

## WHAT I HAVE LEARNED ABOUT TANGO

by Richard Isaacs, [RIsaacs@attglobal.net](mailto:RIsaacs@attglobal.net)

*With gratitude and thanks to the caring and supportive tango community of the New York City Argentine Consulate and the teachers there, Alicia Cruzado, the best tango coach in New York, and Fran Chesleigh, the best tango teacher in New York.*

*They have collectively made me understand the concepts of friendship and charity.*

*And to Catherine Nicodemo, the best dancer in the New York Tango community. I saw her dance and wanted to learn tango, and she sent me to the Argentine Consulate so I might learn to dance social tango properly.*

We dance because we hear music and our bodies feel impelled to respond. Argentine Tango is a wonderful and particularly elegant social dance. It is challenging, fun, and a pleasure to do for everyone from the beginner (as long as you as a beginner keep to things within your capacity: Otherwise it is like going on the black diamond slope when you should be on the bunny trail) to the expert.

Argentine tango is broken into two broad categories: Social tango and stage tango. While I, like many others, was first attracted to tango by stage performances, I am a social dancer, not a performer, and anything I say here refers only to traditional Argentine social tango (I will just call it tango from now on). *Tango nuevo*, American tango, and international tango are different dances than traditional Argentine social tango, and will not be discussed here.

As a beginning tango dancer I picked up a number of helpful hints that I wanted to pass along to other new dancers to help make tango a bit easier to leap into. I have continued to add hints as I have become more knowledgeable. I have gotten these tips from teachers and other students. None of these are my own ideas, and I do not take any credit for thinking them up.

I hope you get as much pleasure out of tango as do I, and that these brief notes will help you avoid the common pitfalls that most of us fall into, and speed your entry into the world of tango.

### **1. A given tango is a three to five minute deeply intimate personal relationship.**

This intimacy, which is not sexual in nature – this is just a social dance, folks – is inherent in tango, because as a leader you must be so attuned to what your follower is doing in response to your lead or invitation, and as a follower you must be so attentive to what you are being led or invited to do. It is said that at a certain level you will not only feel your partner's heartbeat, but will find that your breathing has become synchronized with that of your partner as a result of this total concentration. This need for total concentration is the reason that it is impossible to talk and dance tango at the same time.

Because each dance is a deeply intimate personal relationship, the most important part of the dance is not the steps, figures, and sequences of steps, but the sense of connection, the feeling of intimacy. You can watch couples dancing simply but with intimacy, and recognize this as good social dancing. You can also see couples dancing with dazzling sequences of steps but no sense of connection, and recognize this as bad social dancing. As leader, your follower should always feel this intimacy, so if you find that you are so busy concentrating on the sequence that you have lost this connection – this awareness of your partner’s leads, invitations, or responses – then you are doing it wrong.

Carlos Gavito has noted that tango *is* the embrace. To emphasize this, some teachers, who know that *abrazo* also means hug, have beginning students start by literally hugging. This hug (and no, this is **not** *close embrace*) gives the appropriate physical sense of the intimacy of tango. To put this into American terms, think of dancing to a romantic Sinatra song at a wedding. There you will be dancing intimately, with little movement, simply embracing your partner. Social tango should have exactly this same feeling, and this same level of simplicity, albeit moving with the line of dance.

This sense of intimacy also gives us a clue as to the level of civility that should accompany the dance. Thus, it is considered good form for the leader to dance a whole *tanda* (the three or four musical pieces linked together by the DJ or orchestra in each set) with each follower before moving on. And when you are done, say “thank you,” and escort your follower back to where you got her.

On the other side of the coin, the convention is that when a follower no longer wishes to continue dancing with her leader, she merely says “thank you,” which is the code for “we’re done.”

It is also considered bad form for you to dance for an extended period of time with anyone you encounter at a *milonga*. The temptation is to hog a good dancer, but, leader or follower, you should try to limit your greed to two *tandas*.

While dealing with the issue of tango etiquette, this might be an appropriate spot to talk about dance partners. Most social dancers, unless they are competing (and yes, intermediate- and advanced-beginners can compete, though they won’t win), do not have or need a dance partner. If you *are* competing, and *do* have a dance partner, etiquette is important to prevent strains in the dance relationship. If you wish to go dancing on a night when your partner is not available, or if you want to go dancing with someone other than your partner, or you wish to dance with someone else when you are with your partner, you should ask them if it is ok. They will of course say yes, but asking avoids causing them the stress of hearing from someone else (the tango community, like most other special-interest communities, is somewhat incestuous and gossipy) that you were out dancing, which might lead them to suspect you were changing partners. And if you wish to go dancing with someone else’s

partner, it is considered proper etiquette to say, “Could you ask your partner if it would be ok for you to come dancing with me?”

On a related note, social dancers you know may choose to compete. Competitions in social tango, such as seen in the *USA Tango Championships* (held as part of the annual *NYC Tango and Film Festival*, proclaimed each year by the City of New York as *Argentine Tango Week*), are odd ducks, as the judging is generally done by well known and often-brilliant performers, many of whom are not necessarily wonderful social tango dancers. When you see people you know in a performance, demonstration, or competition, and speak with them afterward, it is appropriate to say, as you should after any artistic endeavor, “Thank you. I really enjoyed that!” It is not ever – I repeat **NOT EVER** – appropriate to give the artist(s) your on-the-spot (or day after the spot) critique, telling them all the things you believe they did wrong, or all the things *you* would have done in their place, making them feel dreadful.

