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Sanjoy Roy Thu 5 Aug 2010 21.31 BST

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Tanguera



Sadler's Wells, London



Explicitly erotic ... Esteban Domenichini and Leticia Fallacara in Tanguera. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

Most tango shows designed for the theatre are montages of dance numbers, with set pieces for various couples and sometimes a unifying theme ("the story of tango", often as not). Tanguera, written and produced by Diego Romay, directed by Omar Pacheco and choreographed by Mora Godoy, has a different aim: to be a tango musical, with dancers who portray characters and choreography that dramatises their story. As the show begins, you wonder why this isn't a more common format. The music - mostly tango classics - has the texture of emotion itself: the squeezing heart of the bandoneón, the quickening pulse of the piano, the ache of violin strings; this music has dramatic nuance in its blood. So does the dance, which is all about interplay between the characters. Mostly, this happens either above the neck - eyes lock, heads turn - or, far more intricately, below the knee, where legs are interlaced, heels kicked up and calves caressed.

The story of Tanguera follows the tale of Giselle (Leticia Fallacara), a Frenchwoman who arrives in the port of Buenos Aires in the early 20th century. Lorenzo (Esteban Domenichini), a humble dockworker, falls for her, but Giselle falls prey to gangland godfather Gaudencio (Junior Cervila) and is led by Madam (Maria Nieves) into a life of prostitution, though she still loves Lorenzo.

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This is dramatic, but not very nuanced. In Tanguera, it's still the set pieces that stand out, not the story. The opening dockyard scene, with its drably dressed workers, effectively deglamourises the glossy image commonly peddled with tango. The dancehall scenes, too, show women who are not just objects of desire, but a kind of currency in themselves: this forcefield of mixed motives is what produces tango. The skilled dancers are both flashy and precise, throwing in big scissoring lifts between their snippy footwork. Choreographically, Tanguera ventures beyond standard partnerwork to ensemble numbers - effective in scene-setting and in the fight sequences, less so in an explicitly erotic sequence, which, with its suddenly smoochy music and undulating bodies, feels like the sex scene of a 70s movie.

Though Tanguera flows like a drama, the plot and protagonists don't sweep you along in its current. There's a mismatch between the crude brushstrokes of its story and the nuances available in its material. Two of its performers, though, transcend such limits: old-timers Marianela, a singer who brings a touch of Broadway to Buenos Aires, and Nieves, who at 75 can still flash her eyes and swivel her legs like a pro.

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