

Technique Booster workshop 10th June – student revision notes

There were two main subjects for this workshop: Developing a delicious embrace, and simple patterns and turns. These notes will be on the first point.

Delicious embrace

What qualities does a delicious embrace have?

Here are some of the qualities or adjectives that were suggested and identified during the workshop that make an embrace delicious and moreish:

- togetherness
- positivity and confidence
- smoothness
- responsiveness
- calmness
- sensitivity
- connected
- fluid
- adaptive

To get more in touch with these qualities, the water analogy for connecting through the embrace can be used. There are three stages or aspects to it.

3 aspects of the water-like presence: stillness, movement and inertia

First, imagine that you are standing up to your chest in water. Feel the gentle yet clear presence of the water around you, as its weight gently presses into you. The water is still and does not push you in any direction, it just lets you know that it's there.

Now imagine beginning to take a step through that water. At this point you begin to feel the *density* of the water as you try to move through it. The water yields and allows you to move through it, it does not block you, but it also makes you exert some effort in *whatever* direction you're moving in. In a sense, the water is *reflecting back your intention to move*. Feel how you need to press into the floor more into order to carry on your step. (You could also lean into the water and half fall through it as a way of moving, but initially I'd recommend exploring using only your legs to draw yourself through a step.)

Imagine how if you move slowly you only feel a little resistance from the water. But if you move quickly you feel more resistance, since you're having to move more water out of the way in a given time, which requires more energy. Whatever direction you move in the water offers a proportional resistance to your movement. In this way the connection the water has with you is predictable and a complete *reflection* of your own movement. This allows your movement to become very smooth, calm and fluid while connected with the water.

Now the third stage of the analogy, inertia. What happens when you put your hand in water and push through it? The water offers some resistance, but then it carries on going in the direction you pushed it, with its own momentum, creating waves or ripples. It's the same when you're walking in water. The momentum you create is transferred to the water, and if you stopped quickly then you would feel the water momentarily pushing onward in the direction you were going before you stopped.

That's the concept in abstract form. Relating it to tango, the leader is the person moving through the water, and the follower is the water.

To experience this in the form of a game, the leader can close their eyes and hold out their arms as if holding a very large beach ball out in front of them. The follower then holds the leader's arms as the leader takes simple steps forward, back or to the side, and sometimes comes to the stop. The follower tries to *create the illusion for the leader that they are really walking through water*. This is done by pushing down into the floor, allowing the knees to bend through each step and providing that sense of density and weight for the leader that water has, while at the same time yielding to the leader's movements, as water does. Pay attention to give the same quality of contact in *every* direction of movement.

At its heart, it's a very simple concept; imagine you are water surrounding the leader. When following, if you're wondering whether you're doing it 'right', just ask yourself, if I was moving like the leader is through water, how would I be feeling the water against my body, how would I be feeling the density and weight of it? Then just try to simulate that feeling for the leader through the points of contact you have in the embrace.

The leader's role within this analogy (as within the rest of tango), to help make it work as beautifully as it can do, is to be clear and confident in their movements. Having a water-like presence from the follower will help, but still the leader must know what they want to do, and give themselves permission to explore and play with the dynamics in the connection than can arise from this way of moving. Start with slow, smooth, gentle movements and give yourself plenty of time to get into the feeling of it.

When playing this game see if you can really distinguish the 3 aspects of the water-like presence: stillness, movement and inertia.

Why is 'water-like presence' a useful concept for tango?

There is a large overlap between the qualities of contact that water provides with the qualities identified which lead to a delicious embrace. Of course there is the personal aspect, human warmth, 'snuggliness' (technical term), playfulness, even chemistry. But in terms of the mechanics of connection, being like water (and making it easy for the follower to be that way) seems to get you pretty close to a truly delicious embrace, the kind that you can lose yourself in. As such the water concept is at the heart of the Tango Lingua approach to dancing tango.

Actually, the water concept can also make it easier to play and create in the dance, because it provides a stable, predictable structure. There is something very intuitive and constant about the way water responds to things moving through it. This consistency leads to predictable behaviour – if you do A, you get B, if you do C you get D. When the rules are known they can be played with and stretched, and new things created, by leader and follower.

Taking a small back step here, before it's possible to fully experience or give a water-like presence in the embrace, it's *crucial for both leader and follower to develop their balance and posture and their ability to move in a smooth and fluid way on their own*. If either partner is overly tense, wobbly or jerky in their movements then it becomes extremely difficult for either person to give or experience a smooth, fluid, responsive, calm, connected, water-like quality of presence.

The exercises done in the warm-up of the workshop and classes are designed to improve your posture and balance. Practice them regularly at home for further benefit.

Common obstacles

Besides balance or posture issues, some common obstacles to developing the water-like connection include:

- Roughness or too much tension in leaders movements or embrace
- Follower rushing through step, trying to arrive at the end of the step (or begin a new one) and leaving the leader behind.
- In general, leader moving their centre towards the next step before passing through a balance point (axis) of the previous step for the follower. In simple terms, not finishing the previous step, before beginning the next.
- Follower maintaining a straight leg at the beginning of a step for more than an instant, thus potentially blocking their own movement and the leader's movement.
- Leader being too complex in their movements before a good quality of connection in the embrace has taken root.

