Lords of the dance

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Leila Guerriero
A SIMPLE STORY
Dancing for his title
Translated by Thomas Bushkead
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Rodolfo Gonzalez Alcantara from A Simple Story
 instead a 5-foot man with stage fright.

The first thing that appeals about this compact book is the clarity of its presentation, from the cover illustration (a stylized masked gaucho) to the opening sentence: “This is the story of a man who took part in a dance contest.” The second striking thing is the opening description of a provincial Argentine town called Laborde, so provincial that even Argentinians don’t know it. Unless they happen to be followers of a traditional male solo dance called malambo, that is; for Laborde (“straight out of the mind of a very orderly, or perhaps psychotic, child”) is the heartland of malambo. Each year, an elaborate contest takes place there.

In the space of 150 pages of workmanlike prose that occasionally rises to lyricism, the Buenos Aires journalist Leila Guerriero tells a fascinating triple story: of a grassroots art form, of one man’s pursuit of his dream, and of the men of long-class Argentina. Like its cosmopolitan cousin the tango, malambo germinated among indigenous settlers including Afro-Argentineans and immigrants (notably Italians), and mirrored the gaucho gait: an accelerating gallop of complex tap-steps that acts as a duel. It pumps with gaucho machismo, and with a lover’s passion for the prize; a piece of the pampas was the gaucho’s only asset, after his horse and his pride. So intense is malambo’s physicality that it cannot be sustained for more than four or five minutes. —‘Because’, one dancer puts it plainly, “you can’t dance with a handheld assault rifle.” Guerriero briskly asserts that “people agree [malambo] probably arrived in Argentina from Peru, but this is far from agreed among musicologists.” She is inexplicably silent on its Afro-Argentinean origin and offers no imaginative or literary context. Perhaps it is more to the narrative interest of the habitual victims of the dance: the Martin Fierro gaucho saga and cowboy movies are de rigueur.

In Jorge Luis Borges’s story “Man On Pink Corner”, two men in a club dance-fight to the death over a woman. But in Guerriero’s narrative, men dance to the death over a dream: the dream of escaping social estrangement, poverty, invisibility, because “when you’re up there you don’t feel the pain. You become a giant”, another dancer says. Malambo dancers share the same baggage of large families with little to eat or hope for, except to be malambo king. As with tango in Argentina, more often than not it is socially disempowered men and women who become great dancers.

But there is a terrible twist at the heart of malambo ambition: the moment a dancer becomes Laborde champion, he attains fame and lucrative teaching gigs, but he may never perform or compete again lost to the town’s perfect reputation. And so his crowning dance is also his swansong. With everything to lose and a new sorrow to gain, dedicated dancers compete year after year.

Guerriero’s prose suddenly soars when she sees for the first time the dancer of the title enter the stage like a “thief of souls”. “He became the countryside, the dry earth, the vast pampas horizon; he was the smell of horses, the sound of the sky in hiding, the sound of solitude — furious, illogic, and war.” Going backstage to look for “a giant”, she finds

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