The Performance of Tango: Gender, Power and Role Playing

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

Marissa E. Guillén
June 2008
This thesis titled
The Performance of Tango: Gender, Power and Role Playing

by

MARISSA E. GUILLEN

has been approved for
the School of Theater
and the College of Fine Arts by

____________________________________
Jordan Schildcrout
Assistant Professor of Theater

____________________________________
Charles A. McWeeny
Dean, College of Fine Arts
ABSTRACT
GUILLÉN, MARISSA E., M.A., June 2008, History and Criticism

The Performance of Tango: Gender, Power and Role Playing (65 pp.)

Director of Thesis: Jordan Schildcrout

Tango as both music and dance remains a significant part of popular culture even one hundred years after its introduction into North American culture. Words like “sexy” or “passionate” frequently modify the concept of tango. Advertisers capitalize on these connotations in attempts to make their own product appear more appealing. Artists go a step further, not only adding tango for commercial appeal, but they also use tango to enhance the narrative. In order to deconstruct the image of “sexy tango,” I will examine the history of tango in both Argentina and the United States; analyze the more formal aspects of the dance itself; and utilize the theories of Foucault and Said to clarify the interaction of gender and power in the tango. The tension created by gender and power, that is also based in history, makes tango especially dramatic. I will apply this combination of contexts to four case studies of the use of tango in theatre and film—“Hernando’s Hideaway” from the musical The Pajama Game (1954); the tango revue Tango Argentino (1986); “Tango Maureen” from the musical Rent (1996); and the tango scene from the film Frida (2002).

Approved: ____________________________________________

Jordan Schildcrout

Assistant Professor of Theater
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Before launching into this document, I would like to take the opportunity to express my extreme gratitude to Dr. Jordan Schildcrout for his endless supply of support and patience over the past year. Conversations with him challenged me to think more deeply and provided insights that would not have been possible without him. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge and thank the other Master's student, Rachel Linn, and graduate designer Nick Quinn for letting me bounce ideas off them, usually in the wee hours and often involving baked goods. Also, thank you to Tom Morin and Georgia Mallory Guy for posing for the photographs included in this thesis.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................... 4

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ...................................................................................................... 5

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. 7

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................... 8

METHODS ........................................................................................................................... 11

HISTORY OF TANGO ........................................................................................................... 14

FORMAL ANALYSIS—BODIES IN ACTION ......................................................................... 23

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS—DYNAMISM OF POWER AND GENDER ......................... 29

- Power Play ......................................................................................................................... 29
- Gender Play ......................................................................................................................... 34

CASE STUDIES ..................................................................................................................... 37

- The Pajama Game as Conventional Male-Female .............................................................. 38
- Tango Argentino—Roles Revitalized and Reconsidered ................................................... 42
- Rent as Subverted Male-Female ...................................................................................... 46
- Frida as Same-Sex ............................................................................................................. 52

CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................................... 59

WORKS CITED .................................................................................................................... 61
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1—MAP OF BARRIOS OF BUENOS AIRES ......................................................... 16
FIGURE 2—LADY’S LUSTRADA .................................................................................. 26
FIGURE 3—LADY’S OCHO ....................................................................................... 27
FIGURE 4—CORTE ..................................................................................................... 28
FIGURE 5—GANCHO ON LADY ............................................................................... 29
FIGURE 6—GANCHO ON GENTLEMAN ................................................................... 29
FIGURE 7—PROMENADE ......................................................................................... 50
Introduction

Tango occupies a unique and dynamic place in American popular culture and awareness. Everyday, we hear tangos in television commercials for shoes; we see tangos in movies and plays, and drop idioms like “it takes two to tango.” Regardless of its medium, whether the music, language or dance, tango instantly evokes a sense of sexy. However, the idea of “sexy” in this postmodern era hints at a much more complex dynamic. Not simply appealing or attractive, the term “sexy” involves the interplay of gender and power, often simultaneously. More importantly, the practice of these elements is anything but static.

This research originated when I caught a ninety-second commercial for a brand of tires on television. Not only did the ad feature tango music, it actually had a man and woman, dressed in white, dancing the tango in and around a tire. The juxtaposition of “sexy tango” and “all-season tire” felt jarring. Clearly, the company wanted people to think their tires were desirable. Did they intend to associate their product with such a specific desire? By extension, what causes such a specific connotation? Suddenly, I became acutely aware of the use of tango not only in commercials, but also in the performing arts, excluding dance, of course.

Tango explores the complicated nature of romantic love and relationships—the most universal expressions of power and gender. Additionally, the physical body is one of the most basic elements of human experience and likewise tango. Also, while gender and sexuality are necessarily
attached to the body, they need not be restricted by it. Tango’s different shapes and forms only enforce notions of power and gender. Just as no two relationships are the same, no two tangos are identical. The dancers move differently depending on the music, space and people involved. A tango can vacillate between tender and tough, dominant and egalitarian, intimate and theatrical, sometimes in the course of a minute. How much of tango is a game, the chase, or the deed itself? Argentine author Marta Savigliano refines the concept of “sexy” in terms of the people involved saying, “tango is not about sex—at least not about heterosexuality—it is about love” (45). Sex is relatively simple compared to the complexities of love in all its stages. What could be a better representation of the vicissitudes and wonderments of love than the multifaceted tango?

Poor, multi-ethnic communities on the docks of Argentina gave birth to the tango, which operated on the fringe of proper or genteel society, where conventions and rules of etiquette could be relaxed. Perhaps because of its outsider status, tango has always defied traditional conventions, particularly gender roles. Tango does not specifically require a man and woman to participate. Because of the shared responsibility of the lead within the tango, the dance appealed both to opposite and same sex couples alike. Unlike many other forms, tango developed as a surprisingly equal-opportunity art form, in which women could participate as readily as men. The relationship between the two dancers is not limited to the romantic. Accordingly, the stories told by their
dancing were diverse. How do the partners, who are not restricted to heterosexual pairings, interact with and manipulate each other? What does that indicate about their social situation, their desires, or about the tango itself?

Performance, both in the theatre and in the dance studio, creates a safe environment in which to experiment with different ideas, including identity. Tango, like theatre, provides a socially-acceptable outlet to try on these different roles. Because power and gender can change and flow, one can explore what it is like to play any gender, race, class or even dominant-submissive position. The history and practice of tango justifies this mutability of roles. It is both transgressive and safe at the same time. The possibilities are limited only by one’s imagination, not even technical ability. The couple not only produces tango movement, but also various relational scenarios, romantic or otherwise. They write their own drama in the moment. They don their costumes of suits and stockings. Perhaps the real sex appeal of tango lies in the unique opportunity it offers an individual to indulge in whatever fantasy most interests him or her. Most importantly, though, the fantasy is temporary and easily shed, a form of escape from the ordinary, a stylish pressure-valve of society.

Plays and films highlight the innate theatricality of tango. Although the director or choreographer’s opinions may differ, the tangos they include in their productions regularly garner attention and praise for their heightened theatricality.
Methods

North Americans (henceforth generically called Americans) today have become familiar with two different looks of tango—the stiff-armed, linear tango seems performed in ballrooms by sequined and tuxedoed dancers, as well as the more “authentic,” intertwined Argentine style that has become popular in clubs and studios. I have chosen to consider both of these styles collectively as tango, since Americans are familiar with both, and they consider both styles “sexy.” Both styles and their connotations continue to appear in American performance and culture, as examined in this paper.

Various media comprise tango, including the music, the lyrics and the dance. Here, I would like to focus on the dance, while acknowledging the musical rhythms that shape the dance. I have deliberately excluded lyrics from my analysis for two reasons. First, it is considered poor form to dance to sung tango (Taylor 9), and secondly, because most of the lyrics have been composed in a regional dialect of Spanish—*lunfardo*—that is not widely spoken outside of Buenos Aires (Baim 29).

Tango’s history and origins lay in the marginalized populations of Buenos Aires. Many historians have tackled the challenge of tracing the history of tango. While they do not specify many details, they can agree on some basics. For the purpose of this research, I have largely relied on works by select historians. These historians, including Simon Collier, Robert Farris Thompson and Carlos Groppa, offer some of the most consistent and recent work published.
Additionally, they draw on more authentically Argentine sources, frequently in Spanish dialects, which further enrich their work and this analysis.

