

## Choreographing a Paper Tango

**W**hen confronted with the question of illustrations for a book on dance, I realized that the real problem of this particular book on the tango was not really one of illustrations in the conventional sense. The text had sought to find words that would transmit the bodily knowledge of a dance form, knowledge that includes the reflections and associations with other experiences that the tango as genre demands. Part of that search might be shouldered by visual images, if there was a way to introduce movement onto a page of written words and to keep its presence there in such a way that readers were reminded that the words were intended to interact constantly with the image of movement to which they referred.

An obvious point of departure was film. But what was not so obvious was how to reproduce film in the pages of a book so that the central element most important to dance, the *moving* body, would appear on the pages. An initial idea of using photographs taken from a series of frames from the



film *Tango: The Exile of Gardel*, by Fernando “Pino” Solanas, became frustrating when we tried to cull sequence out of the twenty-four frames that make up a second on film. The idea of any idiosyncrasy or style of movement was lost when eight photographs of contiguous film frames reproduced merely a step from one foot to the other. If, in order to depict quality of movement by involving a longer sequence, the frames chosen from the film were further apart, the movement became jerkily pixilated, or worse, the photo series became one of scarcely related poses. This last gave the very problematic impression that dance movement consists of “steps” that roughly correspond to “words,” a common idea but false.

How could I obtain a danced sequence on the page that gave a notion of the quality of movement in the tango? Images, photographed from the screen projection of a film I knew by heart, covered the floor. I had cut the postage stamp-size photographs from the contact sheets that contained one out of every three or four film frames. Sometimes I got intense headaches from the visual effort as I tried to distinguish the steps performed by the infinitesimal feet of the tiny people dancing the tango. They had surprised me with their new beauty, different yet again from what I had seen on the screen aided by the step machine’s frame-by-frame projection. But this was only the first new potential yielded by the search for a visual text to use with my verbal one.

Attempting to convey body knowledges not amenable to conventional rationalist analysis, I produced mock-up pages of pasted images. Some essayed detailed dissections of a tiny motion and others produced what looked like inventories of stylized positions. As I studied these with friends and students, the suggestion arose: “And if you could reproduce the movement by flipping through them?” We all laughed at the idea of a flipbook for adults, not least because we were trying to deal with a lyric and often melancholy dance—flipbooks are noted for the humor that arises from their characteristic pixilation. I cut the photographs apart again and tried to flip through the pages, stiff with paste, of minuscule images I had just put together. And precisely because we were all adults and had not seen flipbooks for some time, we all gasped at the simple magic.

xvii

But this nostalgically simple magic brought a dimension I had not expected. I watched, entranced, the lyrically fluid effect created by using photographs of one out of every four of the frames taken from the film, and then the slightly funny, jerky pixilation created by using one still out of every twelve or even every twenty. I looked for the movements that I most love in the tango, the eloquence of the woman’s legs, rising and falling like breathing. But I could not find these movements because, like a breath, each occupied a fraction of a second, and so, at the most they appeared in one or two photographs. Similarly, intricate footwork, which because of problems of balance and rhythm had to be per-



formed rapidly, disappeared into vast numbers of photographs depicting walked steps. Only an eye used to the tango could pick these gestures up and focus on them. A tiny movement captured on only one photograph would disappear in any series of numerous photos, especially when amid numerous takes necessary to depict the several steps that position the dancing couple for the statement performed by legs or feet.

xviii

A first remedy for this visual problem was to leave out some of the photos of film frames, using fewer of those that depicted preparation, so that they did not obscure resolutions or climaxes. This helped but did not completely solve the problem. I looked among the many extra photos that had been omitted in my first selection process, and restored many more of those that had been photographed from the film. The slight improvement suggested something completely new: I could add from my reserves even more photos, some of them duplicates, some of them photos of contiguous frames, contrasting with my initial use of every three or four frames of the film. The result was that the flipbook sequences could accentuate movement in a way that the original film had not, drawing attention to a movement that had moved me deeply but one that had been fleeting. What I saw corresponded to what I had seen and what I had danced in Buenos Aires. Other images not dealing with dance brought memories and associations that many Argentines make as they dance, as intimated by the fact that this imagery arises in a film about tango. This was

what I had seen, what I had danced, and what many of us had felt. Insofar as those associations corresponded to what I remembered and therefore wanted to communicate about dancing, it was, as dancers sometimes say, my tango. But in this case all of it was on paper.

I was choreographing my paper tango.

