
Sara Grdan and Ivan Terrazas

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A. Both of you have strong dance and artistic backgrounds. How did you come to choose tango?

S&I. We actually have quite different paths to tango. Ivan began dancing in Argentina at an early age, and by 12 was working in a dance company. His primary training was in Argentine folklore, but as a part of the company training he also did some classical technique. Tango was in the company repertoire, but in a very limited and very stylized way... It was not until Ivan came to New York in 2001 in search of a dance career, and started going to milongas (primarily as a way to connect with the Argentine community here) that he began to experience tango as a social dance. Sara, with a background in modern and ballet, on the other hand, began going to milongas with a friend whose father was a tango enthusiast in Los Angeles in 1998, and quickly got drawn into the music (something in tango music pulls strongly on the Slavic soul!) and the scene. She became a more consistent fixture on the scene when she moved to New York City in 2003. We met in the fall of 2003 - Ivan at that time was dancing in Eddie Torres' mambo company, and Sara was in law school at Columbia - at the South Street Seaport milonga (back when it was free), and we have been together ever since.

A. What was your profession before you became a professional tango dancer ?

S&I. Ivan was always a professional dancer, although like every hotblooded young Argentine boy he also had dreams of becoming a professional soccer player... Luckily he stuck to dance! Sara was in law school when she met Ivan, so for about 3 years had two fulltime jobs (teaching/performing and working in a corporate law firm), and no sleep. Both of us have strong teaching backgrounds - Ivan started teaching movement at the age of 14, mainly malambo, argentine folklore and soccer; Sara started teaching tennis and skiing at 14, and was tutoring in history and math during high school and college - so we feel extremely comfortable in a teaching environment.

A. You have trained with world famous tango maestros such as Diego Di Falco, Pablo Pugliese, Jorge Torres, Gustavo Naveira, and others. Which of those maestros have influenced you most in your tango development ?

We are grateful to all of our teachers for all the knowledge and experience they shared with us, but we feel especially fortunate for the order in which they came into our lives. Our first teacher was Diego Di Falco, with whom we trained for more than two years about two hours per week. Diego is also, in a way, responsible for us dancing together - he encouraged us to form a partnership, was our relationship counselor, coach, friend,

and with Carolina (Zokalski) became a part of our family here in New York. Once we got a bit better, they invited us to join their company, and we still work with them to this day. From Diego, Ivan learned the essential and most important skill set any leader can have (and few possess) - the ability to lead, with precision, any movement imaginable. Pablo Pugliese was our second teacher and we studied intensively with him for almost two years. Pablo was very difficult to get in touch with initially - we were trying to get him to give us classes for something like two months before he actually gave us an appointment! Pablo helped us find our axis and our turns, and learning with him was a little bit like going to school. He had a clear program for each class, and his emphasis on geometry helped us understand the structure of the dance in an more orderly way. Jorge Torres was a constant presence, from the beginning, as a friend and counselor, and a trusted eye for any choreography we were working on. His understanding of energy, effect, and choreographic structure helped us improve as a dance partnership and as performers.

Our remaining teachers/inspirations, such as Gustavo Naveira (with whom we took the General and the Musicality courses), Guillermina Quiroga, Natalia Hills, Roberto Herrera, and others, helped us understand/fill in any gaps we had in the foundation we had already laid down, and provided us with interesting viewpoints and ways to think about and conceptualize tango.

Of course, it is not sufficient to merely take classes in order to learn. We prepared for an average of two hours before each class, and then spent 45 hours after each class dissecting the information, organizing it, trying to make connections to other things we had already learned and trying to apply the ideas/corrections to other movement. We were completely obsessed and very analytical, and even argued late into the night in order to completely understand the point or idea our teachers were trying to convey. All this in addition to our regular practice time!

A. You teach traditional tango, you perform stage tango, you dance YOUR tango. How would you describe your own style?

S&I. We like to think that we teach and perform traditional tango, but with a modern technique. Our internal work (meaning the mechanics of the lead and follow that we feel, but are invisible to the outside) has already been set for a while now and it is characterized by energy, precision, dynamic, speed, comfort and constant changes in density, and all that without any force (we do not use our arms to push and pull each other around). Our style, from the visual and aesthetic viewpoint, is still developing - we can easily imitate any style, and we are still working to more strongly define our own style.

Nevertheless, following one of our performances a person once noted that it was paradoxical how, with all the emphasis on clear and precise leading, both of us, and not just Ivan, come through so strongly in our dance. For us, there is no paradox - a clear and precise lead conveys to the follower exactly where she is going and which timing is being asked of her. With the knowledge of 'where' and 'how much time', it is much easier for an active and engaged follower to embellish the movement, insinuate a desire to change the timing or the direction, and to interpret than when that information is not available to her.

A. As instructors, you have developed an approach to teaching called "feraltango laboratory method". What are some of the highlights and primary goals of your method?

