

The Tango is more than just dancing; it's a connection

The Tango Center in downtown Eugene provides a venue for Tango enthusiasts to hone their passion

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Marisela Rizik's tiny frame betrays her authority. She stands in the center of the dance floor at Eugene's Tango Center and speaks in a firm, insistent tone with an accent hinting at Dominican Republic roots.

"Tango is about connection," she announces, rotating smoothly on the heel of her right Tango shoe. "You must connect with yourself and your partner. You must learn to communicate without using words."

The connection Rizik's verbal communication has made leaves little room for interpretation: Another crop of Tango enthusiasts has just been brought into the world.

The Tango Center - a non-profit, community-operated dance hall located at 194 W. Broadway - has been open for nearly two years. According to Greg Bryant, executive director of the center, the 1,500-square-foot dance floor has seen more than a few thousand pairs of feet in that time. In fact, he believes Eugene is a perfect fit for the dance, which explains why the "Tango movement," as he calls it, has taken on such a strong following here.

"Tango doesn't really work unless you're interested in communicating," Bryant said. "So, people in Eugene, well, let's just say they're not here for the economy. They are here to discover things about themselves and to find where they'd like their life to go in an area where other people are doing the same thing. Tango is a dance that has those very qualities. It helps you discover things about other people and about yourself."

The dance itself has a complex history. It primarily originated in Buenos Aires, Argentina in the late 19th century. However, historical events within the country, such as economic depressions and changing governments, caused the popularity of Tango to wax and wane throughout the 1900s. According to Bryant, when the military dictatorship that implanted itself in the '50s and outlawed all public gatherings was ousted in the '80s, the underground Tango movement experienced its most recent revival.



Kristen Gerhard | Pulse reporter

Greg Bryant, executive director of Eugene's Tango Center, and University sophomore Amanda Rondeau dance a set at the Center's milonga Friday night

"There was a lot of energy around it and a lot of interest in it there," Bryant said, "and so, it slowly got rekindled and exported."

Despite its international appeal, Bryant said there are few places in the world outside of Argentina where Tango has experienced so powerful a revival as right here in Eugene. Large numbers of dancers come to the center each Friday and Saturday night for the milonga - a place or event where people dance the Tango - and after speaking to any one of them, it becomes clear how passionate they feel about the dance.

Andrew McCollough, a graduate student at the University, made his decision to come to Eugene in part because of the vibrant Tango scene. He teaches a number of Tango classes in the area, including lessons at the Tango Center. He said the most difficult thing about learning to Tango is figuring out how to balance it with everything else in life.

"I sleep less, dance more," he said, describing himself and others in the Eugene Tango movement as "Tango junkies."

Vicky Ayers, a faculty member who teaches Tango lessons at the University, explained that University students make up a large portion of the Tango scene. She believes they are often drawn to the aesthetic appeal of the dance.

"It looks great," she said. "Couples swirling, people talking and laughing as they sit and watch. It is a very exciting scene. But underneath the glitter, the best part is that everyone feels welcome."

Erica Whitty, a full-time administrative faculty member and student at the University, was originally drawn to the Tango Center by the soft glow of icicle and mood lights, and the sounds of a live Tango band. She stayed, however, because of the bond she quickly formed with other regulars at the center.

"Tango is all about connection," she said. "It's like experiencing a dialogue but you're not saying a word. You can just have these really personal moments with somebody - some of us like to call them Tango moments - where you're completely relaxed and just really tuned in to that telepathic connection."

There are a lot of traditional aspects of the dance, such as trading partners after a set of four songs and making eye contact with people before you ask them to dance. Also, beginners who need to communicate verbally with their partners should avoid the main floor. However, Whitty said Tango is also about improvising. Contrasting sharply with more traditional types of dance, Tango has more of a vocabulary and less of a structure.

Members of the Eugene Tango community recommended that University students interested in Tango try the lessons at the Tango Center or stop by for a milonga. The center's dance floor is one of the best in the world, Bryant said, and most people who come to Tango stay all night, dancing from 9 p.m. until the center closes at 1 a.m.

"I think everyone should dance," McCollough said. "A day spent without dancing is a day wasted."

For more information, visit the Tango Center's Web site at www.tangocenter.org.

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