

Argentine culture

Dancing in the dark

A book about a dance contest is also a meditation on authenticity

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A Simple Story: Dancing for his Life. By Leila Guerriero. Translated by Thomas Bunstead. *Pushkin Press*; 160 pages; £9.99.



IN THIS book about dance in Argentina, the word “tango” appears just once. Its subject, instead, is *malambo*, the floor-pounding, heart-quickenning dance beloved of gauchos, cowboys of the pampas, which is at its purest when performed solo. Tango’s absence from this poetic account of a contest in Laborde, “one of thousands of places in the country’s vast interior” that few Argentines have ever heard of, also has a deeper significance. “A Simple Story” is about an expression of a culture that, unlike tango, has been passed over, neglected or forgotten by all but a few devotees, for whom it is an obsession. Its obscurity, this book suggests, is its salvation.

Leila Guerriero, an Argentine journalist, hangs her story on slight, not-so-young Rodolfo González Alcántara as he prepares to compete in the National Festival of Malambo, an annual contest whose winner may never compete again. He is “crowned and destroyed in the same instant,” Ms Guerriero writes. Like nearly all *malambistas* Mr González is clean-living, and toughened both by deprivation and by his gruelling art, which demands five relentless, bone-breaking minutes of prancing and kicking and allows no sign of the breathlessness it causes. He never fails to read his blue-bound Bible before going on stage.

As Ms Guerriero tells the reader more than once, the dancers aspire “to the gaucho attributes: austerity, courage, pride, sincerity, forthrightness”; to “face all that life will throw at them—which is, and always has been, a great deal”.

She wonders repeatedly why men endure torture to triumph in this contest “of such slender renown”, in which the guitar is not amplified electronically, the champion is crowned at dawn and the prize is a plain trophy made by a local craftsman. Part of the answer is obvious: glory among the relatively few people who care, and generous teaching fees that will come their way if they win. Another answer is the real subject of this moving book: to uphold an art and tradition whose value is enlarged by the meagre rewards they bring.