

Lords of the dance

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 Argentinian 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 modern working-class Argentina. Like its cosmopolitan cousin the tango, malambo germinated among indigenous settlers including Afro-Argentines 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 prairie; a piece of the pampas was the gaucho's only possible 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'll suffocate". Guerriero brashly 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-Argentinian connection and offers no imaginative or literary context. Perhaps it is more to the narrative point that we learn the reading habits of dancers: 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 entrapment, 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 background 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, lest he injure 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 taut pampas horizon, he was the smell of horses, the sound of the sky in summer, and the hum of solitude – fury, illness, and war". Going backstage to look for "a giant", she finds

KAPKA KASSABOVA

Leila Guerriero

A SIMPLE STORY

Dancing for his life

Translated by Thomas Bunstead
160pp. Pushkin Press. £9.99.
978 1 78227 159 7



Rodolfo Gonzalez Alcantara;
from *A Simple Story*

instead a 5-foot man with stage fright.

Here the narrative takes off. Guerriero befriends Rodolfo González Alcántara and his wife, trails him through two years of back-breaking training, navigates through the coded world of competitive dancing, and tells Rodolfo's story with compassion all the way to the wrenching climax. We quickly grasp just how high the malambo stakes are for him and the adversaries who are also his friends; it is a small community. Although Guerriero employs the odd nervous rhetorical flourish, she keeps the narrative momentum; the reader is full of awe and desperate hope for Rodolfo. In one scene, he confides that you never breathe with your mouth open when you're on stage, because people know you are gasping. If you breathe through your nose, "no one has to know what you're going through".

Rodolfo went through years of naked hunger in a Buenos Aires suffering economic collapse while perfecting his malambo with the support of his girlfriend Miriam, a fellow dancer. His family all turn up at the finals, though they cannot afford the tickets. As well as painting a poignant portrait of an everyday hero ("You feel like asking him where is it, where have you left the monster that devours you when you go on stage?"), Guerriero captures the existential complexity of malambo not only as the artistic manifestation of a stoic frontier culture, but also as the living expression of an enduring dream: the dream of self-sacrifice at the altar of art. As Borges said of malambo, if nothing else, it gives men "the certainty of having been brave". Yet one of the questions we are left with, to Leila Guerriero's credit, has little to do with malambo: how many of us will have that certainty?

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Telephone: 020 7782 5000 www.the-tls.co.uk

Editor Peter Stothard (editor@the-tls.co.uk)
Deputy Editor Alan Jenkins (deputy@the-tls.co.uk)
Managing Editor Robert Potts (robert.potts@the-tls.co.uk)
Assistant to the Editor Janice Sims (Janice1Sims@the-tls.co.uk) 020 7782 4962
Editorial enquiries (queries@the-tls.co.uk)

Michael Caines English Literature (michael.caines@the-tls.co.uk)
James Campbell American Literature (jim.campbell@the-tls.co.uk)
Lucy Dallas Arts, Food, Digital (lucy.dallas@the-tls.co.uk)
Rosalind Dineen Fiction, International Relations, Digital (rosalind.dineen@the-tls.co.uk)
David Horspool History, Archaeology, Law, Sport (david.horspool@the-tls.co.uk)
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Alan Jenkins Commentary, Poetry, English Literature (deputy@the-tls.co.uk)
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Managing Director James MacManus (deborah.keegan@news.co.uk)
Marketing Director Yvonne Dwerryhouse (yvonne.dwerryhouse@news.co.uk)
Display Advertising Jonathan Drummond (jonathan.drummond@the-tls.co.uk)
Classified Lucy Smart (lucy.smart@the-tls.co.uk)

Correspondence and deliveries 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

Subscriptions tlssubs@inter-media.co.uk 01737 420116; US/Canada custsvc_timesupl@fulcoinc.com
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