



Tomás Howlin Interview

by Jean-Sébastien Viard

Among all the teachers in the tango world Tomás Howlin is the one that stands out by his unique combination of skills, his experience and his outstanding ethics as a teacher. He is very appreciated in North America, and has traveled to many a community to share his knowledge and wisdom. In this interview, I ask him to tell us about his own tango learning experience and his vision of the Montreal tango community.

MTW: Tomas, you were born and raised in Buenos Aires. I believe it is also where you learned tango. Can you give us an idea of your background as well as your early days in tango?

Tomas Howlin: Yes, I grew up in Buenos Aires and moved to Montreal when I was thirty. I learned my tango in Buenos Aires. I was fortunate enough to begin tango when I was young and many of the legendary masters were still alive, teaching, and dancing. I learned from **Pepito Avellaneda, Pupi Castello, José Turco Brahemcha, Juan Bruno** and many others. I imagine that this scenario may appear charming now, but back then it was very challenging.

On the one hand, these people were truly extraordinary. It was not easy to learn their ways. Learning from these teachers meant I had to hang out with them for hours and hours and I would listen to their stories and philosophies on life. Then, maybe if I was lucky, they would show something – a step or a movement. I had to be able to realize what I was seeing, remember it all. There were no smartphones to take a quick video. Then, I tried to do it myself. I had to figure out how I was going to absorb all this precious information. I decided to simultaneously study other dance and bodywork forms to help me understand and process all the information. I was desperate to find guidance on how to dance as well as those people did. So I signed up for ballet, modern dance, contact improv., Feldenkrais, Eutonie, sports coaching. I took every movement class I could find.

MTW: What brought you to Montreal and, more importantly, what made you stay all those years?

Tomas Howlin: I came to Montreal following an invitation to teach at **Studio Tango**. I taught a series of workshops in Montreal, Quebec City and Toronto as part of one of my North American tours in 1998. I simply loved Montreal. I found that it was a perfect mix of a North American and European city, and most importantly I felt this was a place where immigrants were welcome. The tango community, as a whole, was also very welcoming to me and my classes. There is one more thing that I was impressed with — How well developed and organized the tango schools were.

MTW: What is your vision of tango in Montreal? I'm referring to the way it is danced, but I'm especially interested in the way it is taught. Is the way tango is taught in Montreal any different from what you have seen elsewhere?

Tomas Howlin: The tango scene in Montreal definitely has its own personality, but it is also in constant change. In my travels, I often hear people talking about how different dancing in Montreal is. Back when I moved here, the dancing was more traditional, more classic tango. Now, I see a larger spectrum of styles and personalities on the dance floor. The teaching is also different, and this has been crafted over time and influenced by two main features that distinguish this community from others.

First, the extensive experience of some of its dancers, and second the presence of well-established tango schools. Very few cities in North America have tango schools like Montreal has. That has a very distinct impact on the dancing and the teaching. I think that some of the local teachers have been teaching regularly for more than ten years.

MTW: It is true that in many other places, the teaching structures are quite small. Some of our schools offer ten or more regular classes a week! You mentioned how experienced are some of the teachers. Would you say that Montreal students are particularly lucky in terms of their teachers' knowledge and for benefitting from resident and visiting Argentinian teachers?

Tomas Howlin: Yes, that is true. Not many communities in the world have tango schools like Montreal. I would say that this city is lucky to have so many options for learning tango available. The quality of the teaching in many cases is very good, but that is not a standard. Like everywhere else, there are also mediocre teachers in Montreal. Students should use their discernment before choosing a teacher; research for teachers' experience and credentials, and always consult and scout for options. The same applies to visiting instructors.

MTW: Would you say that the city and its cultural environment have influenced your teaching or your tango projects? In other words, did Montreal bring you something?

Tomas Howlin: Growing up and living in Buenos Aires gave me so much tango, but I also received a lot from my students and the experiences I have gathered over time. In the last thirteen years, I've taught mostly in the United States, some in Europe and Montreal. The landscape of my tango road is mixed with many tango communities, not just Montreal. Living in Montreal has given me a lot personally that has allowed me to keep pursuing tango as a career. Working in North America and Europe on a whole has given me access to information and training that is very hard to get in Argentina.

The challenge is trying to figure out how to keep growing my tango while living so far away from Buenos Aires. I live isolated from my tango colleagues and those valuable exchanges. The positive side is that having access to different information about movement and teaching,

I was able to then study a lot about learning technologies, strategies, and approaches outside of tango. Teaching abroad has allowed me to use a less traditional methodology, grow my own voice in tango, and use what I know about the art and science of learning without hesitation. This would have been harder to do in Buenos Aires.

MTW: Can you tell us more about your Tango Learning project in its many layered aspects and how it differs from the ways we usually think about learning or teaching tango?

Tomas Howlin: **Tango Learning** is my latest project, but it is already three years old. It is an intensive study program that combines body work with academic material and work style within the context of Argentine Tango. This makes it unique. **Tango Learning** is designed to offer multidisciplinary resources to train experienced tango dancers on how to better learn and maximize every learning experience. During the training, there are preparation assignments, tango homework, study materials, and team work. Each of these elements is unprecedented in tango.

