

Two Tangos: Slawomir Mrózek and Manuel Molins¹

**Montserrat Roser i Puig
University of Kent**

This study addresses two plays, both entitled *Tango*, one by Manuel Molins i Casaña, and the other by Slawomir Mrózek, that is, two interpretations of the tango from outside the cultural environment in which it was invented.² I shall analyse the extent to which the use of the tango as a musical form and point of reference (be it as a song or a dance) can be perceived as an exotic and external factor (a presence of the familiar other) in the form of hybrid texts including lyrics, for instance, and how in other cases it is unquestionably accepted as an integral part of European culture.

The use of the tango as a music and dance form, associated with the representation of specific social, moral and political values, combines nationalist, historical, political and linguistic elements with myth and in turn is closely linked with what Jung refers to as the '*encounter with the shadow*'. Applying this concept to the national, as Michael Fordham explains, allows us to explore how '[t]he shadow contains, besides the personal shadow, the shadow of society [...] fed by the neglected and repressed collective values' (Fordham 5). This also helps us see the theatre as an ideal expressive medium because this shadow, as persuasively argued by Carolyn Kaufman, 'in spite of its function as a reservoir for human darkness –or perhaps because of this– [...] is a seat of creativity' (Kaufman 1). Both Polish and Catalan cultures have often felt under threat, and we can argue that through the creative use of the tango, the two playwrights have voiced some of their concerns about collective values and future hopes in and of their countries. The tango originated in the late 1890s in Argentina and

¹ A first version of this article was delivered as a conference paper at the 'Music and the Dramatic Text Symposium' organised by the European Theatre Research Network, University of Kent, in May 2014.

² Manuel Molins i Casaña was born in Alfara del Patriarca, Horta Nord, Valencia, Spain, in 1956, and Slawomir Mrózek was born in Borzęcin, Poland in 1930 and died in Nice, France, in 2013.

Uruguay and was also popularized by its discovery in the United States in the 1910s when it was featured in a Broadway musical by the dance couple Vernon and Irene Castle and became a craze (Groppa 2). Simultaneously, and according to Susan August Brown, 'The worldwide spread of the tango came in the early 1900s when wealthy sons of Argentine society families made their way to Paris and introduced the tango into a society eager for innovation and not entirely averse to the risqué nature of the dance or dancing with young, wealthy Latino men' (Brown 1).³

Outside the Spanish-speaking world, tango is better known for its musical complexity and as a virtuoso dance than for its lyrics, but that is not surprising as, according to Jorge Luis Borges, 'Al principio el tango no tuvo letra o la tuvo obscena y casual' (Borges 163) and indeed, the appeal of tango in recent years has often resided in the variety of its musical sources (ranging from the creolized rhythms of African origin to the subtle touches of Andalusian music). It was Carlos Gardel, (born Charles Romuald Gardes; 1890–1935) who created the *tango-canción* in 1917 with his rendition of Pascual Contursi and Samuel Castriota's 'Mi Noche Triste' (Cunningham 1).⁴ In the 1920s Rudolph Valentino performed it in one of his silent movies, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921); Arthur Murray developed the first instruction manual on how to dance it in the 1930s, at the same time that Xavier Cugat and His Gigolos crowded the best dance floors of the [U.S.] (Groppa 2). In the 1940s popularity declined, and even though it saw a few moments of revival, it did not survive the impact of rock and roll and would not come back until the opening of the musical *Tango Argentino* in Broadway in 1985 and the unprecedented success of the 'much discussed' album *Tango* by Julio Iglesias in the 1990s (Groppa 2).

Because of the fusion of established country traditions with city rhythms, tango has been understood as representing social consciousness, as in its very constitution, the musical genre speaks for

³ See also Mario Broeder's discussion of the Paris myth, pp.38-50, in Works cited.

⁴ The recording sold 10,000 copies and was a hit throughout Latin America (Cunningham 1).

hybridity and multiculturalism. It is cosmopolitan but at the same time it gives voice to the displaced: to those who had to leave their land (country folk) or even their country (slaves and Italian immigrants) to escape starvation or persecution. It represents the transformation of different individuals into a new community where shared feeling is the anchor and, as Jorge Luis Borges reminds us in both his *Antología personal* (1961) and *Para las seis cuerdas* (1965), through tango, lonely, hard-done-by individuals find a common voice as it converts the outrage of the years into music. However, despite its popular origins, the tango has evolved considerably over time and has had a complex cultural development. And Borges thus argues that it is very unlikely that the musical form was solely popular because ‘El instrumental primitivo de las orquestas –piano, flauta, violín, después bandoneón– confirma, por el costo, ese testimonio; es una prueba de que el tango no surgió en las orillas, que se bastaron siempre, nadie lo ignora, con las seis cuerdas de la guitarra’ (Borges 159).

