

On Our Cover

The Emptiness Left Behind

For those who knew Rodolfo Cieri, his passing earlier this year meant sorrow, sadness and grief. It also rekindled the sweet memories of his presence on the dance floor.

It has taken many months and countless dry attempts, to sit and listen to three hours of a taped conversation we had with **Rodolfo** and **Maria** on June 21, 1996 at our former home in **Sunnyvale, California**.

In the nineties I found out about the death of, first my dad and five years later my mom, too late to be at their side, given the choice I made earlier in my life to move away and live in another land, far away from home.

In many ways, they still live in my memories as they have for the past thirty two years, and I know that sometime in the future I will join them for the eternal journey. The point is that somewhere in my heart and soul, the tears and grief associated with the death of our beloved ones, are still prisoners of distance and separation.

This seems to have been the blessing or the curse of immigrants and emigrants who went to or departed from **Argentina** during the last century and a half. I no longer wonder about the tears bursting from my eyes and the sobs that threaten to explode inside my chest as *La rayuela* by **Pugliese** reaches the sublime moment when violins and bandoneons sing and cry in an anticipated celebration of the inevitable ending of the song.

I first saw **Rodolfo** and **Maria** early in June 1996 at a milonga in **Berkeley, California**. The introduction by the host barely cut across the indifference of a vocal crowd who seemed to have gotten used to the necessary evil of interrupting the *milongas* with "announcements." All we could see was an elderly couple tastefully dancing to the **Pugliese's** rendition of *Emancipacion*.

Nineteen-ninety-six was a transition

By Alberto Paz



Rodolfo and Maria with Alberto in Sunnyvale, CA. June 21, 1996

year for our Tango dancing education, so even when the couple on the dance floor was not "hot dogging," flying or otherwise trying to impress the ignorant, I was left in a daze by the craftsmanship and seductive allure of their ever precise and calculated moves. But what really affected me the most, was **Rodolfo's** cherub-like smile as he played with the creative genius of **Pugliese** coming from the speakers.

A few days later, for reasons that no longer matter, a common friend brought them to our house, where they lived for the remaining weeks of their sole stay in the **United States**.

A Club named Suerte Loca

Rodolfo danced the same way all his life never considering the possibility that something special would ever happen to change the course of his life.

In 1954 the orchestra of **Anibal Troilo** headed the cast of *El Patio de la Morocha* at a theater on *Avenida Corrientes*. Dancing couples were needed and **Maria** recalls, *This was before we got married, they came to talk*

to us but Rodolfo didn't want to do it.

It's not that he didn't have the opportunity, but he never wanted to dance professionally. That's just fine with **Maria**, because *If he had started doing it then, we wouldn't be here together today.*

More than twenty years went by without dancing and being married with children. When the daughter finally got married herself, **Rodolfo** was working out of a **Ford** pick up truck doing what the **UPS** men and women do today, pick up and delivery of packages. Faced with an empty nest, he didn't want to consider getting older quicker by coming home to watch television. He had heard about a popular *tangueria* that was in vogue, **Volver**, on **Corrientes** and **Suipacha**. One Friday, celebrating a windfall of money that had come his way at work, he invited **Maria** to go dancing at **Volver**. Arriving early, they told the maitre d' that they were new to the scene, and asked for a good spot on the dance floor from where he proceeded to watch the caliber of the dancers as they kept arriving.

At 2 AM they played *La cumparsita* and ten to fifteen couples took to the floor.

RODOLFO: *The music of Troilo from the Forties gives you room to do a lot of things, so when they began playing it I told Maria, let's lead the way and I went "pin, pan, pow." Half an hour later a young couple approached our table. She was an Argentine woman living in France. He was her French partner.*

They had seen them dance and asked if they were teachers. No, they were told. They were just *milongueros* from **Buenos Aires** and that's all. **Rodolfo** said that he always danced because he felt the Tango deep inside. Later **Rodolfo** and **Maria** joined the young couple at their table and found out that they were staying at a hotel. They invited them to move to their home where they developed a good friendship while teaching them to dance Tango the way they knew.

When the couple finally left for

Europe they asked **Rodolfo** if they would consider traveling to **France**. Of course answered **Rodolfo**, but as the plane took off he turned to **Maria** and said, *I doubt that these people would want to pay me to go to Europe after they've seem over a hundred couples dancing at Volver.*

Six months later they received a letter and two plane tickets. The trip to **France** was happening. As they pondered the reality of crossing the ocean on a puny airplane, **Rodolfo** and **Maria** couldn't believe their insane luck on that fateful day of 1988.

