
ARGENTINE TANGO ETIQUETTE AND TECHNIQUES

Most experienced dancers are familiar with the following text, but reminding them of what they already know will not harm them. This guide is especially directed at beginners and those who dance in a Milonga for the very first time.

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1. GENERAL MILONGA ETIQUETTE:

Argentine Tango is an intimate and elegant dance. In order to enjoy it and be popular at the Milonga (Tango dancing club), you should be kind, unselfish and show respect to the other dancers.

On the dance floor

a) Responsible usage of the floor space requires that one should stay out of the way of other couples and realise that the dance floor is shared by all dancers. You should respect the other dancers space and create a relationship with your partner by being considerate and friendly. Move anti-clockwise around the outside of the dance floor, known as the "fast lane". The slower lanes are towards the centre. Experienced dancers dance on the outer "fast lanes" and inexperienced ones should dance within the inner lanes, close to the centre. While you are dancing, refrain from cutting across these lanes and maintain a continuous flowing movement, always moving forwards with the line of dance especially on a crowded dance floor. Avoid dancing stationary figures and blocking the other couples progress.

b). If you are not dancing yourself, show respect for those who are by keeping clear of the dance floor. Avoid standing and talking on the dance floor.

c). If you wish to show your partner a new step, it is better to move to a distant corner, away from the line of dance , where you can demonstrate the new step without disturbing the other dancers.

d). Avoid collisions with other dancers by looking where you are going and by being alert to their presence and movement. Concentrate on moving forward ("caminar al frente") and use steps and figures which will help to achieve that.

e). Do not do figures and embellishments which can be dangerous to the safety of the other couples dancing close to you, eg: high sacadas, boleos, ganchos, backward kicks and flips. Use low sacadas and low boleos and keep feet close to the floor.

If you accidentally collide with another couple, be polite and friendly and apologise with a smile, even if it was not your fault.

2. DANCERS ETIQUETTE AND TECHNIQUES

a) Posture

Before you start dancing, make sure that both you and your partner have your axis of balance placed in front of your body over the balls of the feet. Choose closeness of embrace (close or open embrace), incline forward from the ankles, flex your knees and hold your partner tightly. Listen to the

music, communicate with your partner's body and enter the dance floor carefully, moving forwards and looking for space, not forgetting to follow the line of dance.

b). Leaders Technique

Lead with conviction. Your lead must be clear to your partner, not ambiguous. She cannot read your mind when you lead her, but she can feel your body leading her. Place your arm firmly around her body at the height of her armpit, with the forearm parallel to the floor and gently support her left arm. The inner side of your elbow should gently touch the side of her body.

Your left arm should be joining the right hand of your partner at shoulder height, at a space equidistant to them. Your left hand palm should face the left hand side of your face at the height of your mouth and your arm should be firmly connected with the left side of your body (the breast plate.) Lean forwards on the balls of your feet and have your knees flexed not locked. Lead with the shoulders when you direct your partner to giros (turns) and with your body when leading her forward. Remember to mark her back clearly when leading her to ochos, not forgetting to use your shoulders.

Always be gentle when you are leading and try to create a relationship with your partner's body as well as with the music. Dancing in time to the music is paramount for every type of dance and especially whilst dancing Tango. When dancing, use pauses, they create a dramatic effect in Tango interpretation, but when you start again, remember to enter within the beat of the music.

c). Followers Technique

Firstly I will highlight the most common mistakes I have noticed with followers, all of them very annoying when you dance:-

- (i) Out of the axis of balance. (Falling forward on one's partner or backwards, dragging him away.)
- (ii) Right arm lifeless, collapsing when you exercise the slightest pressure or inflexible at the elbow and wrist, and pushing too hard.
- (iii) Back leading. (Falling backwards with head and back and not extending legs enough when dancing backwards.)
- (iv) Anticipating the leaders next step, and moving wrongly in most cases.
- (v) The most annoying of all is racing with their partner, instead of following.

There is a simple answer to correct all these mistakes and the answer is:-

a). Find your axis of balance. While you are standing with your feet close together, lean forward and transfer your weight onto the balls of your feet, making sure that your whole body as seen from the side is in a straight line, ie: your head (facing at eye level), your back, spine, bottom, legs and your ankles are in a straight line. Your axis of balance is a vertical line starting from the middle of your head and ending at your forefeet. During the whole period of your dance you should maintain this axis making sure that you are not putting any weight on your partner's body or to his left arm except for a light pressure on his palm.

b). Have a flexible right arm but with life in it. When your partner puts pressure on your right arm, do not collapse your arm, but resist slightly and give way in a springy manner like the footbrake of a car. Your arm should be flexible and relaxed at your wrist and elbow.

c). When you are led backwards, keep your body weight forward and stretch your leg back with your toes being the first part of your foot to touch the floor. Then the whole foot will take your weight and

you will repeat the same procedure as you alternate legs. While you retreat backwards, make sure that the closeness of your embrace remains the same and that you exercise a gentle forward pressure on his body to neutralise the force developing against your body as he leads you backwards.

d). Do not anticipate his next move, but wait for your partner to lead you there even if you were right as to where he was leading you. It is nicer to follow your partner at a slower speed than his, so that you are always certain where he leads you and avoid unnecessary mistakes.

e). Do not move faster than your partner because then you lead him and you cease being the follower. Following correctly is a very important technique in Tango. By following correctly you achieve complete harmony in movement with your partner and the resulting feeling is sensational. The best Tango dancer will look a poor dancer if his partner cannot follow properly. Remember Tango is a 50/50 partnership between leader and follower.

