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Tango Nuevo



Synopsis

“Required reading for anyone who understands the electrifying power that dance has to transform a life. Exceptionally well written. . . . [Merritt’s] lively, engaging writing style is unique—it can go from side-splittingly funny to poignant in the time it takes to execute a boleo.” —Melissa A. Fitch, author of *Side Dishes: Latina American Women, Sex, and Cultural Production*

The Argentine tango is one of the world’s best-known partner dances. Though tango is much admired and discussed, very little has been written about its ongoing evolution. While the dance is steeped in history, the younger generation has begun to push tango into new and provocative realms. In the most cutting-edge performances, men and women switch the roles of leader and follower; ideas from swing, salsa, and blues are freely incorporated; and dress has become anything but traditional. While some may refer to this as tango nuevo, the term has been met with much resistance. In this innovative work, Carolyn Merritt surveys tango history while focusing on the most recent iteration of the dance and the *práctica* scene that has exploded in Buenos Aires since the early 2000s. She examines this growing, thriving community of young and eager dancers who are pushing the tango beyond its traditional limits, along with the spaces they’ve created within which to dance, socialize, and experiment in ways more befitting their ages, desires, schedules, and attitudes. After starting with an overview of tango, Merritt leads readers through the traditional dance halls and the less formal *prácticas* of Buenos Aires to tango communities on both coasts of the United States. Along the way, her personal observations show the dance’s emotional depth and the challenges dancers face in tango venues old and new. Merritt’s investigation also demonstrates how innovation, globalization, and fusion, which many associate with nuevo, have always been at work in tango. Combining sensuous prose, provocative images, and heart-wrenching stories, Merritt presents an unflinching look at the complex motivations driving the pursuit to master this intricate dance. Throughout, she questions the “newness” of nuevo through portraits of machismo, violence, and elitism in contemporary tango. The result is a book that highlights the tensions between preservation and evolution of this—or any—cultural art form. Carolyn Merritt lives in Philadelphia, where she teaches anthropology and performance studies and works with the ThInKing Dance project.

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Customer Reviews

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The best book on Tango that I’ve ever read, current or otherwise. Well written, covers ALL aspects of the dance that you’d never guess unless you were deep in the thick of it. A great read!

It covers some good history about tango. However, it is very technical as it is written as a thesis and not for a leisure read for pure pleasure. I recommend this for anyone who likes facts about tango.

very readable, informative and entertaining. lovely photos to enhance the text. great for dancers and non dancers alike. an achievement in music and dance lit.

To find a book on Argentine tango, that is extremely detailed, is this scholarly and written by an anthropologist, has been astunning find. It has filled in many details I have been curious about and gives a much needed overview of the choices dancers will be making now that Argentine tango is out in the world and can not be put "back in the box". Harry Lindwall

Does tango "belong" to Argentina when perhaps more people dance it outside Argentina? When the financial center of gravity is outside too? (A similar issue faces yoga and India.) I enjoyed this book’s exploration of this issue. Also, the recent developments, circa 1980+, in tango. The cycle of development -- innovation, protest, grudging acceptance, revisionism, so what was so new about it, full acceptance. The US anecdotes seem quite Philadelphia centric, author’s home base, perhaps a shade too much. Would have liked an exploration of tango today in Europe, say Germany vs. Finland.

To start with, I’d like to preface this review with the fact that I am one of the many tango professionals interviewed by Carolyn several years ago during her initial book research. When I later found out that it was going to be called "Tango Nuevo" I had an immediate negative reaction. After reading the book, however, I have come full circle to really appreciate the enormous effort and

intelligence that the author put into her work. It is both a huge achievement from a cultural anthropology stand point as well as a personal memoir that is not rife with unnecessary fluff (that is all too common in most contemporary books on the subject). Warning: This book will be a difficult read for the tango uninitiated (unless you are an academic or student of cultural anthropology at large)...since it is full of historical and contemporary references that only seasoned followers of the evolution of tango can fully appreciate. That said, it is a must read for anyone interested in a deeper understanding of all the forces that have conspired to create our current thinking, marketing, and understanding of this social dance which has rooted itself in almost every corner of the world. The cyclic nature of external/globalized influences is very apparent. Hats off to Carolyn Merritt for this amazing and empowering undertaking. The world of contemporary Argentine tango social dancing owes you a huge thanks! I will personally be using this guide as a reference for years to come and also hope to share parts of it with my future students.

Carolyn Merritt's fascinating account of her experiences with "Nuevo Tango" dancing in Buenos Aires and beyond provide the tango aficionado with insight and information available nowhere else. This very satisfying book offers the reader both a chronicle of her personal tango obsession, and a seminal anthropological account of cultural evolution in this South American social dance form. Drawn from her time dancing tango in Buenos Aires beginning just after the infamous deadly Cromagnon fire, whose bureaucratic aftermath shut down all the normal tango milonga venues, her lived experience of the birth of the alternative "practica" scene brings to light some absolutely fascinating details, like the tango dancers blocking the streets in protest when one of their alternative venues was raided by the police. Especially gratifying for me was her extensive treatment of the roles played in this evolutionary pageant by Gustavo Naveira and Luciana Valle. I've been fortunate to work extensively with both of them, and while Gustavo is the better-known, it is very satisfying indeed to see Luciana receive some long-overdue acknowledgement for the role she and her partners played in resuscitating the practica scene through their El Motivo practica at Villa Malcolm, which got its start a few months before the Cromagnon fire. Luciana's deep experience in the events described here, covering significant milestones in Buenos Aires tango within the last two decades, provides some rewarding balance in what is often largely a narrative dictated by men. In fact, Carolyn's whole book can be seen as a significant redressing of that imbalance, especially since it takes as its focus this knife-edge of cultural evolution on issues that include gender stereotyping, globalization, and national identity. As the editor of the New York Times once said, "people pay us for what we don't print". Far more than just an aggregation of interview quotes,

list-server discussion outtakes, and website samplings, she has gone the extra mile to ferret out the significant from the glib, and to master her subject sufficiently to be able to give appropriate weight and context to the voices whose words she shares with us. Throughout, she vividly and memorably illuminates for us the fascinatingly diverse and multifaceted world-in-motion that is Argentine Tango in Buenos Aires.

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