The woman in question had a dance academy in **Marseilles**, and she had put together a major production based on the History of Tango. The expensive project played once at **Teatro del Molino**, and it included a full *comparsa* of black people entering the stage from behind the public to perform a *candombe* number that left **Maria** gasping.

MARIA: *It was a wonderful experience and we're forever grateful to that woman for giving us that first opportunity. Sadly, within twenty days things turned sour as misunderstandings turned into problems. The hostess, who later gave up Tango dancing, erred badly with us. Gradually she began demanding to be **Rodolfo's** partner. She wanted him to dye his hair and to get rid of his glasses.*

RODOLFO: *I said to her: you saw me dancing in Buenos Aires; you saw me dancing with my wife. That's how you agreed to bring us here, as a couple. Now, you can't ask us to do something different. No way.*

Thirty days to the date of arrival in **France**, **Rodolfo** and **Maria** left the woman's house and moved in with **Elena**, who with partner **Alfredo** tried very hard to help them survive for the remaining six months of their stay.

Singing, dancing Tango and folklore, **Rodolfo** and **Maria** managed to make ends meet stranded in a foreign land, handicapped by the language barrier, with plenty of tools of their own

and help from generous compatriots. **Rene Fabianelli** was one of them.

In the years that followed, **Rene** became the "guardian angel" who organized their successful tours around **France** and the rest of **Europe**. Meanwhile in **Buenos Aires** **Rodolfo** kept telling friends about their crazy luck, and that one day he'll open his own Tango Club, appropriately named,



Rodolfo and Maria Cieri's memorable performance at the Dance Spectrum in Campbell, CA. July 1996

Suerte Loca.

A Milonguero of good stock

Rodolfo learned to dance Tango from his father as a kid. His mother objected because she wanted him to go to school and be somebody. **Rodolfo** did both. He pleased his proud father at the old man's *milongas* in **La Paternal** dancing with sisters and cousins at the tender age of ten.

Time came for **Rodolfo** to go to school. **Dad** insisted that he devote time to study rather than dancing. The night life could be dangerous and lead to no good.

RODOLFO: *After the first year of high school I quit. I told 'mi viejo,' I want to be a dancer. He didn't insist a lot. That's something I regret today, that he didn't try harder to keep me in school.*

He developed a style and spent years as a night creature of the *milongas*. When he met **Maria**, she was barely fourteen. Dating in those days meant meeting her at the street corner by her house while the sun was up. A vampire would have fared better, but he kept his courtship up for almost three years.

MARIA: *I was seventeen years old when I married the first and only man I had known. I wanted to sing, to play the guitar. Suddenly, the 'no' from my father had been replaced by the 'no' of my husband. Meanwhile, he kept going out addicted to the life of the *milonga* and the allure of other women. It's a long story, but I wasn't prepared for that. His parents played an important role making me come back every time I had decided to leave.*

RODOLFO: *We were separated three times until my **Dad** kicked me out of the house and told me I was worse than garbage for playing with the life of a decent and loving woman. He told me in no uncertain terms that I had to choose between the *milonga* and my family. Well, thanks to all that we are together today, enjoying something that I never expected: dancing and making friends.*

They have danced together and they have witnessed a time when there were real dancers at every club. Dancers who competed to be the best. Dancers who would never consider imitating anybody else. Dancers who dressed to kill to impress the ladies before dazzling them with their brilliance on the dance floor.

They both admire **Juan Bruno**, the **Juan Bruno** from the time when he used to dance **Tango Salon**.

MARIA: *Very few could dance **Tango Salon**. It is very difficult for the couple to walk with the feet on the floor. To execute paradass and turns with a smooth rhythm and with the feet on the*

floor. **Juan** seemed to walk like no one I've ever seen. **Rodolfo** doesn't have the profile to dance **Salon**. It doesn't look good on him.

RODOLFO: Before he quit **Juan** was a **bailarin de tranco largo**, a bird with long legs gliding over the surface of a lake. His moves were deliberately slow. What I showed you today in the **canyengue**, how to break your waist for example, in **Tango Salon** you have to do it very subtly, like a **filigrana**, like a watermark on paper, a delicate move which is both elegant and fancy. You have to stand up firmly and well grounded, and you need a partner who does not hang on you to drop you off your balance. When **Juan** stepped on the floor for a **Di Sarli** piece, chills ran down my spine before he even began to move. I have never seen any of today's teachers attempting to dance that way. It's very hard. Even **Juan**, when he came out of retirement a couple of years ago, was doing something totally different.

