

Version 1

Read First

On the Submissiveness of Women in the Tango

by Don Berry

INSTRUCTIONS

Before reading this article, imagine you and a partner alone, poised and ready to tango. The beat of the music begins and your partnership starts to flow with the fluidity and drama of expert tango artists. . .

The richness of tango lies in contrast—in the interplay of opposites. There is continual interweaving of slow beats and quick beats; of smooth, flowing motion and sharp turns; of moves of expansion and moves of contraction; of freedom and discipline. In one contrast, the tango is unique among dances, and that is the contrast between its sensuality and the precision of its geometry. Sensuality and geometry are not often paired in aesthetics. The creative power of this pair of opposites, the vitality generated by their interaction, is seen in tango as nowhere else. And they point directly to the fundamental pair of opposites that are always at the secret heart of tango--man and woman. It is often said that the man “dominates” tango, and the woman’s role is “submissive.” There is some truth in that. But it is such a crude and superficial understanding of the relation between man and woman in the tango that it distorts the creative act that arises from them. Certainly

the man creates the dance. From his own sensitivity to the music and to his partner, he recreates the history of tango every time he takes the floor. Unlike the more rigidly codified dances, every tango is a new tango. Each new pair of partners creates it from the beginning, according to the moment, the mood, the music, and their inner feeling. The state of the heart. But the very reason the man creates the dance is to evoke the beauty, the grace, and the inner spirit of the woman, without which tango is only empty geometry. He evokes this inner feminine spirit for his own enjoyment, but also so the women can enjoy her own femininity. He creates the form, and she fills it with beauty. That is the shared experience of tango. In order to make this possible, the woman is not submissive, she is responsive. She is in a state of heightened awareness, watchful to the nuance of tempo and rhythm, sensitive not only to the music, but to the man’s feeling about her and the music, and to the dance he is creating from those feelings. The art of following in tango is both more subtle and more mysterious than leading. And when a woman follows, she is not dragging along behind like a platypus on a chain. She follows as a cloud follows the wind, and her art is to be as responsive to the man as the cloud is responsive to the wind. This state of heightened responsiveness is not an exclusively feminine skill, by any means. It is also the state of the hunter tracking a wounded animal. (It is even the state of the defensive backfield of the LA Rams, and I do not recall hearing the words “submissive” or “passive” used in that connection.) In the tango, it is the woman who plays this responsive role. In fact, the image of the feminine that is evoked in the tango is at the farthest pole from passive. It has the greatest feminine range of any dance, at one moment swooning languidly into his arms, at the next a sassy, pert and rebellious flirtation. The tango can express a wider range of the feminine than any other dance, and this is the source of its power for both man and woman.



Adapted from article first published in the Club Tango Newsletter, Don Berry, September 2002.

NOTES ON LEADING THE TANGO: All these things have certain practical consequences in the tango, and in particular in the lead. In the vast majority of cases, the reason a woman does not follow is because the man is not leading. First of all, when a woman is truly following, and in a highly responsive state, she is easily bored. If she always knows what is coming next, and with what timing you will lead any given figure, you will lose her attention and she will start dancing on her own. Perhaps that is acceptable for an exhibition dance, but there is a great difference between displaying the tango and dancing the tango. An exhibition dance may show the form of tango beautifully, but loses its heart, which is the moment to moment flow of energy between the dancers, in which the outcome is an adventure and a mystery. In an exhibition, the meaning is for an audience; in a dance, the meaning is for the dancers alone. That is tango. It is the man's responsibility to be creative enough to keep the woman's attention on the dance. She needs surprises, an occasional unexpected delight, or she will lapse into a routine of memorized steps, and the dance will not be a memorable one for either of you. (One way to improve a woman's following is to make her close her eyes, so that she can respond only to your lead, and not to mental images.)

The implication of this for the lead is clear. The man has to know what he is doing, and do it decisively, without ambiguity, and without giving confusing signals about it. The tango, like all arts, is a combination of freedom and discipline. The dancers cannot enjoy the rewards of tango freedom until they have mastered tango discipline; specifically for the man, the discipline of leading with certainty. In tango, particularly, there is a survival value in certainty. For example, when you lead the figure el gancho, you must place the woman's body very accurately. Otherwise, and let us be straightforward about this, you will be kicked in the groin by a three-inch spike heel moving at an extremely high rate of speed. This is not good. And at such a moment the thought that the woman in tango is "submissive" will not even cross your mind. We can dispense with the superficial description of woman's role in tango as "passive." But we can also remember the seed of truth in the cliché: the heart of tango is in the contrast of opposites, and the more opposite the roles played by man and woman, the more creative the dance will be. Sensuality alone is limited. Geometry alone is limited. But in free and disciplined combination, together they are unlimited.

In the mythos of tango it is said that two dancers have died from the overwhelming emotion generated by the dance, one in Buenos Aires in 1912, the other in Paris in 1926. Both were women.

I trust all joy.

--Theodore Roethke

Version 2

On the Submissiveness of the *Follower* in the Tango

by Don Berry

INSTRUCTIONS

Now, before starting Version 2, imagine how the flow, dips and dramatic turns of the tango metaphorically resemble the workplace. Think about the partnerships created and the roles each play to complete the dance of your organization.

The richness of tango [*organization-relationship of leader and followers*] lies in contrast—in the interplay of opposites. There is continual interweaving of slow beats and quick beats; of smooth, flowing motion and sharp turns; of moves of expansion and moves of contraction; of freedom and discipline. In one contrast the tango is unique among dances, and that is the contrast between its sensuality and the precision of its geometry. Sensuality and geometry are not often paired in aesthetics. The creative power of this pair of opposites, the vitality generated by their interaction, is seen in tango as nowhere else. And they point directly to the fundamental pair of opposites that are always at the secret heart of tango—leader and follower. It is often said that the leader “dominates” tango and the follower’s role is “submissive.” There is some truth in that. But it is such a crude and superficial understanding of the relation between

leader and follower in the tango [day-to-day work] that it distorts the creative act that arises from them. Certainly the leader creates the dance. From the leader’s own sensitivity to the music and to the partner, the leader recreates the history of tango every time the leader takes the floor. Unlike the more rigidly codified dances, every tango is a new tango. Each new pair of partners creates it from the beginning, according to the moment, the mood, the music, and their inner feeling. The state of the heart. But the very reason the leader creates the dance is to evoke the beauty, the grace, and the inner spirit of the follower, without which tango is only empty geometry. The leader evokes this inner feminine spirit for his own enjoyment, but also so the follower can enjoy her own femininity. The leader creates the form, and the follower fills it with beauty. That is the shared experience of tango. In order to make this possible, the follower is not submissive, but responsive. The follower is in a state of heightened awareness, watchful to the nuance of tempo and rhythm; sensitive not only to the music, but to the leader’s feeling about the follower and the music, and to the dance the leader is creating from those feelings. The art of following in tango is both more subtle and more mysterious than leading. And when a follower follows, the follower is not dragging along behind like a platypus on a chain. The follower follows as a cloud follows the wind, and the follower’s art is to be as responsive to the leader as the cloud is responsive to the wind. This state of heightened responsiveness is not an exclusively feminine skill, by any means. It is also the state of the hunter tracking a wounded animal. (It is even the state of the defensive backfield of the LA Rams, and I do not recall hearing the words “submissive” or “passive” used in that connection.) In the tango, it is the follower who plays this responsive role. In fact, the image of the feminine that is evoked in the tango is at the farthest pole from passive. It has the greatest feminine range of any dance, at one moment swooning languidly into the leader’s arms, at the next



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