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### Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."



Gloria and Eduardo Arquimbau dancing tango. Courtesy of ToTANGO. <http://totango.net/eduardo.html>.

# BUENOS AIRES TO CHICAGO:

## A Conversation with Argentine Tango Masters Gloria and Eduardo Arquimbau

Interviewed by Sonia and José Soltero  
DePaul University

Several historical versions about the origins of the word *tango*, as well as *tango* as a form of dance, have been the object of debate for aficionados. According to Hoss de le Comte (2003),

*Tango is a word of African origin. In some African dialects the word means closed meeting place. At the end of the eighteenth century, the slaves called tango the place where they met to make music and dance...*

*It has also been said that the word tan~go imitates the beat of percussion instruments, used to mark the rhythm of a dance called candombe.*

Others argue that the tango evolved from the word *candombe* to *cando* and then to *tango*, the place to dance *candombe*. Hoss de le Comte (2003) explains that tango as a dance is the product of different dancing forms that came together around 1870 in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. Among these dances are the Cuban *habanera*, the gauchos' (Argentine vaqueros, or cowboys) *payadas* (later called *milongas* in the Buenos Aires' suburbs), the Spanish Andalusian *flamenco*, and the African slaves' *candombe*. Following its multicultural origins, tango became a dance adopted by the numerous immigrants to Argentina at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. With tango, the immigrants obtained a vehicle to express their melancholy, nostalgia, and hope in the new country.

Gloria and Eduardo Arquimbau are two of the most accomplished tango dancers in the world. Their impressive curriculum goes back to 1960 in Buenos Aires, the place of their debut at the Cine Opera Theater and the Astral Theater, celebrating the return of the master tango musician Francisco Canaro. They were instrumental in bringing back tango to Argentina by performing live and choreographing at Buenos

Aires' television stations in 1962 and 1963 as well as in numerous Argentine theatres. In the 1970s they performed in the Latin American broadcasted TV program "Siempre en Domingo," which transmitted from Mexico City, took their tango performances to international levels to the US, Japan, Venezuela, Colombia, and the Soviet Union. In addition, they performed and choreographed with the famous tango dance troupes "Tango Argentino" and "Forever Tango" during the 1980s and 1990s.

Gloria and Eduardo's contributions to tango include a series of instructional videos, which have been translated to nine languages. But despite their masterful skill, it is a pleasure for all tango dancers, beginners or advanced, to attend their teaching sessions when they continuously travel the world showing their art. It was during one of their trips to Chicago in the summer of 2004 that we had the opportunity to study tango and interview them. In what follows, we present some excerpts from that interview (Center for Latino Research, 2005):

**Sonia & José:** *When did you start dancing tango?*

**Eduardo:** I started dancing when I was 13 years old. I was dancing in shows as a performer. However, I did not dance tango professionally yet, because nobody was interested in tango at the time. Nevertheless, I was dancing tango on my own. In the case of Gloria, it was different because her father was a tango dancer and instructor.

**Gloria:** I was 9 years old when I started dancing tango.

**S & J:** *Did you dance together since the beginning?*

**E:** No, it was in 1959 when I started dancing tango with a friend. He and I decided to form a tango troupe to perform at the only TV channel in Buenos Aires at the time, and we invited Gloria to join us.

**G:** I was 9 years old at the time, but I already had some experience performing different dances.

**E:** We were selected to dance as a couple at the Opera Theatre with the famous tango orchestra director Francisco Canaro. Afterwards, Canaro hired us to dance in the musicals that he directed at the Astral Theatre. After that we toured Japan and continued dancing with Canaro's group during the following years until his death in 1964.

**S & J:** *Did you learn tango from your parents?*

**E:** Although my father was a tango dancer, I was too young when he used to dance. My mother was from Spain and did not dance. But we could say that I had the tango in my blood.

**G:** We grew up in a suburb of Buenos Aires where tango was very popular. It also helped that we were neighbors and my family knew Eduardo's family. Eduardo and my brother were friends.

**E:** Yes. There were many immigrant families and we used to dance tango everywhere, even on the street. At the time, our neighborhood, called *Parque Patricio*, also known as *Corrales*, was a suburb of Buenos Aires, but nowadays it is part of the downtown area of the city. The name "*Corrales*" comes from being the area where cattle used to come in to the city. That area was the location of the meat packing industry at the time.

**S & J:** *Did tango begin in that area of Buenos Aires?*

**E:** Yes, that was one of the suburban areas where tango started. Between 1880 and 1900 *Corrales* was an immigrant neighborhood. It was filled with immigrants doing all sorts of menial jobs, including playing musical instruments on the street, street salespeople, meat packing, and others. There were many gambling places and bars where the workers used to dance tango, *habanera*, and other rhythms. Therefore, it was easier to communicate by way of dancing than talking... You see, dancing is a form of communication with our bodies.

**S & J:** *When did tango start to be danced in the downtown area of Buenos Aires?*

**E:** Well, at the time people used to spend two hours walking from the suburb to the downtown area of the city. Now, we only spend ten minutes driving. But back then people used to remain in their neighborhoods most of the time. They were born there and then they would live and die in their neighborhood; very rarely they would travel to other places, including the downtown area. Thus, it was until tango became popular around the world, especially in Europe and the United States, that middle class people in downtown Buenos Aires began to be interested in it.

Although social class interaction was very limited at the time, during carnivals those social restrictions were more flexible and the working class people from the suburbs were admitted in

the middle and upper class salons without an invitation. There, the middle and upper classes had the opportunity to watch the tango dancers and experience the dance that was so popular in Europe and the US.

That started a new trend in Buenos Aires and many *Academias* (former theatres or dance studios) started playing and teaching tango around 1910. However, the tango that was taught there was different from the one being danced by the people in the barrios.



