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Dancing to Change the World: Is the Dancing of Queer Tango Good Politics?

Abstract: How politically effective is queer tango today? The privileged dancers who migrate each year to Paris, Rome, Berlin or Buenos Aires for queer tango festivals and marathons thoroughly enjoy themselves, but does this amiable social dancing actually change anything? In two decades of increasing international movement, has this once radical dance practice forgotten its late twentieth century feminist and gay liberation roots, dwindling into a branch of tourism? I suggest not. Dancing bodies are political bodies. Dana Mills (2017) suggests there are two types of political dance: “weak”, where the dancing reiterates political ideas already expressed in words; and “strong”, which “assumes that dance has a communicative power independent of other symbolic systems.” Queer tango is more than festivals and it includes the weak, the strong and the words. Indeed, all three interact. Historically, queer tango dancing bodies notionally expressed ideas taken from the literature of queer theory. Now, they often move among and dance with mainstream tango dancing bodies, changing the mainstream by dancing queer tango’s implicit critique of it *in* the mainstream. Edgardo Fernández Sesma’s flash mobs in Buenos Aires tie placards to their backs with words on them - the names of homophobic nations – thus turning friendly social dancing into political performance. Queer tango includes language-based, political discourses: informal discussions at the edges of dance floors; international online bantering facilitated by social media; and a growing body of non-academic and academic writings. Yet, as one of Juliet McMains’ (2018) interviewees reminds us, it may be joyous simply to dance in a “a room full of queers” as one does at a queer tango festival, but such dancing is also an affirmative, political act, the power of which should never be underestimated.

Introduction

Memory, migration and movement.

I am a queer tango dancer. I live in London. Each year, I migrate around the world in order to dance queer tango. Last week, I returned from Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Each hosted queer tango festivals. This year I have danced queer tango in London at Queer Tango London, in mainstream London tango venues, and at international queer tango events in Rome, Oldenburg, Paris and Berlin (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Dancers at the Berlin Queer Tango Festival

I returned from Buenos Aires inspired afresh by the work of queer tango activist, Edgardo Fernández Sesma. But for a full life, I might have made it to Riga, or Munich or Hamburg. At such events I re-engage with friendly, dancing bodies from around the world. And it brings me joy.

Joy has a value, surely, but queer tango emerged out of a suite of late 20th century social and political concerns about gender and about sexuality, explored through feminism, and what was then called “gay liberation”. Queer tango has expanded as ideas of the “queer” have matured, but has it kept up? Today, I am asking - aside from making us happy, is the dancing of queer tango good – that is to say, effective – politics?

The Political origins of queer tango.



Fig. 2. Brigitta Winkler with Angelika Fischer in the 1980s; Augusto Balizano and unidentified dancer

There are two, almost, but not quite distinct histories of queer tango: that of women; and that of men. In general, it has been women who have been more active in thinking through the political and social dimensions, while the men have tended simply to organise and dance with our customary sense of entitlement. Recent research (Batchelor, Havmøller 2017) highlights the many different 20th century times and places of queer tango's origins, with no one qualifying as "the birthplace". Mariano Docampo may be credited with the formal link to queer theory, but "queer tango" – that is, what is danced, the theoretical foundations, the aspirations and the terminology used – took time to cohere into a single entity, if indeed they ever did. There is still disagreement as to what queer tango is and how it should be defined (Docampo 2015; Havmøller 2017; Batchelor 2015; McMains 2018).

Yet from the memories Ute Walter, Marga Nagel, Sabine Rohde, Brigitta Winkler, Rebecca Shulman, and Mariana Docampo, and of the men, Daniel Trenner, Augusto Balizano (Fig. 2) and Egardo Fernández Sesma among others, suggest the joy to which I am drawn has always been there. But queer tango,

unlike mainstream tango, has an overt, social and political agenda. This marks it out. Sabine Rohde recalls dancing in the 1980s:

We were political[ly] aware. We all had long, after-Milonga late night discussions about what we are doing with this "macho dance". Why us? (Rohde 2017)

Queer tango's protagonists originally carved out "safe spaces" in a world seen as hostile, in which same sex couples would not be an anachronism, and where who dances which role, is not predetermined by gender. Above all, queer tango develops the tango's luxurious, erotic potentiality, such that it welcomes alternatives to the heterosexual, man-woman model hitherto universally identified as the essential foundation of this famously [hetero]sexy dance. Queer tango opens up – and as it turns out, historically, re-opens – the tango embrace to the homoerotic and legitimises it. And as concepts of the "queer" have developed, the embrace legitimises a rich variety of liberating, alternative, and sometimes non-linguistic models of gender and sexual identity. Now, no-one need be restricted by labels such as "lesbian", or "gay man". And just as these alternatives emerged out of developments in the wider world onto the queer tango dance-floor, so their queer tango embodiments were and are thought by those dancing to have social and political value beyond it. Queer tango draws from and feeds back into that wider world.

