

Welcome to Tango Town

From the mean streets of Buenos Aires to the oil-rich streets of Calgary, tango is quickly emerging from underground to mainstream

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On a sunny day in May while riding my bike, I stop for a rest at a white, one-storey wooden structure. While the simple sign by the door read Sunalta Community Hall, I am struck by the building's poetic contrast to its environment, its plainness steadfast as Calgary's modern esthetic surges around it: skyline, fashion, food, demographics, social interactions.

Suddenly, I hear tango music coming from inside, harkening back to the era the hall was built, circa 1940. Could it really be revered tango composer Osvaldo Pugliese?

I followed the melody, entranced like a child following the Pied Piper. It lures me through the building's narrow doorway and another into a simple rectangular hall, wood-panelled with a few utilitarian windows letting in light.

And there they are. A dozen or so tango dancers — tangueros. Couples leaning into one another in close embrace, their bodies erect, composed, yet succumbing to the ensuality that tango evokes. They skim over the hardwood floor together, the men leading the women, signalling with subtle arm, chest and leg nudges. The women react, displaying their footwork that sometimes loops and glides, using their feet as if striking a match on the floor. One woman kicks her foot between her partner's legs in a sudden staccato burst.

Tango demands a disciplined vocabulary and precise alignment and footwork. Etiquette insists the man lead and the woman follow, honouring the dance's origins when it was used for men to show off their dancing skills and their prowess with women. Couples follow a line of traffic. There's symmetry between the man and the woman and tension between expression and form.

Tango grew up in the mean streets of Buenos Aires in the late 19th Century, born of disenfranchised slaves, immigrant men and prostitutes. Despite its low-class origins and the Vatican's disapproval, Argentines have been exporting tango around the world to enthusiastic response since the early 20th Century and, eventually, tango found its way to Cowtown with Angi Lobos-Taylor.

Calgary's original tanguera arrived from Argentina in 1991, looking for political and personal stability. She remembers the oil patch was in a slump and the city's population was older and more homogenous than it is now. Calgary nightlife left a lot to be desired.

"I spent many evenings with my mother taking walks in the cemetery," Lobos-Taylor recalls. "People went to bed early unlike in Argentina or other Latin countries where we have dinner later and are more socially active after sundown. And with more immigrants coming, we needed that."

So Lobos-Taylor created her own scene. By 1997, she and a core of mainly Latinos formed Club Tango Argentino. They danced in spaces borrowed from seniors' centres and members' companies, then graduated to community centres and small bars. The original members brought friends, who brought their friends and so on. Now the group is a microcosm of global migration patterns.

"It reflects the changes in Calgary," says Lobos-Taylor, a public health educator. "A typical Calgarian is

no longer white Anglo Saxon.”

And it truly is an international crowd I find dancing tango in Sunalta Hall — people from cities as diverse as Cairo, London, Prague, Damascus, Lima, Manila and Paris.

The men look dapper in traditional black; the women in bold-coloured dresses that hold tightly to their torso and hips, then softly flair to allow the fabric to move seductively around their legs as they dance.

A man with a grey ponytail sees me enter and is quickly at my side. With a distinctly Dutch accent, he welcomes me to Club Tango Argentino. Charles Leiva, one of the directors of the club, tells me what I’ve stumbled upon is practica, or practice session.

Leiva is an accomplished ballroom dancer who has given it up for Argentino tango. “Of all the dances — waltz, foxtrot, salsa — tango is the most exciting. It is the king of dance,” he exclaims with sparkling eyes. “Look around the dance floor,” the ex-marine engineer and human resources consultant suggests, gesturing at the dancing couples. “You’ll see that no two couples are doing the same thing. Tango is all about improvisation.”

Leiva doesn’t have to sell me. I’d fallen for tango during a recent trip to Buenos Aires, and now I’ve discovered my city’s bosom of tango in this tiny unassuming hall. I feel like I’m connecting with my tango soul while entering a fascinating new parallel universe in Calgary.

In one corner of the hall, Anthony Ng guides a couple through their steps wielding his white fan as if he were a grade-school teacher threatening errant students with a ruler. “Shoulders down. Remember your frame,” he barks, punctuating his directions by snapping the fan open and cooling himself.

Ng, a management consultant, martial arts instructor and tango maestro, is as bald as a billiard ball and an intense tanguero.

He dances with catlike grace and explosive movement in what he calls “extreme tango.” Ng, who came to Calgary from Hong Kong almost 30 years ago, began dancing tango because it complemented his martial arts practice. Tango’s strong male lead helped him cultivate the discipline to manipulate an opponent, which is the essence of martial arts.

“I became a convert because tango offered such unbridled, artistic expression within a defined structure,” says Ng. He tells me tango is an addiction. “Sniff it once and there is no chance for rehabilitation with tango.”

Half a year after discovering tango at the quiet community hall, I understand what Ng means. I eventually bought real tango shoes and danced, then danced some more: Tuesday nights at La Pachanga, Wednesdays at Don Quijote, Thursday and Sunday at Sunalta.

And once a month, a milonga, a tango dance party thrown at Sunalta Hall, with up to 100 tangueros dressed in their tango best.

