

## GOTAN PROJECT: TANGO, A DANCE TO EXPERIENCE ONESELF

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### SUMMARY

*The tango brings out the true essence of the individuals, it removes every mask and stops the lies you tell yourself, forcing the contact with yourself even before with the others. This is the essence on which we relied to propose a course of psychotherapy with basic elements of tango, as a peculiar mode of experiencing oneself. In this paper we analyze how Tango could become an interesting instrument for the cure and the prevention of psychological and physical problems.*

**Key words:** tango - tango-therapy - art mediation - group psychotherapy - psychological and physical problems

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### EXPERIENTIAL GROUP THERAPY MEDIATED BY THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF TANGO

Our project comes from the encounter with Federico Trossero, an Italian-Argentinian psychiatrist tango dancer and tango-therapist who understands that tango and psychiatric and psychological sciences could become an interesting instrument for the cure and the prevention of psychological and physical problems. He began to practice his method with his psychiatric patients, and, having had a good result, he started to develop and spread his method, publishing in the 2006 his first book (Tango terapia. Una propuesta para el encuentro con uno mismo y con el otro, Ediciones Continente, Buenos Aires). In 2008, in Argentina there occurs the first International Congress of Tango-therapy. Coming from the theoretical model of Trossero, we developed Got A'n\_go (the denomination of our working group), that, through the project called "Tango Salus... incoming", aims at understanding and taking care of the human complexity, through the encounter among tango, psychiatry and psychotherapy. These disciplines abandon their traditional language, in order to treat psychological problems with also the help of the basic elements of tango: the symbolic dimension that reconfigures the ongoing experience.

#### **TANGO: a dance to experience oneself**

*"It's a little bit your inner world,  
the baggage that you carry on your shoulders,  
everything you have done in your life  
that in the same way, you tell in those footsteps."*

(Muraca 2007)

The tango is a living experience. A person approaches Tango, as well as it approaches World, and through this approach, which produces emotions and feelings, reveals oneself. Our body is not only a biological object (Körper: the physical body, which occupies

a space delimited by the skin), but it is the place through which man kind feels an immediate experiencing of itself (the acting and the experiencing); it is a living body too, (Leib: the body that I am, not the body that I have, a body that has no boundaries delimited, a body in which a consciousness lives). When this body moves itself through the tango, it feels emotions which are so revealed in this "danced" space. These just danced emotions are traces of ourselves, which - as in every psychotherapy - are needed to be read out. The tango-therapist, verbalizing the emotions raised during the tango-therapy session, allow the person to get hold of them. The tango-therapist helps the person to make sense of what is happening, so that - starting from this new self-knowledge - he can open up new possibilities of being oneself and living in a healthier, more balanced, more appropriate way. Compared with the traditional psychotherapy setting, what it changes is that the person expresses itself dancing instead of speaking.

### FROM TANGO TO TANGO-THERAPY

From tango to tango-therapy, the step may seem short, but it is crucial, because the tango itself is not therapeutic, but its use as a therapeutic mediation in this particular work of group psychotherapy. The tango-therapy aims at offering a space of expression, knowledge and development of The Self, and this is possible because through the movement, the body speaks and tells about its fears, anger, sadness, ambition, dreams and such like. Learn in gab out the basic elements of tango (posture, walk, basic steps, improvisation) becomes not more the end, but the means by which a person could reflect on his/her own way of being, of feeling emotions and of meeting the "other". The idea of making therapy through the tango belongs to that trend that sees the dance - and art mediation in general - as having a big potential, since our emotions, thoughts, feelings, frailty are living in the body, are speaking through the body, and of ten they go beyond the spoken

word. Thus, the tango becomes a metaphor for the whole of life.

The two dancing bodies are not empty shells without a soul; they are living bodies, with experiences and stories. We would state that the tango becomes the instrument to access to this lived body for knowing its inner world. When you dance, the emotions are dancing: anxiety, uncertainty, feeling of the other's invasiveness, fear of negative judgment of others, jealousy, envy, courage, avoidance, disappointment, fear of bodily contact and so on. Dancing, each of us feels himself in various ongoing situations, and we can see a correlation between bodily states and emotional states. Furthermore, experiencing an emotion corresponds to perceiving a change in one's bodily state. This is the potential of art mediation and this allows making tango a therapy:

- to express through movements what words fail to communicate;
- to move a thought and so, a change from the danced experience (here we would like to underline that our working methods are only by using material that comes from the experiencing that occurs in the work session).