Queer tango prompts people to feel, think and act differently, and the extent to which it does is, surely, a fair criterion by which the dancing's political impact may be assessed. Whatever else it is, queer tango is *political* social dancing – dancing to change the world.

How might dancing queer tango achieve political effects?

Much has been written about the relationships between dance and politics – Clare Croft's anthology, *Queer Dance* is but one example which might be thought pertinent – but despite caveats to the contrary here and elsewhere, most critiques consider dance as performance and audience. Erin Manning's *Politics of Touch* is a welcome and valuable exception. The author uses the social dancing of tango to develop her concepts. Yet Manning's is a work of political philosophy where "politics" is a somewhat abstract entity. My own interests are simpler and more immediate: at a dangerous time in the politics of much of the world, a politics disfigured by nationalist, masculine posturing, what evidence is there that queer tango is making any political difference? And I am referring to social dancing and to those who witness it.

Dana Mills (2017) is useful here. In *Dance and Politics* she draws...

...the distinction between the weak reading of political dance – the representation through moving bodies of ideas previously articulated in words – and the strong reading of political dance – the creation of a phenomenologically independent world which includes its own system of inscription and world of reception.

Queer tango includes both. Few examples are purely the one or the other.

At its simplest, politics is “the process of making decisions that apply to members of a group” (Wikipedia 2018). Conventionally, there are a range of mediums by which politics is conducted, ranging from the manner in which lives are lived, the language to which Mills refers, and by implication, imagery – that is, representations of lives lived, real or imagined – or, moving back towards the physical – street protest, violence, terrorism, revolution, or war.

I suggest that to contribute to political processes, dancers’ dancing must – intentionally, or unintentionally – alter how people feel, think, and eventually act. Queer tango dancing– weak or strong – can be judged politically effective to the extent that it furthers the objectives of, or develops the themes touched on by queer tango. Rather than attempting to consider all of these, I will explore just two a little: queer tango as a contribution to debates about gender, sexuality and identity; and queer tango as a model of inclusivity.

Part of the problem with defining queer tango is that it has many different manifestations. Accordingly, here, I consider three of the main ones: local queer tango groups; international events; and “applied queer tango” – that is, queer tango deliberately used for political purposes.

Local queer tango groups such as Collectif Queer Tangolibero are examples of what was, in the early 21st century, the standard unit of queer tango. Activists created them across Europe, in Buenos Aires and in Montevideo, in Istanbul, in North America, east and west coasts, and middle, not forgetting Canada – by no means an exhaustive list. The relationship with the local environment is crucial. Some countries are so repressive, queer tango groups would be a practical impossibility. In Putin’s socially conservative, homophobic Russia, and in Istanbul in a country lurching towards social and sexual repression, activists sustained such groups, in part, as tangible ripostes.

Queer Tango London is (ironically, given recent events) more typical of the European experience. From 2008 onwards, Tim Flynn followed the late 20th century “safe space” model, a place where LGBTQ+ people and their friends might dance with whomsoever they chose. Hostility beyond the safe space was a given, but untested. Sometimes there are no queer tango groups because the

context is SO liberal. Queer tango dancers in southern Sweden, for example, tell me they have no need formally to organise, because they can dance queer tango comfortably at mainstream venues. The same is now true of mainstream milongas in London, where Queer Tango London functions mostly as a safe space launchpad for queer dancers who become proficient, before becoming part of that “normal” landscape. The local model is far from exhausted, as a story in *The Washington Post* about a new group earlier this week made plain.

The political effects of local groups are chiefly affirmative. As Tanya, one of Juliet McMains’ respondents put it: “There is no way to explain what it’s like to be in a room full of queer people, for us. Just to not feel different all the time.” (McMains 2018). And this dancing is “strong” in the Dana Mills sense for the most part, an affirmation of ideas residing not in words, but in bodies.

International queer tango events

Local groups knew they were part of something international.

Some organised their own international events. Dancers in Hamburg initiated the first of these in 2001. In 2011, the first International Queer Tango Festival in Berlin under Astrid Weiske was held and immediately became something of a benchmark. Festivals – have been joined by “marathons”, where the emphasis is wholly on participants’ dancing, and both have proliferated. Taken together, in 2015 there were 13. In 2018 there were 34.¹

But what has been their political impact?

Like local groups, one important political function is the affirmation of sexual and gender identities, but with this vital international dimension. If Faysal Tekoğlu embraces me or is embraced by me or others on the dancefloor in Berlin, he returns to an increasingly repressive social environment in Recep Erdoğan’s Turkey, knowing others think and behave as he does, and he knows it as a physical reality.

In 2016, many dancers from socially liberal countries, myself included, came to the Salida queer tango Festival in St Petersburg. Each venue address would be released secretly for fear that the heavies would find it and smash the place up. When some straight dancers at a mainstream venue – to which we had been invited by the proprietor – first snickered, and then noisily stormed out of the room, we witnessed first-hand the hostility to which our queer tango confederates there were subject. To his credit, the proprietor immediately came over to us, and danced with each of us in turn.