Summary:

1. Lean forward and have a proper axis of balance, positioning your body opposite to your partner's
2. Offer an outstretched and flexible right arm with slight pressure on the palm of his hand
3. Embrace your partner with your left arm without putting any weight on him
4. Keep your feet about 6 inches away from his feet and have your knees flexed
5. Follow his lead without anticipating his next move
6. Following means following not leading
7. When moving backwards, keep your weight forward and stretch your legs backwards
8. Your chest should always be kept parallel to his chest when you dance and not at an angle
9. When doing ochos, your legs should be touching each other tightly from thigh to ankle
10. Make sure your tummy is held in and that your head, neck, back, spine, bottom, legs and ankles form a straight line when seen from the side (profile view)

3. ON THE DANCE FLOOR

- a). Follow the line of dance and prepare to move forwards.
- b). If the couple in front of you block your way, dance around them or use a rocking step like the cradle (la cunita) and continue dancing until they move away from your path.
- c). Followers must not back lead. This is unpleasant for your partner, and makes it more difficult for him to prevent a collision with other couples behind you, since you are dragging him off-balance when you open the embrace position and throw your body backwards instead of forwards.
- d). Followers, tap your partner's back gently to forewarn him in case he is heading for a collision.
- e). Experienced dancers, be patient, polite and understanding with beginners. Remember the time you were a beginner yourself. If you are asked to give your advice, give it with friendliness. Don't be harsh and critical if they make a mistake. Ask permission to make a suggestion or "comment", always remembering that an insensitive but well intentioned comment can still ruin someone's evening.
- f). When entering the dance floor, exercise caution so that you don't disturb the already dancing couples by cutting across their path. It is the responsibility of the incoming couples to stay out of the way of the couples already dancing. Look opposite the line of dance to prevent blocking someone's way or causing a collision.
- g). Have fun and enjoy your dance since that's the main point of dancing.

4. PARTNERS INTER-RELATIONSHIP

a). Be charming and polite to your partner.

b). If you are the more experienced dancer of the two, try to dance at the "level of your partner", always complementing your partner and ignoring any missed or badly executed figures or mistakes she or he has made.

c). Regardless of who is at fault, when a mishap occurs, be polite, smile and accept the blame even if it was not your fault, and carry on dancing as if nothing has happened.

d). When dancing with a new partner, start with simple figures and then gradually progress to more complicated ones, always being sensitive to your partner's ability to follow you. Make your dance partner comfortable with you. Don't make him or her anxious and intimidated.

e). Concentrate on your partner and the music, and dance with feeling. Don't get absorbed by your own thoughts or by the complexity of the figures you are planning to do. Remember when dancing Tango the relationship with your partner and the music is vital.

f). It is appropriate to dance a series of 3 - 4 dances (tanda) with your partner and, when the music ends, lead her back to her seat and thank her for the dance, complimenting each other for the enjoyable time you had. Never dump your partner in the middle of the dance floor, or after only one dance. It is not polite.

5. ASKING FOR A DANCE

Be pleasant and personable, smile and make eye contact or nod your head before asking your partner to dance. If your offer has been accepted, approach the lady you have asked, offer her your hand and lead her to the dance floor. If your intended partner is standing close to you, you may ask her for a dance using the traditional opening phrases: "May I have this dance?", "Shall we dance?", "Would you like to dance?" Nowadays it is acceptable for a lady to ask a man to dance. So ladies, don't be shy. You have a choice after all!

6. DECLINING A DANCE OR BEING DECLINED

It is natural for people to have preferences for whom they wish to dance with. That is normal. But when we decline an invitation for a dance we must be sensitive, and careful not to hurt the feelings of the other person, particularly with beginners or shy persons. If you decide to decline a dance, better use one of the following excuses: (i) You need a rest, or (ii) You have already promised this dance to someone else.

If the person who has asked you to dance has been unpleasant to you and inconsiderate in previous dances, then simply say "no thank you".

If you have been declined a dance, smile, excuse yourself and retire. Don't take it personally and get discouraged. Ask someone else. You will be surprised to find that others will be delighted to dance with you.

7. PERSONAL GROOMING

Because Argentine Tango is an intimate and very closely danced dance, good personal hygiene is essential. Before going to lessons or dancing:-

1. Have a shower, wash your hair and use a light perfume or deoderant.
2. Brush teeth and use breath freshners frequently and if you choose to chew gum, do so discreetly.
3. During dancing avoid talking and concentrate on the dance.
4. Don't overuse aftershave or heavy perfumes.

5. Always carry paper towels with you, to wipe your face if you perspire heavily and, at intervals, you can wash your face in the bathroom.
6. When you go to lessons or Milongas, avoid jeans, sweat shirts, trainers and tennis shoes.
7. Ladies, wear tango or similar high heeled shoes and a nice dress, and gentlemen wear shoes with leather soles.

Tango is an elegant dance, so remember to dress smartly!

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