For the above reasons, when it appears in literature, the tango tends to be idealized, mythified, and some of its characteristics enhanced or ignored. The dance in itself, structured around the technique of invading the other person’s space and negotiating and renegotiating a shared space, has been interpreted as echoing the mechanics of the survival of individuality in a hostile, diverse and heavily crowded social space. While the unquestionable leading role awarded to the man makes it a heavily gendered dance which could have been deemed as unsuitable for modern use, emphasis has been placed instead on the power of the woman in becoming a perfect follower and responding to the man’s invitations with a voice of her own in an extremely loaded dialogue (which is meaningful, determined, charged, and often interpreted as aggressive or passionately violent) –or, as Borges puts it referring to the moves, mimicking those of a knife fight. Tango also elicits the recognition ‘que pelear puede ser una fiesta’(Borges 161),⁵ this has been

⁵ More recently, the fact that in its developmental years tango was danced by male couples to train each other before asking the women to dance, has made it appealing to gay and lesbian couples who are happy to go along with the lead/follow model.

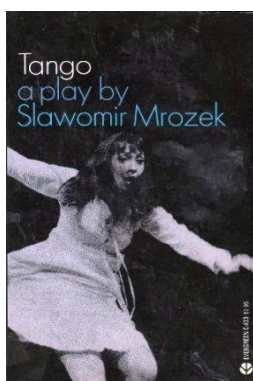
associated with the sexual image of tango (originally associated with prostitution⁶), which has become stylized and disassociated from its roughness, especially since it went to Paris and returned, transformed, to Buenos Aires. Where literature has connected with tango it is when tango has been linked to ideas.

With regard to the lyrics, Jorge Göttling identifies nine themes in tango: scepticism, the mother, the breakup of the love affair, the reencounter, revenge, the knife fight, the fleeting quality of love, alcohol, and gambling (Göttling 21-83) and, according to Farris Thompson, the Italians and Spaniards who arrived or stayed in Argentina (Buenos Aires in particular) shortly after the end of the Spanish Empire, found their 'argentinidad' in tango (Farris Thompson Ch1. Loc 303). Furthermore, there is also the idea of tango being the spiritual home to all of those who are not understood, displaced or without history. In that sense it has a timeless, nostalgic quality which allows the observer to become aware of a set of circumstances that perhaps have not been experienced exactly in the same way, but have enough in common to create a feeling of empathy, that is, the tango projects a sense of survival, which encourages the spectator, reader and dancer to fight on. In the first instance, as Borges explains, this appeal comes partially from the fact that its protagonists are rebels but also sensitive individuals:

El argentino hallaría su símbolo en el gaucho y no en el militar, porque el valor cifrado en aquél por las tradiciones orales no está al servicio de la causa y no es puro. El gaucho y el compadre son imaginados como rebeldes; el argentino, a diferencia de los americanos del Norte y de casi todos los europeos, no se identifica con el Estado. Ello puede atribuirse al hecho general de que el Estado es una inconcebible abstracción; lo cierto es que el argentino es un individuo, no un ciudadano. (Borges 162)

⁶ For further information about this connection, its uses and misuses, see Broeders pp.23-30.

In this respect, therefore, it is not surprising that the tango should have appealed to writers and readers who did not want to be associated with dictatorial regimes, even though there are notable exceptions.⁷



***Tango* (1965), by Slawomir Mrözek**

Martin Esslin notices that ‘many of the leaders of the Theatre of the Absurd were exiles, people divorced from their roots and thus particularly aware of the precariousness of human existence. [...] [and that] Slawomir Mrözek came to this experience of exile thrown into a new environment [...] by publically protesting [in *Tango* (1965)] against the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968’

(Esslin 379) even before it happened. For Esslin, Mrözek ‘is in the first rank of those truly heroic intellectuals in his country and its neighbours who, in defying naked violence and oppression, kept the true human spirit alive against all odds and preserved the tradition and pre-eminence of their national culture in the face of a determined and ruthless attempt to eradicate it’ (Esslin 380), and in this play he challenges his audience masterfully. Anthony Bukoski describes the play as follows:

In *Tango* three generations –Eugene and Eugenia representing Poland’s turn-of-the-century bourgeois society; Stomil and Eleanor, the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930; and Arthur and Ala, the modern generation– argue about and attempt to change their relatives’ moral, cultural and political views. As each fails to convince the others of the ‘forms’ that give meaning to life, the family declines. Their energies have been diffused by so much talking and by Stomil’s pointless ‘theatrical’ experiments. Eugenia dies from her grandson’s political and philosophical

⁷ While associating tango with ultra-conservatism is in a sense logical, the most common connection is with corruption. See Broeders pp.31-38.

excesses, Arthur from Eddie's beating, and Stomil spiritually and emotionally from his wife's infidelity and his own failed dreams. In the end, Eddie, a parasite who sports a Hitler-like moustache and reveals very little about himself, believing only in the power of 'a wicked punch', now dominates the family. (Bukoski 134).

What is interesting about this play is the choice of the tango as 'a mirror to misfortune' (Farris Thompson Ch2 Loc 597), which can be connected to the play's subtitle: *Tango, or the Need for Harmony and Order*, that is, the desire for an authoritarian regime to restore the family's traditional values even at the cost of going back to a dictatorship.

