

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Matthew McLaughlin

Embracing Uncertainty

by Carolyn Merritt

In April, [I wrote of my conversations with tango dancers](#) and friends about how we are processing the absence of tango and the emergence of virtual tango events due to COVID-19. In this follow-up piece, I report on the [Philadelphia Argentine Tango School's](#) recent [Virtual Tango Festival](#), continued conversations with tango friends, and the potential this pause offers for reimagining tango on the other side of the pandemic.

What makes life worth living? How do we plod on in limbo without the simplest comforts—beyond food, shelter, safety—of human contact and connection? Can we take meaningful steps to heal the ruptures wrought by the violence, disenfranchisement, and inequity that rob so many of these basics? Can we reimagine in order to rebuild a world where our joys are truly collective, unfettered by suffering?

I've been told not to begin with questions. I've been told tango can change the world.

Tango is imperfect and so am I. As time drags on and I reflect on its absence, its mysteries and its humanness loom large. Tango as dance promises little more than possibility, potential. Born of pain and sorrow, dislocation, marginalization, nostalgia, myriad beauties and violences, the dance transcends these foundations even as the themes reverberate through the mythology of its poetry, music, and history.

Tango dance can yield communion, a unique means of bridging difference; these transformative moments shimmer like oases, visions of salvation that ultimately dissolve. But these sensations and their memories take root in the body and hold lessons. They nourish us

as the losses pile up—trips canceled, projects delayed, work lost, tours cut short, evenings on end in isolation. While tango dancers wait to embrace again, this collective pause offers time and space: to dive more deeply into the music and lyrics; to examine the remnants of a century's-plus evolution; to interrogate our current culture in order to intentionally chart our future.

From May 22–25, the Philadelphia Argentine Tango School (PATS) hosted a virtual festival in lieu of the canceled live event. The 10th anniversary festival, which would have featured live music every night, has been postponed to May 2021. When I spoke with Meredith Klein, the school's director and an old friend, she highlighted the devastation she would have felt had the weekend passed with no activity whatsoever. The success of the school's online offerings since the outbreak of COVID-19 demonstrated its potential. Since March, PATS has hosted a weekly lecture series and technique classes. The virtual festival drew in some 400 attendees (about 2/3 of the anticipated crowd for the live festival) with 35 offerings including technique, music concerts, lectures, conditioning, a happy hour, bookmaking, and meditation.

Klein emphasized her joy at creating work for artists right now. Forty-nine presenters from North America, South America, and Europe will receive some portion of \$8,500 in payments to artists. This coup is offset by the nearly \$40,000 loss, which would have gone to artists in the live festival, in addition to revenues that would have been paid to venues and vendors. And then there is the sobering reality that similar losses have been accruing in the tango and the larger arts worlds since the pandemic began, and will continue for some time.

While PATS has received support from the Paycheck Protection Program, the City of Philadelphia, the Artist Relief Fund, and individual donations, this does not bridge the 90% reduction in income since the closure of their physical building. And support differs according to place. Argentina has offered little to no financial support to artists. This situation, and the knowledge that small amounts of money go much further there, led Klein to invite more artists from Argentina (25 of 49) to present in the festival. She also invited eight Argentine artists living abroad, noting that Argentines living in the U.S. on artist visas have been scared away from applying for government support by the threat that it will impair future visa applications.

"...tango is a cultural phenomenon, and to reduce it to just dancing ignores its wider scope. It is not a coincidence that it has survived more than a hundred years of enormous social changes."

-Gerardo Razumney, dancer and musician, from public comment to my April article

Those who participated in the festival applauded the event's successes—from the wide range of offerings, to the "astonishingly good" sound in music concerts, to the ability to pose questions and receive answers in real time with the online chat function. Local dancer Gerardo Razumney attended numerous lectures on tango history, culture, and music, and raved that the sessions were so wonderful he wished they'd been longer.

The virtual nature of the festival made it easier for my partner and me to attend more classes together than we have in recent years. We have a young son and we generally trade caretaking and class-taking time, saving babysitter funds for the evening [milongas](#). Technology allowed us to study with a teaching trio on two different continents—Carla Marano (Buenos Aires) with Octavio Fernandez and Natacha Lockwood (Paris). At times, Fernandez and Lockwood would demonstrate different iterations of a step and then accompany the students in practicing, while Marano watched and offered feedback as we moved. Seeing and replicating instructors' movements while another instructor observed and offered guidance was exceptionally helpful. Here, distance yielded a new approach to team teaching and use of technology to enhance modeling and feedback.

I tuned in alongside many others for the nightly music concerts: virtuoso pianist [Pablo Estigarribia](#) (the largest draw with 120 sign-ins);

duo [Leandro Ragusa \(bandoneón\) and Nili Grieco \(flute\)](#); a shared event of musicians who perform solo and in ensembles; and the finale featuring the 10-person [orquesta típica La Juan D'Arienzo](#), who performed in Philadelphia in late February before their tour abruptly ended. Especially exceptional was La Juan D'Arienzo—the individual musicians recorded themselves separately in their homes, and these were masterfully mixed together into a seamless, top-notch orchestral experience.

Musician and dancer Heyni Solera voiced appreciation for Klein's support of new music and academics. One half of the duo [Arco & Aire](#) (bandoneon/cello), Solera spent nearly a year studying and playing bandoneon in Buenos Aires, where she observed the "huge knowledge gap in the U.S." when it comes to contemporary tango music, "which has evolved just like the dance." Following the music's developments is more than a lifeline to tango, but a crucial component of improving one's dance. As Solera noted, listening to the music outside of dancing is essential for all dancers but especially leaders "because they attend to so many factors at once" (the music, their partner, navigation, and more).