S&I. We have three main goals as teachers, which we try to achieve simultaneously with our students. First is to help our students understand and feel in their bodies the proper body mechanic necessary to accomplish movement. In this sense, we feel that we teach people how to move, and not necessarily how to dance tango (since if you can do the first, you should have little trouble with the second). Second, is to teach them how to lead/follow anything without using force or physically moving the follower around. We do not believe in

conventions (for example the follower has to know when to hold on to the leader's arm, or do a boleo when the leader simply moves around her in a side step, etc.) because 1. conventions eliminate the constant dialogue between the leader and the follower which provides richness of the dance, 2. conventions prevent people from dancing with others who are not in their class or in their clique, and 3. conventions make the movement feel and look more mechanical, exerciselike by removing the need of both partners to pay attention to each other and to feel each other's bodies. If you cannot truly embrace and feel your partner, then what is the point? Third of all, we teach our students to understand tango as a whole, closed system of movement and geometry relationships where there are NO EXCEPTIONS to general principles (a Unified Theory of Tango). Our technique developed principally through immersion in two different ways of moving, leading and following (Diego's and Pablo's) and the resulting search for commonalities, rather than differences that underly the ways in which different people explain and express the lead and follow. We realized that reinventing the wheel for each movement was counterproductive and unnecessary, because all movement follows lines of principle within the relatively narrow parameters of the dance (embrace, two bodies, four legs). We teach our students to understand and analyze the principles behind the movement i.e. how a back step is really the same as a back ocho, sacada, boleo, enganche, gancho, etc., so that in two years they no longer need to ask us questions about mechanics and geometries, and that we can move on with them to dynamics, interpretation, expression. The whole point of having good mechanics, understanding geometry, being technical, is so that the dance itself does not get in the way of, or become an impediment to, the connection we seek when we dance. We don't see any reason to be technical solely for technique's sake - good technique is only a means to an end, a great connection.

A. I understand that Feraltango laboratory classes are designed for experienced students. What are the prerequisites to take these classes? What do you emphasize most during the classes?

S&I. The Feraltango Laboratory courses are actually designed for students of all levels, though it is true that we generally have a proportionally bigger number of advanced dancers in our classes. This is the case for several reasons: first of all, we are independent teachers and advertise only by word of mouth - so you already have to be a member of the tango community for some time before you even know our classes exist. Secondly, most people come to us after they have been dancing for three to four years and can no longer improve, or are unable to execute well some more complicated/exciting things. It is only after they have hit that wall that people are willing to put in the kind of time and effort our classes demand and good results require (which is something a beginner lacking such experience might not quite be willing to do). Third of all, while we welcome anyone interested in learning and willing to work hard to improve their dance, our classes are not for everyone. We maintain a working environment in our classes, require people to practice, and do homework, and to come prepared for the class each time. We do a lot of exercises, and we do not teach steps except as a way to illustrate a principle, or for review. So, if your idea of going to class is solely to socialize and meet people, and learn a few steps, our classes are probably not a good fit for you.

But, to answer your question more directly, we have had professionals and beginners in the same class before, with excellent results all around. We believe that this is due to the fact we emphasize quality of movement, elements, and principles in our classes as opposed to steps, so everyone in the class works to the best of their present ability...

A. Sara, you became a Gyrotonic Expansion System instructor. Are the Gyrotonic exercises useful in improving posture, balance, mobility, etc.. in tango?

S&I. I came to Gyrotonic independently of tango. Gyrotonic has changed my life in physical and other ways (how I breathe, think, observe, reflect and react), and in turn, has changed how I dance. I experienced improvement in mobility (i.e flexibility, coordination, strength and alignment), and increased my understanding

and awareness of the movement of my own body and human bodies in general. The ease with which I move today is in large part due to the fact that I have been practicing Gyrotonic since 2003, and I do not think I would understand myself or tango (structurally and energetically) if I did not have the Gyrotonic Expansion System background. I really recommend this system to anyone, whether tangoobsessed or not!

A. You are among the youngest and most recognized teachers and performers in the US. Do you travel abroad to teach and perform?

S&I. At this point we have traveled in Canada and a little bit in Europe. However, we are moving to Argentina at the end of November for about a year or so, and then we plan on going to live in Europe for a while. In New York we were fortunate to have the experience of building up classes locally (we have 5 Feraltango Lab classes and a dropin musicality class running at capacity), and now we are looking forward to traveling and performing more, maybe working more at festivals, etc.

A. Having experienced teaching and performing at tango festivals in cities around the U.S., what in your opinion are the strengths and weaknesses of NY's tango community as compared to other cities?

S&I. At its best, the New York Tango community can be vibrant, exciting, united, joyful, expansive and fun. At its worst, it can be cliquey, petty, arrogant, closed, nepotistic, patronizing and depressing.

A. What advice would you give to a person new to tango as to how to proceed toward becoming a tanguero?

S&I. Find a community that nurtures you and a teacher that inspires you. Enjoy the embrace, hum along to the music, and never stop learning.

A. Tango is...

Ivan: My job and a way to express myself.

Sara: The inspiration worth all the perspiration!

A. Thank you so much for sharing your tango story with us

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