

BEYOND THE BINARY: EXPRESSION AND CONNECTION IN QUEER TANGO

By Liz Sabatiuk, Queer Tango Program Manager at Tango Mercurio



Augusto LaMarshall observing students at BloomBars in Columbia Heights, 2019. Photo Credit: Jaime Montemayor.

Despite what an Internet image search would have you believe, tango isn't only for men in dark suits leading women in slinky dresses. That iconic image reflects a strongly gendered tradition, of course, but it isn't the full picture of tango's history--and it's certainly not a full picture of tango's present.

Twenty years after the first queer tango festival (2001 in Hamburg, Germany), queer tango has become a tiny but mighty global movement. Not only has it engendered queer tango communities in cosmopolitan cities around the world (including DC), but it has also made mainstream tango more welcoming to dancers outside the man-lead/woman-follow binary.

I'm proud to be part of that movement, both as a social dancer and as the Queer Tango Program Manager for Tango Mercurio. Tango Mercurio is

an arts education organization presenting Argentine tango as an agent of community development. When we launched the Queer Tango Program in 2018, we hoped to 1) provide a comfortable environment for folks in the LGBTQ+ community to explore tango and 2) diversify and enrich the existing DC tango community. I'm happy to say that between the time we launched and the start of the pandemic, we made strides on both fronts.

Let's just say 2019 was quite a year! In addition to a weekly class and *práctica*, we offered workshops, performances, and periodic queer milongas (tango parties). We made it to CAPITAL PRIDE. And just months before the Covid-19 pandemic would change the landscape for dance, travel, and life as we knew it, we were honored to host Augusto LaMarshall as a guest artist with Tango Mercurio.



Photo Credit: Jaime Montemayor.

Augusto is sometimes known as the godfather of queer tango. He lives in Buenos Aires, where he started the city's first gay milonga, La Marshall, in 2003, and co-founded its first queer festival, the Festival Internacional de Tango Queer de Buenos Aires, in 2007. He performed in Germany at that aforementioned first queer tango festival ever. He was a humble and generous maestro during his visit to DC.

Toward the end of his visit, Augusto graciously joined members of our local queer tango community for pancakes, coffee, and an informal conversation hosted by the DC Queer Tango Collective. (More on the Collective below.) We talked about the history of tango. (Spoiler alert: Men have been dancing tango with other men since the beginning.) We talked about gender. We talked about bigotry, tolerance, and evolution. We even talked about queer tango social etiquette. It was an illuminating, inspiring, and hilarious two hours.

Five months later, the world changed. So, what do people who love hugging other people and walking to music do during a global pandemic? For the most part, we look forward to the day

when we can go back to hugging other people and walking to music. And if you're me, you also write an essay for an eBook about the future of queer tango (available for download through queertangobook.org starting June 5) and make a [podcast about Augusto](#). If you'd like to learn more about the queer tango movement from the perspective of one of its trailblazers, I humbly recommend taking 20 minutes to listen.

And here's more on the DC Queer Tango Collective as promised. I reached out to one of its founders, Jose Otero, to share the concept and history behind the Collective along with his hopes and plans going forward. Here's what he had to say.

"Modeled after a similar group in New York City, the Collective got its start in October 2018, growing from only a handful of members initially to more than 100 today. We aim to create informal and welcoming social spaces for LGBT, queer, and dual-role tango dancers in DC, both virtual ([check out the DC Queer Tango Collective Facebook page!](#)) and in person (pre-COVID). Before the pandemic, members regularly shared plans to attend local milongas, lessons and practicas; organized outings to local and out-of-town performances, festivals, or events of interest; shared thoughts on how to promote queer tango dancing; and hosted several well-attended house parties. In addition to the wonderful brunch with Augusto that Liz referred to earlier, in early 2020 the Collective organized

"THAT'S WHAT TANGO IS ABOUT.
IT'S NOT ABOUT THE GENDER OR
THE SEXUAL ORIENTATION, IT'S
ABOUT DANCING WITH
DIFFERENT PEOPLE... I DON'T
CARE WHO YOU SLEEP WITH!"
~AUGUSTO "LAMARSHALL"
BALIZANO

several tango practicas, including one offering a lesson by an out-of-town queer tango guest teacher".

"While the pandemic put a stop to in-person events, members of the Collective have kept in touch virtually, hosting meetings and posting messages about tango events both local and across the world. The past year has provided members with an opportunity to reflect on the beauty and opportunities that queer tango can offer, as well as on ways to promote inclusive, diverse, and queer-welcoming tango. With the resumption of in-person events coming soon, the Collective is planning its next members' social and other events. Stay tuned! We hope to hear from many of you and look forward to embracing and dancing with many new members".

As the hot weather hits and we slowly emerge from these strange days, it might just be the perfect time to [learn more about queer tango](#) or even try it for yourself. You can see what Tango Mercurio is up to on [Facebook](#) or at tangomercurio.org and find local tango events on the [Capital Tangueros](#) Calendar. ●



Photo Credit: Jaime Montemayor.