Both advertisers and artists frequently feature tango, either as music or as dance, in their work, demonstrating the enduring presence and popularity of tango. More importantly, their usage invites questions and analysis of that presence. In its hundred-year history, tango has become cultural shorthand for “sexy.” Artists and entrepreneurs alike have capitalized on the enduring allure and popularity of tango. Including tango in their various products attracts patrons by subliminally tapping into a cultural connotation of sexy and sophisticated. Advertisers want to associate their product with something as desirable as tango. Artists tap into that same cachet in their storytelling, efficiently conveying the idea of “sexy” and its various manifestations. History bolsters this reputation by long-associating tango with prostitution, scandal, and an orientalized sensuality. Throughout this paper, I will deconstruct the more loaded concept of sexy into its constituent parts in order to more accurately analyze and describe the lasting appeal of tango. The dance itself can be dissected in terms of anatomy and the practicalities of the execution of movement, since the visceral provides so much of tango’s appeal. I take this cue from Ted Polhemus, who emphasizes the idea of dance as communication, saying:

Furthermore, movement and other physical styles are in any society imbued with symbolic meaning with the result that how we use and move our bodies in inevitably the occasion for the transmission of all sorts and various levels of socio-cultural information including, most importantly, those meanings which exceed the limits of verbal language (Polhemus 6).
Using Foucault’s concepts of power within sexuality, the flexibility of
gender play of tango can be understood in a more theoretical way. Combined
with readings grounded in gender studies, I will analyze the danced form of tango
in terms of how gender functions, and how that functioning creates tango’s allure.

The four case studies examine the use of tango and its “sexy”
connotations in theatre and film. In dramatic narrative, tango suggests a sense
of intimacy and power with such efficiency that makes it preferable to more
superfluous text. Alternately accepting, rejecting or subverting the “sexiness” of
tango, theatre and film provide several opportunities for case studies. In 1955,
Abbott and Ross composed a tango, “Hernando's Hideaway,” for their musical
The Pajama Game, pairing a heterosexual man and woman in a flirtatious,
kitschy scenario. Simultaneously banking on and revitalizing appeal of the form,
producers created the revue Tango Argentino, which burst onto the Broadway
scene in the mid-1980s. This production blended all the notions of sex and
power in both its tango dance and tango music, creating a booming tango
economy in its wake. Forty years after The Pajama Game, in 1996, another man
and woman danced the “Tango Maureen” in Rent, with very different dramatic
objectives. Harkening back to its same-sex roots, Julie Taymor used tango to
reveal the characters and relationship between two women in her 2002 film
Frida. These four examples represent a spectrum of possibilities in which tango
can and has been used as physical storytelling in popular culture.
For the three live performances in the case study section, I have relied on reviews, recordings and film adaptations in order to reconstruct the choreography and dramatic effect of the tangos. While nothing can replace the first-person experience of theatre, these recordings offer a fair approximation of their original material. The film adaptation of *The Pajama Game* came out in 1957, less than a year after the original production closed on Broadway. Bob Fosse returned to choreograph the film, which also included Abbot and Bissel serving director and writer, respectively, as they had on Broadway. Adaptations of both *The Pajama Game* in 1957 and *Rent* in 2005 feature most of the original Broadway cast reprising their roles. Because of the revue nature of *Tango Argentino*, no film adaptation was made. However, the Lincoln Center Library maintains an archival recording of the original production, which I viewed.

**History of Tango**

Americans have taken pleasure in the tango for nearly a hundred years, but the history of tango extends back to the 19th century. The development of tango mirrors the development of Buenos Aires at the turn of the twentieth century. Like Argentina, tango has a long, ethnically-diverse history, drawing on European, African and American elements in its music, rhythm and movement. Additionally, issues of class and power complicate the history and allure of tango.

After about three hundred years of Spanish rule, Argentina declared its independence in 1821. In the 1880s, immigration to Argentina exploded as miners discovered silver and businesses had to build railroads to accommodate
its export. People poured in from Europe and other regions of South America (Collier 20-1). During the development of Brazil, slaves had been brought over from West Africa, who later crossed the border into Argentina. Buenos Aires as a city rapidly grew. Historians disagree on the numbers, which can range from tripling to sextupling over the course of approximately fifty years. More important than the size itself, the population of Buenos Aires became more diverse, with each culture contributing something to the art form that Argentina’s Parliament would later declare a national treasure (Katz 10).

With newfound prosperity must come wealth disparity, or more optimistically, the potential for wealth accumulation. The wealthy European sons, along with the few locals who managed the resources, primarily lived in the northern parts of the city, such as Barrio Norte and Recoleta (see Figure 1). Lower class or income people, by contrast, lived in southern neighborhoods like San Telmo and La Boca (Collier 33). These southern neighborhoods in particular increasingly became densely populated, mostly by young men and considerably fewer women (Collier 38).
Waves of immigrants poured into the port city, bringing with them their language, music and dances, which began to meld into what is now tango. These immigrants did not generally move too far into the city, adding to the crowded harborside barrios on the south side. Unlike New York, immigrants did not segregate themselves into neighborhoods based on their country of origin, adding to the ease with which various forms could move and morph from barrio to barrio (Collier 35). European immigrants brought the newly-accepted social dances of waltz and polka to the streets. There, these European dances encountered more African forms, including canyengue and candombe. The habanera had descended from the Afro-Caribbean communities, with its distinctive rhythm that fascinated Bizet (Baim 133). Without much private space, people congregated outside, on sidewalks, or in outdoor cafés, as tenement
culture flourished. As a result of these population disparities, some historians trace the development of tango to the brothels of Buenos Aires, one of the few places men and women interacted at leisure. These cultures and economies collided in the lower-class barrios of Buenos Aires. Similar to the arrondissement system in Paris, barrios were separate districts of the city. However, tango knew no such boundaries, appearing throughout the city.

One of the few things historians agree upon is the murkiness of tango’s origins. Historians cannot even agree on the origin of the name “tango.” Given the presence of Romance languages, the word could derive from the Latin word *tangere*, to touch (Collier 41). Some scholars take it back further, deriving from any one of many Ki-Kongolese words imported by slaves and Afro-Argentines from West Africa to describe different qualities of movement (Thompson 81). Still others suggest that the word does not have a literal etymology as much as an onomatopoeic one (Jakubs 134). Yet, this variety of possibilities seems appropriate for such an eclectically derived genre as tango.

While it is impossible to pin down the specific birthday of tango, or its exact origins, most scholars have agreed on a few details about the music itself. Musicologists detect Spanish flamenco and Angolan canyengue rhythms (Thompson 8-9). Flamenco plays with the regularity of a four-four count, irregularly emphasizing or de-emphasizing the downbeat. Canyengue, usually also in a four-four time, has a certain bounce, a half-beat every other beat (long-short-short). Anyone familiar with Bizet’s *Carmen* recognizes the distinctive

---

1 Scholars alternately refer to this dance as canyengue or cayengue.
habanera (long-short-short-long-long) that may incorporate a tonal rise (Collier 40). These rhythms combined with the more indigenously Argentine milonga, a faster rhythmic dance visually similar to tango (Baim 109). With the influx of German immigrants in the 1880s and 1890s, the bandoneon, a smaller variation on the accordion, became a staple of tango instrumentation (Collier 48). Perhaps the sense of “melting pot” adds to the American appeal, given our own history of and fondness for the diverse contributions of immigrant culture.

Because of these fuzzy details and the lack of documentation, tango connoisseurs have developed a mythology to narrate the origin of tango. The brothel birth adds to tango’s association with sex. The tango could have been danced between courtesans and customers or men in queue. Practically-speaking, it has been proposed that the men danced tango as they waited for the next woman to become available, which also allowed them to hone their skills, making them more attractive to the few women in Buenos Aires (Baim 28). Photographs from the late nineteenth century depict both male-female couples as well as male-male male couples dancing in the streets.

Along with the laborers came a few aristocrats to manage and make money from this burgeoning economy. These young men frequented the bars and brothels of Buenos Aires where they learned the tango. After their stay in South America, many of them returned to Europe with newfound fortunes and tango skills. Tango began to infiltrate the salons and resorts of France. Parisians were fascinated with the exotic rhythms and intricate steps. Much like
Columbus “discovering” the New World, Paris and other major cities in Europe and the United States “discovered” tango, which had been familiar to the newly-minted Argentines for many years prior. In addition to dominating the dance floors, tango began to dominate fashion as well. France used its unique cultural position to legitimize and promote the exotic (Taylor 67). And what was popular in Paris soon crossed the channel and the ocean to London and New York, respectively.

