



## Unión Tanguera transports its sexy *Nuit Blanche* to Berkeley

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1913 was an infamous year in the history of music and dance, the year that Stravinsky and Nijinsky unleashed *Le Sacre du Printemps* on an unsuspecting Parisian audience, provoking a riot. But it was also the year that the world went tango mad. All of Europe was dancing it, although it was denounced as soul-corrupting (“Tango defeats Vatican” screamed a December headline in the New York Times: “Strenuous efforts made by the Vatican to suppress the tango dancing-mania in Italy have proved a failure.”) It was the first



couple dance ever seen in Europe that invited improvisation. Legend has it that Parisian women abandoned the corset in order to dance the tango.

100 years later, the French-Argentine Unión Tanguera is keeping us up at night at Cal Performances in Berkeley with *Nuit Blanche* (*Sleepless Night*), their imaginative evolution of tango into a loosely spun tale of “alcohol and isolation,” the program notes tell us. As the evening winds down at a cabaret-*milonga* (tango nightclub) – that would be breakfast time for Americans – the tango performers mingle with the clientele, pick fights, have sex, and ruminate on existential issues, as boredom and disappointment set in.

The stage is divided by panels of scrim that serve principally to separate the musicians from the dancers, and provide various entrance and exit points. Composer-pianist Pedro Onetto wrote the bewitching score, mostly played live, that traipses easily between generations of tango and integrates pulsating electronic sounds. Camilo Ferrero played a mean bandoneón while Marta Roca sizzled on violin and Ignacio Varchausky served up driving rhythms on



double bass. The only other set element were three large, squishy beanbags that performed triple duty as seating, as stylish accessories that the women toted around, and as weapons to

fling at each other when tempers flared.

Three central duets establish a clear progression, starting with Lucila Cionci and Rodrigo “Joe” Corbata, who dance as if they are devoted lovers but erupt in conflict as soon as their “performance” is over. Second are Claudia Jakobsen and Jorge Crudo, who are dizzy in love but may not have their feet on the ground. Finally to Esteban Moreno and Claudia Codega, who appear to have found that elusive, perfect communion.

These duets are offset by ensemble numbers, all in an offbeat and mostly entrancing fusion of tango styles with contemporary dance, in which traditional embraces are often abandoned, innovative grips introduced, and embellishments such as acrobatic and balletic lifts seamlessly incorporated. Gravity of a Martha Graham nature frequently pulls the dancers down to the floor. The concept of leading and following takes on new dimensions as a man crawls on the floor, his hands wrapped desperately around a woman’s ankles, or as a woman dances with two men, one of whom is perched on the other’s shoulders, experimenting with various holds, to comical effect.

The tradition of *cabeceo*, the courtly non-verbal invitation to dance, is quickly tossed out the window, as the four men and three women pair off restlessly in various permutations on speed dating. Men occasionally dance with men and women with women, but the same-sex partnering – powerful and athletic – seems to banish intimacy; the partners size each other up, perhaps as rivals for the same woman, or man’s, affection. (A reminder that tango was often danced by men with men, at a time in history when European men immigrated in droves to build the nation’s infrastructure, and competed for scarce women by showing off their mastery of the dance form.)

Passions ignite, couples start rolling on the ground, and the men bounce off the women in decidedly uncourtly fashion, sending tango aficionados in the audience scrambling for their tango rule books. We’re thinking this is perhaps not a high-class nightclub, but one of the seedier variety.

The fire engine red bean bags are deployed to hilarious effect in one episode, as the women sling them over their shoulders like giant handbags. The men fondle the bean bags, as if they were inflated extensions of the women’s anatomy. The bean bags get in the way of a close embrace, however – one of several gags underscoring men and women’s inability to

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connect – and by the end of the number, the women peevisly flatten the men underneath a three-bean-bag pile-up.

Claudia Jakobsen and Jorge Crudo dance a lyrical, balletic duet with many swirling lifts, Jakobsen in bare feet. Echoes of Pina Bausch come through in Jakobsen's obsession with shoes: she insists on trying-on a reluctant friend's shoes, and jabbbers on like a Valley girl about her love for shoes, in one of several spoken segments (difficult to make out given the lacklustre acoustics at Zellerbach Hall).

Onetto's evocative piano ushered in the final, fluid tango of the evening with a dignified, melancholy *Despedida*, the sound of falling rain – or someone running a bracing cold shower – in the background.

Brainchild of Unión Tanguera artistic directors Claudia Codega and Esteban Moreno, who collaborated with Jorge Crudo and Rolan Van Lóor on the choreography, *Nuit Blanchecarves* out its own inventive space between concert dance and dance theatre, honoring the many influences on tango music and dance over the past hundred years. On a dance form structured simply on an embrace, a walk and a stop, they spin a modern tale of dancers who cannot fully separate their lives on stage and off, who fuel their fantasies with alcohol, and invent a nostalgia for a time and place that never really existed.

*Submitted by **Carla Escoda** on 20th November 201*