Finally, it is an unfortunate truth that in tango younger women tend to be asked to dance by new and beginning-intermediate leaders before older women. Better leaders want to dance with better followers, not younger followers. On the other side, however, new and intermediate leaders tend to be afraid to dance with women they don’t know, so they are much more likely to dance with women with whom they take classes. Women address this issue by becoming part of a community of dancers that know her, like her, and want to dance with her. Other men, seeing her dancing, will be more likely to work up the courage to dance with her. To deal with women who are not part of their dance community, it is considered civil for a leader to look to see if there is any woman who has been sitting without being asked to dance, and to dance with her.

How does a leader ask a woman to dance? The tradition in Buenos Aires, called the *cabaceo*, is to make eye contact. If the woman does not wish to dance she will not make eye contact. If she is engaged in conversation, eating, or otherwise obviously occupied and not ready to make eye contact or dance, leave her alone until you *can* make eye contact.

An interesting issue for women is turning down invitations to dance. It turns out that there are many leaders with frail egos and long memories. If these men ask you to dance and you simply say “No” or even “No, thank you,” they will never ask you to dance again. Not ever. If this is a leader with whom you will never wish to dance – possibly not a bad decision – this is a perfect solution. If you are not quite sure, it is more politic to cushion the crushing rejection by saying something like, “I would love to, but I am tired and resting now” if that is the case, or “I would love to, but I am with my dance partner” if you are, or “I am waiting for someone” if you are hoping for someone else to ask you, or “Not now, thank you, but perhaps later” if you are willing to dance with them later at this milonga, or any other reasonable lie appropriate to the circumstance.

Can a woman ask a man to dance? If it is a man you know – a classmate for example – it is generally safe to ask. If it is a stranger, it will depend on the mores of the *milonga*: in some locales it is considered acceptable and in others it is not, and this may differ from individual to individual. If you are not sure, ask a more experienced dancer. I am given to understand that many teachers and almost all professional stage performers do *not* wish for an unknown woman to ask them to dance.

## 2. Tango is about the music.

Tango is done to tango music. Your dancing should be about musicality, rather than fancy sequences of steps, and the musicality needs to be about the music of tango. We are fortunate to live in a time when we have unusually good access to music, and, as dancers, we should take advantage of this. Those of us who have broadband access to the Internet can listen to tango 24 hours a day at <http://radio.batanga.com/radio/tango/listen>. It is important for you to listen to a lot of tango music because

A) it is difficult – particularly for a beginning dancer – to dance to unfamiliar music, and

B) you otherwise might be limited in the music to which you can dance. I have seen a number of leaders who consider themselves to be good dancers who have no problem dancing to DiSarli or other orchestras with a strong clear beat, but are uncomfortable outside this rhythmic realm because of their unfamiliarity with the wider variety of music that is available to them.

While you should be familiar with a wide range of tango music, there is nothing that says you should like every piece of music. And there is nothing that says you should dance to music you don't like. Just be sure you are not confusing challenging music with music you don't like. Also, keep in mind that not every piece of music – particularly if you are not familiar with it – can be danced by everyone.

Finally, many non-Spanish speaking *tangeros* feel bad that they don't understand the lyrics. Don't. As with all popular music, the lyrics are often silly or depressing (think Country Western). As an example, my personal favorite piece of tango music, both for listening and for dancing, is *Milonga Triste*, interpreted by Sandra Luna in her album *Tango Varon*. The lyrics for this long and lovely and long piece are about a beloved girl who has died, and are somewhat morbid. But only if you understand them! By the same token, some Argentines will tell you that tango can only be danced well by, no surprise, Argentines. This is too silly to require further comment.

### 3. Tango is an improvisational dance (and lead versus convention).

There are only six steps that can be led in tango (though there are figures that are done by convention, and not directly led). These six leadable steps are a step forward; a step to the side; a step back; a change of weight with no step; a pause with no step or change of weight; and a pivot. As a leader, at any given instant your only decision is which of these six choices to pick to lead.

This is very liberating for a new leader because the concept of tango as an improvisational dance frees us from the trap of structures. If you are taught the “basic eight” as a dance sequence, for example, you will find yourself dancing those eight steps and wondering what to do next. If, on the other hand, your goal at any given instant is merely to decide which of the six leadable steps to pick next, you can go on all night in comfort.

As an added benefit, this means that any sequence of steps is just that: Some permutation of the six possible leadable steps, each of which must be individually led and followed. While doing an intricate sequence of steps is daunting, knowing that at each stage you merely have to choose the appropriate lead from among one of six possible choices is less daunting.

Note that there are figures done by convention, where an *invitation* acts in place of a lead. What do I mean by this? Well, with the fundamental six steps that can be led, any adequate leader – and most beginning leaders – can lead a brand new follower to do these, and the follower will do them. While the level of subtlety of the lead will vary from follower to follower, even the most inexperienced follower will do these six steps.

