



ARTS & CULTURE

COVID-19 Weakens Argentina's Tango Culture

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In a huge, quiet dance space in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the tables are put away. In an area for musicians, a piano sits unused. Electronic sound equipment nearby is unconnected to power.

The empty dancing place is called the Viruta Tango Club. It shows the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on performers of a dance form based on close, physical contact.

Like many other public spaces, the Viruta Tango Club has been closed since March 8, 2020. Argentine officials severely restricted public activity in hopes of limiting the spread of COVID-19. The club used to admit hundreds of tango dancers between Wednesday and Sunday.

“For those of us who make a living from tango, our **self-esteem** is on the floor,” said Horacio Godoy, a dancer, historian and club organizer.

“We are more emotionally than financially **bankrupt**,” he added.

COVID-19 also forced Argentina to close its borders. This has hurt the tango business. Foreign visitors provide a lot of support for the industry.

International performances by Argentine tango dancers also have been cancelled as their country continues to face high numbers of coronavirus infections. Argentina has had more than 80,000 confirmed COVID-19 deaths.

Godoy earns some money by teaching tango online to foreigners. He said the city’s assistance program for dancers and musicians does not provide enough money to pay for Viruta’s costs. Of 18 employees, only three have kept their jobs.

“The city of Buenos Aires can’t offer history like Rome and Paris. It doesn’t have a **beach** to offer like in the Caribbean. It doesn’t have **gastronomy** on offer like Italy. It doesn’t have waterfalls or glaciers. The city of Buenos Aires has tango,” he said.

The Federal Assembly of Tango Workers said the industry used to employ around 7,000 people in Argentina. But since the start of the COVID-19 health crisis, one fifth of Buenos Aires’s 200 tango clubs have closed permanently.

Before the pandemic, there were about 40 tango footwear and clothing companies. Now, about 12 remain.

Although tango is the most famous part of Argentine culture, the industry does not get any special government support.

“Tango workers suffered from permanent job insecurity long before the pandemic,” said Diego Benbassat, a musician with the Misteriosa Buenos Aires orchestra and a spokesman for the tango workers union. He said, “There were never public policies designed for tango, so that is why we are so **vulnerable**.”

Dancer Mora Godoy once taught tango steps to America’s former President Barack Obama. She has received standing **ovations** for her international performances. But, COVID-19 forced her to close her dance school.

“I did 419 shows with my tango company in 2019. We had done more than 100 in 2020 by the time everything was closed and this madness, this sadness, this world tragedy began,” she said.

She shows some pictures from her dancing life before the pandemic. One of her favorites is from 2016. It shows then-President Obama resting his hand on Godoy’s back as they dance the tango. The president was on an official visit to Argentina at the time.

“It is very painful not to be able to dance,” said Godoy. She said some tango professionals have become taxi drivers or found work at food stores to make a living. She said businesses that once made a lot of money from running tango clubs have done little during COVID-19 to help the dancers who had been so important to club profits.

“Everything froze,” said musician and dancer Nicolás Ponce, who started a business selling plants during the health crisis.

The nature of tango, he said, is what makes it so difficult to perform in the current health emergency. “That feeling of **embrace** is what makes tango stand out from other dances,” he said.

Longing for that embrace makes many tango dancers, or tangueros, ignore restrictions to dance in outdoor spaces.

On a recent Saturday, 12 couples got together to dance at the Obelisco, a monument in the center of Buenos Aires.

“Tango in the open air is health. What is dangerous is stillness,” read a sign placed near the monument by dance teacher Luciana Fuentes. She is not against restrictions and takes measures to prevent spread.

“But,” she said, “I will not stop dancing tango in public spaces.”

I’m Caty Weaver.

Debora Rey reported this story for the Associated Press. Caty Weaver adapted it for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

Words in This Story

self-esteem *-n.* a feeling of having respect for yourself and your abilities

bankrupt *-adj.* unable to pay debts; completely lacking some good or desired quality

beach *-n.* an area beside the ocean or body of water that is covered with small rocks and sand

gastronomy *-n.* the art or activity of cooking and eating food

vulnerable *-adj.* open to attack, harm, damage or loss

ovation *-n.* when a group of people watching a performance show their approval and appreciation by clapping their hands together repeatedly

embrace *-n.* to put one's arms around someone is a show of love or friendship