Anthony Bukoski finds two links with the tango: the mention of brothels (twice) representing an 'atmosphere of moral disintegration' (Bukoski 134), and the existence of a tango hat, a remnant from a time when it took great courage to dance the tango, which has survived the passing of time hidden in the accumulated junk around the house (Mrözek 25).⁸ But the most obvious link is the final tango danced by Eddie (as leader) and Eugene (as follower). As described in the stage directions, while Arthur's body still rests on the ground, 'Eddie goes out and comes back with a tape recorder. Puts it on the table and plugs it in. Immediately the tango "La Cumparsita" resounds very loud and clear. It must be this tango and no other' (Mrözek 107).

That it should be 'La Cumparsita' by Gerardo Hernán Matos Rodríguez is very interesting because it is the archetypal tango which everyone, including non-tango dancers, has heard and also because in every social tango dance known as *milonga*, 'La Cumparsita' is played specifically at the end of the evening to announce that, after dancing with as many people as possible during the event, each leader should re-join his regular partner for a last dance, before bringing the event to a close and going home.⁹

The symbolic readiness of the docile follower to go home with the oppressor is a cleverly engineered and shocking outcome.

⁸ See also Broeders pp.31-38.

⁹ La Cumparsita music: http://www.planet-tango.com/lyrics/la_cumpa.htm

Indeed, in his stage directions for Act I, Mrözek creates a picture of chaotic freedom, suggesting a triumphant overthrow of the old conventions (Mrözek 25). However, Eleanor's and Stomil's son, Arthur, endeavours to reinstate the old social and moral codes by ending what his great-uncle calls 'fifty years of "jokes"' (Mrözek 70). According to Mardi Valgemaë, this would place 'the beginning of the "joke" chronologically in the immediate vicinity of the Russian Revolution, and as Arthur's Rebellion takes on added dimensions, *Tango* shifts from the realm of social comedy to that of political allegory' (Valgemaë 45).

On the other hand, we can say that what the play glorifies the oppressor in that, at the end of the play, the son, who had come to reinstate order, is killed, and the one who takes over is the character of Eddie, a hanger-on who has just found his way into the family and into the bed of Arthur's mother. The symbolism of Eddie inviting Eugene for a dance as celebration of his power and of Eugene's submission is staggering:

Eddie puts his arm around him. They take the proper position; wait out one measure and start dancing. Eddie leads. They dance. Eugene still has the red carnation in his buttonhole. Eddie in Arthur's jacket that is too tight for him, his powerful arms protruding from the sleeves that are too short. He has taken Eugene by the waist. They dance all the figures of the tango. (Mrözek 107)

This tango is interpreted by Bukoski as 'mimic[king] a dialectical catastrophe whose synthesis in the play comes in the embrace of past and present, middle class and proletarian forces' (Bukoski 135). But its scope is probably greater than that, for, following the final stage directions we see how the stage and the audience are made to turn into one, thus evidencing how close to the present the situation is: 'The curtain falls. "La Cumparsita" is still heard. As the light goes on in the theater, the tune issues from numerous loudspeakers throughout the house' (Mrözek 107).

Martin Esslin declared that when he saw Axer's production of Slawmoir Mrözek's *Tango* he became totally convinced that 'Poland,

through its traditions as well as through its own terrible experience of the horrors of the century, was at the cutting edge of European intellectual and artistic life' (Esslin 377), and explained that:

Tango appeared to me –and appears to me now more than ever– the classical statement of the dialectics of revolution: the inception of the movement among the artistic avant-garde, whose iconoclasm undermines the certainties of the previous order, its gradual consolidation into philistine conformism as the idealistic impulses of the revolution are being lost, and its final descent into nothing but corruption and the mindless pursuit of naked power. (Esslin 377)

Indeed, the play ends with the representatives of the old and the new order dancing a ritualistic tango over the dead body of the romantic intellectual. This strikingly visual representation poses the question of whether it is possible to restore the old order, whether must we go on dancing the tango (Mardi Valgema 46) or whether we, as an audience, should respond to this outrageous outcome by identifying the threats of human nature and rebelling against the temptation of perpetuating the same old mistakes, and thus forces the audience to confront the shadow of dictatorship. and the implications of such a u-turn.

Bukoski sees Eddie's association with tango as particularly fitting because he applies to it Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's definition of it as 'a monotonous and expressionless dance [which] does not arouse in the spectator's spirit feelings of joy, of enthusiasm, of admiration, or of desire. It is a dance without soul, for automatons, for people who have renounced the complexities of mental life... It is to evade the world' (Estrada 257) – a very suitable scenario for non-retaliation by the oppressed. In fact, in an article called 'Dancing with Freud: Slawomir Mrózek's *Tango*', John O'Connor links Eddie's snatching of power to the 'instinct for mastery' (O'Connor 10); that is, 'Eddie's acquisition of control of the society essentially moves it out of the realm of civilization and into a regressed and primitive state. He will control the relationships in the society based on his own instinctual impulses.' (O'Connor 10). And Ala, one of the characters

representing the new generation, who is the woman that Arthur wants to possess (and is also his cousin), ‘controls Arthur throughout the play by toying with him, tempting and rejecting him’ and uses ‘[h]er sexuality [as] a powerful force in the play’ (O’Connor 8), much as is done in dancing the tango (Broeders 23-30). Nonetheless, by the end, Eddie, who has come from the streets but who can dance the tango, is the one in control and possesses her, and Arthur is the one who ends up dead.¹⁰

‘La Cumparsita’ in itself is a highly controversial tango.¹¹ First of all, it was composed by the Uruguayan, Gerardo Hernán Matos Rodríguez in 1917, but two Argentinians, Pascual Contursi and Enrique P. Maroni, aware of the potential of the song, usurped the tune, put lyrics to it, and made it into the great success: ‘Si supieras’.

