



**Left:** Adriana Pegorer.  
Photo: Gary Lam.

## Close your eyes and... dance

**Adriana Pegorer** explains how and why tangoing with visually impaired people enriches her practice and research

**Whether you're dancing or teaching it, as I do, tango is overwhelmingly led by a visual stimulus.** The glittering drama of courtship that this form of movement entails – with women in high heels and provocative dresses and the dominant attitudes of their male partners – is often what draws people in. But if all of that is removed it's the kinesthetic sense of the dance, its essential aroma, which still remains.

Tango is simply a walk that develops in a playful and harmonious duet with your partner, the music and the couples around you. It could be argued that the most difficult step is 'the embrace,' followed by 'the walk.' The negotiation of legs required by a duo whose upper bodies are in close proximity to each other can be challenging. But once you're in the arms of a competent and sympathetic leader, and with a few basic steps under your belt, as a follower you don't necessarily need to engage visually with the space. Your partner will do that for you. In recent years traditional roles have become more open, too, particularly in relation to gender and possibly in response to the electronic tango music which attracted younger people to a form more often associated with their grandparents' generation. In many popular tango salons all over the world, including Buenos Aires, one can witness men following a woman's lead or same-sex dancing. (This isn't something you're likely to see on *Strictly Come Dancing* just yet.)

Tango Argentino-style (1) (not the ballroom version with the swift head turns) lends itself uniquely well to visually impaired people (VIP) who want to enjoy both spatial activity and social interaction. They are sensitive and accomplished followers to begin with, a skill that most tango beginners find difficult to master. I'm still working on it after over ten years in the field. According to Carlos Gavito, my late tango mentor, closing your eyes when following is considered a sign of artistic maturity when it develops from a subtle quality of trust and confidence.

My desire to teach tango to VIP came from a personal incident. In 1998 I was on the first year of my dance degree course at Chichester University. One particularly windy morning some dust flew into my eyes. Even after I'd rinsed them with water and put in drops my vision was less than half; it was like trying to see through a thick net. Deciding that this blurriness would go away pretty much as it came, with time, I somewhat tentatively headed to the dance studio for my morning sessions. The level of focus and attention I had to maintain during the technique class was exhausting, and I remember the teacher calling me on it a few times.

At the end of the class I didn't feel like leaving the studio and confronting stairs, bodies, doors or anything that moved. Instead I sat down and waited for the following class in contact improvisation to begin. Despite my visual limitation I enjoyed immensely connecting with my partners in a completely different way than I normally would (2).

After the classes, instead of going straight to a doctor (I had a test later on), I preferred to just rest my eyes. As I lay on my bed, filled with a mixture of fear and exhilaration, I gradually realised what an important day this had been for me both as a dancer and a person. Closing your eyes, or being blindfolded as an exercise, can give some idea of the powerful rearranging of the senses that occurs. That, and the deep kinesthetic perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from stimuli within the body itself that you didn't know you had.

The next morning my vision returned to what it was before, and how different the world seemed. Some years later, when considering a subject for my thesis, I thought that teaching tango to people with visual impairment was just what I wished to explore in more depth. What encouraged me further was meeting an American dancer who'd lost her sight while training to be a ballet dancer.

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Above: Photo: Dominic Everett.

She continued to dance and perform as much as she could, often using objects such as a chair or table to help define the spaces for her dance. Finding this a little limiting, she was keen on the concept of tango and its spatially liberating yet safe embrace.

I tried, unsuccessfully, to find a blind or visually impaired dancer in the UK with whom I could work. During my research, however, I’d contacted Maria Oshodi. She is the founder of Extant, a UK performing arts company managed by visually impaired arts professionals (3). After exchanging numerous e-mails, phone calls and meetings, on March 2007 I delivered one tango session as part of her company’s educational programme. This gave me important insights and feedback that I then shared with Dominic Everett, the regional leisure service development officer at Action for Blind People, when I proposed doing more sessions to him (4). Subsequently he and I organised two open taster sessions in September and October 2009, adding one more in November because of popular demand. Each session was about two hours long and attracted 26 blind and partially sighted people, some of whom attended more than one session. Volunteers who were mostly experienced and sighted tango dancers, in turn, partnered them. After every two or three songs I encouraged people to change partners just to enable everybody to meet and dance together. The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) offered us a large room in kind, and several of its employees attended the sessions.

The feedback on this embryonic project showed that there seems to be a keen interest for it to be repeated on an ongoing basis. As a teacher and a practitioner of tango I like to draw from history, etiquette and technique, but I’m also extremely open to searching out creative ways of moving in partnership that are relevant in a new context (5). I’m not interested in teaching complex steps and dramatic lunges. My desire is to refine movement skills and develop interpersonal connections in a supportive and integrated atmosphere where the exchange is mutual. During one session a visually impaired woman asked me, ‘Am I doing it right? It would be so much easier if I could see you.’ I reassured her that her dancing was, for me, far more authentic than if she were simply trying to copy me or anyone else.

I trust that the fresh, even aromatic approach to the tango that I teach could become an interchangeable skill

applicable to different kind of dances, as well as to either sighted or non-sighted dancers. In the meantime I’m happy with the various testimonials that participants in my VIP tango classes offered later. As one man wrote, ‘I came to the session for several reasons. One of these was because I’ve always had a fear of dancing in public. This is such a shame because I recognise the social and health benefits of dance. Now that I’ve tried it I realise that a couple dancing the tango do so as one, and so one doesn’t have to worry about not being able to see what other dancers are doing. In a word, it was wonderful!’

I’ll finish by sharing two little facts. One is that another blind American woman, not a dancer and someone I never met, had a guide dog called Tango (6). The second is about Hugues de Montalembert, who lost his sight in an attack in New York and tells his story in the documentary film *Black Sun* (7). In it he suggests that when living with sight loss it’s important to ‘find a way to dance with people, to dance with life.’ I think this can be true for everyone.

If you’d like to suggest funding opportunities, offer space or time in kind (join the sessions, help with access work etc) please **contact** [adriana@adagioconbrio.co.uk](mailto:adriana@adagioconbrio.co.uk) / 07974 619 570 or [Dominic.Everett@actionforblindpeople.org.uk](mailto:Dominic.Everett@actionforblindpeople.org.uk) / 07908 527468 (text only)

- 1) Tango has recently been declared part of the world's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations
- (2) Touchdown dance company has since 1986 researched and developed specialist methods and processes using touch and sensory feedback techniques to involve people with visual impairment in dance, in particular with Contact Improvisation [www.touchdowndance.co.uk](http://www.touchdowndance.co.uk)
- (3) [www.extant.co.uk](http://www.extant.co.uk)
- (4) Action for the Blind now becomes a part of the RNIB Group after joining up with Royal National Institute for the Blind
- (5) For more information on my own work please visit [www.adagioconbrio.co.uk](http://www.adagioconbrio.co.uk) and [www.tangorelease.blogspot.com](http://www.tangorelease.blogspot.com)
- (6) [http://www.guidedogs.com/site/PageServer?pagename=stories\\_tango](http://www.guidedogs.com/site/PageServer?pagename=stories_tango) (accessed November 2009)
- (7) Dir: Gary Tarn UK 2005 [http://secondrundvd.com/release\\_bs.php](http://secondrundvd.com/release_bs.php) (accessed November 2009).