

The Greatest Maestro of Tango in The World

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In the world-wide community of Argentine tango (an enormous community now on every continent), there are a few maestros that are sought after everywhere. These are people who have studied, danced, and written about tango so extensively that to dance with them means that you'll receive the distilled essence of the form itself — its movement, its history, its soul.

One of these maestros — perhaps THE maestro of all — is Gustavo Naveira.

"So, you see, you can go this way ..." Gustavo points directly ahead over his wife Giselle Anne's right shoulder. "Or ..." He turns to the left and points with the same finger behind him. "... you can go that way."

He smiles, somewhat puckishly.

The students, about fifty of us, gathered recently in a ballroom in a San Francisco hotel, scratched our heads, muttering, some laughing. Although what he and Giselle Anne had just demonstrated was beyond beautiful, the rest of us dancing would more probably look like glum, confused insects struggling over a little crumb of bread.

"This way or that way." Sounded simple. Very difficult to do.



Gustavo Naveira is the greatest teacher of Argentine tango in the world. With his wife Giselle Anne, he displays a complete knowledge of tango movement and the reasons why tango works so marvelously as a dance form. To study with them is to receive an encyclopedic — and very exciting — knowledge of where tango comes from, of its traditions and grand forms, its lore, its music and extraordinary musicality. You don't just do steps, as is so often the case in dance classes, even those taught by other considerable Argentine maestros. Gustavo displays the variations. He asks, "Why do it this way instead of that way?" He changes direction in ways that at first appear impossible. But when he and Giselle Anne do it, it appears altogether natural. And if you and your partner have enough ability, curiosity, emotional intensity, and plain gumption, you'll get it too.

The noted Argentine maestra Nora Dinzelbacher suggested that I go to Buenos Aires with my amor Beatrice Bowles, to participate in one of Gustavo's famous five-day seminars. He will plan a series of classes on a certain genre of tango movement or, in the case of the series we attended, on the musicality of tango itself. Nora and her husband Ed Neale have participated in several of these, and she counseled us that, although this would be one of the most difficult things we would ever do in tango, it would reward us many-fold. New understandings. A more profound way of approaching the music. A view of tango dance movement that would be far more broad and meaningful than anything we had ever seen before.

That turned out to be so.

So when we heard that Nora had subsequently asked Gustavo and Giselle Anne to participate in Nora's Tango Week, a celebration of tango that was in its tenth edition this year, we knew we had to go there too. Now a San Francisco institution, Nora's Tango Week has long been the standard by which such festivals in the United States are measured. She was related by marriage to the famous Dinzel family of tangueros, and so is connected in a very direct way to the scene in Buenos Aires. She personally knows everyone who's anyone in tango in Buenos Aires, which effectively means that she's privy to the highest quality of dancer in the world.

A class from Gustavo and Giselle Anne begins simply enough. He is not a tall man, in his forties with very dark hair, who dresses for the classes simply in a pair of slacks, a sport shirt and shoes. Seeing him walk across the street, you would not suspect that you were watching a volcanic arbiter of great dance and a noted historian of the genre.

Gustavo has been teaching worldwide for many years. Asked in a 2004 interview in the Argentine publication *Pagina 12* why so many people outside of Argentina wanted to study tango, he said "It's a dance that offers you a number of answers to the problems of modern life, because it occasions a solution for easing loneliness — a theme that in Europe has become so important — and because it's a guide to communication that goes far beyond language and culture. Besides that, it allows the person to liberate himself, at least for a moment, from the pressure that The State can exercise over him or her, and it's also a kind of game in which the roles of the couple can be rediscovered once again."

He's done a few turns in the movies as well, most famously as one of Sally Potter's partners in her film *The Tango Lesson*.

A 1999 article in *El Clarín*, one of the two major Buenos Aires dailies, laid out succinctly Gustavo's importance to the development of contemporary tango.

Talking about the innovative styles of dance that were coming at the time from the Buenos Aires neighborhood Villa Urquiza and from the Club Almagro, the article stated, "You could say that three stylistic tendencies contend for supremacy (in Buenos Aires), Urquiza's style, Almagro's style and Naveira's style."



Giselle Anne is a graceful woman of delicate beauty who, when she dances with Gustavo, simply arrests the heart. She studied dance extensively at the University of Buenos Aires and at the Instituto Superior de Danza María Ruanova in that city. She then went on to choreograph and perform around the world.

When she and Gustavo first walk onto the dance floor to address waiting students, those who are unfamiliar with them will not be prepared for what they are about to see ... and to learn. Gustavo will begin with something like, "Well, today we are going to think about 'ganchos'," the widely-known move in which one partner's leg encounters that of the other partner in a kind of hooking motion. It's an invasion by one partner of the other person's space that, when done properly, provides an electrifying moment of conflict, engagement, and resolution. It at first appears, if not impossible, at least rather risky, and to be sure there are simple ganchos as well as very complicated ones.

Gustavo will survey the circle of students, holding his hands out, his shoulders hunched, a questioning look in his eyes. "Now what do you suppose a gancho really is?" he will ask, and therein begins a long, thoughtful, and conscientious discussion and demonstration of a move in tango that defines the very form itself.