Si supieras,
que aún dentro de mi alma,
conservo aquel cariño
que tuve para ti...
Quién sabe si supieras
que nunca te he olvidado,
volviendo a tu pasado
te acordarás de mí...

Los amigos ya no vienen
ni siquiera a visitarme,
nadie quiere consolarme
en mi aflicción...
Desde el día que te fuiste
siento angustias en mi pecho,
decí, percanta, ¿qué has hecho

¹⁰ Were it not for the fact that Eddie turns out to be another oppressor, this would be consistent with the vindication of the rights of the emotional underdog, so often found in tango lyrics. See Gottling, in Works Cited.

¹¹ The following summary has been compiled with data provided by www.todotango.com, especially Horacio Ferrer’s biography of Gerardo Matos Rodríguez.

de mi pobre corazón?

Sin embargo,
yo siempre te recuerdo
con el cariño santo
que tuve para ti.
Y estás en todas partes,
pedazo de mi vida,
y aquellos ojos que fueron mi alegría
los busco por todas partes
y no los puedo hallar.

Al cotorro abandonado
ya ni el sol de la mañana
asoma por la ventana
como cuando estabas vos,
y aquel perrito compañero,
que por tu ausencia no comía,
al verme solo el otro día
también me dejó...

There was a lawsuit where the original composer, through the Association of Artists of Argentina, managed to claim back the rights for this particular piece and, in retaliation, composed his own lyrics which were never as popular as Contursi's:

La Cumparsa
de miserias sin fin
desfila,
en torno de aquel ser
enfermo,
que pronto ha de morir
de pena.
Por eso es que en su lecho
solloza acongojado,
recordando el pasado
que lo hace padecer.

Abandonó a su viejita.
Que quedó desamparada.
Y loco de pasión,
ciego de amor,
corrió
tras de su amada,
que era linda, era hechicera,
de lujuria era una flor,
que burló su querer
hasta que se cansó
y por otro lo dejó.

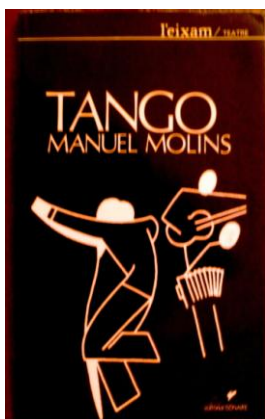
Largo tiempo
después, cayó al hogar
materno.
Para poder curar
su enfermo
y herido corazón.
Y supo
que su viejita santa,
la que él había dejado,
el invierno pasado
de frío se murió

Hoy ya solo abandonado,
a lo triste de su suerte,
ansioso espera la muerte,
que bien pronto ha de llegar.
Y entre la triste frialdad
que lenta invade el corazón
sintió la cruda sensación
de su maldad.

Entre sombras
se le oye respirar
sufriente,

al que antes de morir
sonríe,
porque una dulce paz le llega.
Sintió que desde el cielo
la madrecita buena
mitigando sus penas
sus culpas perdonó.

As can be seen above, the successful version, ‘Si supieras’ recounts the love story of a man who has been abandoned by his lover and wants her back and talks about his sorrow, which is a standard tango theme (Gottling 41-48), but the lyrics written by Matos are about an outcast: a man with no principles, who has gone away and done all sorts of morally improper things and who, by the time he goes back home, finds that his mother has died, does not have the possibility to make amends, and ends up being a reject. The hopeless outcome of Mrözek’s *Tango*, though different in its storyline to this version of ‘La Cumparsita’ finds resonance with it in that it also deals with the underdog at the same time that it takes its warning further, implying that revolution needs to be taken with caution because power can corrupt anyone who is not ruled by a good heart and a decent set of principles.



***Tango* (1983-2012), by Manuel Molins**

Manuel Molins engages with Latin-American music forms such as the Argentinian tango and the Cuban bolero not only as a vehicle for the subtle introduction of Catalan sentiment into his works, but also as a means of connection with a world-wide spectator or reader. This shows us some of the implications in Catalan drama of elements of invisible heritage such as the tango, questioning current interpretations, and inviting new cultural and historical

understanding; how peripheral art forms can impact on the plays within which they operate, combining the alterity of geographically distant minority groups into the global community of exiles, oppressed individuals, and music lovers.¹²

Molins' *Tango* was originally published in 1983, but was quite substantially revised by the author in 2012.¹³ It is a play about an odd couple (Marta Furió in her 40s, and Marc Roig, aged 23) who celebrate the first anniversary of their relationship, when they met and danced the tango 'Youkali' (1934) by the German composer Kurt Weill (Dessau 1900-1950).¹⁴ Marta, who has just found out that she is pregnant, wants to get divorced from her husband Tomàs Turull (a highly ambitious ultra-Catholic banker now turned politician aged 45, who has been happy to let Marta live away and have affairs for several years, but who is now concerned that this may tarnish his political career) and marry her lover Mark. As it turns out, Tomàs paid Mark to become Marta's lover so he could keep a close eye on her, and is now furious because not only has he got her pregnant, but he declares he is in love with her.¹⁵ Even though Marc asks her to elope with him after

¹² For a full study of the world-wide appeal and commodification of tango, see Maria Törnqvist in Works Cited.