Life is but a dream

Our table talk lingered past dessert time. As a matter of fact time seemed to hold still. **Rodolfo** seemed disturbed by the memory of his father. The elder **Cieri** had died in 1966 but his presence still weighs strongly on this fragile man with the glassy eyes, leaning against the chair, holding a glass of wine.

It seems that his father kept appearing in his dreams. The recurring themes were answers to whatever was troubling **Rodolfo** at the time. Like a way to finish the barbecue pit he had built on the roof of the house he had constructed by hand, one brick at a time. Or the advice on where and how to install a bathroom on the upper floor.

When **Rodolfo** talks about his father, the tone of his voice lowers, as if he is still aware of his presence. He had repeated time after time stories about the early days of his childhood when the old man taught him to dance a brand of Tango he had forgotten. How he began to hate as a child, having to show off in front of **Dad's** friends at the neighbor-

hood clubs. Later, when a young **Rodolfo** lived from **garufa** to **garufa**, a dapper ladies' man at the **milongas**, he avoided facing a disappointed father with a pointing finger.

For years after the passing of the elder **Cieri**, **Rodolfo** visited the mausoleum at the **Chacarita** cemetery. He tried many times to see his father with an inexplicable obsession until the time came for moving the casket from the mausoleum. The family had to decide between ground burial or cremation. **Rodolfo** convinced the family to have the body cremated and the ashes placed next to the graves of his grandparents. As a truck loaded with caskets arrived, **Rodolfo** demanded to identify the body. He was going to see his **Dad** one last time. **RODOLFO:** They had to use an axe to break the locks and when they finally opened the casket I yelled at the top of my lungs! My **Dad's** body was intact like the day they put him in the casket. His face, his hands crossed over his chest still holding a fresh orchid... My sister hugged me... (his voice breaks and the steady sob of a child fills the room as the tape recorder runs for a couple of minutes). He never went to visit the ashes at his **Dad's** final resting place. Yet, the old man kept visiting him in his dreams. *That's life*, he appeared to say.

The Tango My Dad Taught Me

One day **Rodolfo** woke up and said to **Maria**, *I had a dream with my Dad. It was such a beautiful dream. He came to see me and he congratulated me because I had built my own house. I told him, you see viejo? I finally succeeded with the Tango. I have danced in Europe and here in Buenos Aires on the stage of Teatro San Martin. I told him all about my friendship with Carlos Garcia, ex-pianist of Roberto Firpo who was now the director of the Orquesta del Tango de Buenos Aires. He listened attentively and suddenly said, yes, but you never danced the Tango I once taught you.*

Maria had always been curious and excited about the **canyengue**, so she asked **Rodolfo** why he didn't dance it.

Rodolfo said no. He considered it too difficult, besides he had completely forgotten what it was that his **Dad** had taught him. Then, they got a letter from **London** inviting them to participate in a show. Excited by the opportunity he tried to remember the barrage of **canyengue** steps his **Dad** used to dance, but he could barely remember but a few. Once again **Dad** visited him in a dream and helped him remember some of the moments they had spent together. **Rodolfo** remembers telling his father, *Your son is going to dance the canyengue Dad.*

RODOLFO: That year in **London** we presented the **canyengue** for the first time at **Paul and Michiko's Cafetin Porteño**. People went crazy. This Saturday night we are going to dance it for you and **Valorie** at your **milonga**. **Maria** is going to wear the same vintage dress as in **London**. Pity that I did not bring my vest and my **lengue**.

ALBERTO: You can use mine.

RODOLFO: Great! We're going to do the **canyengue**. We're going to do it.

He was now the only one left in his family and he seemed to wait for his time with resignation, whenever it would arrive. Did he know already about the illness that would take him away four years later? I'll never know. Like the passing of my parents, **Rodolfo's** departure feels like he just moved farther away.

We're reliving the fond memories now as we have finally sat down to watch the videotapes of those great classes in our living room, along with their compelling performances at the **Dance Spectrum** in **Campbell**. **Maria** singing **La ultima curda**. The two of them dancing **canyengue** to **El chamuyo**. The delight of the audience as they tackled a **D'Arienzo** piece with their unique brand of Tango.