In New York, young people were inventing and dancing a variety of so-called animal dances such as the bunny hug, the turkey trot and others (Baim 50). Thus, the practice of social dancing was already firmly in place. However, when tango arrived, the animal dances rapidly went extinct. The hops and skips could not compete with the slinky and smooth tango. In case the music and movement were not sufficiently attractive, tango was roundly criticized by adults and even the Vatican for being inappropriate for young people to be dancing socially and in public (Baim 61-2). London ministers worried less about what the New York matrons called “hugging lewdly” than what the lewd hugging might lead to after the tango teas, and away from the careful eyes of chaperones (Collier 74). In general, the mixed heritage of tango made it inappropriate, the movement it caused was obscene, and the fashions it inspired were indecent. No amount of criticism, however, could kill the tango trend. In 1914, New York’s Waldorf Astoria began allowing the playing of tango music and the associated dancing at their afternoon tea dances, and the rest of the city soon followed suit

Once it had entered the Euro-American awareness, tango both fought and relished its reputation as exotic. Theorist Edward Said scrutinizes the appeal of the alien or exotic in his book, *Orientalism*, published in 1978. This seminal text defines orientalism as the concepts of colonized lands and peoples by those people who colonized them. Tango has both benefited and suffered from orientalization and its prejudices. To Europeans and Americans, tango looked different, but somehow familiar enough to make it safe or acceptable. They had accepted it on their terms, limiting body contact, straightening arms and codifying steps, rather than accepting tango on its own terms (Taylor 67). Its Argentine heritage made it exotic; its African roots made tango even more thoroughly orientalized. The history of Argentina itself further complicated this dynamic, because Spain had colonized the area in the sixteenth century, and Britain had unofficially colonized Argentina with its economic investment and culture. Ironically, tango combined European, American and Atlantic influences, all of which were considered the boundaries and purview of the occident.

Tango’s orientalized appeal not only involves a sense of foreignness, but a sexual permissiveness. Considering the works of authors who sought to Romanticize the Orient, Said says, “the Orient was a place where one could go for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe” (Said 190). Tango exuded a sense of scandal with dancers’ whispers of brothels and bordellos and incensed
critics due to the close contact those dancers. The oriental aspect of tango allowed it to achieve even greater popularity and controversy than the waltz, which was still acceptably European. While the waltz initiated close contact, the tango added other elements, along with its orientalized appeal. As with Foucault, Said’s orientalism necessarily indicates a disparate power system, complete with a potentially-destabilized position of dominance (Bayoumi 69). Not only does this power dynamic describe some tango choreography, like the dip; it also adds to its allure.

In general, the public seemed polarized given the mixed heritage of the tango. As for those who objected to the dance, I would argue that they took issue not with its African roots as much as the idea of those roots tangling with white ones. Fundamentally, the “problem” with tango was not that it was “too sexy,” but rather that the tango provided a pleasurable, even positive embodiment of a miscegenation that deeply troubled a white-dominant society. Gradually, African influences became sufficiently diluted to make tango more mainstream. Tango continued to walk the fine line between high society and an almost anthropological study.

Additionally, tango presented yet another opportunity to profit from the myth of the orientalized. When tango was first introduced in Britain, the English were near the height of their imperial power, making them accustomed to Oriental commodities. Europeans and Americans embraced tango as an exotic diversion. Entrepreneurs continued to exploit the tango as exotic in order to sell
all types of products even tangentially related to tango. “The image of the ‘modern’ dance couple [such as Vernon and Irene Castle] actually became a major selling device for goods and services” (Malnig 279).

Scandal dissipated as the practice of tango spread throughout all social scenes. People of all colors and walks of life were dancing and listening to tango. Its critics became the minority or were even absorbed into the trend. Jo Baim states that in Argentina, “an additional social factor that may have helped further its acceptance was the outlawing of houses or prostitution in 1919. This moved the tango even more firmly into the theatres and better clubs and dance halls” (99). Removed from the smoky, dark houses of ill-repute, tango lost some of its edge, but not its allure. The quality of the dance and music outlived its faddish popularity. Tango did not need to be actually or officially scandalous or illegal to still be pleasurable. Interest in the tango waned in Paris in the late 1920s, while Argentina experienced the Golden Age of Tango. People were writing new tangos. Orchestras had to be booked in advance, and porteños were building or refurbishing dance halls at an incredible rate (Collier 154).

Unfortunately, this flourishing of tango came to an abrupt halt with the rise of Peron in the late 1940s. Tangos were censored or banned unless sufficiently pure, devoid of the low-class lunfardo slang (Castro 208). Some more extreme socialists view tango as a distraction from their political cause, seeking to

---

2 Audiences have likewise described the performance group De La Guarda, a more recent Argentine export, as sexy (Ruétalo 175). Could it be the Argentine-ness, the novelty, the mildly controversial/political or the focus on the body and phenomenological?

3 Porteños: citizens of Buenos Aires. Literally “those from the port city” (Baim 14)
reemphasize tango’s ties to prostitution, crime and poverty (Frank 21). An entire generation of Argentines grew up not knowing tango, because political and financial instability forced tango underground (Tango: Baile Nuestra). In the United States, tango made way for other Latin-infused dances like the rumba and the cha-cha. This period coincided with the development and worldwide distribution of rock and roll. Partner dancing fell out of vogue, and the violins and bandoneons of tango found it hard to compete with electric guitars and drum kits. The aura of the illicit, however, allows tango to continually attract new audiences as well as suddenly re-emerge as something hot or trendy to enjoy.

**Formal Analysis—Bodies in Action**

Tango as an art form remains distinctive because it utilizes different media. Tango music is readily identifiable as such. In a still photograph, even the ostensibly-uninitiated can pick out the danced tango. There is something about the two bodies pressed together that makes it uniquely recognizable as tango in a way that other dances are not. Smaller gestural components make the couple meld and move together across the floor with the style and purpose characteristic of tango. Dancing the tango involves achieving the right amount of physical contact especially in the core, a strong but supple embrace, and the flirtatious footwork.

In an attempt to remove some of the scandal and tarnish of tango, European dance masters added more space between the partners. Vernon and Irene Castle, considered the epitome of respectability on the dance floor in the
early days of tango in America, even tried to propagate their Innovation Tango, which featured zero physical contact (Baim 77). In practice, however, this space decreased, as partners delighted in the possibility of actual physical contact at the end of the more puritanical Victorian era. This close contact raised the eyebrows of society matrons who denounced tango for its immorality (Groppa 39). Ironically, this was the same generation that had fought to dance the waltz and polka, which were condemned for the same reasons (Collier 94).

Nevertheless, the physical contact they objected to was crucial to the execution of tango. Partners lean against each other in the eje stance, like an A-frame, individually supporting themselves, but balancing each other collectively (Taylor 85).

The stationary embrace of the tango offers two primary options for eye contact or the lack thereof. A ballroom dance instructor of mine once explained the physical placement of the lady’s head away from the man with minimal eye contact as the prostitute’s impersonal way of choosing which of the many men she would take upstairs next. In the Argentine tango, dancers do not have this same restriction, as some couples dance cheek-to-cheek or eye-to-eye. The eye contact or its absence can be equated with a level of passion, intensity or nonchalance, any of which add to the sexual subtext.

In case the physical proximity was not sufficiently sexy, the gestures and movements of tango range between the subtly and overtly erotic (Groppa 17). Like many other dances, tango “is or can be a form of sexual expression in itself”
(Pajaczkowska 21). From its African roots, tango makes much greater use of the pelvis and core—the sexual center. In Kongoolese culture, the *tienga* quality of movement refers to the use of the hips, which indicates a connection to both the sexual and the centrism of the sun (Thompson 66). Other Latin dances like the cha-cha and the rumba also make extensive use of the hips, and they are similarly identified as “sexy.” Movement is grounded, with more emphasis on legs and knees, originating from the core and displacement of bodies (Thompson 278).