¹³ In this article I will be using the unpublished, revised 2012 version, kindly supplied to me by the playwright. The nature of the changes between the two versions is that of filling in much of the detail on the tango and on the ways in which it needs to be performed. Even though one could try to interpret such changes as linked to the evolving political circumstances regarding Valencia itself and the Catalan Countries' recent history, looking at it in detail, the case does not seem compelling.

¹⁴ 'Youkali' was originally the Tango habanera instrumental movement for *Marie Galante* (1934), a play by Jaques Deval (Paris 1890- 1972). Kurt Weill composed the music while he was in exile in Paris, before he moved to the US; Roger Fernay (Villefranche-sur-Mer 1905-1983) wrote the lyrics.

¹⁵ The action takes place on Saint John's Eve. This is a religious commemoration made to coincide with the timing of the Summer solstice, and which has retained the pagan belief of being a magic night, hence the ritual dance, the swimming in the Mediterranean Sea at night, and Marta's purchase of a magic sword for Marc. There is also the build-up of a Summer storm, which echoes the perceived tension of the tango as a dance as well as the fraught relationships which we discover through the dialogue.

her fake suicide, Marta decides to go and live her life with the baby and leaves him behind singing the last lines of the same tango.¹⁶

This is a different type of tango to 'la Cumparsita' as it is not very well known and it is in French, thus displaying not a search for Argentinian authenticity, but a link to Parisian tango, that is, a composition much more stylised and far removed from the grass roots of the "Guardia vieja" (The Old Guard).¹⁷ The action takes place in a traditional Catalan country house (*masia*), located in a cosmopolitan part of the coast where many cultures meet but where anonymity for the couple thus far has also been possible. Tango music starts playing in the background even before the characters come on stage and only vanishes once they embrace.¹⁸ Marta is singing and practises her tango steps as she lays the table. Marc arrives and comments on her technique, but she immediately puts him in his place by reminding him that 'el tango no és per ballar-lo sola. Després el ballarem tots dos' (Molins 2012 4). Indeed, in a metatheatrical turn, and as part of the celebration, Molins makes them re-enact their first meeting one year earlier featuring a display of identity swap between the two lovers, with Marta playing Marc and vice-versa. In this way, not only does the audience piece together the original events, but does so through role and gender reversal.

We thus find out that on their first meeting Marc invited Marta to dance a disco song. Marta thought that he was treating her like a prostitute, felt outraged and left, but after thinking it through, she returned and, happy to go along with that role, asked him to dance the tango ('Youkali') that was playing at the time.¹⁹ To start with, the dance was a struggle because of its technical difficulty, but Marc admits that it aroused his desire and that, despite his lack of dancing accomplishment, there followed two days of sex and a relationship which lasted until now.

¹⁶ 'Youkali', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHIIHyOglPY>

¹⁷ See Broedes pp.38-50.

¹⁸ The 2012 version includes a new start to the play with stage directions detailing the tango, the steps and Marta reciting the first lines of the song without noticing Marc's arrival.

¹⁹ On the link with prostitution, see Broedes pp.23-30.

The lyrics of this tango are to do with their aspirations and describe an idyllic land where the lovers are going to be together and happy forever more.

Youkali, c'est le pays de nos désirs.
Youkali, c'est le bonheur, c'est le plaisir.
Youkali, c'est la terre où l'on quitte tous les soucis.
C'est dans notre nuit
comme une éclaircie,
l'étoile qu'on suit
c'est Youkali. (Molins 2012 4)

Through their dance, the characters move to a space of evasion, a paradise. But when reality returns, it becomes obvious that the paradise Marta dreams of is not the same that Marc has in mind. Thus the play's ending, with the man singing alone, offers a stark contrast to Mrözek's where the end features two men dancing together.²⁰

In this particular case, it is not technically realistic to expect an inexperienced man to dance it on his first tango-music track. This issue is resolved by Molins by getting Marta to take the leading role in the first instance (Molins 2012 11), teach Marc how to move around the dance floor (Molins 2012 12) and only making Marc actually lead the dance one year later, through the role reversal.²¹ Even though this is quite unusual nowadays, in the early years it was supposedly common for prostitutes and paid female dancers to take beginners to

²⁰ Even if at first sight this same-sex coupling may seem odd, there is a historical justification for it in that, in Buenos Aires in the late 1800s, there were so many immigrants and so few women that the men learned their technique with each other until their dancing was accomplished enough to perform adequately on the dance floor, otherwise they ran the risk of being turned down and spending all evening waiting at the side. The disturbing thing about Eugene, is that we get the feeling that he had known how to dance the tango all along and that points to a return to the 'Old Guard' as if it had been hibernating, waiting for this moment.

