

If you are new to tango, you will find that tango is not like any other dance, and one of the reasons it is so unique is that it has its own culture. Tango's culture developed an "**etiquette**" to protect the dance experience from those who would ruin it -- those who hurt others on the dance floor, those who demand dances or pester others. Many do not like Rules and Laws. So let me introduce you to "Etiquette" the little sister of her bigger brothers, "Rules" and "Laws." Get to know Etiquette, she will make sure you dance more with the people you want. If you leave her at home, I promise you are sure to ruin not only your fun *but ours too*.

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## Chapter One: Preparation for the milonga.



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**What to Wear:** Dress to impress. Dress to be as sophisticated as the music is and how the opposite sex dresses. Ladies: Do not wear something that will ruin his clothes or be a knot in his stomach or chest if you dance close embrace. Tangueros: Respect the ladies and dress as if you were taking them out! Would you wear jeans and a t-shirt if you were going to a restaurant with that beautiful, well-dressed woman you have in your arms? I realize that in Europe that jeans were introduced as very expensive imports, and jeans seem okay in Europe, but they are *not okay*. Blue jeans are work clothes in many parts of the world or casual, and the woman you are dancing with is dressed way above you. This is not a European or casual dance. I can say this as an American: If new tangueros in Buenos Aires have succumbed to the imperialism of American casual culture, then we have all lost the beauty of tango traditions. Is it really so hard to dress up to the lady's level?

**Hygiene 101:** Nothing much to say here your mother has not said, other than hygiene is very *important* and the easiest thing to fix. Bring an extra shirt if you sweat a lot.

## Chapter Two: Arriving at the Milonga

**The Alpha and Omega Rule:**

The first *tanda* after putting on your shoes belongs to your significant other. Likewise, the

last *tanda* is reserved for your special partner. A *tanda* is group of songs (tango/milonga/vals) that are separated by a short interlude called the "curtain" (*cortina*).



**The Cabeceo:** A nod of the head in Spanish is a "cabeceo." Using a cabeceo is the proper way of requesting 15 minutes of a tanguero/tanguera's time. The idea of the cabeceo is not to ask, which causes the other to be obligated to dance. It is all in the eyes. If someone does not return your cabeceo by looking back at you, then respect their decision (or poor eyesight).

**Please note that most of the problems and predicaments addressed below about etiquette are caused by not using the *cabeceo*.** For the Visually Impaired: I learned how even the near blind can do well and use the *idea* of the *cabeceo* to enjoy their dance. Please go to [this link](#) for ideas.

## Chapter Three: On the Dance Floor



Tangosutra Milonga, Eastern Market, Washington, DC

### Lady Leads the Way?

I do not believe that woman truly follows the man. Both man and women follow the music first. But one thing is unfortunately true of nearly milonga I have gone to in my life: Women like to lead me onto the dance floor. This is dangerous. (See Chapter V: To and From the Dance Floor.) [Click on this link to see what it looks like](#) when women lead the man out onto the dance floor.

### One *Tanda* at a time:

You just had a great *tanda* with this new guy or gal from out of town. Maybe you can get two in a row? There is a problem with this. First, he may be with someone else, and that creates suspicion because two-*tandas*-in-a-row is the beginning of true love. Repeated *tandas* are a sign of tango nirvana and true love. Is that what you want to say – "I am in love with the way you dance"? The other may like or even love the way you dance, but have other reasons not to reciprocate this feeling of tango adoration. It may be nice to be adored but I recommend a bit of caution here. You can unwittingly create a feeling of obligation to "make" his or her night. In

traditional Buenos Aires multiple *tandas* have a special meaning--let's consummate this tango adoration. Some will not believe me (see Chapter VI).

## New meanings for words you thought you knew:

- **"Thank you"** does not necessarily mean what you think it does. It is only said at the end of a *tanda*. Sooner means: "Please let me sit down; I do not feel comfortable dancing with you."
- **"You are welcome"** is not the proper response to "thank you" at the *end* of a *tanda*. One counters with "It was my pleasure." Otherwise it is as if you were the giver only and received nothing yourself.
- **"I am sorry"** is superfluous except in very small doses, or when you hurt someone. This is a social dance and not a performance. In the same vain, avoid excuses, such as "I am rusty" or "I am not very good." Just let your soul dance. If the other person realizes you have deficits, you are better off with being just who you are. I never tell someone when I think my own cooking has too much salt. They may not have noticed and saying something makes them taste it. Dance is the same way. Just enjoy what is happening.

## Miscellaneous Dance Floor Etiquette:

- **Wise teachers are silent at a milonga.** Sure, you know a lot. Maybe you are a teacher. A rocket scientist. No matter! Avoid TEACHING on the dance floor. That is the role of a *práctica*. This is an often broken rule where I now live in Germany. Teachers that do this are ignorant of this very *important* part of tango culture. Stop teaching! This is not only for the poor woman who you have decided to bequeath your great tango wisdom. Your silence is *most* important for everyone else who must listen to your instruction as we pass you on the dance floor. Go to a *práctica* or take her home to your "dance studio" and save us all.
- **Wise Students are silent at a milonga:** Don't ask for advice on the milonga dance floor. Beginners love advice. Ladies, please don't ruin a man who was doing pretty good about not talking. If you must, go to his "dance studio" for instruction, okay?