With figures done by convention – the *cruzada*, the *ocho cortado*, the little cross spring to mind – it is impossible to lead an inexperienced follower into doing the figure. You can indicate that the convention is being invited, but you cannot induce – or even physically manipulate – a follower unfamiliar with the convention to do it. The invitation may be subtle for an experienced follower and more obvious for an inexperienced follower, but the lead has, in fact, been replaced by an invitation, with the follower needing to recognize that she is being invited to do a figure done by convention.

As an example, the invitation for the *cruzada* is two steps outside partner to the leader’s left (by yet another convention we do not do a cross to the right), combined with an upper body disassociation to the leader’s right. With an experienced follower the disassociation of the upper body might be much more subtle than with an inexperienced follower.

While you might think of this invitation as the “lead” for a *cruzada*, it does not fall into the category of a lead as I am defining it, because you will never be able to *lead* a follower unfamiliar with the convention to put one foot in front of the other in such

an unnatural way. This holds true with the cross in *ocho cortado* and the little cross. Plus, it gives new followers the misleading impression that the *direct* response they get from the lead for the six leadable steps will be as reliable as the *knowledge-based* response they get from the invitation done for figures done by convention.

The *molinete*, also done by convention, is somewhat different. The invitation is a led *ocho*, with the leader continuing to turn in a circle around his axis, with no further indication as to what the follower should do. The follower familiar with the convention will continue to pinwheel around the leader, alternating forward and backward *ochos*. An inexperienced follower will either walk around the leader, or do all the pivots in the same direction. However, you could convert the convention to a series of individually led pivots and steps, in which case it is no longer a *molinete*. Equally, if for some reason you wished to convert the *molinete* to a series of forward or backward *ochos*, you could lead those as individual steps, in which case it is no longer a *molinete*.

#### **4. Tango is a lead-follow dance.**

From the follower's point of view this means that it is the leader's job to lead you to do one of the six leadable steps or invite you to do figures done by convention, and your job as follower to look beautiful through the way you respond to that lead or invitation. From the point of view of the leader, it means you lead or invite your follower to do something, verify that she is indeed doing what you have lead or invited, and then you accompany what she has done.

When a step is completed, from the follower's perspective the dance is over until the next lead or invitation. This means, for example, that in a sequence like the *ocho*, the fact that a pivot has been led does not mean that you as a follower should automatically do a step in expectation of an as-yet un-led invitation to do so, or, worse, embark on a series of un-led *ochos*.

If as a follower you don't understand the lead you shouldn't guess. You should wait until a clear lead is given, or say "I don't understand your lead," which puts the ball back into the leader's court.

#### **5. Tango is a sophisticated dance.**

Tango is a very sophisticated dance, and requires time and effort to do well. Some consider tango the social dance equivalent of ballet, and estimate that it takes six *months* for a follower to become marginally competent, and three *years* for a leader to become marginally competent. You cannot rush the process by taking classes beyond your capability. You can take all the advanced workshops that you wish, but until you are ready to learn something, you simply won't be able to learn it, and skills

that will be simple when you are ready for them will seem difficult or impossible. Plus you will slow down those for whom the class is at an appropriate level.

Indeed, when you are a new leader, even private lessons will not be of value to you: A good teacher will tell you when it is time to consider private lessons, which may be up to a year or more after you start. With practice and the passage of time, basic steps and complex sequences that once seemed impossible mysteriously become accessible.

By the same token, watching instructional videos – even those dealing with fundamentals – will not allow you to learn things beyond your current ability.

Instructional videos tend to be of value after you have been dancing for a while, and are less of a learning tool for a beginner than one might expect because they tend not to deal with fundamentals. YouTube is even less helpful because most of the demonstrations we see, no matter how simple, are nonetheless performances, and pretty much by definition take up way more space than is available on a dance floor. As an example, if one looks at the YouTube video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPqGzIZh79k> ) of the brilliant Gustavo Naviera and Giselle Anne walking, one is dazzled. But, as with virtually all demonstrations/mini-performances on *YouTube* and elsewhere, there is little applicable for a social tango dancer: Just imagine another hundred couples on the floor in any of the demonstrations and you will clearly see the problem.

It is also important to avoid the trap of finding a teacher whose dancing you like, and trying to emulate their style. Since tango is an improvisational dance, the object is to learn the building blocks from the teacher, and have your own style emerge.

Otherwise you end up with a group of students whose dancing all looks the same.

If you happen to be competing and have a dance partner, don't dance only with each other when taking classes. It is important to know that your follower is actually following, rather than merely pre-knowing what you are doing, and the only way to tell this is for you as the leader to lead multiple followers successfully, and for your follower to successfully follow multiple leaders. On the other hand, it is perfectly legitimate if you are competing to dance only with your partner at *milongas*: This way you will develop your own style as a couple.

It is a good idea for the beginner to go to *milongas* just to watch people dance. You will like the way some people dance and not like the way others dance. Try to figure out why, so you can adopt the things you like and not adopt (or eliminate) the things you don't like.

You can observe a lot of things in others that might be hard to see in yourself. For example, some leaders dance bent over, rather than standing straight. This pushes their follower off balance. As another example, you will notice that followers dance as close as they choose, but that some leaders want their follower to dance even closer. The leader therefore crushes his follower to him, pulling her off balance.