²¹ And, ironically, at the end of the song, she compliments him for being so easy to lead (Molins 2012 12).

the dance floor and continue with their instruction after the man-to-man training phase.²² So, this interpretation of the tango, like Mrózek's, could also be historically justified.²³ However, as the play develops and Marc falls into the expected leader's role where he feels comfortable, he starts to believe that he has the power to Marta to his version of the fantasy land that is Youkali. While these gender stereotypes associated with the tango seem on the surface to go against modern standards, Molins subverts the myth of the submissive follower by showing how Marta (who is the one who leads the tango in the first instance and is untroubled by Marc leading her in the second) is nonetheless able to turn it into an empowering tool and engineers the play's outcome.²⁴ She is the one who also knows the reality of the lyrics: that Youkali is dreamland and, therefore, does not exist. So, by letting herself be led, she exploits Marc's weakness and, not only gains power, but succeeds in shaping her own survival – a refreshing contrast to both the domineering role played by her husband and the naivety of her lover.

Tango music is appealing to the lovers for different reasons. Marc declares: 'Sóc un anacrònic, preferisc ballar ben enganxat...' (Molins 2012 7) and Marta explains that she loves Youkali because it transports her to a fantasy island, a world of pleasure and desire. They are both affected by a sense of otherness and feel ill at ease in the disco where they have met. But it is Marta who can see beyond the stereotypes: 'Érem patètics tots dos. No encaixàvem de cap manera en aquell lloc' (Molins 2012 7), signalling her broader perspective.²⁵ Interestingly, however, when Marc asks Marta in which country Youkali is, she replies that it is 'Aquí, entre tu i jo, és la pista' (Molins

²² See, for instance, the description of this process in Carmen Montoro Cavero's novel, *La vidriera irrespetuosa* (2012).

²³ See also Broedes pp.23-30.

²⁴ In modern times, women tango dancers have been heavily criticised by feminist discourse because of what is often mistakenly interpreted as their submissive role, but the post-modern woman knows that it is not.

²⁵ This feeling of otherness is also compounded by their age difference and Marc's preference for older women.

2012 11), showing that when they are together on the dance floor they share this fantasy.²⁶

It is during Marc's initial tango lesson that the conversation reveals not only what they resonate with in the dance, but also the peculiarities and of state of mind of the two characters.²⁷ Of relevance in this respect is Marc's desire to ignore the past and Marta's desire to forget it altogether (Molins 2012 17). Marc shows an identification with uprooted people without history (normally associated with the birth of tango) Marc tells Marta: 'Et vull així; exactament així, sense història. Com els protagonistes d'un vell tango'. (Molins 2012 18) and describes himself as a sentimental man who likes tango music (Molins 2012 26).²⁸ Marta, on the other hand, describes the tango as a vulgar and melodramatic type of music suitable for old people (Molins 2012 26), showing that she is not taken in by the myths, while Marc evokes the image of tango as a log to cling on to after a shipwreck (Molins 2012 46 & 52) and tries correcting her by explaining:

No, t'equivoques, el tango no té edat ni temps perquè la seua música és la queixa dels que intenten sobreviure a totes les desfetes [...] l'amor, la mort... El tango és la passió arravatadora i vulgar que ens justifica i empeny fins al crim o al suïcidi. (26)²⁹

²⁶ This same idea is developed by Kapka Kassabova in her novel *Twelve Minutes of Love* (2012).

²⁷ This lesson will be re-enacted towards the end of the play, but the tone will be stern and the dynamics of it will therefore be transformed by the deterioration of the relationship (47). As in the tango, the dialogue reproduces the repetition of specific sequences, which can be led into and out of in many different ways, and which acquire a different poignancy depending on the context within which they are placed. This reoccurrence of patterns is characteristic of the whole play.

²⁸ Marc is also a bit self-conscious about this, as shown when, referring to the fact that the DJ at the disco plays the same tango, he states: 'Imbècil! Vaig pensar; es burla de mi. Aquest paio s'ha olorat la història i se'n riu del presumpte macarró' (Molins 2012 10).

²⁹ These words, first uttered when Marta agrees to Marc leaving the house to go to his business meeting, will be repeated later in the play when she decides to leave him (Molins 2012 47).

As seen in this quotation and in the foreword to the play, Manuel Molins describes *Tango* as a melodrama (Molins 2012 3)³⁰, which, as Peter Brooks explains, is the socialization of that which is profoundly personal in a context where virtue is powerlessly under threat but where in the end, evil is expelled because the way in which society works is shown to be right (Brooks 85-88). Nonetheless, Molins has his own interpretation of the genre and writes that:

Segons el Diccionari Fabra, un *melodrama* és un “drama popular que tracta de commoure per la violència de les situacions, l’exageració dels sentiments”. No discutiré tan autoritzada definició, tot i que seria convenient revisar-la i matisar-la. Però no és faena meua: jo he de dir que intente escriure un *melodrama*, un discurs efímer que commoga el major nombre possible d’espectadors eventuais i d’eventuals lectors. Escriure melodrama és una tasca feixuga que no sempre ha estat justament estimada pels centaures teòrics del teatre: s’han despreciat tantes coses en nom d’un conjunt de tòpics tan escarransits i fastigosos, que potser a hores d’ara hem arribat en un atzucac prometedor: la crisi de les visions i els anatemes d’aquells centaures miops. Ho torne a dir: hi assage d’escriure un *tango* dramàtic, un de tants tangos dramàtics com s’han escrit, respectant, fins on siga capaç, totes les convencions del gènere. D’una altra manera: no hi jugue a manipular cap codi. Les meues pretensions són més arran de terra. És clar que hi faré la meua com déu em done a entendre. (Molins 2012 3)