Courtesy of Gloria y Eduardo Tango Argentino.  
[www.gloriayeduardotangoargentino.com](http://www.gloriayeduardotangoargentino.com)

**S & J:** *How different were those two types of tango?*

**E:** The tango danced and taught initially at the *Academias* was more socially acceptable for the middle class, more "respectable." It was the kind of tango that one could dance with one's sister. It was less sensual. In exchange, the *Academias* also polished the tango technically; it became more sophisticated as a dance.

**G:** That was the situation during the time that my father became a dancer in the 1930s.

**G & E:** In the 1930s and 1940s the tango incorporated more figures and became more agile.

**E:** In the early 1900s tango had a strong Spanish influence; then, in 1910 the piano and the bass were added to tango as substitutes for the guitar and the *bandoneon* appeared in tango. This was possible because then tango was played at salons, not only on the streets. Then in the 1920s tango became very influenced by the Italians. Both the Italians and the new instruments slowed the tango.

It was in the 1930s that orchestras, such as Juan Darienzo's, went back to the origins of tango and began to play a more agile, dynamic rhythm. This made tango more fun to dance and more popular.

By the 1940s, the golden era of tango, tango was danced everywhere: at the barrio clubs (sport clubs that included soccer, basketball and other sports), patios, *Academias*, and salons. It was difficult to choose a place to go dancing tango because there were many good places with excellent orchestras. In addition, all social classes were dancing tango and there were no differences regarding the sensuality involved in the way they danced across classes.

It is interesting to observe that by this time, the *Academias* had changed significantly. Now *Academias* had professional female dancers. Men would show up at the *Academias* between 5 and 11 PM to buy tickets ("fichas") to give to the women in exchange for dancing a song with them. Of course, *Academias* ceased to be family places and the work of "fichera," or female professional tango dancer was not considered "respectable." Additionally, in the 1940s there were many cabarets in Buenos Aires that showcased the best tango orchestras, such as the "Marabu," the "Chantecler," etc. These places were popular among wealthy people in Buenos Aires.

Rich people would attend the racetrack in the evening and then go to the cabarets afterward. Sometimes factory workers

would go to listen to the good, famous singers and musicians at the cabarets as well.

**G:** Yes, but despite the more open, flexible atmosphere, everything related to tango was not considered “decent.”

**S & J:** *Was the success of tango during the 1940s related to the Peronist regime?*

**E:** Yes, Peron’s times contemplated a rising nationalism and favored Argentine folklore. This situation was very positive for tango.

**S & J:** *When and why did tango begin to decline in Argentina?*

**E:** The process of decline started in the mid 1950s and lasted throughout the 1960s. It was essentially due to the opening of the country to foreign economic interests and the commercialism related to the new imported goods. This took the young people away from tango.

**S & J:** *Did tango have to compete with other musical forms such as rock, jazz, etc.?*

**E:** No, the tango “milongas” (tango dance parties) included jazz, waltz, tropical music –now called “salsa”—and even rock. We used to dance all that in addition to tango, although most of time was spent dancing tango and “milonga” (a faster paced Argentine music previous to tango). What really affected tango was the “marketing” of the new forms of music and dance to the Argentine youth.

The new “disco” places excluded tango, milonga, waltz, and candombe altogether. In addition, they saved money by using pre-recorded music instead of hiring live musicians, and allowed younger people –the age limit to be admitted to “disco” places was reduced from 18 years old to 14. Furthermore, the commercialization of the new cultural forms made tango and other Argentine rhythms appear “old,” outdated. People dancing tango were perceived as “viejos” (old folks).



Courtesy of Gloria y Eduardo Tango Argentino.  
[www.gloriayeduardotangoargentino.com](http://www.gloriayeduardotangoargentino.com)

Naturally, this situation made life very difficult for tango musicians. Fortunately, in the middle 1960s and in the 1970s there was a generational change that favored tango and other Argentine cultural forms. We are part of this generational revival of tango that culminated in the 1980s when we started teaching tango and created and danced with “Tango Argentino.”

**S & J:** *What did help the revival of tango in the 1980s?*

**G & E:** Tango became very popular in Europe and Japan thanks in part to the tango performances that our generation executed there. Then many Europeans and Asians started coming to Argentina looking for tango lessons. In turn, this created a new interest in tango among the new Argentine generation, in part because it opened new job opportunities as tango dancing instructors and performers. Although we had been performing continuously since the late 1950s, we started teaching in the 1980s.

**S & J:** *Did the military dictatorships of the 1970s affect tango?*

**G & E:** No, by that time nothing could stop tango anymore. If there was a curfew, people would come to a milonga early, they would close the place throughout the night, would dance the whole night, and would leave the next morning.

We had to stop our interview at this time to let Gloria and Eduardo teach their tango lesson, despite the huge interest that her commentaries elicited among the students showing up for class.

Thanks to Gloria and Eduardo Arquimbau’s yearly trips to Chicago, among other American cities, tango dancers in Chicago have received strong impetus and motivation to continue improving their skill. These days in Chicago there are several milongas one could attend throughout the week and numerous tango instructors and dancers, no doubt all of them influenced by Gloria and Eduardo’s pedagogical ideas on the ways of teaching tango and their enthusiasm for this Argentine art form.

To see more on Gloria and Eduardo’s vita, class schedule, and photo gallery, visit their website: [www.gloriayeduardotangoargentino.com](http://www.gloriayeduardotangoargentino.com). For information on tango instructors and milongas in Chicago, visit the website [www.tangoinchicago.com](http://www.tangoinchicago.com). Gloria and Eduardo will tour Chicago during the summer to teach and perform.

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