

Buenos Aires Tango Joints

In search of the real thing

by Elizabeth Hanly

might have been lost in the pampas of the last century. Two gauchos, those fierce Argentinean cowboys made famous in the stories of Jorge Luis Borges, were holding each other in the embrace that's tango. They turned endlessly. Tango doesn't have curves; instead it twists, one leg always sliding between the partner's legs. Each of the gaucho's turns was quick as a slap.

I was at a private party at a polo club two hours outside Buenos Aires. A handful of grooms were showing off for the guests, giving me a glimpse of tango's primordial roots. Dwellers of Buenos Aires's port area invented tango, putting together violin, flute, guitar, and a heart-breaking German accordion called a *bandoneón*. Originally, men danced with men, until prostitutes came on the scene.

Valentino's Dance

By the early 1900s, tango had become avant-garde in Buenos Aires café society. Although church officials condemned the dance, it was an international fever in the 1930s, thanks to crooner Carlos Gardel and film idol Rudolph Valentino. By the 1950s, though, it had vanished, only to be resurrected on Broadway with *Tango Argentino*, in 1985.

But had tango ever really disappeared in Buenos Aires? Writers and artists there describe its rhythm and its perverse—and at times lyrical—beauty



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as the subtext of the city. Tango put aside? It must be thriving, as it always had, in some damp *boliche* (nightclub) on a side street somewhere. Back in Buenos Aires after my night at the polo club, I decided to find it.

A natural first step on my tango search was *Casa Blanca*, in the bohemian San Telmo district. This is “tango for export,” as the Argentineans call it, a two-hour cabaret of singers and dancers, including Juan Carlos Copes, superstar of the Broadway production, and María Nieves, his partner. Copes and Nieves are wonderful, but the real treasure here is the Leopoldo Frederico Orchestra—a dozen aging musicians who call up the feast that was tango in its heyday.

Casa Blanca itself is a small, lovely theater with rows of chairs and barlike tables. Its show does manage some intimacy—certainly more than those tour buses outside would indicate. It offers a

good introduction to tango, too, even if nobody but the entertainers dance. Just the same, no Argentinean would be caught dead in the place.

Argentineans do turn up at *El Viejo Almacén*. “We come,” an Argentine told me, “when we need a long, cool draft of nostalgia.” Which must be often, because *El Viejo Almacén* is generally crowded.

Once again, this is a show, rather than an opportunity to dance. But this show doesn't have the slick finish of the *Casa Blanca* production. There are 20 or

so acts: small tango combos, giant orchestras, a few Carlos Gardel sing-alikes, some soloists with their *bandoneóns*, several whirling couples—performers far more interested in being true *tangeros* than showmen. The array of talent is stunning, by any standards. At *El Viejo Almacén*, amid so much sentimentality, so many songs of longing and betrayal, one begins to step inside tango, and not incidentally, Argentina. Someday some wise person will give the place “cultural treasure” status. Meanwhile, it has the additional virtue, as does *Casa Blanca*, of being squeaky clean.

Bandoneón and Salami

By the end of a week's worth of searching for the perfect tango dance hall, though, I began to believe that all the old joints were gone. “Our tango artists these days are singers,” a journalist told me. “Yes, tango's alive here,

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Tango's Cathedral

La Catedral de Tango, in the suburb of Belgrano, is among the most quietly spectacular tango clubs. The setting is nondescript—some sort of cement-industry social club. The music is canned; the food, mostly potato chips. But *Petroleo* is here. It was he who taught Borges the tango. *Petroleo* earned his name because of the amount of wine he drinks, but his rhythm and pauses are impeccable.

Students from as far away as Japan,

Casa Blanca offers a good introduction to tango, but no Argentinean would be caught dead in the place.

as well as Buenos Aires's most promising young dancers, come to *La Catedral* on Saturdays to show off. On Tuesdays, they return for lessons with *Petroleo*, an undertaker named *Portalea*, or a lady called "*La Ruse*" (alias "*Sorge*"), who on occasion teaches tango at the capital's national theater. Superb tangeros all, these three—especially *Sorge*—are gentle teachers on Tuesdays. Given the choice of lessons with either these folks or *Copes*, who charges many times their fee for private sessions, I'd head to *La Catedral*—even if money were no object.

Youngsters sometimes have special evenings at *La Catedral* to honor the old folks who taught them. On one such night, a half dozen regulars sat with me, talking about "tango as feeling," "the body as an embrace," and "the woman in one's arms." Eventually, though, something brought the group back to its senses. An ever-fresh *Gardel* was on the machine and those turns, so formal and shameless, once again were everywhere in the room. ■

Elizabeth Hanly frequently visits and writes about Latin America.