To maximize sound quality, the music concerts took place in webinar format, meaning no grid of attendee squares, no simultaneous chatting, and none of the pixelated intersubjectivity we've grown accustomed to in just two months of Zooming life. Artist Samara Talkin lamented this downside to videoconferencing even as she underscored the phenomenal sound: "I love showing up and seeing all the names, and sharing a moment that is the same with others." I was surprised to miss this too; I often tune in to evening events from the bathtub with my video off, but I still feel a sense of anticipation on arrival, and delight in familiar faces who bring back memories. Perhaps for this reason, the final moments of the festival—in which presenters and attendees were invited to turn on their video and to share one last tango—were so bittersweet.

Another standout event was the lecture "Sexual Citizenship and the Tango World: Exploring the Nature of Consent, Boundaries, and Creating Safer Communities." Part of a book tour by Dr. Jennifer Hirsch, co-author of [Sexual Citizens: A Landmark Study of Sex, Power, and Assault on College Campuses](#), the lecture was co-presented by tango dancer and organizer [Mitra Martin](#). The stories from Dr. Hirsch's study at Columbia University represent a different environment and culture, but the conceptual vocabulary Dr. Hirsch outlines for approaching sexuality and relations within specific spaces holds promise for the tango community. Dancer/teacher Elly Fernandez and artist Talkin felt this was the most impactful lecture of the weekend, noting that discussions of sex, boundaries, and consent in tango are long overdue. We all wondered whether these discussions would have happened were it not for this pause from dancing and expansion of tango into virtual spaces.

Talkin shared that she has "stayed in a *tanda* (set of 3-4 songs) when I was made to feel uncomfortable because I knew I was being watched," while Fernandez admitted that she only stuck with tango because people watched out for her along the way. I've also wrestled with leaders on the dance floor and in classes. Indeed, like countless others I've been [dance-raped](#) in tango: groped, harassed, made to feel uncomfortable or unsafe, had my physical and verbal cues ignored. I once watched someone give up on tango after her first evening. She was accosted by a man all night, sought refuge in the bathroom, and asked me to coordinate her exit rather than re-enter the *milonga* to find her ride home.

During the lecture Q&A, a dancer shared lessons from the swing dance community, where they have codes of conduct, clear processes for sanctioning breaches, and a safety committee of trained volunteers at events. Other attendees pondered the balance between empowering individuals to advocate for themselves and expecting organizers to monitor behaviors, as well as how to craft guidelines for a multicultural, multi-generational community like tango.

While she agrees these conversations are important, teacher Barbara Kountouzi sees the challenges of kicking people out of an already small community. Indeed, Mariel, an actor and dancer, shared that she got pushback when she broached sanctioning paying customers. Dr. Hirsch's concept of sexual geographies opens a path for discussing space in social communities—namely, who owns the space? If communities thrive with participation and buy-in, then collective approaches to sharing experiences, to listening, and to envisioning physical, mental, and emotional safety can only strengthen Philly's tango scene.

Many of the people I connected with in April and more recently have been participating in online events over the past months. Hannah, a dog walker who was dancing a couple times a week before the pandemic, misses what had become an important social community for her. Though she occasionally drops in to [Milonga la Memoria](#), she admitted to “still feeling very confused by the concept of virtual *milongas*.” Educational consultant Julie Winyard is a regular face in Philadelphia despite the fact that she lives in the UK. She dances here when visiting family, and she has traversed the Atlantic multiple times for Philly's festival. Winyard “doesn't pine for tango,” and she doesn't anticipate dancing before a vaccine, but she has found that listening to the music helps “keep the tango alive in her body.” She also tunes in alongside countless local and global dancers and tango enthusiasts to “[Tango by Year](#),” a weekly discussion of tango music and history.

Weeks ago, Fernandez told me she felt “unmoored” without tango; while she has found physical activities to lift her spirits, she doesn't take pleasure in listening to tango music without dancing, and she isn't perfecting her dance technique at every opportunity like she once did—when cooking, brushing her teeth, standing at her desk, waiting on line. Others have taken up or deepened their commitment to physical training like ballet, yoga, pilates, and more, both to fill tango's absence and to maintain their core, strength, and balance for the day when we can embrace again.

When I asked Razumney why he chose not to participate in any of the technique classes in the virtual festival, he responded that “[t]ango dancing is a language, and I don't like monologues.” The festival's concerts and lectures drew more attendees than the technique classes. My partner and I have danced a handful of times in the past three months; it is just not the same without the collective energy of the *milonga*. Logistically coordinating the tiniest of gatherings still confounds, yet some dancers acknowledged openness to (or curiosity about) meeting with a small group of trusted friends, as one confessed:

“If the opportunity arises, I will take it, whether a vaccine comes out or not. For me life is not worth living in such fear and isolation. I fully respect that many people won't want to, but I also believe that people should have the option, as long as they don't put others who have not made the same choice at risk.”

-anonymous

In the meantime, virtual engagement occupies a middle ground that parallels our larger limbo.

Solace emerges like weeds in the sidewalks. All around us, the frameworks of old structures show signs of crumbling. The one gift of this pause, time and space to envision and lay the groundwork for a better future, invites us to embrace possibility.

Carolyn taught yoga in the Virtual Tango Festival and with the PATS online classes program.

[Virtual Tango Festival](#), Philadelphia Argentine Tango School, May 22–25, 2020.

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