By the same token, some leaders dance faster than they or their follower are capable of dancing. And some inexperienced followers will imprudently allow themselves to be rushed. This is a bad idea. Within the constraints of the music and your skill level, you should dance at an appropriate speed: If you are a beginner, you may simply not be able to do a *molinete* at full speed on the quarter notes, but will be able to comfortably turn on the half note or full note. Don't rush, and don't allow yourself to be rushed.

You will notice that good leaders give a clear invitation that their follower can understand (and can follow) while bad leaders lack a clear lead. Others simply manhandle their follower, pushing her around with a total lack of subtlety or grace. Incompetent and abusive leaders will tell their follower what she, the follower, is doing wrong.

Last, but far from least, some followers look happy while dancing and others look distinctly unhappy. Try to figure out what the leader is doing that is either pleasing or displeasing to their follower, then do the former and avoid the latter. And a leader that looks happy is someone with whom you, as a follower, want to dance. So leaders, make an effort to look happy, and to dance with enough connection – total focus on how your partner is responding to your leads and invitations – that your follower looks happy.

Followers have their share of observable problem behaviors. For a start, you will see that some followers *anticipate* what their leader is going to do, and respond in advance to a lead that has not occurred, and might not be anything the leader intended to do. You will observe that other followers over-ornament, or ornament by rote, always doing the same ornament on a given step. Worst of all, you will see that some followers drape themselves over their leader's shoulders, physically dragging them toward the ground by the mere fact of having abandoned their own axis. This can be really damaging and painful to the leader. Leaders, once they have returned from the chiropractor, tend to avoid these dangerous followers. By the same token, a follower who abandons her own axis when she leans on her leader tends to sway her back and stick out her behind in a fairly painful-looking, as well as unappealing, manner.

Sophisticated or not, it is important to remember that tango is a social dance, and that it is supposed to be fun. Some beginning dancers (and even some good dancers and some good teachers), working very hard to be good dancers, get upset when they see bad dancers. But if the bad dancers are enjoying themselves, that is ok: Not everyone can dance well, but everyone should be able to enjoy the process. As Winston Churchill said of his painting, "Anything worth doing is worth doing badly." Because of this, it is more important that you enjoy dancing at a milonga than it is for you to dance perfectly at a milonga. Ideally, you will both enjoy the dancing *and* keep working to become a good dancer.

## 6. Learning to lead is hard.

There is a consensus opinion that while following is hard, leading – at least at the beginning level – is harder, because as a leader you need to know what you want your follower to do, how to lead or invite her to do what you wish, how to verify that she has done what you think you have invited or lead, which foot her weight is on at every given moment during the dance, and how you plan to accompany the steps and figures you are leading or inviting her to do. It is important that the leader understand and internalize this responsibility. One experienced leader was overheard to explain to a new follower who was concerned about where her weight was supposed to be, “My job is to know where your weight is, and put it on the foot where I want it to be. Your job is to have feet.”

Many leaders don't lead very well, either through not having yet danced enough to gain skill and experience, or through unwillingness to practice enough to gain skill and experience, or to take lessons to solidify the fundamentals they haven't mastered. This inability to lead includes by definition all beginners. It also includes an embarrassingly large percentage of leaders who have danced long enough that they *should* be intermediate level dancers but are not, most of whom think they are better dancers than they really are.

In theory inexperience is not a problem: You lead those steps and invite those figures that you know how to lead and invite, and they eventually become more fluid and musical. And by practicing new sequences at *prácticas*, you will eventually get better at leading steps that you hitherto have not led well in combination.

It is legitimate to try to invite a figure, and, if it fails, to try to invite it a second time. If it fails twice, the leader should simply not try to invite it again. While it is conceivable that the woman might be at fault twice – unlikely, though certainly possible if she started the dance by saying something like “I'm a beginner,” or “I took my first class today” – the greater likelihood is that it is an unclear or bad invitation. Go on to a step or figure that you *can* lead or invite. Remember that figures done by convention are not led by physical manipulation: Either your follower knows the convention or not. If your follower does not know the convention, and does not understand, for example, that the invitation for *la cruzada* is the leader walking two steps outside partner on his left with a disassociation of his upper body to his right, don't do this figure: You are there to dance, not to annoy or insult or manhandle or teach your partner, and you should be able to forge a pleasant dance from the steps that you can lead, without embarrassing her with figures she doesn't know.

If you as a leader are trying in a *práctica* to lead some choreographed sequence you picked up in a class, and can't yet quite figure out how to lead the six possible leadable steps in the order that make up the sequence, it is likely that your follower will ask you to tell her what you are trying to do. Resist the urge to tell her: The object of the game is for you to be able to lead, rather than to be able to have your

follower back-lead you. It is more useful to ask your follower what she is feeling at each point in the sequence, so you can figure out where your lead has gone astray.

