

Tangomanía ~ Sensation or Scandal?

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ABSTRACT

In the early 1900s the world turned from the dances of previous generations, such as cotillions, quadrilles, and English country dancing to “modern” dances, such as foxtrot, so-called animal dances, and the Latin rhythm of the tango and to more upbeat music, such as ragtime. These dances and music raised eyebrows in high society, particularly from the older generation, as they were thought to be too sensual and likely the cause of corruption and lack of moral behavior in youth. As the steps became more standardized from their original improvisational style, the tango took the world by storm and became either sensation or scandal – depending on one’s point of view. This paper discusses the transformation of tango from the brothels of South America to an accepted form of popular social dancing.

In the early 20th century Americans, tired of the old music and dances that came from their grandparent’s generation, found pleasure dancing to “modern” music such as ragtime; and they embraced “exotic” dances from other countries, such as the Tango.

Innovations were not always accepted by society as appropriate or decent, especially by mothers and fathers! Because of its association with bars and brothels, many in the upper class rejected dances they considered unseemly, including the tango. They had forgotten that early moralists in the 19th century had called the waltz “a dance of loose character”--disgusting, indelicate, immoral, and lascivious.

By the turn of the 20th century, the industrial revolution in America brought more people into cities, and new social institutions emerged – cabarets, dance halls, theaters, movies, and amusement parks. These public venues gave rise to greater social mobility and a massive consumer culture. The movement, rhythm, and style of early 20th century dances produced a new aesthetic for social dancing as well as a revised code of social behavior. Popular dance forms of the early 1900s directly impacted social and cultural changes. These dances provided a new freedom, a reaction against the restricted movements and outdated lifestyle of the 1800s. Social dances moved into public areas such as hotels, restaurants, cabarets, and dance halls with smaller dance areas and dim light. Couples danced closer together and were less aware of other dancers around them.

In Buenos Aires, Argentina, by 1900 the economic prosperity, population growth, and industrial expansion rivaled that of New York City. There were dozens of bars and brothels in the port city where young “toughs” came to drink, brag, swagger, and dance the Milonga. [photo]. Its steps, combined with those of an African dance – the *candomblé* – created the passionate, erotic, and proud tango. When upper class Argentinians traveled to Europe, they took the dance with them to the

ballrooms of Paris. Tango swept the world with sensation and with outrage; depending on one's point of view it was shocking or delightful. [photo]

Born in the brothels of South America, when the tango arrived in America via Paris, it was considered by many the epitome of degradation. Dancers acted out the ritualistic relationship of prostitute and pimp. Quite likely, its low reputation and suggestiveness contributed to its popularity. [photo]. The passionate and provocative tango dramatically used the body with mixed rhythms, quick turns, and movements punctuated with pauses. The steps of Tango were sexual and aggressive, and the typical music played on violin and accordion suggested longing and despair. [photo]

A mix of European, Andalusian-Gaicho, and African influences, as well as the Cuban Habañera del Café and Milonga of Argentina, tango was comprised of more than 100 steps. Today, its modern ballroom rhythm – **slow-slow-quick-quick-slow** – is far more sedate than the passionate and provocative original, which dramatically used mixed rhythms, quick turns, rests, and action steps that were sexual and aggressive. [photo]

In 1914 Pope Pius X banned the Tango for its “barbaric contortions.” Newspapers and magazines ran articles questioning whether this modern form of dancing was “proper.” [photo]. Where 19th century balls had been held in private drawing rooms or in assemblies with the utmost decorum (and chaperones), 20th century ballroom dances, done in public, drew criticism and questions:

- Were these early dances indecent?
- Were they too wild, abandoned, irreverent?
- Would ‘modern’ music corrupt the young?
- Could the dances being done in dance halls result in crime or lack of moral behavior?

The evil influence of dance clubs on young ladies was considered “a straight chute down which...thousands of young girls descend to the way of the prodigal.” [image]

In the United States Vernon and Irene Castle are credited with popularizing the tango, turning it into a standardized, less rebellious version. Between 1911-1918 the Castles set the world on fire, first in Paris as exhibition dancers and then in America. The Castles were the highest paid act in vaudeville, earning \$5,000 a week compared to the average American salary of \$10-\$15/week. They were the first entertainers in over 150 years to wear contemporary clothing rather than costumes. [photo]

The Castles tamed the tango – making it into a less scandalous, more organized dance by simplifying the steps but keeping their sensual quality by cleaning up the ‘seedy’ movements of Tango from its Argentine nightclub origin, refining them and giving them subtlety, elegance, style, and acceptability. The Castles were not only wonderful dancers, they were inventive and graceful. Though moralists thought dancing face to face was vulgar; the Castles’ tasteful style changed Western social

dancing into a form that was intimate, improvisational, and natural but easily copied by ordinary people. [photo]. Vernon & Irene Castle's success resulted from pioneering a new way of dancing – changing foreign Afro-Brazilian improvisation into standardized steps and smoothing out the suggestive moves by replacing them with elegance & emphasizing the upright torso.

In 1914 the Castles traveled by 3-car private train from Boston to Nebraska, giving 35 performances in 24 days to demonstrate the 'new' ballroom dances, including their tamed version of tango. Their manager, six student dancers from their school, their black bandleader James Reese Europe, and 18 black musicians accompanied them.

Prior to World War I American *Tangomania* affected everything from fashion to food. Men's evening dress became more elegant and sleek; dancers wore evening attire and polished shoes. [photo]. The gliding steps and fast sharp turns led to women's dresses with sexy slits to allow freedom of movement. [image]

The tango was responsible for the popularity of tea dances (tango teas) held at restaurants, hotels, and department stores at which unescorted ladies could find a partner with whom to dance -- — another opportunity for moralists to complain. By 1912 when ballroom tango was the rage of the dancing world, even elegant hotels invited their clientele to their "tango teas." In her book *Castles in the Air* Irene Castle wrote, "It was against the law to dance too close to your partner...and bouncers in restaurants tapped their patrons on the shoulder when they got closer than nine inches." Some women prevented intimate body contact with their partners by wearing bumpers on their dresses.

When couples went out for a smart night on the town, they danced in restaurants and tea rooms. Basically, Europe & America were dance-crazy just before World War I. The Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, New York, held tango dinners where patrons could dance between the courses of a meal. Dance halls and cabarets not only hosted dancing but became a symbol of a new freedom for women —_a hotly debated idea.

Clearly, dancers were pushing the boundaries of sexuality and decorum; and the survival of the tango was largely a result of the Castles, who refined the steps and gave them subtlety, elegance, and acceptable style. As a wholesome, "modern," married couple, they were the "proper" model for social dancing and created the image of good taste. [photo]

The outbreak of World War I in 1918 left little time for frivolous pursuits like dancing; and the tango fizzled away, although it did not die out completely. It reappeared as an impressive spectrum of dancing in vaudeville and in Hollywood. Rudolph Valentino re-popularized tango in his 1921 film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. [photo]

Tango Argentino opened in Paris in 1983 and on Broadway in 1986, performed by 30 of Argentina's finest dancers. It celebrated a century of the tango by presenting its history through music, song, and dance. The diversity of the dancers and the simple elegance of tango fascinated audiences who had no concept of Argentine tango before seeing the show. *Tango Argentino* received numerous Tony Award nominations including the 1986 award for the Best Choreography, Best Direction of a Musical, and Best Musical. In 2000 it won the Tony Award for the Best Revival.

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