Two pelvises pressed together may initially attract an audience, but the flashy steps can hold their attention. In 1917, American Waldo Frank wrote, “Within the chaste contours of the tango figures, rages the desire of sex. The bodies do not touch, yet they are joined” (qtd. in Collier 173). Legs flick in and out, slither up and down; bodies curl around each other, across and over each other. Robert Farris Thompson goes into great detail describing some of the more basic steps in the Argentine style. Ballroom dance has subsequently adopted some of these steps into their version of tango. Steps like the *lustrada*, as demonstrated in Figure 2, in which a dancer will “polish their shoe” on either their own leg or the leg of their partner exhibit a mix of both sensuality and humor (Thompson 283).
Both dancers and observers consider the *ochen*, the tracing of a figure eight on the ground, the most lady-like step, because it allows for the greatest personalization and accent of the woman's legs (Baim 81). The feet intertwine, scissoring and crossing over each other intricately (see Figure 3). It looks good in either short skirts or long dresses. In this step, it is necessary for the woman to move independently instead of mirroring the man. However, men can perform the step too, usually in unison with the woman, suggesting a level of equality, since the man has adopted a woman's step for his own use.
Figure 3—Lady’s ocho

The cortes force the woman’s leg between the man’s legs (and likewise the man's between hers) as he pulls her toward him. Historians have called some gestures like these, which can include bending the woman back dramatically, the “pirate style” of tango that was popularized in Paris and demonstrated by Rudolph Valentino in film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* in 1921 (Thompson 14).
Most invasively, when a dancer performs a *gancho*, or hook step, he or she finds a parting in their partner’s legs to quickly flick a foot between them (Thompson 292). The dancers’ feet and legs penetrate the space of the partners, suddenly, covertly and only occasionally with permission, adding to the sexual imagery of penetration or rape.
European dance masters who had already codified social dances like the waltz, the polka and the mazurka, sought to likewise streamline and formalize the
tango. In order to incorporate it into their syllabi, they emphasized the distinction of lead-follow, which placed the male in the dominant position and the female in the corresponding submissive position. The male moved forward, leading the female as she stepped backward. Additionally, dance masters stiffened the stance of tango partners, extending his left arm horizontally. In both ballroom and Argentine tango, the position and use of the left arm can distinguish between the leader and follower roles. Usually the person with the extended or elevated left arm leads. This can be a useful cue especially when analyzing same-sex tangos. For the sake of simplicity, I will call the left-arm lead Male, while acknowledging its hetero-normative bias. American culture usually features the man in the left-arm position. Even in the 1959 film Some Like It Hot, which features a parody of tango, the “male” figure has the left-arm position, leading Jack Lemmon, who is in drag. Most of the physical lead originates in the right side of the body, while the left arm remains in place for decoration. The man indicates with the right side of his body more than the left. He can more effectively move his partner’s body by relocating his own, rotating his right hip toward or away from her, or by applying pressure on her waist or spine with his right hand. On crowded dance floors, the left arm of the man can be dropped entirely, in a posture considered more liberal and modern, as well as more considerate of the limitations of space (Taylor 86).

---

4 Syllabus is a technical term used by ballroom dance instructors to indicate the list of specific steps at each level of training. It indicates progression of training as well as allegiance to a particular certification program.
Rather than a formal lead-follow relationship, tango uses more of a call-response kind of interaction between its partners. African dances such as candombe feature this type of interaction (Thompson 109). Call-response suggests a level of conversation, challenge, and occasional competition, and it creates dynamism in the dance. One person will initiate a movement, in tango called a *marca*; and the other will create a movement based on the first. The second movement does not necessarily mirror the first. Taylor further defines *marca* as “pressure,” an idea that hints a level of subtle manipulation (65).

Without the strict one-to-one relationship of lead-follow, the partners must constantly respond to each other, molding their movements to the other, which creates something more vital and mutable. Thus, the caller becomes the responder and vice versa. Taylor describes this effect, saying, “he [the leader] would have to resolve the dilemma that you have suddenly posed for him” (111).

Lead-follow lends itself well to choreography, in which a single gesture precipitates a specific movement from the follower. In this sense, the dance feels predictable. The leader predicts what the follower will do based on the initial gesture that he (the leader) creates. The follower predictably expects this kind of dictation and simply produces the desired effect. In tango, with more of a call-response interaction, the possibility of unpredictability emerges and increases. One partner may anticipate a series of moves that may result from his or her action, but there is no guarantee. This transition away from a more formal lead-follow increased during the Golden Age of Tango in Buenos Aires, as “women of
the 1940s rebelled against men who bossed them around with preemptory hand
motions” (Thompson 257). Even more than before, dancers shared the duties of
calling and responding between themselves instead of assigning a single
gendered role to a single dancer.

This type of conversation suggests something equal between partners,
instead of relying on a dominant-submissive relationship. In addition to allowing
more possibilities for the woman, it also operates in a decidedly Foucauldian
power balance. Dyer suggests that the very embrace “may thus stress the
pleasures of mutuality or intimate the intoxications of power play” (53). While
Foucault defines sex in terms of binaries such as permitted/forbidden, he
considers power as something more complex and multifaceted (88, 93). The two
partners can share the power more fluidly, since it does not have to be limited to
a single source. At any moment, the balance can shift toward one person or the
other. The leader, for lack of a better term, may suggest a movement, but the
follower must choose to accept that suggestion. The leader may manipulate the
follower, but the follower allows herself to be manipulated. She gives him the
power to use over her. Taylor describes this phenomenon as “handing myself
over to my own body” (113).

Foucault also describes the importance of resistance in the execution and
existence of power. Resistance provides a necessary counterpoint to power
(Foucault 95). Like anti-matter, the presence of resistance destroys but also
reifies power. Like power, resistance appears in different forms in the tango.
Dancers have tone in their very bodies, a muscular presence that both supports and resists. This resistance allows for the call and response to work effectively. Without physical resistance from the follower, the lead will be entirely absorbed into the follower’s body, and thus not counteracted or generative of something else. On a more sophisticated level, tango psychology involves a level of resistance and power, which makes the call and response of the dance compelling to watch.

Perhaps a better way to distinguish dominance is the concept of placement—who is placing whom? Although the male might hold the left-arm dominant position, the female could be circumscribing his movement. He may “lead” a move, but she could respond by making him chase her. Frequently, the man remains stationary, allowing the woman to perform flashier ostentatious moves around him (Quinn). Without moving himself, he can effectively place her body, which seems to gravitate or decorate his. Tobin quotes a Buenos Aires maxim, “El hombre propone ye la mujer dispone,” which means “the man proposes and the woman decides” (94). The double use of the Latin root *pone*, from the verb which means ‘to place or put,’ further suggests the importance of placement. Also, the translation hints at the power of the woman in the execution of tango steps.

The call-response interaction as well as the constantly-shifting power dynamic more accurately replicates a conversation or a relationship, which tend to be more spontaneous and unpredictable. Perhaps part of the charm of
relationships, and likewise tango, is the element of surprise. Just when you think you know what is going to happen, something changes. Within the heterosexual norm, there is an expectation that the leader is both male and absolute, and he leads something female and submissive. The voluntary vulnerability suggests not only power disparity, but also a sense of trust that is integral to the dance and romantic relationships.

The more realistic depiction of romantic relationships by the tango not only adds to its appeal, but also to its dramatic possibilities. A musical theatre adage says that characters sing about being in love, but dance when they are in love (Altman 136). Tango can express a potential or actual consummation of a romantic relationship, making it popular in stage and film, which often center on such storylines. More generally, well-executed tango creates tension. Improvisation figures so prominently in tango, which can extend into the preoccupation with the unknown and the fear surrounding it. Sudden power shifts create drama, which mirrors many character conflicts. Characters must fight for, relinquish or maintain their power within their tango. In order to achieve these objectives, they change tactics, position or intention.

Gender Play

Unlike so many other social or partner dances, tango allows for greater flexibility in the execution of gender roles. Not only do partners share the lead between themselves, but also the gender of the partners is not fixed as opposite sex. The very history of tango features many images of two men dancing
together, cross-dressing performers, and a surprising number of female
performers (Collier 177). The presence of same-sex couples in tango
exemplifies this flexibility of gender and power.