Keep in mind that at a real *milonga* you shouldn't do any of the performance sequences and figures you have learned. You **absolutely** shouldn't do things like *ganchos* or stage *boleos* which will leave those unfortunate enough to be dancing near you black and blue. And you shouldn't normally do figures like the *molinete* which are static, and will bring the line of dance to a halt, unless someone in front of you has already brought the line of dance to a halt, and you need to dance in place. Since this happens all the time, you need to build a repertoire of figures you can do when the line of dance grinds to a halt, as it does all too frequently.

You can get a good idea of what is appropriate at a *milonga* by looking at the rules for Argentina's salon tango competition, which say (not my translation):

26 - Once a dancing couple is formed, they shall not separate as long as the music is playing. This means that they cannot break the embrace (*abrazo*), which is considered the tango dance position.

27 - For the position to be considered correct, partners must constantly hold each other by means of the embrace. Even though during certain figures the embrace may be flexible, it must never be broken, and this shall continue during the entire piece.

28 - All movements shall be performed within the space allowed by the couple embrace.

29 - The Judging Panel is judging 4 different areas: musicality, circulation, walking style, and the consistency of the embrace.

30 - Within these guidelines, dancers may perform any figures commonly used, including *barridas*, *sacadas* close to the floor, *enrosques*, etc.

31 - *Ganchos*, leaps, *trepadas* (lifts) and any other typical *tango escenario* choreography are absolutely excluded.

32 - Couples shall constantly move counterclockwise, like in the *milongas* (tango dance places), and shall avoid remaining in the same choreographic place in order to avoid interrupting the dancers' circulation.

33 - No dancer may raise his/her foot above the knee line.

Point 32 tells you that at a *milonga* there will be – or more realistically SHOULD be – one or more lines of people moving in a circle counter-clockwise around the room. You can do walking steps forward, you can do walking turns forward, and you can lead your partner to do backward traveling *ochos* in the line of dance, but you can't stop to do sequences in place, as that would bring the line of dance to a grinding halt. We note, however, that if you look at videos of any of the USA Tango Championships, even with only four or five couples on the floor the line of dance frequently stops...

When the floor is crowded, you can dance *close embrace*. While neophytes think of close embrace as a way to be dancing pressed against a partner – they haven't yet learned that you dance as close in salon style as in close embrace, although in this case with the closeness *breathing* depending on the step – the more experienced know that close embrace is a way to dance in crowded venues without taking up a lot of space. And crowded dance floors can be very crowded: In Buenos Aires you are likely to have roughly a square yard of space, which moves around the line of dance.

Close embrace, unlike *tango Nuevo*, is not a dance distinct from *tango de salon*. Close embrace is a construct developed by non-Argentine teachers in which you *always* dance pressed together: In Argentina you would merely dance close when there was no space, and not do figures which took up more space than was available. Because of this, close embrace uses a subset of available tango techniques, many of which – *ocho cortado* springs to mind – are somewhat abbreviated and more linear. It precludes steps which require space, such as a conventional forward *ocho*, where there is simply no room for the follower to do the pivot and forward step. We note that the unsophisticated leader can force forward *ochos* in close embrace – many things that, by convention, are not done in tango are nonetheless physically possible – requiring the follower to make space by sticking her behind out.

It is critical to keep in mind that in close embrace, as in other iterations of tango, both partners keep their own axis. While the follower has *forward poise*, so that her weight is over her toes, she does **not** *lean* on her partner, giving up control of her axis.

It is also critical to keep in mind that differences in style are not generally significant, and that we non-Argentines are not locked into the style used in some particular neighborhood in Argentina. Instead, we can do whatever tends to fit with the moment, which includes our partner, the music, the space available, our mood, our energy level, *et cetera*.

Can *tango de salon* also be done on a crowded dance floor? Of course, but you have to dance smaller, which you should be doing anyway.

Some leaders attempt to bypass learning to lead by telling their followers what they – the followers – are doing wrong, rather than recognizing that the lead was unclear. The appropriate response to this needlessly insulting behavior is for the woman to ~~knee the leader in the groin and~~ walk off the dance floor, either before or after the music ends. Other possibilities are to tell the leader to stop it, or to ask for a teacher to clarify what is happening. When this last choice is taken, the teacher will generally end up saying that the follower is doing fine, and that it is a problem with the lead.

Be aware, however, that there is a near-overwhelming desire for a leader – even a new leader – to give his follower advice, particularly regarding figures done by convention. While advice is sometimes solicited by a new follower, the advice given is invariably wrong. It is unlikely to be solicited by an experienced follower, for

whom it will be not merely wrong, but insulting. Solicited or not, unless you are a tango teacher it is really better to control your impulses, and, in the case of the new follower, to dance to her level. If your follower doesn't know how to do a *cruzada*, don't do them. If she can't do a *molinete*, do something else. As a leader in social tango, your primary job is to make sure that your follower enjoys the dance. There is no need to ruin the dance experience for your follower by turning it into an impromptu class filled with misinformation. Instead, stick to the six leadable steps.

If you absolutely are unable to control your near-pathological impulse for teaching, instructing, and giving helpful-albeit-incorrect suggestions to your follower, they should be chosen from among "you're beautiful," "you're talented," and "you're wonderful," none of which are likely to intimidate or offend even the most self-conscious follower. If none of these three seem to fit the circumstance, ask the teacher or keep your mouth shut.

