

The *Passion*

by Marie Yereniuk

Clint Jefferies' new play *Tango Masculino* is not just a dance between two men, as the title would suggest, but an exploration of such universal themes as control and identity, which sweeps the audience into a firm (and perhaps precarious) embrace.

Tango Masculino was directed by Jeffrey Corrick of the Wings Theater Company. Set shortly after the turn of the 20th century, *Tango Masculino* recreates the dangerous streets of Buenos Aires, controlled by the black market and a code of machismo. Ruling the streets is the lunfardo, a class of rogues who use the knife to settle disagreements over women, drugs, and politics.

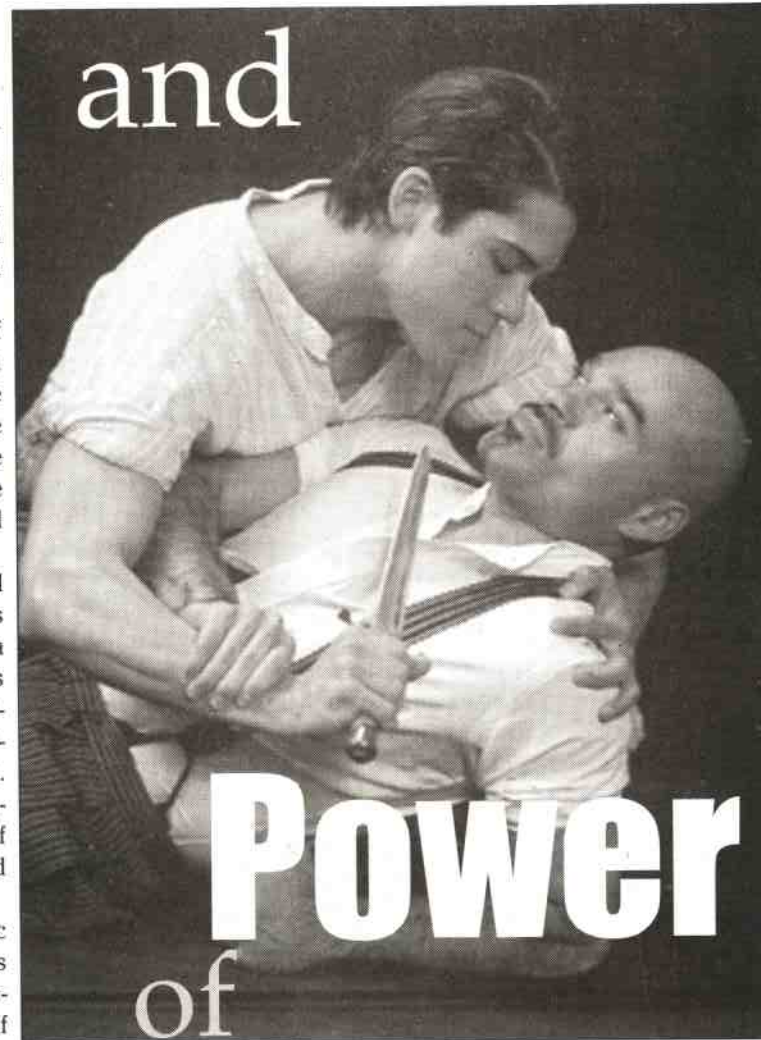
Musical numbers interspersed between the central storyline evoke the feeling of a 1930s Buenos Aires cabaret; set up on a platform to the right of the main stage is the club itself. With new musical compositions by musical director Paul L. Johnson, la Canta (Maureen Griffen) and el Cantor (Stephen Cabral) are supported by the undulating strains of live tango music. David Hodges plays the bandoneón, the square concertina that produces the unmistakable sound of tango music; Joseph Brent plays violin and guitar; and Meyer de Leeuw also plays the guitar.

The vibrant rhythms and vocal swells of the music add to the overall effect of the production, which is both realistic in the development of particular characters, and nearly mythological in the affirmation of archetypal, universal struggles. *Tango Masculino* seems to exist simultaneously in this moment, as well as existing a hundred years ago.

In addition to the acting and singing, there are several dancing scenes (choreographed by Kate Swan) that give the psychological and emotional drama a physical dimension. There is something immediately recognizable and understood about an embrace between two people, especially when that embrace is moving in a dance.

Most of the action of *Tango Masculino* takes place on the patio of a bordello in Buenos Aires' Porteño district, where the proprietor Rosendo (Ivan Davila) is unquestionably the most influential rogue. Using sex to demonstrate his status, he apparently makes no differentiation between society ladies, prostitutes, men who pay for sex, or the police. "Everybody's my type," he boasts.