Most historians believe that at some point in its early history, two men
danced tango. One of the earliest teaching guides for tango features two men
demonstrating the different poses. The reason for this, however, remains more
controversial. Perhaps the men danced together to practice or just to amuse
themselves. Does this same-sex scenario make the tango less sexy or more
feminine? One of the first American tango dancers, Vernon Castle, “felt that by
being a dancer, his masculinity might be questioned if he accepted a non-combat
role [in World War I]” (Groppa 51). Only a few years later, Rudolph Valentino,
who made tango so visible in The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, fought the
same prejudice in his career, since he was simultaneously a dancer and an
object of desire for women worldwide (Addison 129). Although a physical
activity, dancing has not always been viewed as sufficiently masculine (Addison
130). Perhaps the men who felt threatened by Valentino’s popularity sought to
distinguish themselves as physically larger, participating in competitive activities
rather than aesthetic ones. However, the origins of tango suggest more
traditionally masculine scenarios for a couple of men centered on the display of
power in terms of violence. In her book, Paper Tangos, Julie Taylor considers
tango as an outlet for violence (Mooney A56). The image of the duel repeats
itself throughout both tango choreography and lyrics. Thompson draws a parallel
between early tango and the Ki-Kongolese practice of *nsunsa*, or battle-dance (74). He later traces the etymology of the word milonga to the Angolan word for argument (121). The poet Jorge Luis Borges frequently associates male-male tango with knife fighting, which also uses circular patterns and a lower center of gravity (Tobin 79). In most cases, the men fight over a woman. In a dance that plays with power dynamics, perhaps the element or at least possibility of violence and danger adds to its “sexy” aura. Men use the force of tango to fight amongst themselves, as well as fight for a lady’s attention.

Historically, women have played an impressively prominent role in the development of tango. Nearly as many women’s names appear in the historical sources as those of men. Many of them made a name for themselves independent of men, as dancers, singers, performers and teachers. In an era when proper society addressed women by their married names, such as Mrs. John Smith, the presence of feminine names is especially remarkable. Early in its popularity, most tango instructors were male. However, some of the most famous dancers of the early tango period, like El Cachefaz and Mingo, learned tango from women (Thompson 237). Postcards from Paris in the 1910s advertising tango teas or lessons feature two women in tango poses, rather than a male-female pair. Rosita Quiroga wrote some of the earliest tangos, which singer Carlos Gardel later recorded and made famous in the 1930s. Other ladies like Pepita Avellaneda and Linda Thelma sang tangos at clubs, regardless of the sex of the author (Collier 62). To further muddy the depictions of gender, some
female performers preferred to sing in male drag. Lower, huskier voices suited tango in a way that more conventionally feminine airy sopranos did not. These women conveyed a sex appeal à la Marlene Dietrich, with a similar vocal range. Tango performers refused to conform to societal expectations, particularly those ruling on gender. Homosexual clubs in Paris in the 1910s and 20s likewise embraced tango because of the liquidity of gender roles and general liberation of views of sexuality (Collier 176). Partners could negotiate issues of lead-follow (and their associated gendered roles) more easily and artfully in tango than other social dances. Not only the physicality, but even the history of tango subverts conventional gender role portrayal.

Case Studies

Theatre and film have used tango in a variety of ways. Shakespeare set some of his love or courtship scenes within the context of a dance, tapping into a set of understood cultural codes (Hanna 167). As early as 1921, filmmakers featured Rudolph Valentino dancing a tango with Alice Terry in The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse to capitalize on both Valentino’s talents and the still-popular dance. The following works use tango within their narrative, depicting a variety of sex and power dynamics. Some examples like “Hernando’s Hideaway” support more conventional ideas of tango, which see the dance as an expression of heterosexual romantic desire. Tango depicts more than romantic love, including rivalry, friendship, independence, and in the case of Tango Argentino, a sense of timeless beauty. However, tango has always challenged
tradition, in the same way theatre and film has challenged notions of tango. Unconventional pairings in the examples change the sex/power dynamics. Works such as Rent and Frida use notions of tango within their narratives, but pair their dancers unconventionally. Also, these tangos function differently, emphasizing other aspects of plot and character.

The Pajama Game as Conventional Male-Female

At the end of the 1953-54 season, Adler, Ross & Abbot and Bissel opened their new musical, The Pajama Game, on Broadway, featuring the choreography of Bob Fosse, including “Hernando’s Hideaway”—a playful tango. Dancer Margery Beddow observes, “the number also showed his [choreographer Bob Fosse’s] great sense of humor about sexual games” (2). In the same season as Damn Yankees and Mary Martin in Peter Pan, Brooks Atkinson wrote, “the last new musical of the season is the best” (“The Pajama Game” 20). He went on to praise the production as “exuberant” and “amiable” (Atkinson, “The Pajama Game” 20). Carol Haney’s performance, in particular, caught the attention of critics for her comic acting and dancing abilities, both of which she displayed in “Hernando’s Hideaway.” At the Tony Awards for that season, Haney was named Best Featured Actress. Additionally, The Pajama Game received Tony Awards for Best Musical and Best Choreography for Bob Fosse (ibdb.com). The original production ran for over one thousand performances, and various producers have since revived it twice, including a 2006 production featuring Harry Connick Jr. that also won Best Choreography.
Based on the book *7½ Cents*, *The Pajama Game* tells the story of a labor dispute at a pajama factory in Middle America. Sid Sorokin is the new guy in town, hired to manage the factory and its unionized work force. Babe, the primary union liaison, must reconcile her romantic feelings for Sid Sorokin with her loyalties to the union. Another couple in the factory, Hinsie and his long-time girlfriend Gladys, deals with their own problems. She works as the factory secretary in Sid’s upstairs office. As such, she has special access to financial records that could make the difference in the union dispute. When Babe chooses the union over Sid, Sid takes advantage of his night off. He approaches Gladys, hoping that she will give him the key to the financial files rather than a goodnight kiss.

Tucked among file cabinets and paperwork, Sid invites Gladys out on a date. Gladys suggests that he takes her to what she describes as “a dark, secluded place”—Hernando’s Hideaway. Before even starting the song or dance, Gladys looks over her shoulder, as if to protect her secret or her honor. Then, she draws him in with her fingers. He maintains a singular masculine stance, strong and still, as she drapes around him. Suddenly, Gladys breaks into tango. She charges aggressively toward Sid. He doesn’t know what she might do next. Gladys’ physicality draws most attention to her flamenco-styled arms. However, she activates her core, by tilting her pelvis up towards Sid. Her movement varies from the bold and erect to the slinky and secretive. Instead of short poses, Gladys instigates traveling movement as she pushes him back into
the filing cabinets. He watches her with fascination as she takes charge of him and the situation at hand. Her underskirts flash, suggestions something a bit risqué. In the 1957 film adaptation, also written by Abbot and Bissel, the petticoats are the same bright yellow-orange color that one boutique actually marketed as “tango silk” in the 1910s (Collier 77). Although technically in the follower-position, Gladys initiates the promenade movement, effectively placing Sid where she wants him. In the next phrase, Gladys actually takes over the left-arm dominant position, traditionally reserved for the male leader. She bends him into a modified dip, then charges forward, making him even more submissive. When she is not touching him, her hands are on one hip, the other thrust toward him. Her shoulders and hips press against him. Her physicality forces him to chase her out of the storage area. In order to resolve the tension established by the tango, Sid and Gladys must relocate to a setting more appropriate to dancing and romancing.

The characters have physically explored the dangerous potential of their liaison. Now they meet at Hernando’s Hideaway, a space that carries the same cachet of danger, excitement and exclusivity. Hernando’s Hideaway remains secluded because, according to the lyrics, you need to be referred by a guy named Joe. Unlike the Golden Fingerbowl, the other social scene in town as per the lyrics of the tango, Hernando’s Hideaway offers privacy, or at least discretion. Patrons are not subjected to scrutiny or judgment in this location. Like the brothels, Hernando’s Hideaway, with its underground feel, creates a sense of
danger, either because it is at an unsafe, out-of-the-way location, or because it could be scandalous to be seen there. Its clandestine reputation adds to its allure.

Initially, the only light comes from single matches before fully revealing the space, which has many lamps in saturated colors, cutting through the smoky haze. Looking around the space, all of the people have paired off into heterosexual couples. By going out with Sid Sorokin, Gladys cheats on her boyfriend, Hinesie. True to traditional tango lyric narratives, Hinesie jealously stalks his woman, knife in hand.