Thus, Molins intends to be faithful to the code (as the dances keep to tango protocol) and only push its boundaries from within its strict parameters, in the same way that Dominic Keown sees the play making use of melodrama in order to show how society entraps women:

³⁰ The same connection with melodrama was also made by the Argentinean novelist Manuel Puig in *Boquitas pintadas* in (1969).

El melodrama no deixa de ser apropiadíssim en aquest context, donada la seva universalitat, sobretot en la fórmula del culebrot. Això no obstant, amb la seva discrepància del cànon espanyol i l'ús d'aquest com a vehicle de la promoció del masclisme oficial, el cas de *Tango*, de Manuel Molins, provoca tota una sèrie de reflexions antitètiques no sols en el teatre, sinó també en el camp de la política sexual. (Keown 278)

On the other hand, once Marc has left and her husband Tomàs appears, he mocks her for her taste in literature (romantic novels) and tells her that her explanations sound 'a lletra de tango', because she has 'gobbled up' so many 'històries malaltisses' (Molins 2012 32), but Marta explains that it was precisely thanks to them that she managed to survive life with him and, what is more, she tells him that: 'les novel·les em feien sentir viva i em procuraven les sensacions de la gent normal: amor, odi, passions...' to the point that 'Vaig comprendre que la meua vida era ben lluny dels grans personatges i vaig provar sort en els melodrames' (Molins 2012 32). And metatheatrically, Marta and Marc also comment:

MARC: El tango és molt complicat i un punt trist, no creus?

MARTA: El tango és un drama.

MARC: A mi em sembla un melodrama.

MARTA: Exactament, sí; un melodrama. És el romanç de la gent sense història. Però callem i lliurem-nos al plaer de la vulgaritat.

La parella s'acobla quasi perfectament. Ballen. La música s'esvaeix poc a poc (12).

One could say that Molins uses the tango dance to display the ways in which it is possible to become empowered even while inside an apparently inescapable enclosure. Marta has realized that security (like that offered by Tomàs and the security men he employed to guard her and their house) is a prison (Molins 2012 44). She now stares reality in the face and, even though for a while she descends into despair and alcohol like Tomàs, 'Youkali' starts playing and saves her (Molins 2012 45). At this point the music is quite

aggressive. As the stage directions explain: 'Marta balla alternant els passos amb Marc, Tomàs o tota sola d'acord amb els impulsos i l'eficàcia del seu relat o l'interlocutor. És clar que les reaccions dels personatges són ben diferents d'acord amb les respectives situacions i biografies' (Molins 2012 46).

At the end of the play it is Marc who is left with the solace of tango. He finishes the song:

Youkali c'est le pays de nos désirs.
Youkali, c'est le bonheur, c'est le plaisir.
Mais c'est un rêve, une folie,
Il n'y a pas de Youkali. (Molins 2012 52)

and he declares:

És la il·lusió dels qui estimen i la força dels qui intenten sobreviure a la desfeta del temps. El tango és la passió dels qui miren cada nou dia amb el cos fatigat o l'esperit confús. Sobretot això, la gran passió vulgar que ens justifica i empeny...

Mais c'est un rêve, une folie, \ il n'y a pas de Youkali.

Ballem ? (Molins 2012 52)

Conclusions

We could summarise by saying that the tango tends to appear in plays relating to individual suffering generated by social, economic or personal crises. It is effective because it taps into the popular imagination and specific stereotypes, and only occasionally does it push the boundaries of these stereotypes. It often uses them to communicate with the audience in a visceral rather than a purely intellectual way. In both *Tangos* we find the reproduction of the complex dance techniques in the structure of the play. A key feature is the constant invasion of another's personal space, which develops plots of desire and rejection, attraction and repulsion, success and failure. It seems hard to believe, but in both plays, trauma has made

characters such as uncle Eugene and Marc more docile and placed them closer to the ethos of tango.

Both Mrözek and Molins relate to the tango as a composite of dance, lyrics and myths. Both plays show how the tango is deeply rooted in the communal unconscious and how it has become a useful tool which can help in the development of the individual and the collective in a Polish and a Valencian-Catalan environment, as well as universally. The analysis has also revealed that while stripped of their Latin-American cultural context, the key features of the tango have been preserved, turning it into a psychological tool in the development of these two authors', their characters' and their audiences' emotional intelligence.