## Chapter Three, Part II: On the Dance Floor

Floorcraft Basics ...*that even experienced dancers sometimes have never learned*

Without etiquette tango is dangerous.



Ladies & Gentlemen, DO NOT do this (even at home).

- **Emergency Medicine Rule:** "Cause no harm and protect." This is the basic floorcraft rule. You thought the first rule on a social dance floor was to dance, but rather, it is to *cause no harm* and to *protect*. Dancing is clearly second! If you go to the emergency room the last thing you want is more problems than when you arrived. For the medical staff the rule "cause no harm and protect" is paramount. Likewise, when you come to the dance floor with a woman who has sore feet, don't make it worse with cuts and sprains!
- **Avoid stepping backwards against the flow of the dance floor.** A backstep is a poor starting default -- even if that is what you were taught in the "basic step." The basic step should be to the side or forwards! Going backwards is *basically* a bad idea.
- **Dance in lanes.** The outside lane is near the edge of the floor and is usually reserved for the best dancers who keep up a good flow. Men who do not keep up the flow are called "rocks in the stream." The second lane is nearer the center and should be far away enough from the outside lane to avoid bumping or physical harm. No passing on the right, especially on the right of the outside lane -- a favorite pastime of some *tangueros*.
- **Fill in the Space in front of you without tailgating.** A favorite trick of stage dancers, pretending to be social dancers at a milonga, is to have lots of room ahead of them so they can yo-yo back and forth, using four times the space of everyone else. Dancing well in a SMALL SPACE is the final frontier of advanced dancers. Need space to dance? Time for some *Small Space Exploration*.
- **Tango is NOT a race!** Ask the ladies. They like a dynamic of expressive slowness with faster moments when the music calls for it. The dance floor may look like a racetrack, but it is not. The person who veers in and out of lanes is by far the most dangerous person on the dance floor. Lady leads, this rule applies to you as well.
- **Safety is not just a man's job:** My favorite tangueras often have their eyes closed but they sense a change in my body when danger is near and keep their feet to the ground. Ladies, if you do not have this psychic ability, open your eyes. Also, never go first onto the dance floor -- that is the man's job for safety reasons. You are not being a wise if you allow him to invite you to walk out into traffic -- in the street or on the dance floor!

## Chapter Four: Near the Tables



When you hang out at the tables, become a sociologist studying people. You will notice a few kinds of people:

**The Bodyguard:**

**After a woman (or a man) has declined a dance, the "body guard" will around with now a secondary job of being his or her bodyguard.** Let's say that he even used a *cabeceo*, and she responds by saying "not now." He might as well read that as "maybe not now, or forever." This poor soul should have just taken off to deal with the rejection. Waiting for her to rest as she said she would is just deepening the wound or putting pressure on her to dance with a pitiful guy. She does not need a bodyguard. The same goes for women – just leave if he says "not now."

#### **Time-out:**

**Once you have declined a dance with a little white lie, you are in Time-Out.** Just like kindergarten. None of this would be happening if the *cabeceo* had been used. But let's say she says, "No, I am resting." So now you leave. He or she who has said "not now" is in the "penalty box" for at least that *tanda*. I believe that the time-out is not in force when the "no" does not contain a little white lie. That is why it is best to simply say, "no, thank you" and not equivocate about perhaps later. If you do equivocate with something like, "I am resting my feet," it is simply not nice to then go off and dance with someone else. Some would say that you are in time-out for the *tanda* after saying no, but follow your sense of kindness. No lie, no foul or time-out. For the right person and said from a truly gentle person, one can avoid the little white lie. Here are some solutions which you might want to practice to avoid the white lie:

#### **The White Flag Technique:**

A way to save only the best dances for the right man is for her to take off her shoes later in the evening. This is body language for "my feet have surrendered." Leave her alone unless you are close to her and you know that she is saving herself for only most effortless dancer.

#### **"No" vs. "forever no"**

Spouses are remarkably like dance partners: Both **cannot** read minds. If you ever obviously avoid a *cabeceo* or even say "no" to someone but really want to dance later, then make this clear. I have stopped trying to get a *cabeceo* from women whom I THOUGHT were shunning me. Then later I find out from other *tangueras* that they think I am shunning them. Requiring others to read your mind is not very helpful in any relationship. Tell the person you like to dance in the future but not now at this moment. You can even add that you have promised a few dances, but "please know that I do enjoy dancing with you!"