Adding to the sexual innuendo, Sid agrees to this kind of date only to procure the key around Gladys’ neck. She alternately hides and reveals the key, teasing Sid. After the tango, Sid gets Gladys drunk, making her vulnerable. Sufficiently intoxicated and potentially without a dance partner, Gladys hands over the key. As Foucault states, “There is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives” (95). Although the key literally opens the storeroom, which holds the ledger books for the pajama factory, the key could also be a veiled reference to Gladys’ sexuality a la chastity belt. From a Stanislavskian point of view, Gladys uses the power of tango to demonstrate to Sid the attractiveness of both herself as a date and Hernando’s Hideaway as a social scene. Neither character indulges in tango as a solely pleasurable experience unto itself. Instead, they use tango as a mean to achieve their ulterior motives.
In “Hernando’s Hideaway,” Gladys’ choreography evokes flamenco or paso doble, but the music and drama are distinctly tango. These qualities starkly contrast to another dance number earlier in the show. In The Pajama Game, composers Richard Adler and Jerry Ross use polka in their song “Once-a-Year-Day.” Also a partner dance, the polka suggests a level of festivity and exuberance along with the idea of a bacchic release. When the polka first emerged, staid critics deemed it too vigorous to be danced between a man and a woman (Collier 83). Just one generation later, those same people who defied the critics to dance the polka now condemned tango for being similarly inappropriate. Adler and Ross use these different dances with great narrative savvy. Whereas the polka works well in a playful picnic setting, the tango accurately evokes the sense of danger and excitement Gladys is trying to convey in the storeroom and club.

**Tango Argentino—Roles Revitalized and Reconsidered**

Although tango fell out of vogue for a few years, it reemerged as a cultural phenomenon with the production of *Tango Argentino*. Juan Carlos Copes and his partner Maria Nieves assembled some of their fellow tangueros in a musical revue of tango in 1983, which developed into the Broadway hit *Tango Argentino*. Originally produced in Paris, before arriving in New York, *Tango Argentino* awoke the excitement of people who saw it. The revue featured some of the most prominent tango artists, including musicians, singers and dancers, displaying their talents and the variety within tango.
Tango became less prominent in the media, appearing only anecdotally in the years prior, but after the arrival of *Tango Argentino*, the word tango dotted *The New York Times*. The show stirred much public interest and puff pieces. People wanted to know more about the history, use of tango, as well as how to achieve the look. In this way, *Tango Argentino* spawned a cultural industry of tourism, lessons and fashion similar to the tango craze of 1914. Thompson observed, “The reasons for its success were clear: people savored the mixture of music and text, singing and dance, in what was self-evidently one of the richest offerings of national talent on the planet” (266). Simple staging and monochromatic costuming focused the spectacle on the tango itself. Because it was so different, *Tango Argentino* energized the 1985-86 Broadway season.

Although it lacked a conventional plot, the Broadway industry nominated the production for the Tony Award for Best Musical in 1986. The program traces the lineage and development of tango over its hundred-year history, which is especially evident in the costuming (Thompson 262). The first two dances feature women in decidedly period garb—floor-length ruffled skirts, then a cloche hat with tango top. The manner in which they dance tango also reflects its evolution over one hundred years. In addition to the choreography and virtuosity of the pieces, *Tango Argentino* demonstrates all the different shapes that tango has taken over time, from the slinky, to the stiff, to the rounded, aerial and intimate. Perhaps the very nature of tango created sufficient drama that made scripted text unnecessary.
Tango Argentino makes use of all the permutations of partnering within tango. Men dance with men, or women, who can lead or follow. Sexy couplings are not limited to the young and the beautiful. Juan Carlos Copes and Maria Nieves, the two principal dancers, were in their fifties at the time and no less sexy. These couplings, however, did not feel artificial or gimmicky as much as part of the historical narrative. The opening dance features several men, dressed all in black with the exception of white ties, dancing with each other. After an orchestra solo, the women dance together. They share the lead and follow. The way they back-kick their long, ruffled skirts evoke the flamenco influences on tango. The mood is playful, as if they are teaching each other, which is emphasized by their hand-in-hand exit.

In one of the longer sequences, the possibilities of partnering expand. The opening scene features a man and a woman, presumably lovers about to be separated by a distance. Juan Carlos Copes appears, quickly seducing the young woman, who transforms from a faithful lover to dancer in glittering attire. She dances with Copes, then another young woman, then another man. When she returns to the arms of Copes, he bends her backwards dramatically, while maintaining his own stiff, erect torso, his hand firmly on his hip. The tango has liberated her from a single heterosexual narrative into something more multifaceted. Having danced with five different people, she finds herself alone. The lights blackout abruptly, before fading up, revealing her limp body being
dragged offstage. Tango breaks down social conventions, and in this act of apparent violence, social controls as well.

In the same way that the opening male-male dance harkens back to the origins of tango, vocalist Jovita Luna echoes the history of women in tango music. In the twenties and thirties when women like Linda Thelma and Azucena Maizani appeared on the tango scene, they frequently performed songs in drag (Collier 141). Sixty years later, Senora Luna wears a sequined suit and short hair. Her contralto voice could be mistaken for a male tenor in a pinch. She sings with authority and dominance, recalling a bitter memory, which is a traditional tango lyric narrative. When she sings her ballad, she uses the stage and her body in a way that blurs gender lines in a compelling, dramatic way.

The distribution of talent and display does not favor one gender or narrative over another, providing equal opportunities of male and female artists. The orchestra is exclusively male, but the presence of more female vocalists than male ones seems to balance this. Both Juan Carlos Copes and Maria Nieves shared choreography credit in the initial manifestations. Different dance sequences highlight the male dancers and then the female dancers. Men lead, but their moves allow the women to perform more “peacock” steps. In one sequence, the man looks forward, almost expressionless, while the woman glares at him. Even as she moves backwards, she seems to dictate the direction of their movement.
Twenty years later, various manifestations of the tango revue continue to tour around the United States. Many of the original artists reassembled to launch *Forever Tango* in 1996. It was not technically a revival, but it was no less popular. Original cast members of *Tango Argentino* now choreograph and perform in these new shows. While the exact details have changed, these show remains popular throughout the country. It continues in its formula, because it continues to attract audiences. *Tango Argentino* and its descendants do not comment on power dynamics as much as present the versatility of tango as dance, song, music and culture, in which this power dynamics operate.

*Rent as Subverted Male-Female*

In the same year as *Forever Tango*, a pseudo-revival of *Tango Argentino*, Jonathan Larson adapted the Puccini opera *La Bohème* into a musical theatre phenomenon—*Rent* in 1996. The original opera, which remains one of the most produced in the United States, tells the story of starving artists in 1830s Paris, as they struggle to exist in a cold but colorful Latin Quarter (Opera News). Artists Rodolfo and Marcello must burn their manuscripts to keep themselves warm. Colline and Musetta pawn their few prized possessions for food and medicine for their friend Mimi, who is dying of tuberculosis. When the opera premiered, it stirred great controversy over its candor. Before *La Bohème* even debuted in Paris, it traveled to Buenos Aires, where it opened in June of 1896, only four months after its world premiere (Stanford).
In addition to drawing the inevitable comparisons to *La Bohème*, critics raved about *Rent* and its fresh and talented cast. Hailing *Rent* as the re-emergence of the rock-musical, critics frequently compared it to the counter-cultural musical *Hair* of the previous generation in 1968. Most focused their attention on the untimely death of Larson, who died of a brain aneurysm the night of *Rent*’s final preview. Reviews then go on to praise performers Adam Pascal and Daphne Rubin-Vega, who added depth to their portrayals of Roger and Mimi. While this relationship garnered the most detailed references, nearly all of the reviews mentioned the “Tango Maureen” as either song or dance. Michael Feingold labeled it “goofy” in its Off-Broadway manifestation, but it still grabbed his attention (Feingold 71). When it transferred from the New York Theatre Workshop to the Nederlander Theater on Broadway, *Rent*’s potential audience multiplied ten-fold (Brantley C13). However, these larger audiences not only enjoyed the show itself, but also the eclectically-decorated lobby, adding to the overall experience. *The Village Voice* was particularly ebullient in its praise, simultaneously acknowledging its “event-ness” and the accuracy of its depiction of Greenwich Village (McDonnell 28).