¹ Figures taken from The Queer Tango Project website <http://queertangobook.org/queer-tango-resources/calendar/> accessed 09 12 2018

Applied queer tango

In her book, *Global Tangos*, Melissa Fitch (2015) devotes a chapter to the therapeutic value of tango. Queer tango can similarly, if differently, be of value, if danced with specific political or social objectives in mind. I have tried it a few times myself. I used it in workshops with managers to get them to feel, think and behave differently regarding leadership, followership and gender in their day to day work (Burge, Batchelor and Cox, 2013). This is “soft” political dancing in Mills’ terms, in that all these ideas have been expressed in words, though I doubt my participants had read them, but “strong” in the sense that women leading men and not apologising and men allowing themselves physically to be led and not take over is experienced and understood in a physical sense, and initially at least, is independent of language. In D/deaf CAN Dance! with Melanie Parris, a profoundly deaf work colleague, I ran a research project teaching queer tango to D/deaf people, to find out what benefits might accrue if they danced with hearing dancers, or with each other (Parris, Batchelor, 2016). With the talented football coach, Jack Badu and the support of Stonewall, the UK LGBTQ+ campaigning charity, in the Football Tango Project, we get players to dance with each other (that is, to feel) and then think, and then discuss homophobia and the politics of sex, sexuality and gender in football.



Fig 3. Jack Badu, football coach and charity activist (left) practising a tango-based football “drill” (exercise) in the Football Tango Project.

But my hero in terms of applied queer tango is the indefatigable, Buenos Aires-based, Edgardo Fernández Sesma, an activist on a queer tango inclusivity mission. I will not attempt to mention all his activities here but confine myself to one or two which, following my latest trip to Buenos Aires are fresh in my mind. Having taught and danced with them a couple of years ago, I was invited by a group of “adultos mayores” (or “adultes mayores” to use Fernández Sesma’s term devised occasionally to rid himself of the Spanish default masculine) to their five-year birthday celebration. This was no ordinary pensioners’ party. It was a model of queer tango inclusivity. Five years earlier, as a queer tango response to the scandal of pensioners being mistreated or abandoned by their families and by the services intended to support them, Fernández Sesma established this group for adultes mayores to meet, to dance (most have danced all their lives) to socialise, and to campaign against the

mistreatment and abandoning of pensioners like themselves. With coffee, cakes, and the odd glass of wine it proved a great success.



Fig. 4. Queer [Tango] inclusivity. Activist, Edgardo Fernández Sesma with a volunteer and “adultas mayores” [Edgardo’s grammar!].

The socialising is really important, but the group does not confine itself to that alone. Fernández Sesma IS a queer tanguero. The adultes mayores are NOT a “conventional” LGBTQ+ constituency, but they too risk marginalisation and queer inclusivity, rightly, reaches out to them. They have been happy to help with the now famous flash mobs which Fernández Sesma organises against homophobia around the world.



Fig. 5. Queer Tango Flash Mob in Buenos Aires

Dancers appear [unannounced,] dancing in the streets with banners tied to their backs of countries where LGBTQ+ people are persecuted, tortured or murdered. As further evidence of inclusivity, this party closed with performances by Lucrecia Pereya Mazzara who has Down's Syndrome and Edgardo, and by Brenda Holz and Horacio Tolosa. Brenda is in a wheelchair. And Brenda was not just a show stopper, but a regular at social dancing.

Others may practise “Applied Queer Tango”, but they have yet to come to my attention.

Conclusion

Is dancing queer tango political? It is. Is it effective? It can be.

Queer tango is a branch of politics, not a substitute for it (though I much prefer it to masculine, nationalist posturing). No French President will abandon environmental taxes because we dance queer tango. Sometimes we also need to discuss, to vote, to march, or – apparently – pull on hi-visibility yellow jackets. But queer tango makes material contributions to the character and strengths of societies, and against a background of the deterioration in political life, this should be valued.



Fig. 6. Dancers at a Queer Tango London práctica, 2018.

On a small scale, I dance at Queer Tango London and help support any number of people in their identities, just as their dancing supports me in mine. I dance with Gawaine Preston from Queer Tango London at mainstream milongas which helps maintain a new normality which includes us, and others like us. I go to international festivals and help sustain a trans-national community where our dancing re-affirms sexual and gender identities and re-asserts their value. All these realisations of human relations have value beyond the dance floor.

I began by implying that international queer tango events might have dwindled into a branch of tourism.



Fig. 6. Dancers in the fountains outside the Louvre as part of a “City Walk” at the La Vie en Rose queer tango event, Paris, 2018. Copyright, Camille Collin.

I leave you with a superb example of political queer tango. La Vie en Rose is the wonderful – and thoughtful – international queer event which happens each year here, in Paris: The City walk is a progress around Paris, where tango music is played and dancers dance. At one level, we see more of Paris. But at another, Paris sees more of us. We dance. We are good! Smart phones are whipped out. Photos are taken. Videos are made. And they get taken away and shared, and discussed and shared... Queer tango politics which IS effective, and – of course – a joy!

Brilliant.

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