#### **The Cortina Silent Prayer:**

The *Cortina* Prayer is that you wish you were dancing, ¿*obvio, no?* Did you ever notice that people pray in silence? **Let's have a MOMENT of silence during the cortina if you want to dance. Tell your conversation partner, "During the cortina, let's look up and catch someone's eye."** Mobile phone text messages, talking with friends and generally being spaced out will have disastrous results for your tango prayers and as well as conversations with Deity. Amen?

#### **Cutting In:**

**Interrupting others in a conversation** is perhaps the second most difficult social skill at a milonga. (The most difficult follows below.) I only have seen one person cut in during a *tanda*. That's pretty rare. However, what do you do when you wish to dance with someone engaged in a conversation at the tables? **Stand back in the periphery for a moment and if you do not get a *cabeceo* from the person, then walk away.** Some women will drop a conversation in a moment to dance; others will be perturbed by "lurking *tangueros*."

#### **The Couple:**

**There are three basic types of couples. The general rule of thumb is that when you approach any couple you will need to engage both in this agreement.**

**Type A: The couple is talking. That's all.** Do not butt in to ask for a dance. She or he may be working up to dancing together. Try to get his/her eye from the periphery, and if not walk away.

**Type B: The couple dances with everyone, but they are sitting together, perhaps resting.** If your potential dance partner is looking up, the try a *cabeceo* but acknowledge the

partner too once you have established eye contact.

**Type C: The couple dances mostly with each other.** In fact they are – “the couple” – just sitting there. It is hard to know what is going on with them. They might have high levels of anxiety with dancing with others, or have had fights over jealousy from dancing with others.

Perhaps they just love to sit and watch. However, the most likely thing that is going on is that he has a bubble over his head that reads, “**My God, I wish someone would ask her to dance so I could go dance with someone else.**” And the bubble over her head reads, “**He’ll go off and dance and no one will ask me, and I will feel like a fool sitting here.**” A *cabeceo* for either him or her may be the most interesting challenge at a milonga. Really this is not archaic stuff, but social grace. So acknowledge both and also make it known through social grace that you would like to dance with half of that couple! Good luck! This is a task only for the brave and/or foolish.

## Chapter Five: To and from the dance floor



Getting her to and from the dance floor

**Entering the dance floor:** It is the man’s job to get the oncoming man’s attention before entering the dance floor. Men: A woman does not go into a revolving door first. The man does. He pushes and she follows. Just like revolving door, the “Ladies First Rule” is **NOT** the rule of entering a dance floor. Both the man and the woman’s have their roles here. Ladies, please leave entering the dance floor to the man because he is the one who has to catch the oncoming man’s eye and gauge the speed of oncoming dance-traffic.

**Oncoming Traffic:** So let’s say she does not pull him out on the floor, now what? Unfortunately, the oncoming man may be thinking of driving his car in city traffic and not understand tango etiquette. Just let him drive by. You don’t want this guy behind you anyway. A smart dancer will avoid entering where the majority of people enter the dance floor, which is usually the closest place to the tables. The wise *tanguero* finds a place which is not crowded, and even chooses the two men who will be around him. If the other men know me, we have just created what is called a “train” – and men who dance dangerously will not be allowed in. Really poor dancers in some communities will even be squeezed off the dance floor by a train of men who do not appreciate their dangerous moves. Both in the US and in Buenos Aires I have heard of this happening.

**"It's Curtains for You!":** *Cortina* means "curtain." A smart DJ has a short piece of music that is easily identifiable as *not* tango as the "*cortina*." This music is the sign to step off the dance floor

(the stage of life), even if you are going to do act two with the same person. As mentioned above, the best dancers are waiting to hear the music *after* the *cortina* before they catch the eye of another dancer. The smartest dancers pay attention to the order of the DJ, which is often three *tandas* of tangos, and a *vals tanda*, followed by three more *tandas* of tangos and finally a *milonga tanda*.

**Escorting the woman back off the dance floor:** Treat her like a lady, and offer her your arm. This is tango, and for a moment you are in Buenos Aires. Commentary: I have learned that even though a woman appreciates being treated like a lady, one need not always take her very far because she might be scoping out the next *cabeceo*. I now try for the edge of the dance floor.

## Chapter Six: After the Milonga



**Going for coffee (*un cafecito*):** This is code language for going out and staying up late but not from caffeine intake.

**The man waiting for you with a smile at the bottom of the stairs:** See? You didn't believe me about dancing three *tandas* in a row. Now, he wonders why you act surprised when you deny going out for "*un cafecito*."

This is nothing to do with etiquette, but you stayed with me this far, so let me give you one other late night tango tip:

Your Aching FEET!! Do NOT soak your feet in hot water. I learned this from a woman who was born in stilettos: You soak your feet in the coldest water you can stand. Also, I know this from running many marathons too. Hot water on swollen feet or muscles is only making things worse. Cold water will have wonderful results if you are planning to dance again anytime soon. I used to hate cold water on my feet, but now I love it because I know what it is doing to help me dance again soon and without soreness.

Happy dancing!