Theatre artists of the mid-1990s were developing their distinctly postmodern, non-traditional narratives. In 1996, Terrence McNally’s play *Master Class*, which had opera-diva Maria Callas as a major character, debuted, along with musical/performance *Bring in ‘da Noise/Bring in ‘da Funk*. It was *Rent*, however, that won all of the accolades that year, sweeping most of the major
awards with its trifecta of Best Musical, Book and Score including the Tony, Drama Desk and Pulitzer that year (ibdb.com). Both director Michael Greif and choreographer Marlies Yearby were nominated for their work (Greif was nominated for both the Tony and Drama Desk; Yearby for the Tony), although neither won.

Unlike the film version of *The Pajama Game*, the 2005 film adaptation of the musical *Rent* was largely panned by audience members and critics. Reader-generated review website rottentomatoes.com described the movie thus: “Fans of the stage musical may forgive *Rent* its flaws, but weak direction, inescapable staginess and an irritating faux-boho pretension prevent the film from connecting on screen” (rottentomatoes.com). It stayed in theatres long enough for the hardcore fans and devotees to see it, but seemed to get swallowed up in the general popularity of the movie-musical. Perhaps too much time had passed since the critically-acclaimed musical opened on Broadway. Not only had nearly a decade passed, but *Rent* was and still is playing on Broadway. Many people had already seen the show either in New York or on one of its numerous tours. Also problematic—the film featured most of the original cast, but they were no longer the fresh-faced unknowns. Instead of being the young, starving bohemians, these performers were now accomplished actors who probably had more in common with the bourgeois Benny than their original characters.

While Larson remains fairly faithful to the general storyline of the opera, he changes character names, genders, sexualities and relationships. One hundred
years after the opera premiered in Turin, *Rent* traces the story of a group of Generation X artists trying to survive in the city streets. Different characters die, adding to the poignancy and immediacy of these artists' plight (McDonnell 27). Rodolfo has become the HIV-positive rock musician Roger, who falls in love with Mimi. Whereas Mimi was the only character with tuberculosis, multiple characters, including Mimi, in *Rent* must deal with the day-to-day realities of HIV. Musetta, now Maureen, has a female patron and lover, instead of a male one, further complicating her interactions with Marcello/Mark. Her famous waltz is now a tango. The twentieth century musical and its characters delight in their postmodern, East Village existence, rhyming curry vindaloo with Maya Angelou, both of which exist on the fringes of the capitalist, white, hetero-normative world, like tango and the characters who dance it.

Jonathan Larson uses the tango in his musical for its connotations of passion and connections to sex. About halfway through act one, Maureen, a performance artist-activist, has called her ex-boyfriend Mark to help set up her sound equipment. Either out of habit or out of sustained feelings for Maureen, Mark scurries over to find not Maureen, but Joanne, Maureen’s new lover. Both Mark and Joanne are frustrated by Maureen’s absence, which only exacerbates their mutual awkwardness, having shared a lover. They both sing about how “weird” the situation is, as they begin to work on the sound system. Almost instantly, the audience perceives a tension between the two, which escalates into a tango. At first, Mark takes the lead, moving forward, left arm extended. They
pause, exchanging anecdotes of their first tango lessons. Next, Joanne performs a series of Argentine-style flicks in and out of his legs before taking the lead from Mark. Joanne charges forward, moving Mark backwards. Visually, Mark’s gendered position appears ambivalent. On one hand, he is moving backwards, placed by the other person—the more conventionally female role. However, he maintains the left-arm dominant posture. She assumes an entirely masculine role by placing him in a dip, emphasized by the fact that she can physically support his weight.

Marlies Yearby’s choreography of “Tango Maureen” combines both ballroom and Argentine styles: blending the long, strident steps, as well as the promenade, two faces in the same direction, arms extended, charging forward, with some of the flicks and kicks more characteristic of Argentine tango.

*Figure 7—Promenade*

Their steps move across the floor with purpose, if not the snaky smoothness more common in professional ballroom dance. This more percussive quality
reveals the dissonance between the two characters who seem to alternately avoid and aim for each other’s feet.

The tango allows for more deliberate use of eye contact. Where are their gazes? The classic tango stances allow each person to look away, simultaneously scanning the surrounding for obstacles like sound equipment or Maureen. In their intensity, they can look each other squarely in the eye, which can also be appropriate to tango. Through their tango, Mark and Joanne must compete for Maureen’s attention.

Narratively, Larson seems to play with some of musical theatre’s conventions surrounding dance. The “Tango Maureen” does not depict the effluence of romantic love between two people because words fail them. Initially, neither character wants anything to do with the other. While the tango usually indicates a romantic relationship, the tango between Mark and Joanne, while not conventionally sexual, is no less fraught with drama. Instead of acting out a romance, Mark and Joanne tango as an expression of their rivalry. In this way, their tango harkens back to the duel metaphor of tango. These are two people fighting over the same woman. This more male-male paradigm also fits the more complicated gendering of these two, both individually and in relation to relation to Maureen. Both literally and emotionally, the ladies manipulate Mark. The women take the leader role, placing Mark into a secondary power position where they want or need him.
In the midst of this duel, however, Mark and Joanne discover how much they have in common. They have both fallen prey to the charms of Maureen, two people in an unpleasant situation. As a result, Maureen’s two victims are able to dance more smoothly and in sync, since their two bodies now share a point of view. Although Joanne challenges Mark’s lead at the beginning, by the end, he leads their dance nearly exclusively. Perhaps Joanne ceases to challenge Mark’s lead because he has the experience that she lacks. To some degree, Joanne has submitted to his tutelage and to Maureen’s manipulations.

Emotionally, the tone of the scene changes. At first, Mark and Joanne share a certain animosity, even contempt. During the course of the dance, they exchange their horror stories about Maureen, play out their power frustrations and insecurities, and to some degree resolve their initial differences. Their tango expresses a variety of strong emotions passionately. At the end, Mark walks away with a sense of catharsis—he has tangoed away his aggressions. Unfortunately, Joanne has absorbed them. Mark leaves physically satisfied, disconnected and self-possessed, whereas Joanne becomes “emotional,” further weakened by Maureen calling her “Pookie” over the phone. In its final moments, Mark and Joanne realign themselves to the more conventional gender roles in tango.

Frida as Same-Sex

Tango conflates issues of gender and power in its lead-follow interactions. Observers can more readily label the lead-follow roles in partners of opposite
sex. When both dancers are the same sex, this dynamic becomes complicated only further. With a same sex couple, there is not the conventional type of sexual tension or drama. Auteur director Julie Taymor depicts this alternative image of tango with new dramatic possibilities in her 2002 film *Frida*. Spearheaded by producer and star Salma Hayek, *Frida* also attracted the talents of Edward Norton as one of its screenwriters, professional tango dancer and actress Mia Maestro, who also supervised the staging of the choreography, music by Elliot Goldenthal, and a variety of internationally-acclaimed performers (IMDb.com). However, it was Taymor’s unique visual sensibilities that drove the film.

Throughout the film, Taymor uses music, visual art, dialogue and dance to evocatively tell the story of Frida Kahlo, her life, her painting, and her tempestuous relationship with fellow artist and communist, Diego Rivera. Above all, Frida was a woman of passion and conviction, who fearlessly faced life with all its trials and colors. Without perverting traditional expectations of tango, Julie Taymor rearranges them to succinctly define the independent characters and relationship between artists Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti.

Like Kahlo, Tina Modotti made her art in Mexico, also pursuing her commitment to Communism. Born in Italy, Tina Modotti immigrated to the United States as a young woman. After the death of her husband in 1922, Tina joined her lover Edward West in Mexico, where she learned about photography, modeling for him. However, she did not passively learn. Tina refused to simply be a model. She insisted that he teach her about photography if she was to
serve as his model-muse. Later, Tina modeled for Diego Rivera, and she may have introduced him to Frida Kahlo. Both independent women shared a passion for art and politics, but in their own times, they were overshadowed by their male mentors and/or lovers.

Very little is publicized about Frida’s bisexuality and even less of Tina Modotti. Is it because Frida is more famous and more revolutionary? Her bisexuality only fits the common perception of Frida as a wild, passionate artist. Tina Modotti has only recently been acknowledged in her own right, and her photography, while beautiful, is less lurid or evocative than the overt and personal paintings of Frida Kahlo. Interestingly, the true nature of their close relationship remains unknown. Taylor shies away from defining Kahlo’s sexuality, insisting that “this woman was capable of love without limitations, without labels, and without fear of being labeled” (“A Tango with Taymor”).