When dancing with a significant other, there is a belief that it is ok to tell your partner – leader or follower – what she or he is doing wrong or should be doing better. Annoying as this is for the person on the receiving end, this is a relationship issue, not a tango issue, and there is not a lot you can do about it, so just grin and bear it.

## **7. Learning to follow is hard**

While for beginners following may be easier than leading, following is not easy, and the better the leader the more there is to do as a skilled follower. The initial advantage for the follower is because beginning followers will be dancing with beginning leaders who have a limited vocabulary, and who don't give their follower time and opportunity to express herself.

This changes as the leader becomes more sophisticated, and gives the follower opportunities to become a real *partner* in the dance. Because of this, followers benefit earlier from private lessons than do leaders. And followers can benefit from followers' technique classes during the several years when budding leaders are still struggling with the three important fundamentals of tango: The music, the embrace and connection, and walking.

The end goal of technique for the follower – as well as for the leader – is not the technique, the steps, or the *adornos*. Rather, the goal is to so master the technique that it no longer interferes with your musicality and sense of connection. Following the lead disappears as an issue, allowing the connection to burgeon. If you look at really good dancers, you get the impression – virtually always an incorrect impression, by the bye – that they are lovers. What you are seeing is the elimination of technique as a barrier, allowing the couple to express the intimacy of the embrace and the music, and total concentration on invitation and response.

Note that following is hard even for the most beginning follower because it requires an act of faith, giving up her control of the dance for the control (bad at the beginning) of the leader. This is very difficult for almost all followers.

It is not uncommon to see followers turn to learning to lead in self-defense when there are more followers than leaders and they do not get asked to dance often enough, because they are bored by the low level of leaders, because they are a teacher and want to make sure they can actually lead, because they want to dance with women, or simply because they enjoy leading. These are all very reasonable, albeit still requiring several years to become competent. One might think that it would be easier for a follower to learn to lead, since she already knows what a good lead feels like, but, in fact, there are many followers who have never danced with a good leader.

A valid question would be whether it is worthwhile for a beginning leader to learn to follow. The answer is a sort of doubtful conditional yes and no. Let's start with the "yes" part of the equation. Recognizing the difference between a clear lead and a bad lead for the six steps that can be led is very important for a new leader. Therefore doing some following with another man to get a feeling for what is a good lead, so that your lead can become clearer, is a good idea, and one that every new leader should do. I believe it is, in fact, imperative that a leader practice following at the beginning level.

You will quickly feel that many leaders do not give a clear lead even for the six basic leadable steps, which will help you make sure you are clear in yours. You will also feel that some leaders pull you off balance, making it clear that you should not do so to your followers. You will also feel that some leaders, on inviting a cross, do not give you sufficient time and space to cross, making it clear that you should give your follower time and space. You will also find that some leaders try to lead a forward *ocho* when you are pressed to them, forcing you to either kick their feet or stick your behind out to make room, which will make it clear that you either need to give your follower space to do the forward *ocho*, or simply not do forward *ochos* if you want to retain the embrace.

Now for the "no" part of the equation. Remember that a follower does (for purposes of this particular discussion) three things. The first is to respond to an invitation to do one of the six steps that can be led, which, as I indicated above, the beginning leader who is following should be able to do. The second is to do figures that are done by convention but are not physically led (*ocho cortado*, *molinete*, little cross, *et cetera*). The third is to do adornments.

As a beginning leader who does social dancing, being able to do the follower's adornments is simply not meaningful. Being able to do figures done by convention is also not meaningful for the beginning leader, though recognizing the clarity of the invitation is. But at the end of the day, if a woman asks a new male leader whether he

would like to follow, and her intention is to actually *dance*, the appropriate answer is, “No, thank you.”

## **8. The skill levels of both partners are rarely equal**

Sometimes a leader will be more advanced than his follower, though for new leaders your follower will probably be more advanced. If a less-capable leader sticks to those steps he knows how to lead well, and generates the appropriate sense of involvement with his follower, she will be happy. If you are more advanced than your follower, then you should dance simply enough that your follower can enjoy the dance with a sense of security, occasionally adding something a trifle more advanced than she is used to doing, as long as she can figure out the surprise and have fun. When you do this properly, the new follower should be saying “Wow! I didn’t know I could do that!” rather than being made to feel inadequate by you trying something beyond her ability to follow.

By the same token, if you are a follower dancing with an inexperienced leader, you should enjoy the simpler steps, remembering that the only way the leader will become better is through practice, and that the beginner of today is the advanced dancer of tomorrow. If the inexperienced leader is doing something wrong it is appropriate to say “I don’t understand your lead,” rather than “You are doing it wrong.” With appropriate encouragement, even a beginning leader should be able to generate the sense of connection that makes tango worthwhile for his follower.

All in all, the consensus opinion is that if you have three good partners in a *milonga* or *practica* you are doing very well.

## **9. Milongas, classes, practicas, and the secret of the better leaders**

The average new leader is terrified of going to *milongas* and dancing with anyone other than fellow students. This is because we fear either embarrassing ourselves by not dancing well or being deliberately embarrassed by something said or done by an unknown partner. Embarrassing ourselves might seem to be a not-unreasonable fear: After all, for the first year or so we new leaders can barely lead, have a minimal vocabulary, dance without smoothness or grace, and are so preoccupied by the steps as to be unable to think about connection. This fear, however, is rarely fulfilled.