CTV News anchor Barb Higgins is a regular at the milongas. The United Way ambassador added another ambassadorship to her name when at the July 2007 milonga when Calgary MLA Wayne Cao presented her with a certificate honouring her as one of Calgary’s tango ambassadors on behalf of Club Tango Argentino. Higgins laughs when I ask her how many pairs of tango shoes she has in her closet.

“Let’s see. Two? Four? Six? Then there’s the silver ones and the red pair.” She laughs again. “Oh, about eight, I guess.” And cowboy boots? “Three.”

Higgins started dancing tango just over a year ago and got hooked. As a former ballet dancer, learning the steps wasn’t hard for her. More difficult was allowing herself to get into tango’s close embrace with a man. The dance is uncomfortable for many women in North America who are used to having more personal space.

“The most fascinating thing about tango is the closeness,” Higgins reflects. “It’s so rare in our culture to stop and enjoy an intimate moment with someone. In tango, there’s sensuality for the sake of sensuality. It doesn’t lead to sex. There’s a certain sophistication in that.”

Tara Wilson, a graduate of the University of Calgary’s dance program and hip-hop instructor, concurs: “It’s a grown up dance. There’s a physical and intellectual communication you get with your partner that made my imagination wake up.”

Wilson discovered tango when she took martial arts classes with Ng, who encourages his students to study the dance. “Finding the tango community was like discovering a secret society full of people who didn’t go to the same high schools as I did. It was refreshing.” Wilson says the diversity of people attracted to tango reminds her of the multicultural nature of Toronto.

The native Calgarian says the tango community challenges the stereotype of Calgary. “The dominating culture here is plain white: Calgary oil people, Flames fans — that’s how people think of Calgary,” she says. “But tango, like hip hop and all cultures here, lives underground. No one would really know these cultures are alive here.” Wilson says this is unlike Montreal, where cultural communities openly exist.

“It’s these pockets of culture that keep me from getting discouraged living in Calgary.”

It must be the city’s mythologized maverick makeup, a part of the Cowtown lore that fosters renegade cultural scenes, instead of a more mainstream cultural appreciation. And as the city’s complexion has changed, the cultural undercurrent has become richer and deeper.

Immigration driven by world politics and the oil economy has left the Cowtown stereotype in the proverbial dust.

We’re a product of globalization, so it’s not surprising that the well-travelled tango found its way here.

It’s difficult to define a typical Calgarian. Like it’s difficult to pin down a typical tanguero. Calgary, like tango, attracts scrappy improvisers who are passionate about where they come from and what they believe in. There’s an ingrained competitiveness and individualist streak to the city and to the way we dance tango.

“Tango in Calgary is showier than other places I’ve danced,” says Hugo Zacauala, one of Calgary’s first tangueros. Zacauala, an energetic retiree, came to Calgary from Mexico City almost 30 years ago. He and his wife, a native of Bogotá, have travelled extensively and danced at milongas in Latin America, the U.S. and Canada.

“By big-city standards, Calgary is a small town, but proportionately there are a lot of different cultures coming here,” Zacauala says. “Tango is just one of the things they are bringing.” Zacauala claims Calgary has more diverse ethnic restaurants than even Mexico City. “That’s one of the things we love about

Calgary,” he says.

Zacaula’s tango past extends way back.

He tells me the first 45 rpm record he bought as a child in the late 1950s was by tango singer and film star Carlos Gardel, the international heartthrob who died in a plane crash in 1935. Zacaula prefers a simple tango style that harkens back to Gardel’s era. He says Calgarian tangueros aim for flash at the expense of the heart and feel for which tango is known.

“I feel like a lot of people here have seen a movie about tango and they want to look like that,” says Zacaula.

Ng begs to differ. Nursing his green tea at the bar in La Pachanga, he scans the dance floor. “What most people are doing here is what I call ‘geriatric tango,’” he says, illustrating tango’s perennial struggle between tradition and innovation. He adds Calgary is frustratingly slow to adopt his bold “extreme tango.” I assure him extreme tango is an extension of Calgary’s restlessness and modernity. It will catch on, although perhaps not with the newcomers; people who love tango because it transports them to another place and time. People like Achilleas Gekas, a soulful Athenian, who has been in Calgary for a couple of years working as a chemical engineer with a Greek company.

Gekas is an engaging storyteller and eloquently demonstrates what tango means to him. “Nostos,” he says in thickly accented English. “Do you understand what means nostos?”

He presents me with a handful of dried lavender from his coat pocket and explains: “I brought this with me from Greece. I have

it in my apartment and I carry it in my pockets. This is nostos.”

Ahh, nostalgia. For Gekas, like the tangueros in Buenos Aires more than a century ago, tango expresses the longing for home and left-behind love. It’s about holding someone in close embrace for just a few moments, the length of a dance, to feel that human connection. It’s the intimacy Higgins refers to.

That helps explain why Calgary, a city of transients, immigrants and newcomers, has embraced tango. “Tango is a universal language,” Ng says. “If you know the vocabulary and the grammar, it doesn’t matter where you come from or where you are, you can dance tango with anybody.”

Calgary’s cultural contradictions parallel the themes in tango: tension between nostalgia and restlessness, modern and traditional, improvisation and structure, the anachronism of Sunalta Community Hall unchanging in a sea of change, yet on the vanguard of new culture.

Welcome to Tangotown.