In the context of the film, Tina Modotti hosts a soiree for the intelligentsia of Mexico City. During the 1920s, Mexico City served as a haven of original and often radical thought, which produced both art and revolution. This party is its microcosm where people are free to be their extreme selves. In this scene, Frida creates for herself a vital identity. This event serves as Frida’s introduction into the political and artistic society, in which Diego Rivera and Tina Modotti are major players. After meekly admiring the guests and their work, Frida introduces herself through this tango, which makes quite a first impression.
Tina plays the good hostess, diffusing a tense, politically-charged moment by suggesting a drinking context. “Whoever takes the biggest swig can dance with me,” she says, appealing to the machismo of Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. However, the diminutive Frida not only joins the contest, but also wins. By chugging tequila, Frida adds estrogen to a traditionally male construct, by proving that she can play with the boys.

In a little over ninety seconds, Taymor portrays the unique relationship between Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti using the conventions of tango. Having won the drinking contest, Frida claims her prize, a dance with hostess Tina Modotti. The two women proceed into the middle of a crowded room, dancing to “Alcoba Azul,” apparently at Frida’s request. As there is no obvious male figure, the women share the role of leader. First, Frida thrusts Tina into shadow position, looking intently at Tina. Almost immediately, Tina takes the lead, changing the focus from each other to the audience. Tina stops, still and straight, not unlike Sid Sorokin in the early moments of “Hernando’s Hideaway,” as Frida performs a sinewy ocho, their energy pooled between them. Looking directly at Frida, Tina continues leading until they physically separate. Perhaps Tina dismisses Frida with a deep lunge; perhaps she submits. Frida walks away, taking a drag off Diego’s wife’s cigarette, before returning to Tina. Frida lowers herself to Tina’s level to collect her with both hands, then bends her backwards. Reciprocally, Tina leads Frida in the same gesture, complete with a languid release of the neck, tracing her finger down Frida’s breastbone.
Laughing, they spin, before Frida releases Tina, maintaining a single-handhold. Frida rejoins Tina with a caress and a kiss, standing behind her, with both of them facing the same direction. Together, they lower and swivel. Frida turns to face Tina and leads a syncopated promenade to the clapping of the audience. While Tina gazes intently at Frida, Frida shares her eyes with both Tina and the audience, alternately. Again, they spin, laughing at the musical climax. At the very end, Frida dips Tina then kisses her. They laugh and acknowledge each other and their audience, playfully.

Traditionally, partners are of opposite sexes; historically, two men would dance together. But here, two women share the floor. This violates two expectations. Frida and Tina actively share the lead and follow roles, creating a sense of trust and play. There is no obvious leader, when both women are confident, strong A-type personalities. Their tango is a dance of equals, not of domination. This defies convention. Conversely, there is no clear follower, as both are women, often overshadowed by their male counterparts.

These women prove to each other and themselves that they are independent, sexy, powerful women, unafraid of the male world in which they live. They do not rely on male approval or even presence to merrily exist. Unlike the women in ballet, they are agents, not objects. However, they maintain their agency and identity without sacrificing their femininity. Clearly, these are two powerful, beautiful, passionate women, very like the tango they dance. This dance is even sexier for having two sexy people, both attractive young women,
actresses Salma Hayek and Ashley Judd, dancing it. Taymor uses the tango to express their shared sensuality. In her audio commentary on the film’s DVD, Taymor suggests that tango was the most appropriate medium, not only symbolically, but also realistically. Given the period and people involved, it is entirely likely that these two women would have played with the form of tango (Moyers). In its execution, it is rough, characteristically improvised, performed like “regular people” (Taymor). In production, Taymor opted instead to rely on the talents and discoveries of the two actresses in the moment, under the guidance of the choreographer, and real-life tango dancer and actress Mia Maestro (Blackwelder).

Although the women dance for themselves, the audience within the film reacts. The dance electrifies the audience. Tearing your eyes off the women dancing, you see the rapt faces of the people in the background. Sitting against the wall, standing in doorways, making as much room as possible, they watch the dancers with mixed reactions. Some are curious, others amused. Diego Rivera, as played by Alfred Molina, watches with some pride and pleasure, as two of his lovers dance with each other. Everyone watches intently, later breaking into rhythmic clapping, as if to engage in the expression and passion of the tango, by encouraging the women. Frida and Tina’s audience is supportive and excited, but not titillated. Expanding on Mulvey’s concept of male gaze, Savigliano notes that, “the assumption has been that a woman’s erotic interest was not in her female tango partner but in the men who gazed at the spectacle.”
The women are not oblivious to their audience, but they do not require an audience either.

The dance plays to two audiences: the fictional audience of a 1920s Mexico City salon, and the audience in the darkened theatre. While most critics found the movie either too real or not real enough, they universally comment (and compliment) the stunning visual quality of *Frida*. Aside from the lush visuals, many reviewers mention the tango as one of the highlights of the film. Rene Rodriguez of the *Miami Herald* describes the tango as “impromptu” and “one of the movie’s erotic highlights” (Rodriguez 11G). The staff reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* considered the tango “suggestive,” while challenging the sexual relationship between Modotti and Kahlo it suggests (Obejas 13). Critics universally made note of the tango, but they seemed more interested in the ideas of two famous actresses, Salma Hayek and Ashley Judd, dancing in backless dresses, rather than the message behind the dance of two female (visual) artists. Many are disappointed that neither the tango nor the film portrayed Frida Kahlo as the feminist icon that she has recently become. The tango, however, paints an image of a strong, independent woman, regardless of labels.

Succinctly, Taymor uses the form of tango to wordlessly express the independence, autonomy and passion of her protagonist Frida. She also meets Laura Mulvey’s challenge, “daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire” (Daly 117). Intentionally or not, their tango is sexy. However, words like “titillating” or “erotic” somehow do not
convey the beauty of the moment without tainting it with some male-fantasy. As with this tango, both Julie Taymor and Frida Kahlo push to redefine traditional roles.

**Conclusion**

It would be naïve to attribute all of tango's appeal and continued cultural influence on its history and sociology. Tango in the United States remains fairly “exotic”—it is considered a special, acquired talent, unlike Argentina where tango is much more integrated into the mainstream, as an almost indigenous dance. Whereas all ages and classes dance the tango in Argentina, tango in America tends to be reserved for the more elite. Indulging in tango as a hobby implies a level of social status (Malnig 271). Whether this is by design or by accident remains unclear, but the practical reality is that the hobby of tango costs money. From its emergence onto the Euro-American scene, tango has generated revenue. As a buzzword, fad or practice, it produces income. “Culture has become commodified; style, images, representations, no long embellish economic products, rather they are themselves products” (Thomas 17). Its continued commercial viability, however, reciprocally relies on the experiential appeal of tango.

Regardless of how much it may cost, people enjoy tango, either as participants or observers. Tango allows people to escape their real world for one more exciting and attractive, if only for a moment. Gender roles are not fixed, but flexible. Likewise, power exists in a state of flux. The endless variations, their
execution, and their implications add drama and vitality to tango’s environment. The tango uses the human body to tell a story, which may explain its prevalence in other narrative forms, such as theatre and film. Tango bodies move in a distinctive way. Dancer, feminist and scholar Ann Cooper Albright expresses the power of the human form elegantly, saying, “Elusive and ephemeral, the dancing body has evoked a whole series of fantastic images and metaphors that, unfortunately, tend to gloss over the more profound implications of an art that is so fully grounded in the physical body” (5).

These images and metaphors that tango conjures, forming a non-verbal language, borrow from a variety of other cultures. Both the music and dance of tango have adopted pieces of Spanish, African and European traditions. Such diversity almost defies Edward Said’s delineation of the Occident/Orient, yet still operates within it. If its dramatic potential or origins did not sufficiently recommend the tango to Americans, the tango also carries an association with the underground, the underdog, and the underpaid. Those who do not Romanticize or fantasize about the underworld probably sympathize or identify with it instead. With a clearer understanding at the foundations of “sexy,” artists can include tango in their work with more specificity and awareness, and their audience can better appreciate and decode it. Then they can question the prominence of tango in the everyday.
WORKS CITED


Collier, Simon et al. Tango! The Dance, the Song, the Story. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997.


Quinn, Nicholas. Personal Conversation. 6 April 2008.