The other fear, being deliberately embarrassed by a partner, can happen on, thankfully, rare occasion. At one of the early *milongas* to which I went I asked a woman to dance. I started clomp clomping around the floor, and before the first song ended she simply turned around and walked off the floor, leaving me standing there like an idiot. Would I ever dance with her again? Sure. Putting aside the fact that I don’t remember who she was, I think that life is too short to hold grudges.

The good news is that the more common occurrence is to ask an experienced follower to dance, and have her patiently work through the *tanda*, knowing that if new leaders don't get to dance with experienced followers they won't get better. There are a number of experienced followers who bore with me when I started tango, and I will be eternally grateful to them for their kindness and generosity.

So what should new leaders do? For a start, they should be taking beginner classes, which deal with the fundamentals of tango. Once they have the absolute basics down it will not be inappropriate to go to guided *practicás* and dance with other beginning students. It is also safe to go to *milongas* with fellow students, and either dance with them or watch.

After about six months to a year we all have the premature desire to move from beginner classes to intermediate classes, particularly when it comes to the classes taught before *milongas*. There are two types of intermediate classes. The first, which sadly constitutes a minority, deals with details of principles underlying technique. These classes are definitely worthwhile, but often rejected by students who want to learn a choreographed sequence of steps. The second type of class teaches a choreographed sequence of steps. In the majority of cases these will be performance steps, with the teacher assuming you have three-ish years of experience or more. You will not remember the sequence twenty minutes after the class ends, assuming you can do the sequence at all, and you will never be able to use it while dancing at a *milonga*. These classes are unlikely to make anyone a better dancer, and certainly not a beginner. And for the advanced-intermediate or advanced dancer they have little or no utility outside of their social value.

So are these classes, generally wildly popular, worth taking? The answer is a definite yes – once you are able to at least stumble through the sequence. If you cannot get through the sequence – something that will be made clear by the fact that you keep saying, “What? What? What?” as each piece of the sequence is demonstrated, then you not only are getting no benefit for yourself, but will be actively slowing down whomever you are partnered with at the moment, as well as others in the class if the teacher tries to help you. When this happens you should walk off the floor, sit down, and watch. Which is something we have all done.

If, on the other hand, you *are* able to get the sequence, then the class will be of value in four ways. First, these classes are an awful lot of *fun*, and fun is why we dance. You get exposed to new teachers and new techniques, and, if you are inordinately lucky, will come away with some new principle. Plus, since the sequences taught are often obvious stage choreography, it allows us to fulfill our dance fantasies with sequences that should ideally get us banished from an actual *milonga*.

Second, you will do the class with new partners. This is important because it then gives you a new set of people with whom you will be able to dance at *milongas*. This will be immediately useful when the class precedes a *milonga*.

Third, it helps you gauge your progress. It is gratifying to take a series of classes with a guest teacher, each a year apart, and go from “What? I think I should sit down!” to “I think can do this...” to “That is pretty straightforward!”

Finally, and most important, it allows you to see that even the most complicated sequence is still made up of individual leads of the six steps which can be led.

But if intermediate and advanced classes don't necessarily make you a better social dancer, how do intermediate and advanced leaders become really good dancers? First, they dance a lot. Many have said that it takes 10,000 hours of practice of any skill to become expert, and tango is no exception. And as a leader gets better, his dance experience improves, and he can dance with a wider variety of partners. By this I mean to say that a beginning or intermediate leader will often complain that it is hard finding good followers. But, as he gets better, his leading improves, and followers whom he couldn't previous lead before, including new followers and those who aren't that good, will suddenly and mysteriously become less of a problem.

Second, they have a secret: Private lessons. Private lessons give no benefit to we beginning leaders for our first year or two (though they can be of benefit to new followers in the first year), because we are still concentrating on internalizing the embrace, maintaining axis, and walking. But private lessons are of immeasurable value to the intermediate and advanced leader, because otherwise what you are becoming expert in may be flawed. As someone noted, it is not *practice* that makes perfect. Practice makes *permanent*; it is *perfect* practice that makes perfect. Private lessons help make your practice perfect, and eliminate these flaws.

What do these more experienced leaders work on in private lessons? Things like internalizing the embrace, maintaining axis, and walking. As it turns out, the difference between the adequate and the superb dancer is not the number of figures and sequences they know, but their mastery of fundamentals, which gives their technique cleanness and precision. If you go to any milonga you will see many experienced dancers – or at least dancers who have been dancing for a long time – who do not walk as cleanly and precisely as they should, or who pull their followers off balance, or who have other flaws in their fundamentals which lower their level. These are details that can be addressed in private lessons, but which will go untouched in classes.

The problem, of course, is finding a good teacher, both for private lessons and for group lessons. In a large tango community there will be many teachers, some good and some bad, and schools where the teachers vary from good to bad. It is very difficult for a beginner to figure out who is a good teacher and who is a bad teacher, a fact that is made more difficult because we tend to invest emotionally and psychologically in our teachers..

