, however, take the principle of dialogue seriously and apply it to Tango. This would practically mean that in the dance, both sides operate on equal rights - which is much simpler than is often assumed. Prerequisite is openness and a positive attitude towards this possibility, as well as a joyful willingness to try out both sides.

The participants should really want the advantages of dialogue - they need to consider them as more important than privileges or positions. Whoever is accustomed to imposing opinions onto others due to one's hierarchical ranking must let go of this precedence in the dialogue. And those who are accustomed to holding back opinions as a result of hierarchical ranking have to leave the security of this "safety net".

Our dialogue abilities are not only limited by a lead-follow structure. It is important for all of us to train dialogue abilities. By now, the word has gone round that there is never an absolute truth, but there are always only perspectives. It is difficult for us to understand this completely, to let it become an inner attitude and let it flow into our daily activities, be they conversation or Tango. We want to protect our convictions, about who we are, who the others are and how things should be, for fear of the pain that could arise if we question ourselves.

If I attach my identity to opinions, discussions often get an aspect of violence. On a physical level, this violence can be observed on the dance floor. Often, it is simply ignorance at its base. Apart from willingness, it takes a high degree of self-observation and courage to confront such identity threatening processes, which question securities and usual patterns of interpretation.

In daily communication, a real dialogue is also often just a lucky chance. Even in Tango with non-fixed roles, the extent to which dialogue can succeed will always depend on many situational and individual factors. It appears to be important that these factors are not professed through structures without reflection, and that individual possibilities for expression are not determined through gender, which limits diversity.

Tango lives through subtle communication between the two dancers, who (must) approach each other with respect and emotional openness to experience and express its special appeal. The development of inner mindfulness, and with this sensitivity for oneself, one's partner and the situation, is the deciding factor for quality communication. The experience of awareness in particular seems to make Tango dancing a joyous and enriching experience. This is a relevant feature which allows the dance to succeed.

For learning and teaching, inner mindfulness plays an important role. It is about breaking through automatisms in perceiving, feeling, thinking and acting, which have resulted from past experiences. Ellen J. Langer, Professor for Social Psychology at the Harvard University is working on the concept of mindfulness in this context. Her concept is not exactly the same as the Buddhist approach, but there are parallels. Her research focuses on how preconceived perceptual schemes, interpretations, judgements and opinions lead to behaviour that does not correspond to the actual situation. She specifies that carelessness lies at the root of this, for example through excessive expert knowledge, rigid value systems, fixed self-images and goal-oriented actions, where the focal point is success measured through achievement rather than through the action itself. According to Langer, process automation results from careless thinking and actions. Process automation does not do justice to living processes in terms of complexity and changeability, which leads to restricted self-images, tendencies towards cruelty, loss of control, learned helplessness, as well as limited potential for creativity, intuition, learning and personal growth.

The approach of inner mindfulness is central in Langer's understanding of Pedagogy. This determines the didactic premises which aim to create learning situations that promote mindfulness. She determines mindfulness with the following attitudes: openness for new things, perceptiveness for

differences, sensitivity for different contexts, awareness of differing perspectives, concentrating on the present.

Tango needs a consciousness span which is different to the consciousness and “awakeness” experienced in daily life. Mindfulness is of importance on several levels. To name just a few: quality communication, high degree of attunement, essential detachment and flexibility for improvisation, and the relatedness of the dance partners to being ‘here and now’, be moved by the music and not lose themselves in thoughts about the next figure. Also, the ability to self-express is determined by the level of self-awareness. It is about taking the time to know what one is feeling.

We see the real essence of Tango in this kind of communication and its potential for equal dialogue, and not in rigid gender-determined lead-follow structures which are unequal and prevent real dialogue.

With this background, our classes offer opportunities to experience different physical experiences, for example, how beautiful it is to give, how exiting and inspiring a reciprocal exchange in dance can be between equals, and also accommodate the cognitive sluggishnesses of students. This means demonstrating the construction character of roles which are considered natural and, besides the mediation of body-dialogue in Tango, to also encourage and inspire spoken-dialogue during the lessons.

Above all, personal and social self-reflection is essential. Although psychological patterns may be recognized, they still often persistently stand in the way. So even people with the ‘right’ conviction or persons with the highest motivation and psychological strain often have to face old psychological conditionings and patterns, which they do not like to see - and this despite the support of theoretical considerations and analyses as also used in the Queer Theory. This applies to queer Tango dancers and dancers from more traditional Tango scenes alike. It is about developing the ability to see oneself freely, and also free from the pressure of new dogmas.

This described form of perception in dance can be trained with special exercises, and can be also used for non-role specific communication techniques as well as for examining own communication patterns.

Just as in real life, topics such as interest, contact, self-confidence, openness and trust, establishing and allowing closeness, have an influence on our ability to have dialogues upon equal rights. They require deeper self-examination which people who just want to learn Tango do not always want. And this is where the economic situation becomes important for us, who make a living from Tango. This means that our offers are adapted according to how well they can be conveyed, or, to ask more clearly: will somebody buy this?

We offer these contents in theme-related workshops, usually without giving queer positions or making feministic statements, though these still flow into it, often with a helping of humour. We particularly show the participants our enthusiasm for this approach, speak about ourselves and allow them to take

part in our personal experiences. We very clearly show that this model is normal for us and that it is fun. We encourage trying things out but also give the freedom for participants to take things on board or not. We pay attention to using neutral language. This may initially draw the attention of newcomers or confuse in a certain way.

With all the limitations and difficulties in conveying the message of really queer tango, the "Queer Tango Festival" is for us a successful way of stimulating new experiences, especially in the combination reflection, deconstruction of existing circumstances, conveying pleasure and sensuality. On the one hand we have set-off a lot people into this direction over the last 7 years. On the other hand we have observed that, in spite of all openness and the formulated desire to break open gender roles, the dichotomy of leading and following, this set either-or is rarely used in practice. And we experience within ourselves how persistently these images we want to change work. Depending on the perspective, one could say that there is a strong discrepancy between one's own claim and the ability to convey content. But the radical nature of thought creates impulses which help to initiate starting searches and starting an approach to a perhaps utopian image.