To give some examples: if a girl is insecure about her beauty, when she is invited to dance, she will discover in the bodily contact, the feeling of being appreciated. This way she would experience some new important psychological feelings for her relational life. And again, a shy person will bring that shyness in the ball room without being able to hide his inner torment. It may happen that this shy person, through the intimacy created between the two dancing bodies, discovers in himself an unknown potential and the acquires a different perception of the Self.

Tango has inside a lot of elements that are very useful, psychotherapeutically speaking: the sympathy, the fusion, the evaluation, the curiosity, the desire, the discomfort, the seduction, the tension. And again, through the tango it is possible to evaluate a series of psychological processes such as the contact with the intimacy and emotions of the other, the self-perception of rigidity or softness, the feeling of being rejected, the communication without talking, the awareness of talking all the time for helping oneself out of an awkward situation, the perception of manifold feelings related to different persons, the feeling of being stable situated in a warm hug and so forth. Everything becomes the subject of exploration and analysis. (AA vari 2011).

### Why tango?

*Cabeceo:*

*I get up and we meet on the track*

*First the music with rhythm and melody,*

*Second: the feeling*

*third: the elegance*

*last figures.*

*So they dance!*

Tango is a very unique dance! A close relationship that develops and ends between the two protagonists in the arc of a "tanda".

Tanda is a turn of dancing in a milonga, and by association, a set of pieces of music, usually between three or four, that is played for one turn. Between tandas is played a "cortina" (for curtains), a musical pause, as a short break, that allow dancers to leave the floor and to permit "mirada" and "cabeceo". The literal translation of "cabeceo" is "nod of the head". It is a non-verbal invitation to dance the tango from man to woman. The man looks at the woman and gives a nod to invite her to dance. If she accepts the cabeceo she will move towards him. If she refuses she will look away. Usually the cabeceo follows the "mirada", that in simple terms, is a particular gaze between man and woman, through which the woman indicates that she would like to dance with him. When the man understands that the gaze is effectively directed towards him, by giving a nod he accepts to dance with her (cabeceo).

It is a totally free dance. The figures are constantly assembled, suspended, fragmented and recombined into a new performance, every time. Learning tango is not so easy, it is a real concentration exercise. The tango is a language through which the individuals could experience themselves. The two dancers while dancing create a dialogue through which the man guides his woman so discreetly as to be invisible to the eyes of the beholder. The contact is the core of the tango. The position of the dancers is asymmetrical; their bodies envelop, moving towards and away from each other, with their gazes intertwined (Rémi 2001).

Tango creates, through the fantasies evoked, imaginative experiences and it activates sensory, emotional, bodily and cognitive functions. The tango is reciprocity, where the male and female play their reciprocal roles. The classical and stereotyped roles are replaced by the reciprocity, that is a simultaneous possibility of an emotional experience. There is a tuning, a process of mutual adjustment between the two bodies.

Now we shall discuss other fundamental aspects of tango-therapy.

- 1) **The 'rely on':** namely it means to be able to depend on, to trust and believe each other. In such a dance, that requests strong emotional involvement, close physical contact and intimacy to rely on an often unknown dancer, requires a sufficient self awareness and a strong sense of identity, without being afraid of trusting oneself to another person. The challenge is to rely on, while maintaining the necessary autonomy of life and thought.
- 2) **the centrality of the axis and the emotional attunement:** each dancer has to hinge on his internal axis (as stretched by a string) for the all dance session, inasmuch as by this the mutual balance, the rhythm and the coordination of the movements depends on. Maintaining the centrality of the axis is not only an physical capacity, but also

a way of "being with" oneself and others, a way of emotionally being attuned to. Hence, an intrapsychic and relational manner that has to do, consequently, with assertiveness and self-esteem. The essence of tango lies in this ability of being self-centered and at the same time, being involved in an abrazo (hug) that connects, in which you rely on each other.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Tango-therapy, is a real group psychotherapy, whose main feature is that we work through an art mediation (a dance): what in traditional psychotherapy is spoken, here is danced. Acting and speaking share the same area! This art mediation starts through the tango and develops itself through the tango: the feelings, the emotions, everything that happens during the tango session, are elements on which we have to work giving them the main space; first we work with the body, later with the word.