- Follower not preparing or extending the 'free leg' early enough for a step, thus leading to them partially or fully falling into a step and so being unable to provide a smooth sense of presence. Or on the flip side, extending the free leg early, but always stretching it out the same distance, regardless of the leader's intention, thus creating a void in the connection.

When practising the water-like presence in your embrace, keep things really simple at first, and see if you can notice when the above obstacles arise. If they do, rather than getting frustrated with yourself or your partner, try to explore how the obstacle can be overcome in a comfortable and relaxed way. This will often involve slowing the movement down and repeating many times.

Close embrace

In the workshop we went on to explore how this water-like quality of connection can work in the close embrace. We focused on exploring how amplifying small chest rotations into bigger hip rotations allowed more comfortable and connected pivoting to take place. In this way you can keep the deliciousness you have in walking with a water-like presence, while doing ochos and giros. The concept of dancing with Velcro vests on was used to help maintain good chest connection through different steps.

The leader can tell how much the follower's hips are turning by feeling the torsion through the chest connection (with a little getting used to a particular follower).

Dancing in close embrace with this kind of connection, there is relatively little rotation in the chest (but not rigidity), and when there is, the chests tend to stay together. The lead, and feedback (reflection of intention) from the follower can be very strong, but the force of the lead is *channelled* into hip and leg movements of the follower.

Sometimes, however, the relative orientation of the follower's and leader's chest will change. When this does happen, allow the arm and hand positions to change to the positions that are most comfortable and which allow the connection to be maintained. When dancing in open embrace you may find that changes in hand and arm position are called for more often.

Even when simply walking in a straight line, maintaining a smooth water-like presence in close embrace requires quite precise and responsive movement of the legs, since the chests are together and back is kept straight. Therefore just practising walking in a straight line together and changing directions without pivots is highly recommended.

Two tips to keep things delicious in the close embrace:

- Followers, listen carefully to the precise direction of the lead and avoid the temptation to step slightly away from the leader, or slightly off the line of the lead in

order to avoid leg or feet clashes. So when doing forward ochos, for instance, try to step in a circular fashion, *around* the leader to stay close to them.

- Leaders, move first with the chest, then with the feet. This gives the follower plenty of information and time to respond to your lead, helping them to relax and give you a smooth, solid and sensitive connection. To test this skill, see if you can get the follower to actually start taking a step, *before* you move your feet.

Individual differences, musical variety and responsibility

When you dance with different partners you'll find that everyone has a slightly (or sometimes very) different idea of what a positive, clear and confident connection is. Some leaders and followers will tend to be quite 'light' in their connection, others quite 'heavy'. While with certain types of movement different intensities of presence are more effective, in general there's no right or wrong, and it's about what works best for your partner and you in a particular moment, in a particular dance, to a particular piece of music. As a follower how much presence, or resistance you give your partner can be a dynamic quality. Sometimes you may want to be lighter than water, other times heavier and more like treacle or even wet clay, and the leader can indicate which they'd like through the embrace. Water, however, is suggested as a good medium to spend much of a dance in.

For followers, while getting the concept of water-like presence into your body, I'd recommend aiming for a good 'medium-heavy' level of presence, and getting really confident in that first. Remember you can still be very responsive *even while providing a firm resistance/presence* to the leader. The trick is to:

- keep a good posture; stretch the spine up straight (all the way up to your head), let the hips sink down towards the floor.
- press, rather than lean or hang (i.e. you're in control of your own axis and using the ground to create resistance),
- respond quickly with the movement of your free leg, and work on making your weight transfer fluid, even though you're providing a firm presence (the firmness will actually help you and the leader).

Having said a fair bit about what a delicious embrace is and how you can have more of them in your tango through developing a water-like quality of presence in your dance, I'd like to say a few words about responsibility. While the analogy of 'the follower as water', focuses more on the follower, it would be a mistake to forget the leader's equal responsibility in creating conducive conditions for the follower to provide that kind of connection (just as it would be a mistake to think there's nothing much to following and if a movement is lead right then it will just happen), through their quality of contact with the follower. A tango dance is a partnership with shared responsibility for developing and maintaining the connection.

How far can you take it?

How far can you take the water analogy, in terms of it applying to the considerable variety of movements in tango, beyond walking? Fairly far. It gets a little more complex once you start sharing an axis with volcadas and colgadas, but in general, whatever position you find yourself in, where you have some command of your own axis, you can apply the water concept to get a more fluid and smooth connection.

One of the last exercises in the workshop was to get yourself in an unfamiliar, tangled tango-esque position and try and work your way out while maintaining a water-like presence in the embrace. You can take this exercise into your practicas. Just make some weird and wonderful position up, check that you're starting with a good posture and are balanced, then go about resolving that position to a point where you can walk in the embrace out of it, while maintaining a water-like presence the whole time.

A little hint for doing this is to pay attention to particular points of contact with your partner. Which points of contact are leading and which points are passive? By *reflecting the intention* only at the points of contact which are 'active' (leading) - and leaders exploring exactly which points of contact are best for leading which parts of a movement – you may find the whole thing works out better.

That's it for the notes on the 10th June Technique booster workshop. I hope you found them useful. If you want input on the specific steps we did, just ask me at the end of class.

Joe