

The Magical Lead

(by Johanna Siegmann)

What constitutes a magical lead?

I went to one of our local milongas last night and had the enormous pleasure of dancing with a visiting *milonguero* from Portland. He had one of those imperceptible leads that nevertheless was precise and clear. We were doing very complicated footwork, syncopations and paradass, and yet I never felt a "lead". After dancing with him for a magical *tanda*, I danced with someone who felt like he was driving a Mac truck with no power steering...it really got to me to thinking about something that might be an interesting topic for the list, a philosophical versus technical query.

What is it, in the non-technical sense, that makes for that fabulous lead? It is not "put the foot here, shift the weight there", because there are some marvelous dancers whose footwork breaks every rule. It is not counting, because during improvisations anything can happen and counting would get in the way. Anyway, you get the picture. I would like to start by offering my own possible elements of what constitutes a magical lead:

1. Surrender

There is a moment in a magical leader's (ML) first embrace where there is a tangible melding of energies. Not just the back and forth shifting to make sure you're both on the same foot, but a kind of spiritual handshake. There is a certain tenderness, concern, and awareness of the partner, a calibration of sorts. In that momentary embrace comfort levels are detected, postures are assessed, breathing is harmonized. The ML's first concern is the couple, not the steps he wants to lead. For this to happen, the ML must surrender to his partner in the same way as the follower must surrender to his lead. He must surrender any image of what he wants/expects to do and open himself to the possibility of what might develop.

2. Musicality

Without exception, every ML uses the music!!!! This is the single most important misunderstanding people have about Tango. Improvisation does not mean "ignore the music". You must find the soul of the music. If the leader follows the music, the follower has a frame of reference in which she can move as well. They are both working off the same script. When a leader randomly does fast steps, slow steps, complicated steps, and pauses, a woman has no choice but to follow robot style, since she does not have any idea when he might move again. I believe leaders who cannot hear the music are also unable to "hear" their partner.

3. Following

Related to #1 Surrender. How does the ML spin me, stop me, turn me, while barely laying a hand on me? I don't think it is as much to do with placing me in the right place as it is placing himself. Armando (of Armando - also a ML - and Daniela) explained it as "following the woman". I think that best expresses the body relationship between the two. It isn't about shoulders being perfectly lined up, or a constant distance between the two chests or any of that stuff. The man's lead for the exact same step will be different from one effort to the next due to a million variables: crowded dance floor, sticky spot on floor, gorgeous woman crosses his line of vision, etc. The woman's response will therefore also vary, due not only to those same variables, but also to the altered lead she receives. And yet, the ML's lead remains constantly magical through a firestorm of variables. What he seems to do is place himself at the point of intersection, turning me with the presence of

his body rather than twisting me about with his arms. He is not a brick wall I crash into to change directions, but more of a warm southerly wind.

4. Awareness

Definitely part of #3. The ML is ALWAYS aware of his partner, and is able to interrupt or alter a step if she can't/won't follow. He can turn a stumble into a new step because he is responding to his partner - and is not hell bent on completing a step. The ML's focus is not on one thing but on everything. The ML is aware of the woman's input and responds to it. This awareness is not something that automatically develops once the leader is an advanced dancer - I have experienced this awareness in the arms of beginners, a sure sign that they will one day be MLs.

I'm sure there are more/different/divergent opinions out there, but I wanted to get the ball rolling. What do you think makes a ML? What about a MF?

Fruitful pondering to all,

Johanna