

## In conversation with Susana Domingues



New Works is proud to present *Tango Poema*, as part of its *New Works @ Night* series, January 9th and 10th, 2015 at The Orpheum Annex. We sat down with the creative mind behind *Tango Poema*, Susana Domingues, to find out more about her career, what inspires her, her artistic influences and creative process.

### When and where did you start dancing? When did you discover Tango and how did it become part of your life?

*I first saw tango in a 15 minute news segment about a new Broadway hit called "Tango Argentino". It was 1985. When I saw the dancers in the report, I said to myself, "That! That, I have to do." I had no dance background except for 6 modern-jazz classes I'd taken when I was 12 years old and there were very few people in Canada then, who danced Argentine tango. That year I moved to Toronto from my hometown, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, and soon after found someone who'd learned the basics from the cast of "Tango Argentino". He taught me what he knew and we became performing partners, copying dance moves from the few video clips we could get our hands on. Two years later we were performing at least twice weekly at cultural festivals, weddings and special events. Since then, my life has taken many paths, but tango has always been a prominent through line. It has meant so many things for me: courage and adventure, profession, friends, and in its artistic journey, a guide for life.*

### Tango Poema is an intricate project with many layers. Can you tell us about the creative process and the collaboration with Linda Lee Thomas and the other dancers involved in the production?

*Shows I'd presented prior to 'Tango Poema', i.e. 'Tango Vive' (1993) and 'Cimarron' (2003) had included short historical narrations about tango's beginnings. I've been doing creative writing since 2005 and by 2012 I wanted to present a tango show that used spoken word pieces to say more about tango culture today. I suggested the idea to Linda Lee Thomas and asked if she'd be interested in being part of it. She did nothing but encourage me. A month later we sat on her patio and listened to early recordings of the spoken word pieces that are now in the show. I can't tell you how important it was to me that Linda Lee like them. She's been there as a Tanguera since the beginnings of tango in Vancouver. The pieces were very personal. I was nervous about them and I needed to know if they related to the tango experience of others. Linda Lee's response to them was a great relief – she was moved, and I was encouraged to move forward.*

*The historical tango piece in the show required group rehearsals. This made using local dancers essential. I had a general outline for the piece but I knew the other details would flesh out during rehearsal. Some personal emergencies had caused an eleventh hour casting shuffle with four new cast members. And although we may have felt a little thrown together, the first rehearsal serendipitously revealed a bright, spirited group that was generously collaborative and fun. Ideas were thrown in, or thrown out, with a selfless concern for getting the best result. The audience response to the sold out shows was overwhelmingly positive with a recurring note of applaud for the opportunity to enjoy Vancouver tango talents.*

*There was no question of working with them again for 'Tango Poema' 2015. Each of the couples brings a unique quality to their performances.*

*Their personal dance styles, their choice of music, costume, their mix of choreography and improvisation, all enhance the dynamic spectrum of the program.*

*For myself I've found the artistic process is often about facing one's fears. And so it has been for this upcoming show. Performing pieces alone, as I will be on Friday, presents a new horizon for me. I've always enjoyed performing in the safety of a dance partner's embrace and only stepped out of it for very short passages. The process of choreographing these solo pieces has been enjoyable and I'm excited about performing the ideas for their first audience.*

### Who are your biggest artistic influences?

*Linda Lee Thomas has always been a mentor regarding my artistic yearnings. And she's provided an example of what's possible. She's had an illustrious tango career.*

*Tango dancers; I've appreciated so many, but the first was Maria Nieves. She was both a consummate tango dancer and a powerful performer. She did not compromise one for the other. Over the last four months I've been deeply moved by Joseph Campbell and "The Power of Myth". It was Linda Lee who suggested I read him 15 year ago. Joseph Campbell helped me finally come home to the fact that art is necessary. It's not frivolous. I guess I always knew that, but he synthesizes elements with such unabashed, beautiful simplicity that I became re-inspired about the importance of celebrating life's mysteries - the things that are impossible to know for sure.*

### What is going on in dance right now that is exciting to you?

*It's tango that really excites me. And in the tango world, I love what I see lately. There's a new crop of talented dancers, performing stunning new effects in what feels like a traditional style. Some of these effects are impossible to duplicate without embracing Tango's defining qualities, for example, tango's unique embrace. It's as though they've taken everything at their disposal, the best of all of tango's manifestations, past and present, and dance these elements seamlessly, with musical and technical dynamism, yet in a way that feels rooted and authentic. And I love that this new crop of dancers is coming not from Argentina alone. The main hub of tango activity is still its birthplace, Buenos Aires, but there is a global tango culture now, from which new performers are sprouting.*

### How would you describe Tango to someone who has never experienced it before?

*I guess it's hard to describe Tango to someone in regular language. Poetry, such as the spoken word pieces in the show, might do a better job. Anyone who puts it in a few words, glibly telling you, for example, "It's fun!", isn't telling you the whole story. There's that wonderful quote from Isadora Duncan, "If I could tell you[...] I wouldn't have to dance it". But I'll try.*

*Here goes: When you dance tango, whatever you are bringing with you to that moment, the other person is feeling in some way. Whether you are leading or following, in your movements, you lend yourself to the music and to the other person in a way that requires empathy. I've heard it said that good tango involves an intense state of 'listening'. And because tango's complexity creates so much lovely possibility, there's an incentive to be so very attentive to that other person. When you've danced that way, it's hard not to want more of it. And soon you find yourself in a community of others who are seeking to repeat that same experience. Whatever it is that initially draws people, in tango they find a unique, creative culture and a community.*

### How is Tango lived in Vancouver? What would you recommend to someone who has recently discovered Tango and wants to get more involved in what Vancouver has to offer?

*The person who has recently discovered Tango is in a very special time in their tango journey – a magical time. I would recommend making an effort to keep the experience musical. While even its simplest movements are beautiful, tango also has a complexity that can seduce the intellect.*

*However, dancing requires being in the moment, not in one's thoughts. Learning will involve some work towards understanding tango's mechanics, but it's important to repeat what's learned until the experience becomes musical again. One of the best ways to do this is to dive in and practice at Milongas (Tango halls). In Vancouver we have a vibrant community with numerous long-standing Milongas, each offering a different atmosphere and mix of music. And you don't need a partner to attend.*



JANUARY 8, 2015 (5:03 PM)