

The New York Times

Hurling Thunderbolts From the Floor

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY AUG. 10, 2010



Natalia Hills and Gabriel Missé performing “Romper el Piso” at the Vail International Dance Festival. The pair also presented a master class that discussed the art form of tango.
Credit Erin Baiano/Vail International Dance Festival

VAIL, Colo. — I don’t much enjoy watching dance on YouTube, but the scale of tango suits it better than any other genre. There you can see two ravishing [clips](#) of the [Argentine tango dancers](#) Natalia Hills and Gabriel Missé at the Vail International Dance Festival last year. (Search for their names and the Vail festival.)

Even so, to watch them in live performance is altogether more sensational; and it’s only then that you feel the full excitement of Mr. Missé’s matchless footwork. Both last year and this they were the most absorbing luminaries at the festival’s International Evenings of Dance, but this year the festival also programmed two remarkable all-tango events at the open-air Gerald R. Ford Amphitheater, confirming my view that in Ms. Hills and Mr. Missé, there is no more spellbinding dance partnership today.

Yet what’s most wonderful here is not dancers but dance. The two Argentines presented a master class on Saturday afternoon: demonstrating, presenting other couples from their company and discussing the tango. What emerged was heartening, though not surprising. They — Ms. Hills in particular — spoke of fidelity to the tradition of tango.

Referring to the past masters of the genre, they remarked, “We show the steps exactly the way the milongueros did them” and “We teach the other dancers the reason for each dance — the essence which we feel is in extinction.” There is controversy about what a milonguero is or was, but Mr. Missé was adamant: “A milonguero is not self-taught” (others disagree). “You (the milonguero) go to milongas to dance.” The word “milonga” has more than one meaning too, but he clearly meant it as the dance hall and event where tango is performed.

There are astounding features to this couple’s dancing (especially Mr. Missé’s); at several points the audience bursts into applause, in awe at some dazzling **footwork. But I also adore the most basic ways in which they make the tango extraordinarily sensuous.** The fundamental step is simply a walk, but a walk that links two people, apparently by destiny. The body’s weight is forward, over the front of the foot, and the dancers lean into each other.

Their eyes seldom meet: they can dance with their brows touching and gaze lowered, or with Ms. Hills’s head nestling into the side of Mr. Missé’s neck, in the most intimate communion. Sometimes their bodies seem to touch all the way from brow to knee even as they march or glide along; sometimes there’s just enough space in their embrace for each to turn rapidly to either side, as when Ms. Hills wriggles responsively or when both dancers change directions, seemingly following conflicting impulses.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/11/arts/dance/11tango.html>



Ms. Hills and Mr. Missé in “Romper el Piso.”

Credit Erin Baiano/Vail International Dance Festival

The embrace almost never breaks, and within it the gentle planting of a foot on the floor, toe first, can be like a caress. Or either dancer can simply, slowly sweep a pointed foot around on the floor to trace a semicircle. (And as they walk, they may trace a series of these semicircles along their route.) Often a dancer will hook one foot around the other, so that the legs are dovetailed and the ankles crossed, a position in which either partner may take small traveling steps or may be turned.

The turns in tango are among its most glorious devices. Sometimes it is the man who places his weight on the ball of one foot, the other foot pointing down to rest a toe on the floor (this is called “the needle”), while the woman promenades him. Or instead he stretches one foot behind him, creating a through-the-body line and letting his toe write a whole ring on the floor while his partner travels around and rotates him.

The tango derives its complex character from its music, of course. The basic pulse of the 4/2 tempo can be marchlike and fateful, but the melody is lyrical and sometimes cascadingly brilliant. Ms. Hills also spoke of the dance’s African-Argentine roots among the local mulattos and immigrants, principally in the Rio de la Plata region, a swath of

land including areas of Argentina and Uruguay near the estuary of the same name. “Men would practice together before dancing with women,” she said. “That’s how tango became the way it is: men prepared it, and both partners are strong.”

On Sunday night the festival presented the world premiere of “Romper el Piso” (“Break the Floor”), choreographed by Ms. Hills and featuring Mr. Missé and the four other couples of their Tangueros del Sur company. (An excerpt was shown in New York last year at Fall for Dance.) This show traces a history of the tango from those mulatto roots (Mr. Missé is particularly good in showing an African accentuation of the torso, with currents passing up his spine), through the golden age (the tango of the 1940s), up to the present.

Almost three-quarters of the show is marvelous. The other dancers are excellent; costumes are varied and unsensationally handsome; the live music, stronger on percussion and with fewer high strings than some tango bands, is good (though the musical preludes in the second half are tedious). And “Romper” feels an exceptionally pure account of tango tradition — until, alas, its final quarter, when suddenly, probably in acknowledgment of the Tango Nuevo developments, it abounds in acrobatic extensions and lifts. Since both Ms. Hills and Mr. Missé had spoken of avoiding such tricks, it was baffling to find duets (mainly featuring the other couples) that relied on them.

As the show develops, it also reveals an expressionist tendency in Ms. Hills: she likes to turn her firmly made-up face to the audience during a particularly ominous gesture. But Mr. Missé’s manner is largely objective. In the first half, radiating more amusement and twinkle than I have ever seen him, he was a motor force; but in the second half — with no loss of energy or virtuosity — his manner was at its most cool.

All their duets rightly brought the house down. Mr. Missé’s foot trills (especially the rippling heel-and-toe ones), his skip-pounces, his sudden shakes of feet and pelvis together beneath steady shoulders all deserved the applause they won, and I admired more than ever the whiplash effects he achieves by flourishing a raised foot to and fro, left and right, with astonishing attack. (Ms. Hills also excels at this.) But, like all the greatest virtuosos, they are exemplary in simple things too.

Sometimes, while pinned together at the torso, they just transfer briskly weight onto one foot (slam!) and then back to the other (slam!), and their bodies swing sharply together, like a pendulum swinging staccato. Just from one foot to another and back to the first, but as if hurling thunderbolts.

Correction: August 16, 2010

A dance review on Wednesday about tango performances at the Vail International Dance Festival in Colorado described incorrectly a South American region where immigrants and mulattos gave the tango its African-Argentine roots. The Rio de la Plata region covers a swath of land, including areas of Argentina and Uruguay, near the estuary of the same name; it is not a suburb of Buenos Aires.