It is also worth noting that chronology plays an important role in the interpretations of tango that we have encountered. Tango has gone through different phases of popularity and its rediscovery did not take place in the mid-eighties, that is, around the time when Manuel Molins was writing the first version of his play, and by the time he revised it in 2012, it had already entered its post-feminist phase. Conversely, when Mrözek was writing his play in 1965, the tango was out of fashion and its interpretation was therefore more ambivalent. We can thus explain how, on the one hand Mrözek exploits the myth of the forbidden dance,³¹ while on the other, he also convincingly uses it to represent the oppression exerted by tyrants because of its associations with fascism, corruption, extortion and exploitation. Molins, however, is not concerned with questions of inequality, but more with role reversal and demonstrating that, beyond gender stereotypes, the tango remains useful and valuable as a literary and psychological tool.³² However, at the same time, we find a visceral connection that people make with the tango, which goes beyond the dance, the music and the text, as Kapka Kassabova states:

³¹ For more on the myth of the forbidden dance, see Broedes pp.31-38.

³² And he is not alone in that. Jaime Gil de Biedma, for instance, saw a strong connection between tango and poetry when he stated that 'la mejor poesía / es el Verbo hecho tango' (Gil de Biedma 139). 'El juego de hacer versos', *Las personas del verbo*, (1975).

[Y]ou don't need to dance to make room for the soul of tango inside you. You need to have loved and lost. You need to hope, which is just another word for love. You need to live without holding back. Without fear. (Kassabova 288)

While tango enunciates and develops the themes of love, betrayal, longing, lying, misunderstanding and disappointment, it reaches for complicity, dialogue, negotiation and for the ultimate connection in the execution of the dance and, quite importantly, it capitalises on the enjoyment of the moment, reinforced by the fact that it is as a close-embrace dance. Nonetheless, its intrinsic structure, complexity, rigorous technique and formality can also link it to ultra-conservatism, corruption, violence and chauvinism. This wide spectrum of associations is what gives the tango its huge dramatic potential.

Works Cited

- Borges, Jorge Luis (1974). *Obras Completas*, Buenos Aires: Emecé, <http://literaturaargentina.lunrn.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/borges-jorge-luis-obras-completas.pdf>
- Broedes, Mario (2012). *The Myths About Tango*, e-book.
- Brooks, Peter (1976). *The Melodramatic Imagination*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Brown, Susan August. 'Argentine Tango: A Brief History', http://www.tejastango.com/tango_history.html (Accessed 31/10/2014).
- Bukoski, Anthony (1992). 'Wajda's Kanał and Mrozek's Tango', *Literature Film Quarterly*, 20 (2): 133-37.
- Clarke, David (2011). *Music and Consciousness: Philosophical, Psychological and Cultural Perspectives*, Oxford: OUP.
- Clayton, Martin & Herbert, M. et al (2012), *The Cultural Study of Music. A Critical Introduction*, London: Routledge.
- Cunningham, Amy (3 July 2011). 'Carlos Gardel: The King of Tango', Sound and Colours,

- <http://www.soundsandcolours.com/articles/argentina/carlos-gardel-the-king-of-tango/>
- Esslin, Martin (1994). 'Mrözek, Beckett, and the Theatre of the Absurd', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 10 (40): 377-8.
- Farris Thompson, Robert, *Tango, The Art History of Love*, New York: Vintage Books. e-book.
- Ferrer, Horacio, 'Biografia de Gerardo Matos Rodríguez', <http://www.todotango.com/creadores/biografia/1022/Gerardo-Matos-Rodriguez/>
- Fordham, Michael (1978). *Jungian Psychotherapy*, Chichester: Avon.
- Gil de Biedma, Jaime (1975). 'El juego de hacer versos', *Las personas del verbo*, Barcelona: Seix Barral (1996).
- Groppa, Carlos G. (2004). *The Tango in the United States. A History*, London: McFarland.
- Gottling, Jorge (1998). *Tango, Melancólico Testigo*, Buenos Aires: Corregidor.
- Kassabova, Kapka (2012). *Twelve Minutes of Love*, London: Portobello Books.
- Kaufman, Carolyn (24/01/2007). 'Three-Dimensional Villains: Finding Your Character's Shadow', <http://ezinearticles.com/?Three-Dimensional-Villains---Finding-Your-Characters-Shadow&id=428279>
- Keown, Dominic (2008). 'Algunes reflexions sobre la traducció teatral: a propòsit de *Tango*', in *Teatre, passions i (alters) insolències. Lectures sobre la dramaturgia de Manuel Molins*, Foguet, Francesc and Sansano, Biel, Eds., València: Universitat de València, pp.255-279.
- Levi, EriK (2010). *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Martínez Estrada, Ezequiel (1971). *X-Ray of the Pampa*, Austin: University of Texas Publications.
- Molins, Manuel (1983). *Tango*, València: L'Eixam, (2012), *Tango*, València: Author's Edition.
- Montoro Cavero, Carmen (2007). *La vidriera Irrespetuosa*, Valencia: e-book.

- O'Connor, John (2001). 'Dancing with Freud: Slawomir Mrózek's *Tango*', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, Fall 34 (2), 1-11.
- Storm Roberts, John (1999). *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the US*, Oxford: OUP.
- Tornqvist, María (2013). *Tourism and the Globalization of Emotions. The Intimate Economy of Tango*, London: Routledge.
- Valgema, Mardi (1971). 'Socialist Allegory of the Absurd: An Examination of Four East European Plays', *Comparative Drama*, 5 44-52.