

Hsueh-tze Lee - Tango Instructor Baltimathon 2004

By Tova and Carlos Moreno___

We met Hsueh-tze at her house in Boston. We had tea and sat on her self-described "uncomfortable sofa" that now she can't get rid of "because the greats have slept on it: Brigitta Winkler, Eric Jorissen, Alex Krebs, Tomas Howlin..."

Tova: Set the scene - what was the tango world like when you started dancing? Were you in Boston then?

Hsueh-tze: I started tango while I was living in Boston. My first tango, however, was up at the Olympic Peninsula, in Washington in 1990. I took classes from Nora Dinzelbacher at Wild Week, which was primarily a swing and lindy week. Nora's husband Raul had died half a year earlier. This was Nora's first national venue for teaching on her own.

Nora and Raul had recently moved to the Bay Area from Argentina, and were among the very few people teaching tango in the US at that time. Back then, we didn't have visiting teachers from Argentina, except people who traveled with shows. Tango Argentino, which came through the U.S. in the mid 80's, was THE influential show. People took lessons from the performers or learned from videotapes. As a result dancers mainly learned Fantasia or show tango, rather than social or salon tango.

Nora's approach was similar to Rodolfo Dinzel's, a well-known dancer who was her late husband's brother. Their style is playful. Followers could interject moves and engage in a dynamic exchange. From the very beginning it was a lot of fun. I learned to lead from the very first class

_Tova:Really, why?

Hsueh-tze: It was the best way for me to understand the dance and bring it back to Boston. I worked on learning both parts at the same time.

_Tova: When you went to Wild Week you thought you were there to dance lindy and then tango showed up?

Hsueh-tze: Right. I was there for swing. I discovered tango. From then on my heart was in tango.

I used to organize swing weekends. I began dancing at the age of three, and studied modern dance for many years. I've also danced Scandinavian, English, Scottish, International Folk...and a few others.

Scandinavian dancing is similar to tango in terms of connection and exchange, balance and timing. Scandinavian dances are mostly turns. With tango, one can improvise more.

Tova: Back to the beginning - since it was mainly Fantasia in the beginning, when and how did the other tango styles spread into the US?

Hsueh-tze: Half a year after I started, in 1991, the Stanford Tango Weeks began. Those weeks were a major source of tango instruction in the US. They were special weeks. Imagine! One week of tango instruction, attracting dancers from all over the country. And the rest of the year, not much else. At that time, communities could not afford hosting workshops for a traveling Argentine instructor. There just weren't enough people.

The Stanford weeks, early on, had a social emphasis. 1995 was the year of the Milongueros. Many milongueros from Buenos Aires came: Graciela Gonzalez, Lampazo, Juan Bruno, Eduardo Arquimbau, among others. It was exciting to meet so many milongueros at one time in one week.

Many people who attended the Stanford weeks were later instrumental in building tango communities when they returned home.

Daniel Trenner and Rebecca Shulman were also influential in introducing social tango to many communities across the country.

Tova: Where were people dancing tango if there weren't what we'd call "tango communities" yet?

Hsueh-tze: Several cities had practicas. When I started, the big tango cities (NYC and San Francisco) had one or two dances a month.

For a long time, people thought of tango as a collection of fancy figures, rather than as a walking dance. Focusing on walking was a very important development for understanding how tango is danced.

Even now, there is a heavy focus on figures. If one learns the basics and the fundamental skills, the figures are so easy to do. It's the walking that takes time. If you can walk well, the dance is magical.

Tova: Was there a specific teacher in North America that started talking about the importance of walking?

Hsueh-tze: I believe I first heard it from Michael and Luren (Michael Walker and Luren Belucci in New Mexico/Arizona). Their teachers were Danel and Maria in New York. Danel and Maria were the other couple besides Nora who were among the first Argentine tango teachers in the United States. They are traditional. Their milonga has a dress code. Men lead and women follow.

Tova: So you didn't fit in there well!

Hsueh-tze: No! (everyone laughs.) I actually had quite an experience at their milonga. It was my first dance in NYC,... Now, Danel teases me about leading with a twinkle in his eye - I think it's a twinkle.