The fact that someone is a great performer does *not* mean that they will be a competent teacher. And there is also the matter of taste. I know students who think they are wonderful dancers, but whom I think are terrible dancers. These people think their teachers are wonderful, while I consider some of these teachers to be beneath contempt. So you have to rely on the judgment of others, and your own judgment, as to whether you think their students dance well.

I do believe, however, that there are clues as to who might be good and who might be bad. These clues represent, of course, my view of social tango, as picked up from my teachers and other dancers whose dancing I respect, but may not represent yours.

If a teacher deals largely with the fundamentals of social tango, even in intermediate and advanced classes, that is a good sign. If they teach you what they think you need to be able to do, rather than the useless stage techniques that you think you want to be able to do, that is a good sign. If they will not give you private lessons before you are ready that is a good sign, too. Unfortunately, after a short period of time these good teachers are likely to be out of business or forced to teach what everyone else is teaching, because most students secretly want to be stage performers (and in a week, at that!), and are not particularly interested in the comparatively mundane world of social tango,

On the other hand, if their teaching is based around the basic eight, that is a bad sign. If they tend to teach pre-choreographed sequences, that is a bad sign. If they teach followers to lean against their partners, sticking their butts out, that is a bad sign. If they teach steps inappropriate to social tango, such as stage *boleos*, *ganchos*, *volcadas*, *colgadas*, *et cetera*, that is a bad sign, too.

#### **10. Tango is a *social* dance, not a power struggle. Nor should it be a tool to outshine or humiliate your partner.**

As a leader, your job is to look good by making your follower enjoy the dance and look good. There are, unfortunately, some mean people within the tango community who will tell the person with whom they are dancing how bad they are, which kills any chance of the dance being enjoyable. In most cases, this is done to a new follower by a leader who is, in fact, unable to give a clear lead. In rare cases it is done by a follower who is dancing with someone new and, by definition, not very good.

New dancers are painfully aware of their limitations, and telling them that they are bad or inadequate can drive them from tango. This kind of abusive behavior should no more be tolerated on the dance floor than in real life, and teachers need to tell students that when this happens to them they should simply walk off the dance floor and find a better person with whom to dance. If we hear or see others doing this, we should tell them to stop. And keep in mind that when you are encouraging to and supportive of new dancers with whom you dance, you may well be the person that keeps them from quitting because of people who have been mean to them.

Dancing is enjoyable – that is why we do it – and tango is particularly enjoyable, albeit challenging. If you as the leader are not enjoying the dance, you are not doing it right. If your follower is not having an enjoyable experience, then you as the leader are doing something very wrong indeed, since your primary job as leader during this brief, yet deeply intimate, personal encounter is to make sure your follower is enjoying the experience. If you are not having a good time, particularly as a follower, you should change partners.

### **11. Dancing tango is much like making love.**

When you first start dancing tango, it is very awkward and counterintuitive, and you are not quite sure how all the pieces fit together. As you get better, it starts to be less stressful and more fun, but it is still hard to focus on the needs of your partner, rather than just your own. Eventually everything falls into place, and you as a leader can competently and enjoyably dance with *anyone*, with it being an intimate and pleasurable experience for both.

However, if you are not careful, you find that your dancing has become routine. Instead of doing ten dances in an evening, you will find you have done one dance, repeated ten times. This may be masked if you dance with many partners. If you have a dance partner it will be more obvious, with your partner knowing what you are going to do as soon as you start to do it. Or, even worse, before you start to do it, because you always do the same steps in the same order, and do them without that feeling of connection – that focused awareness of invitation and response – which makes tango the intimate dance that it is.

When this happens you need to step back and figure out what you need to do to bring the excitement, the surprise, and the intimacy back into the dance. This is not about adding new steps or sequences of steps. Rather, it is about being able to change your *style* of dancing at will, and about making a fresh decision after each step as to what will come next, while retaining the sense of connection, so that each dance feels fresh and different and intimate. Even though you are choosing among the same six basic steps to be led dance after dance, you will be doing them differently or in different order, so they will continue to require your follower to be alert, which is what sustains her intimate connection with you. When you are able to change both your style of dancing, and the order in which you choose steps, while still concentrating on your partner, each dance will be unique, with no obvious relationship to the last dance or the next dance, and pleasurable both for you and for your follower.

**12. Tango is a metaphor for life, which means that it's always the man's fault.**

The corollary to this is that when something goes wrong a follower should say "I didn't understand your lead" rather than "oops" or "My mistake." While it is certainly true that any follower can misread a lead, most of the time the problem is an unclear or bad lead of one of the six leadable steps, not a mistake on the part of the follower.

**13. While tango may be a metaphor for life, it is, in fact, just a dance.**

People have a tendency to turn their activities into a way of life, and tango is no exception. Learning tango can become all-consuming, with huge amounts of time going into both learning and dancing. You can find scholarly books about every aspect of tango, and it can be easy to forget that tango is just a dance. It is instructive to watch Carlos Gavito discuss this in a 1996 clip on youtube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hm90s1uruxY>) called *GAVITO teaches tango y nada mas – Excerpt*. In this he points out that he is a *milongero* and dance teacher, not a historian or a philosopher or a psychiatrist.

###