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Tango Nuevo



Synopsis

“Required reading for anyone who understands the electrifying power that dance has to transform a life. Exceptionally well written. . . . [Merritt’s] lively, engaging writing style is unique—it can go from side-splittingly funny to poignant in the time it takes to execute a boleo.” —Melissa A. Fitch, author of *Side Dishes: Latina American Women, Sex, and Cultural Production*

The Argentine tango is one of the world’s best-known partner dances. Though tango is much admired and discussed, very little has been written about its ongoing evolution. While the dance is steeped in history, the younger generation has begun to push tango into new and provocative realms. In the most cutting-edge performances, men and women switch the roles of leader and follower; ideas from swing, salsa, and blues are freely incorporated; and dress has become anything but traditional. While some may refer to this as tango nuevo, the term has been met with much resistance. In this innovative work, Carolyn Merritt surveys tango history while focusing on the most recent iteration of the dance and the *práctica* scene that has exploded in Buenos Aires since the early 2000s. She examines this growing, thriving community of young and eager dancers who are pushing the tango beyond its traditional limits, along with the spaces they’ve created within which to dance, socialize, and experiment in ways more befitting their ages, desires, schedules, and attitudes. After starting with an overview of tango, Merritt leads readers through the traditional dance halls and the less formal *prácticas* of Buenos Aires to tango communities on both coasts of the United States. Along the way, her personal observations show the dance’s emotional depth and the challenges dancers face in tango venues old and new. Merritt’s investigation also demonstrates how innovation, globalization, and fusion, which many associate with nuevo, have always been at work in tango. Combining sensuous prose, provocative images, and heart-wrenching stories, Merritt presents an unflinching look at the complex motivations driving the pursuit to master this intricate dance. Throughout, she questions the “newness” of nuevo through portraits of machismo, violence, and elitism in contemporary tango. The result is a book that highlights the tensions between preservation and evolution of this—or any—cultural art form. Carolyn Merritt lives in Philadelphia, where she teaches anthropology and performance studies and works with the ThINKing Dance project.

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Customer Reviews

Carolyn Merritt's fascinating account of her experiences with "Nuevo Tango" dancing in Buenos Aires and beyond provide the tango aficionado with insight and information available nowhere else. This very satisfying book offers the reader both a chronicle of her personal tango obsession, and a seminal anthropological account of cultural evolution in this South American social dance form. Drawn from her time dancing tango in Buenos Aires beginning just after the infamous deadly Cromagnon fire, whose bureaucratic aftermath shut down all the normal tango milonga venues, her lived experience of the birth of the alternative "practica" scene brings to light some absolutely fascinating details, like the tango dancers blocking the streets in protest when one of their alternative venues was raided by the police. Especially gratifying for me was her extensive treatment of the roles played in this evolutionary pageant by Gustavo Naveira and Luciana Valle. I've been fortunate to work extensively with both of them, and while Gustavo is the better-known, it is very satisfying indeed to see Luciana receive some long-overdue acknowledgement for the role she and her partners played in resuscitating the practica scene through their El Motivo practica at Villa Malcolm, which got its start a few months before the Cromagnon fire. Luciana's deep experience in the events described here, covering significant milestones in Buenos Aires tango within the last two decades, provides some rewarding balance in what is often largely a narrative dictated by men.

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