In the beginning, I was the only woman dancing the lead in classes, and was somewhat famous at one point (laughs). Across the country, people referred to me as "that woman who leads". It is great now to see many more women leading, and men following.

Tova: Were you used to leading in other styles of dancing?

Hsueh-tze: Yes. Certain dances, such as contra or Scottish, are based on figures and the roles are more similar. In other types of dancing, such as Lindy or West Coast Swing, it's lead and follow. I had led swing and waltzes.

Tova: But it was new for the tango world.

Hsueh-tze: Yes, at least for tango in the US at the time. Leading as a woman has not always been an easy process.

I didn't realize nor understand in the beginning how uncomfortable it

would be for many Argentines to see women leading. It went against a lot of what they cherished about tango. In addition to views that "tango is a dance between a man and a woman" and "a woman who leads cannot be a good follower",... they saw women leading as showing disrespect for their culture.

In North America and Europe, most people see tango as a dance form separate from its cultural context (which is not entirely great, either). However, it is more acceptable for men and women to dance either role. Often, role switching starts because the gender ratio is not balanced. Later, dancers either find they enjoy dancing both roles, or prefer one over the other.

Leading and following require different skills. Both require work.

Tova: When did you start teaching?

Hsueh-tze: I started teaching private lessons in the early 90's, much earlier than group classes, which require a critical mass. My first group class was in 1995 in preparation for workshops I organized for visiting instructors (Rebecca Shulman & Jorge Udrisard). At that time I was in graduate school, (Harvard studying Physiology). I taught the class at the Harvard Medical School.

I taught classes at irregular intervals until 1998 when I helped Daniel Trenner teach an intensive course through the Bridge to the Tango. In 1999 I began teaching on my own.

Tova: When did you decide to teach tango full time and leave the academic life?

Hsueh-tze: When I started turning down tenure-track positions. I had several offers. My decisions were based on quality of life issues. A biology professor with a laboratory research program can't do much else! The work never stops.

For several years, I taught biology at Wellesley College and tango at the same time. I went from teaching full-time at Wellesley to part time, and then two years ago I made a complete break.

I am now free to travel. My schedule is great! I teach regular classes

during the week and I can travel over the weekend. It is important to enjoy the traveling without getting burnt out. I have my students and Blue Milonga here, so it's great to come home, too. It's really the best of both worlds. It keeps me really busy though, juggling home and travel.

Tova: What aspects of the tango hooked you?

Hsueh-tze: It was the feeling of closeness and the embrace, the music and the possibilities to improvise. It was what you hear everyone say - but it really was!! I find it a very creative process. It is intellectually stimulating, artistically fulfilling, emotionally soothing, and there's a spiritual quality to it, too.

Tova: Do you miss academia? You were in it for so long, it would seem like an integral part of you by now.

Hsueh-tze: I always want to be growing, learning in some way. That aspect is there whether I'm in science or in the arts.

There are some things in science that I do miss, but I'm still able to engage in science a little, by bringing knowledge of biomechanics and movement into tango.

Tova: Can you give an example or two?

Hsueh-tze: Sure. You've observed me talk about projecting one's intention before stepping. How does one do it? A simple mechanical explanation is to use the leg muscles to direct a force towards the floor. This force down and back up can be felt before one steps.

Understanding how the body moves helps in figuring out how to dance certain figures, and also for preventing injuries. Many professional dancers have problems with their lower back and their knees. There are proper ways to turn that are safe for knees, and proper ways to walk - especially in close embrace - so that the lower back is less vulnerable. In my lessons I try to explain how to dance comfortably and safely.

Tova: It seems like you must have a solid understanding of physics in order to teach tango well.

Carlos: Yeah, I think the lead/follow aspect really brings in the reactions - the transfer and absorption of energy that must occur.

Hsueh-tze: And what's so wonderfully enriching about tango is it's not just the mechanics of the movement. I see some people who are excited about how to do a certain move, or how to get in and out of a figure. These puzzles are enticing. It's also great that tango is so much more than that. You have the artistic part: the musicality - how to create a dance that feels like a dance and not a series of figures - and then beyond that, the connection to another person!

Carlos: Yeah, you just get to hold someone and there's no equation for that!

Hsueh-tze: Right! And then it's beyond mechanics.