He and Giselle Anne will demonstrate the various concepts of the 'gancho' upon which they've based their ideas, and the demonstrations become more and more complicated as the session moves along. What is heart-stopping is the beauty of what they have to show and the organization of thought that Gustavo brings to his teaching. They have ruminated deeply about these moves and interactions, and this is especially clear in the interplay between showing the thing to their students, helping the students do it, and then talking about it. The dance sequence takes just a moment. But the practicing and the talking may take all day, with many, many more illustrations, in which the gancho changes from something we students have seen and maybe can do in some elementary way into a living, breathing personification of the entire history of tango ... and all the possibilities that exist in it for people of ability and adventuresome creativity.

Gustavo leads the way, and Giselle Anne adds to it significantly, especially with her advice to followers. A gancho for a woman is a very different adventure than that for a man, and women need to know how to accept the gancho as well as to initiate their own. Giselle Anne gives the woman's point of view in as considered a way as Gustavo advises the men, and their dancing in demonstration clearly astonishes the people watching.

The overall effect is one of careful consideration of the traditions of tango, and the way in which these traditions fuel new creativity.

With another young maestro named Fabian Salas, Gustavo is credited with having introduced the concept of "nuevo tango" to the world, "new tango". It features a very inventive manner of doing tango, in which dancers will move from a very steady axis of balance to an off-balance mode that requires different thinking than that in so-called "traditional" tango. There are also, famously, changes of direction that seem to defy explanation. All this has accompanied similar changes in tango music, especially since the ascendancy of the great Astor Piazzolla to world prominence. Piazzolla, who died in 1992, turned tango music on its ear by introducing elements to the form that had previously never been used. Counterpoint. Fugue. Extraordinary poly-rhythms. Jazz. The dance has followed a similar pattern, mostly because of Gustavo, who indeed recently choreographed, directed and starred in *Fracanapa*, a dance spectacle based on the music of Piazzolla.

Interestingly, when he speaks of this, he talks about how he learned of all these "revolutionary" moves by watching old-style tangueros in the 'milongas' (dance-hall parties) and 'boliches' (little neighborhood clubs) of Buenos Aires. In a 2001 interview, Fabian Salas asked "What did we invent? Nothing. Yes, we came up with . . . 'boleos' and 'ganchos' like this, but everything was already there. Even what in the beginning we called 'alterations' and then, later, 'changes in direction'. But we didn't invent them. They were there."

What they brought to the process was a way of explaining what the milongueros had been doing for years. Of course there was significant creativity on the part of Gustavo and Fabian themselves, inventive re-workings of the movements. But their respect for the older milonguero tradition is obvious and very plainly stated by Gustavo himself.

This causes some unintended comedy when you encounter the breed of nuevo tango practitioners in the United States and Europe who believe they are teaching some variation of the things Gustavo and Fabian developed in the dance. But they do it without the basis in traditional tango that Gustavo and Fabian feel is so important. This results in hilarious combinations of missteps, bumbings, and foolishness that have little to do with tango. It's a new kind of dance that is athletic but not sensuous, excited but not thoughtful, self-congratulatory but not tango. Dull.

Just after World War I, Vernon and Irene Castle developed a dance that they somehow thought was based on Argentine tango. They were fearful of the more sensual dangers of real tango, and attempted to clean it up, to make it more palatable to the church-going puritan consciousness of young couples dancing in the United States at the time who did not wish to upset their parents. That dance became the American ballroom tango that we must now all suffer through when watching the dance contest shows so popular on television. The nuevo tango that is being taught in the United States reminds me of the Castles. It demonstrates the same problems that their tango had, one of which was that there was no sensuousness in it.

A very well-known Argentine maestro who has taught extensively in this country once said to me, "Terry, you know that in the United States, with the Americans, there are beginning students, intermediate students, and teachers." It's quite true. People not very capable of dancing tango at all take on for themselves the mantle of tango expertise — without knowing much about Argentina or, more particularly, Buenos Aires. They know nothing of the history of that country, history all-important to understanding what tango is. They are not aware of the swollen tide of immigration over three centuries — to Argentina from everywhere else in the world — a movement



essential to the development of tango music. They know almost nothing about the music itself beyond the tape loop of the few dozen numbers that they play ad infinitum at almost every tango event you attend. They have not taken the trouble to learn how to speak or read Spanish, so that, among other very important things, the entire vast literature of tango lyrics is lost on them. They hold festivals at which tango is taught by ... well, each other! They infer that their "organic" tango or their "alternative" tango has become the real tango. They collect money from a gulled public, while in the meantime the great Argentine maestros, old and new, traditional and revolutionary, are teaching, dancing and creating in Buenos Aires — and, if you're lucky, elsewhere in the world — basically unacknowledged by these intermediate Americans.

They would do well to study with Gustavo Naveira and Giselle Anne. They would learn something ... something very profound, very tango, and very revolutionary.

Photos: Jerry Jew