It is important to have a large room that can hold a number of people neither too large nor too small (about 30), so as they are able to move freely. A room too small or too large would lead to discomfort. The duration and the typology of the group could vary, depending on the client and users: from three to six or twelve months (obviously closed groups). Federico Trossero's groups are often open and last for two or three years. It is possible to have a 'full immersion' group (closed group). The group must be coordinated and led by a psychotherapist, who necessarily has to dance tango. He might be assisted by an assistant, with clearly identified roles. The presence of a tango teacher is not fundamental.

In our experience, we have identified the following progressive steps:

- warm welcome;
- free verbalization;
- emotional attunement;
- bodily experiential work with tango's elements;
- psychotherapeutic session;
- "emotional" relaxation.

The thematic areas (representing the themes that must be gradually developed in hierarchical order) are:

- listening (with this word we mean the experience of "pure" hearing, of listening to "other" through the touch and the sight, and the centering in oneself);
- emotioning;
- the rely on;
- femininity/masculinity;
- co-perceiving the self and the other.

Depending on various factors, this structure could change: users, clients, duration, typology of groups, possible co-presence of other forms of art mediation.

## **PURPOSE**

Tango-therapy does not aim simply at rehabilitating some lost functions (it can also be used in psychiatric rehabilitation, too), but also it is used for helping people to experience themselves (our best goal!).

Other purposes and benefits of tango-therapy are described in the following levels:

### **MOTOR LEVEL:**

- developing physical skills;
- improving posture and body awareness and its limits;
- improving control and fluidity of movements;
- improving coordination and space management;
- improving balance (static and dynamic);
- making natural, spontaneous, free and uninhibited movements;
- training the cardiovascular and pulmonary apparatus and strengthening the musculoskeletal system.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL LEVEL:**

- extending the inner awareness and discovering unknown aspects of the Self;
- facilitating emotional development and improving the expressive skills of the body;
- overcoming inhibitions, fears and limits;
- developing a greater assertiveness;
- increasing concentration and memory (important to remember the sequence of steps);
- increasing self-esteem, instilling a greater trust and confidence in himself and in own abilities;
- obtaining a greater intimacy with one's own body and starting to feel at home with our own body;
- increasing creativity;
- developing a better emotional attunement.

### **SOCIAL LEVEL:**

- improving communication skills and socialization;
- improving interpersonal relationships;
- experiencing active and passive roles;
- learning to cooperate with each other and, at the same time, learning, when necessary, how to stop the other.

## **USERS**

The tango-therapy has a wide range of applications as we could read in the following list:

- anxiety states: anxiety transforms the body into an enemy territory, full of unpleasant feelings, somatizations, pains. Situations in which the lament and the avoidance restrict much more the possibility of body movements and the individual's life;
- social phobia, inhibition and anxiety in situations of social exposure;
- people characterized by rigid and obsessive traits; these personalities are fixed and reluctant to change;

- situations in which there is a bad relationship with one's own body: eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorder, outcomes of injuries; abused women or woman after breast surgery;
- low self-esteem; lack of validation; feeling of emptiness;
- situation where one may lose control over one's emotional sphere;
- bad relationships with the opposite sex;
- conditions such as anger, fear and sadness states;
- people with postural problems and difficulties in mobility; disorders caused by neurological diseases (such as Parkinson's disease or multiple sclerosis).

Tango-therapy is useful in rehabilitation, physiotherapy and neurology, inasmuch as the tango activates high neurocognitive functions, such as attention and memory (Trossero 2010).

## CONCLUSION

Tango-therapy aims at making the word a movement and the movement a word, so new steps could become a

vehicle for new horizons. Essentially, the goal is to make use of what emerges in the setting of tango-therapy in order to use within one's own life.

*"This Tango teaches us life  
And this life teaches us our Tango"  
(Trossero 2010)*

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