Seeking Rosendo's guidance and a job, a young man



and Power of *Tango*

named Jorge (JoHary Ramos) arrives with no money and no family. The relationship between the two grows as they become sexually and emotionally entangled, even in the face of the social code.

Initially, Jorge's need for a mentor complements Rosendo's continual desire to emphasize his uppermost social position, and Rosendo takes the man's part in the actual dance. (When the dance is over and Rosendo asks Jorge, "are you coming [upstairs]?" it is silently understood

who will have the more active role in the sexual encounter.)

"Un acto de valor, un acto de dolor," el Cantor says after Rosendo and Jorge dance for the first time [translated as: "an act of courage, an act of pain"]. The tango, and the love it embodies, is both beautiful and deadly: violent sexiness and sexy violence between individuals (as well as within them). Jorge finally confronts his homosexuality and attraction for Rosendo, although he initially denies both.

As Jorge struggles with himself in a sort of internal tango, there are times in which he views Rosendo with envy. At least on the exterior, it seems Rosendo is the kind of man to control the world, rather than be controlled by the world. Even still, Rosendo has an inner, less visible desire to surrender his position as the most powerful man on top. Secretly, he wants to find someone who is stronger than him. As Rosendo, Ivan Davila's tender interpretation of this scene seems to suggest that there is a hidden strength in vulnerability.

"You don't have to be top-dog," la Madre, Rosendo's wife, says with a hint of irony. This is especially poignant because she was rejected years ago for a long line of prostitutes, and knows all about not being top dog.

The play has a political dimension, in addition to the personal: Lorenzo (Roberto Cambeiro), who is "married" to Manon (Paul Taylor), a la marica (slang for "queer"), keeps protesting the corruption of the "capitalist swine." His unwavering conviction is so strong that it gets him killed. Manon loved Lorenzo for standing up "for the downtrodden workers of Argentina," even though the fight comes to a bitter end.

The characters are in this play not overdone. Every gesture and word seems intentional; it is not in-your-face over-acting, but neither is it sloppily left to chance.

Especially impressive about the production is the fact that even the most humorous moments do not become overstated to the point of falsity. Even Manon's song "la Mujer Honesta" (Honest Woman), ironic because Manon is really a man dressed in drag, seems to merely ask the audience to consider the opposition of appearance versus reality.

The tango, thus, has metaphorical significance in this work, symbolizing man's quest for domination, in whatever form. But a partnered dance, like the tango, cannot be sustained in a simple leader-follower arrangement. The passion of the tango arises from the tension between the two dancers, as each struggles to control the dance.

Although The tango is "a dance where passion and power collide," la Canta sings in the first scene, which presents a glimpse of a cabaret show. And later, she reiterates the idea with el Cantor: "passion and power are the essence of man," more commonly between a man and a woman. It was not uncommon in the early part of the 20th century to see men dancing together in bordellos, to "keep them in the mood" as they waited for women. This coupling, not unlike a cock-fight, leads to both men competing to be the stronger (and sexier) man.

As Jorge's confidence grows, so does his desire for domination over Rosendo, causing them to collide as each affirms his own power. Rosendo finally vocalizes the challenge: "do you want a fight, or a dance?" suggesting that the two are equivalent in some ways. Rosendo says of the dance, "this is a challenge."

Although initially very stylized and form-oriented, the tango between Rosendo and Jorge quickly becomes a fight. The two circle around the stage as if they were bulls in a ring, their eyes locked with such intent that the energy is almost palpable. Then they really do fight (fight choreography by Kymberli E. Morris), until Rosendo is on his back at knife-point.

The dance begins again, but this time the handhold is different: Rosendo, having finally found someone stronger than he, is now in the woman's role of follower. After the dance, it is Jorge who asks, "are you coming?" in a scene whose gestures mirror the earlier scene when Rosendo was still "top-dog."

By the end, the dynamics between Rosendo and Jorge have changed from their initial encounter. In learning about power and passion through the dance and Rosendo's guid-

Masculino

The political power struggle between the ruling class and the working class brings Rosendo's earlier words to mind, when he tells Jorge that "the tango's a struggle like sex is a struggle." It is all about "who has the power."

Tango as an art form (dance, music and poetry) was born of the working class in the mid-19th century. It is the art of everyman, the proletariat, with themes that cover the whole spectrum of human emotion, memory and desire.

ance, Jorge has learned another lesson: how to let go.

Tango Masculino will be performing at The Wings Theatre Company, 154 Christopher Street, through May 4th. Performances are Thursdays-Saturdays at 8pm; Sundays at 3:30pm and Mondays at 8pm. Tickets (\$19) are available by calling (212) 627-2961.

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